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The impact of media on electoral volatility

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Informed Floating Voters?

The Impact of Media on Electoral Volatility

In the last decades the number of floating voters has risen in many democracies and particularly in the Netherlands. Although media is likely to influence electoral volatility, it has often been neglected as a possible explanation for vote switching. Therefore, this dissertation examines how information provided by the media during election campaigns affects electoral volatility. The studies in this dissertation provide insights into which types and which aspects of campaign news coverage affect which type of electoral volatility, through which underlying mechanisms. In this way it aims to unravel whether citizens are making well-informed vote choices.

Sabine Geers
Informed Floating Voters?



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Informed Floating Voters?

The Impact of Media on Electoral Volatility

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Chapter 1

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Defining electoral volatility

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

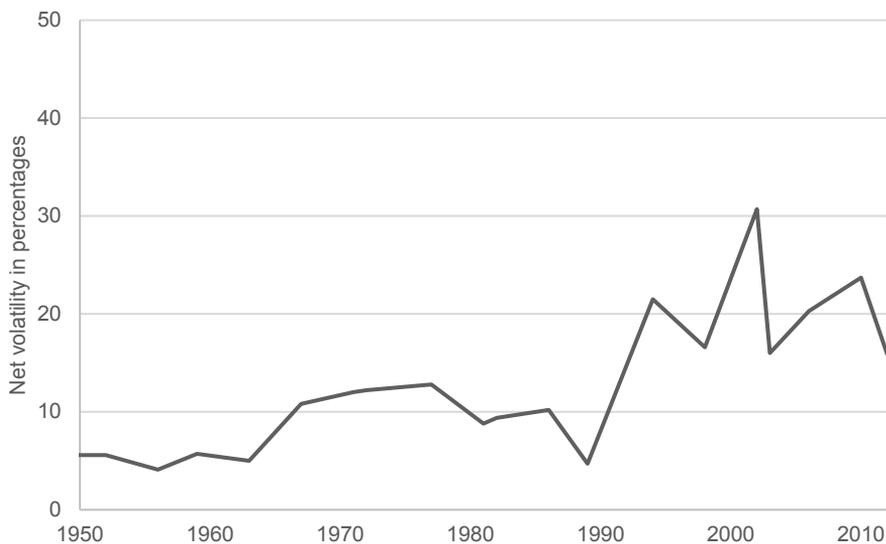
intra-election (or campaign) volatility. Whereas the first refers to party change between two subsequent elections, the latter refers to change in party preference from the start of the election campaign to Election Day. The distinction between campaign volatility and inter-election volatility was already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

The development of electoral volatility

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

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

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



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

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

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

Existing explanations of electoral volatility

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

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

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

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

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

Campaign effects: A changing perspective

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

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

Media and electoral volatility

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

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

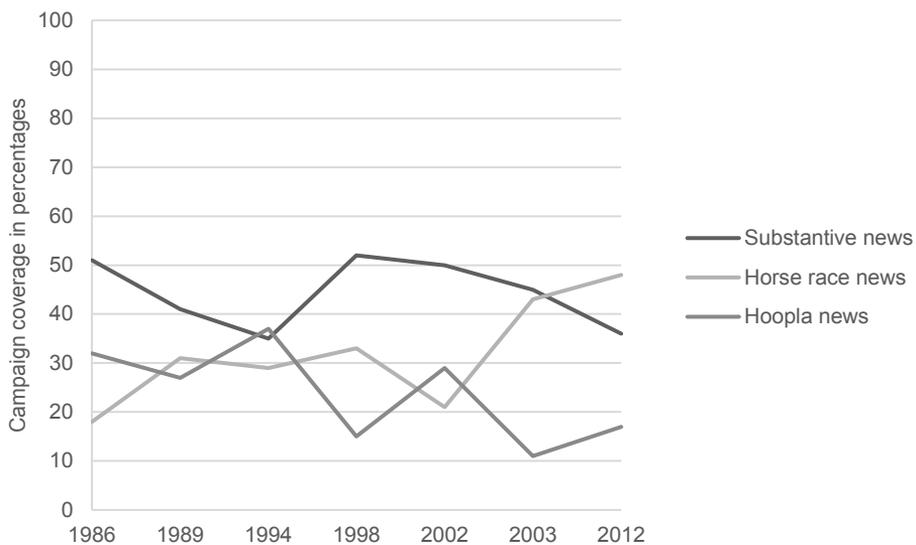
However, studies examining the relationship between media exposure and electoral volatility are few and results are scattered and inconclusive (e.g., Baker et al., 2006; Bybee, McLeod, Luetscher, & Garramone, 1981; Dassonneville, 2011; Forrest & Marks, 1999; Van der Meer et al., 2013). Some report positive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

Media logic and campaign coverage

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

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

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



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

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

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

Media, electoral volatility and democracy

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

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

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

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

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

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

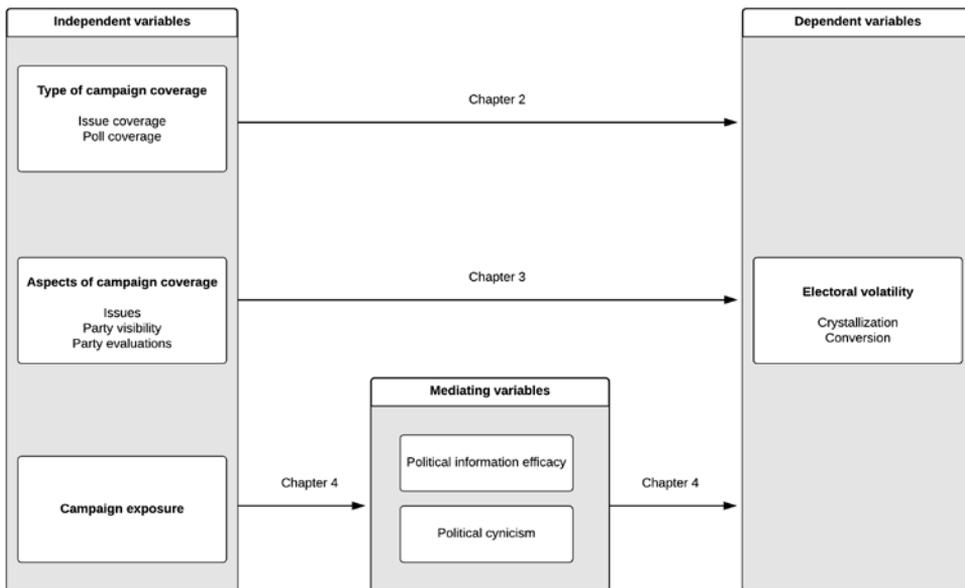
The extent to which citizens are able to make an informed voting decision is partly dependent upon how they process information, but also depends on the supply of information. Due to the mediatization of politics, the presence of strategic and horse race coverage in the media has increased at the expense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

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

The central concepts of the dissertation

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

Figure 1.3: The conceptual framework of the dissertation.



Two types of electoral volatility: Conversion and crystallization

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

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

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

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

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

Campaign coverage and electoral volatility

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

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

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

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

Underlying mechanisms: Political information efficacy and political cynicism

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

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

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

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

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

Focus of the dissertation

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

Research setting and design

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

Research setting: The Dutch case

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

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

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

Data

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

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

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

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

Outline of the dissertation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 2

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

Abstract

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

¹ This chapter is under review as: Geers, S., Bos, L., & De Vreese, C.H. (2016). Effects of Media Coverage on Electoral Volatility: Conversion or Crystallization?

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

Media and electoral volatility

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The influence of specific media content on electoral volatility

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

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

To our knowledge, the effect of specific media content on volatility has only been studied by Adriaansen, Van Praag, and De Vreese (2012) and Takens (2013). Both studies investigated how exposure to issue news and strategic news can induce volatile voting behavior, but come to diverging conclusions, probably because of their different approach in operationalizing both types of news. However, what they both include in their operationalization of strategic news is the media's coverage of polls. Poll coverage is a key aspect of strategic news (Jamieson, 1992) and is closely related to Patterson's (1993) game frame or a horse race frame. Since one can expect that specifically poll news can induce vote switching, because of the volatile nature of polls, we do not focus on other aspects of strategic news, such as language of war, games and competition and emphasis on candidate style and perceptions. In this study, we are particularly interested in issue news and poll news, and will examine their effect on both conversion and crystallization.

Issue news is generally defined as providing information about present and future policies, about political stands of parties, and about ideologies and ideas (Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998). The basis on which votes are cast depends on the degree of issue news. According to agenda setting and priming theory, issues that are more salient in the news are more central in voters' considerations when evaluating a party (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Zaller, 1991). Voters may choose or switch to the party that performed well on the issue in focus, leading to retrospective voting (e.g., Söderlund, 2008); or they may vote for the party whose issue position is most in line with their own, leading to prospective voting (Lockerbie, 1992; Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2001). Either way, the party to which a voter switches depends on the media's coverage of issues and the coverage of parties' positions and performances on these issues.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Method

The Dutch case

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

Panel data

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

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

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

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

Content analysis

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

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

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

Linking survey data to content data

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

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

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

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

Results

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

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

Table 2.1: Gain and loss of voters between waves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

	Crystallization (versus abstention)	Conversion (versus stable)
Sex	0.430 (0.382)	0.357 (0.212)
Education	0.049 (0.114)	-0.129 (0.065)*
Age	-0.023 (0.012)*	-0.001 (0.007)
Ideology	0.000 (0.109)	-0.141 (0.054)**
Ideological extremity	-0.132 (0.171)	-0.342 (0.091)***
Political interest	0.528 (0.134)***	0.008 (0.080)
Issue news		
In newspapers	11.648 (5.026)*	3.910 (2.252)
On television	6.476 (3.962)	-5.357 (2.025)**
Poll news		
In newspapers	-30.835 (15.597)*	-11.093 (7.014)
On television	-5.675 (4.125)	5.448 (2.124)*
Intercept	-1.979 (1.170)	0.064 (0.741)
Log Likelihood	-658.463	-658.463
Nagelkerke R ²	.288	.288

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

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

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

Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

^{ix} For newspaper reading we also included exposure to newspaper websites.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 3

Priming Issues, Party Visibility, and Party Evaluations: The Impact on Vote Switching

Abstract

Voter volatility has become a hallmark of Western democracies in the past three decades. At the same time short-term factors—such as the media’s coverage of issues, parties, and candidates during an election campaign—have become more important for voters’ decisions. While previous research did look at how campaign news in general affects electoral volatility in general, it has omitted to explicitly test the processes underlying these effects. Building on theories of agenda setting, (affective) priming, and issue ownership, the current study aims to explain why certain news aspects lead voters to switch their vote choice. We theorize it is the visibility of a party, the evaluation of a party, and the attention for issues owned by a party that primes voters to switch to a certain party. We use national panel survey data (N = 765) and link this to an extensive content analysis of campaign news on television and in newspapers in the run up to the 2012 Dutch national elections. The results show that issue news leads to vote change in the direction of the party that owns the issue. Even stronger is the effect of party visibility on vote switching. Our results, however, find the strongest support for the effect of party evaluations on vote change: More favorable news about a party increases switching to that party.¹

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Introduction

In the past decades the number of floating voters in Western democracies has increased considerably. The linkages between parties and citizens are of declining importance (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000) and voters make more independent political choices instead of relying on traditional loyalties (Van der Meer, Van Elsas, Lubbe, & Van der Brug, 2013). As a consequence, citizens switch more often between parties than they did before, not only between elections, but also during election campaigns. With the decline in voter loyalty, sociological determinants have lost much of their predictive power (Dalton, 2013). Instead, short-term factors such as media attention for and media evaluations of parties and candidates have become more important for voters' decisions.

Yet, only few studies have included media in their explanation of electoral volatility (e.g., Baker, Ames, & Renno, 2006; Bybee, McLeod, Luetscher, & Garramone, 1981; Forrest & Marks, 1999; Van der Meer, Van Elsas, Lubbe, & Van der Brug, 2013) and results are scattered. Some report positive correlations between media use and volatility (Baker et al., 2006; Forrest & Marks, 1999), while others find a negative relationship (e.g., Bybee et al., 1981) and some find no effect (Dassonneville, 2011). Although these studies give insight into the effect of media use, the effect of media coverage is understudied.

More recent studies have investigated whether different types of campaign coverage, most notably issue news and contest or strategic news, have an effect on individual-level vote switching (Adriaansen, Van Praag, & De Vreese, 2012; Takens, 2013). Adriaansen and colleagues (2012) found that issue news can induce voter uncertainty, whereas strategic news decreases voter uncertainty. This voter uncertainty would subsequently spark electoral volatility. In contrast, the study by Takens (2013) showed that voters become volatile in response to contest news, while issue news leads to stability in vote preferences. In this study we argue that prior research, by focusing on how campaign coverage in general affects volatility in general, has omitted to explicitly test the processes underlying these effects.

For issue news, theories of issues voting (issue ownership) are expected to explain the effect on vote switching. Rather than issue news in general affecting volatility in general, it are specific issues in the media, owned by specific parties, that lead to vote switching to a specific party. The missing link between issue news and volatility is thus the party: the impact of issue news on vote switching is dependent upon the issue discussed, because different issues are perceived to be owned by different parties. These assumptions have been tested on the aggregate level, looking at vote choice (Kleinnijenhuis & De Ridder, 1998; Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof, Oegema, & De Ridder, 2007; Sheafer & Weimann, 2005), but not on the individual level focusing on vote switching.

Contest or strategic news in itself also does not explain why voters might change their vote choice (as is assumed in Adriaansen, et al., 2012; Takens, 2013). Again, for these types of news the missing link between news coverage on the one hand, and vote switching on the other, is the party. It is the positive or negative portrayal of a specific party or candidate that causes voters to consider switching to that specific party (Balmas & Sheafer, 2010). Therefore, this study focusses on how the positive and negative evaluations of a party in the news affects vote change.

By focusing on issue news and contest or strategic news in general affecting volatility in general, prior work has neglected an essential explanation for vote switching. If the link between campaign coverage and vote switching is the party, then one should also take into account the visibility of each party in the news. This is even more important as previous research has shown that party visibility is a pre-condition for electoral success (Hopmann, Vliegthart, De Vreese, & Albæk, 2010; Oegema & Kleinnijenhuis, 2000; Semetko & Schoenbach, 1994; Vliegthart & Van Aelst, 2010). The current study builds further on the existing body of research studying the relationship between campaign coverage and vote switching, by testing the impact of issue news, party visibility and party evaluations in one model. We argue that it are the media that set the public agenda by paying attention to issues, parties and evaluations of these parties (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This primes voters to switch their vote choice to a certain party, leading to electoral volatility (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

In this study we combine panel survey data and content analysis data to test the differential impact of campaign news on voters with varying levels of media exposure.

In the analysis we employ a model in which the voter-party combination is the unit of analysis, which allows us to examine at the individual level which voters change to which party. In the next section we will explicate how media content might affect vote change, linking the literature on voting behavior to political communication theories.

Issue news and vote switching

To understand how issue news affects vote switching at the individual level we first need to understand how news about issues affects vote choice in general. We propose that agenda setting and priming theory, which address the salience of issues in the media and in voters' minds, should be combined with issue ownership theory. First, according to agenda setting theory, the media influence which issues voters recognize as most salient by emphasizing certain issues over others, making these issues more accessible in one's memory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Secondly, according to priming theory, individuals use the issues that are most salient and accessible in their memory to evaluate the performance of political actors (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Thirdly, according to issue ownership theory, citizens will vote for the party they consider to be the owner of the most salient issue – that is, the party they consider to be best in dealing with the issue (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996).

Broadly defined, issue ownership refers to the idea that voters consider some parties better able to deal with specific issues than others. The party with the best solution or track record for a given issue is considered to be the 'owner' of that issue, issues being for example employment, immigration, or health care. Since parties communicate their issue emphasis via the media (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007), one should not only take into account which party owns which issue, but also which issue received most emphasis during a campaign in order to empirically test all facets of the issue ownership theory. Thus, issue attention in news coverage should also be included in the issue ownership voting models. To our knowledge this approach has only been applied by Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2007), who mainly conducted analyses at the macro level. In the current study we test our model at the micro level to understand the effect of issue news on individual-level vote change, explained by issue ownership theory. We test agenda setting and priming implicitly by examining whether media attention for owned issues induces vote switching.

Theoretically, we expect issue news to be related to electoral volatility based on recent research showing that issue ownership also has a volatile component (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Nuytemans, 2009; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2014). The stable component comes from parties' distinctive constituencies (Stubager & Slothuus, 2012). Yet, parties can also selectively (de)-emphasize certain issues, to re-activate old issue ownership, or to compete over new issues or steal issues from other parties (e.g., Damore, 2004). This dynamic part is affected by news coverage of issues and parties. A study on the sources of issue ownership showed that while party programs affect long-term perceptions of issue ownership, media coverage has a more immediate effect on issue ownership perception (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). Additionally, recent experimental research (Bos, Lefevere, Thijssen, & Sheets, 2016; Dahlberg & Martinsson, 2015; Tresch, Lefevere, & Walgrave, 2015; Walgrave et al., 2009) has shown that news messages can affect issue ownership perceptions and vote preferences on the short-term. These findings are confirmed by a longitudinal study of the Dutch 2010 election campaign, which shows that "issue ownership is rather unstable at the individual level, due to news attention peaks for specific issues" (Kleinnijenhuis & Walter, 2014, p. 241).

Based on these findings we can assume that this volatility in issue ownership perception, at least partly, explains the volatility in party preferences. Although this is the underlying theoretical assumption explaining the relationship between issue ownership and electoral volatility, especially in the long run, this study captures issue ownership perceptions at one point in time in order to explain the impact of issue news on individual-level vote switching. We argue that this impact is dependent upon two factors. First, the amount of attention media devote to an issue during the campaign influences the issue salience in voters' minds. Since issues come and go more rapidly in the news, the media attention for issues, as well as the issue salience in voters' minds has become more volatile (McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Zhu, 1992). And secondly, the voter's perception of issue ownership determines which issue is perceived to be owned by which party. The issue owning party gains electoral success when the voter is exposed to this issue in the media. This leads to our hypothesis that:

H1: Exposure to a party's owned issue increases switching to that party.

Parties in the news and vote switching

In the introduction we argued that if the link between campaign coverage and vote switching is the party, one should also take into account the portrayal of each party in the news. According to priming theory, the most salient (attributes of) parties or candidates become important criteria for party evaluation (Kim & McCombs, 2007). Previous work on the impact of the media on party choice indeed shows that visibility, of parties and their leaders, affects party preference or support positively (Hopmann et al., 2010; Oegema & Kleinnijenhuis, 2000; Semetko & Schoenbach, 1994; Vliegenthart & Van Aelst, 2010). Following Hopmann et al. (2010) we argue that especially in a multiparty context the visibility of politicians or parties can be the straw that breaks the camel's back. A certain amount of visibility makes voters aware of a party and leads them to consider this party as a viable alternative. Even though the impact of visibility might be dependent on other factors (Bos et al., 2016; Hopmann et al., 2010), visibility is a pre-condition for being elected. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: Exposure to news about a party, increases switching to that party.

Although priming causes the most salient party in the news (agenda setting) to be important for a voter's evaluation of a party, it does not take into account whether the evaluation of that party is positive or negative (Balmas & Sheafer, 2010). Sheafer (2007), therefore, introduced the concept of affective priming, which adds an affective dimension to priming. This notion entails that when a party (or candidate) is primed, people will evaluate that party based on the affective evaluation they attach to that party. This affective priming is in turn influenced by media content through the affective compelling arguments effect (McCombs & Ghanem, 2003; McCombs, 2004), in which journalists attach an evaluative tone to a party or candidate in the news. Consequently, it is very likely that a voter's evaluation of a party is influenced by the tone towards that party in the media.

The evaluative tone in the media can be attached to several aspects of the news coverage of parties: either to the standing in the polls, to performances in debates or to candidates' personal traits. For each of these news characteristics, it are the media's

evaluations of a party and, consequently, the affective priming in a voter's mind that predicts if the evaluation of a party will be positive or negative.

Extant research has indeed shown that media's evaluations of a party or candidate increases positive evaluations of that party or candidate (e.g., Beck, Dalton, Green, & Huckfeldt, 2002; Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2012). The effect of evaluative news on the vote or, more specifically, on vote change has been studied less extensively (Balmas & Sheafer, 2010; Hopmann et al., 2010; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007). Yet, the affective priming hypothesis can easily be extended to voting behavior, since the evaluation of party (or candidate) correlates highly with voting for or against a party (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1992; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 102-103; Sheafer & Weimann, 2005).

Moreover, voters may rely on information about the evaluation of a party as a cognitive shortcut to make a voting decision without engaging in rational cognitive processing. As such, positive and negative evaluations serve as peripheral cues that can lead to a change of vote, without actively thinking about the parties and issues under consideration (Lodge, McGraw, Conover, Feldman, & Miller, 1991; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Zaller, 1991). Therefore we expect that:

H3: Exposure to favorable news about a party increases switching to that party.

Method

The Dutch case

Testing these hypotheses requires: (1) individual-level panel survey data, to assess whether respondents change their party choice during an election campaign; and (2) content analysis data, to distinguish between different content characteristics in campaign coverage. We focus on the Netherlands, a democratic corporatist country with a multi-party system and a public broadcasting system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Mair, 2002). This context is relevant for this study as ideological differences between parties in The Netherlands are small (Roberts & Wibbels, 1999) and parties' positions on certain issues are often fairly similar. Therefore, switching is likely to occur and both

issues and party evaluations in the news are likely to induce vote change. In contrast to the US, the stability of vote choice in the Netherlands has decreased considerably since the 1960s (Mair, 2008), like it has in more Western democracies. As such, the Dutch context is an appropriate setting to test our hypotheses on the impact of media content characteristics on vote switching.

In this study, we focus on the 2012 Dutch parliamentary election campaign. In total, 21 parties participated in the elections on September 12, 2012. For 14 of them vote change was practically non-existent, which is why we include only the seven major parties (Liberal party, Labour party, Socialist party, Freedom party, Christian Democratic party, Democratic party, Green party) in the analysis.

Panel data

Sample. The panel survey dataset we used was collected by TNS NIPO in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam and *de Volkskrant* using computer-assisted self-interviewing. These data were gathered in the campaign running up to the 2012 Dutch parliamentary elections of September 12. Initially, 2250 respondents were approached in May 17, 2012 (t-4: N = 1,537; AAPOR RR4 = 68.3%), and recontacted June 21 (t-3: N = 1,239; recontact rate AAPOR RR4 = 80.6%), August 16 (t-2: N = 1,206; recontact rate AAPOR RR4: 78.5%), August 30 (t-1: N = 1,187; recontact rate AAPOR RR4: 77.2%) and September 14 (t: N = 1,162; recontact rate AAPOR RR4: 75.6%).ⁱ In this study we only included the respondents that participated in all waves (N = 765).ⁱⁱ We only used the data of the last two waves (t-1 and t), since we are interested in the influence of the media's campaign coverage which only started *after* t-2. Of the 765 respondents 66% remained loyal to the same party between the two waves, 24% switched their party preference, and 10% eventually did not turn out on Election Day. Our data are by and large representative of the Dutch population.ⁱⁱⁱ

Measures. Our *dependent* variable is vote switching, which is based on one variable in the panel dataset measured at two points in time. At t-1 respondents were asked which party they would vote for if elections were held today. At t, the post-election wave, respondents were asked which party they ended up voting for in the elections. For each respondent, we constructed 7 dummy variables, one for each party. The party

dummy variables were assigned a ‘0’ by default, and a ‘1’ if the respondent switched to that party between t-1 and t.^{iv}

Our main *independent* variable in the panel dataset used to link the panel data to the media content data is media exposure. We asked respondents about their exposure to the various media outlets that are also included in the content analysis: “Can you indicate how often you read the following newspapers?”, “Can you indicate how often you watch the following television programs?”. These media exposure variables were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from never (0) to (almost) daily (4).^v

Competence issue ownership was measured at t-1 for 9 issues (employment, immigration, safety, social security, health care, housing, European Union, education, environment) with an item that asked which party has the best solution for issue X according to the respondent. This measure of competence ownership is also used by other scholars (e.g., Lachat, 2014).

We also included several *control* variables, starting with the usual socio-demographic variables, measured at t-4: age ($M = 51$, $SD = 17$), sex (49.7% male, 50.3% female), and education (measured in 7 categories ranging from ‘no education/primary education’ to ‘bachelor degree or higher’, $M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.81$). In addition, we controlled for various individual predispositions measured at t-2. First, ideological proximity is measured by calculating the difference between each respondent’s own left-right placement and left-right placement of each party as perceived by the respondent (1 = distant and 10 = close, $M = 7.20$, $SD = 2.45$). Second, political interest, which was 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, $M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.66$). Finally, we control for partisanship as the tendency to label one (preferred) party as issue owner on every issue by including a dummy variable which is assigned a ‘0’ by default, and a ‘1’ if the respondent mentions the same party as issue owner on all 9 issues.

Content analysis

Sample. We conducted a content analysis of the last three weeks of the election campaign on television programs and newspapers (August 22 to September 12, 2012).^{vi} All items with political content were coded in collaboration with the Dutch public

broadcasting agency (NPO), by a team of four coders. In this study we only included those media outlets for which media exposure was tapped in the panel dataset (i.e., the most used media outlets in the Netherlands). Those are the news programs of the public broadcaster *NOS Journaal*, and two commercial stations *RTL Nieuws* and *Hart van Nederland*, the current affairs programs *Eén Vandaag* and *Nieuwsuur*, the talkshow *Knevel and van den Brink* (all public broadcasts), and the infotainment programs *De Wereld Draait Door*, *Pow!News* and *RTL Boulevard* (only the latter is a commercial broadcast). For the newspapers we included two broadsheet/elite newspapers: *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad*, two semi-tabloid newspapers: *de Telegraaf* and *Algemeen Dagblad*, and two (popular) free dailies: *Sp!ts* and *Metro*. Items were coded that satisfied the conditions of campaign news, in the sense that the story was about the elections, party leaders, or about the government. Items were identified based on content and form.

Measures. For the operationalization of issues, party evaluations and party visibility in the news we largely follow the suggested coding instructions by Hopmann, Van Aelst and Legnante (2011).

For issue news we coded all issues mentioned in a news item. For each item, the coders had to code whether an issue was mentioned or not. Coders could choose from a list of 22 issues. Some of the issues in the content analysis data were merged or renamed, so that they could be linked to the issues in the survey data. Issues that were coded in the content analysis, but could not be linked to the issues in the survey data are not included. These are issues that received little to no attention, like culture, infrastructure, agriculture. Eventually, 9 issues were included in the analyses: employment, immigration, safety, social security, health care, housing, European Union, education and environment. The average Krippendorff's Alpha across these issues was .74.^{vii} The total issue attention per issue is the sum of all mentions across all items within a media outlet, see table 3.1.

Party evaluations are coded for all actors (max. 8) in an item. We coded evaluations of parties, as well as evaluations of all party representatives. The evaluation in an item could either be neutral or mixed (coded as 0), unfavorable (-1), or favorable (1). The intercoder reliability for this measure is sufficient, with a Krippendorff's Alpha of .74. We use the average party evaluation across all items within a media outlet, see table 3.2.

Visibility is also coded for all actors (max. 8) in an item. A party's visibility is relative to all other parties in an item and relative to the other content in an item. Coders were first instructed to code which part of an item is about all actors combined, ranging from 'very little' to 'very much'. In a second step coders had to code the share of attention for each actor. The Krippendorff's Alpha for this measure was .80. We use the average visibility across all items within a media outlet, see table 3.3.

Linking survey data to content data

For each respondent, the media exposure variables in the panel survey data were weighted on the basis of the media content variables in the content analysis data, computing individual exposure to issues, party evaluations and party visibility in the news (following e.g., De Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Schuck, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2016):

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

These weighted media exposure variables were thus determined by the media outlets each respondent uses and by the average attention for party evaluations and party visibility and the total attention for each issue in each outlet.^{viii} The total exposure to issues, party visibility as well as party evaluations was divided by the total amount of media outlets included in the analysis.^{ix} For example, a respondent reads the newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* on a daily basis (media exposure = 4) and the issue 'health care' is discussed 10 times in *NRC Handelsblad*. We link this issue attention to the respondent by multiplying the issue attention score for health care with the respondent's media exposure score for *NRC Handelsblad*, resulting in an issue exposure score of 40. This step is repeated for each of the 9 issues, each newspaper and each television program (total of 15 outlets). Subsequently, for each issue, the issue exposure score is first summed for all 15 media outlets and then divided by 15 to obtain an average media exposure score.

For the issue exposure variables a second step was added in which they were linked to the issue ownership variables. First, for each respondent and each issue, each party gets a separate competence issue ownership score (0=not owner, 1=owner). Second, for each issue X, the amount of exposure to issue X is linked to the party who is owner on issue X. This means that the average exposure to health care in the example above is linked to the party that owns the issue of health care according to the respondent, and is zero for all the other parties. Next, an aggregated issue variable was constructed, because the separate issue variables were highly correlated. This issue variable is created per party by taking the sum of issue exposure for all issues that a party owns. For example, out of a possible 9 issues, a respondent perceives the Liberal party as the owner of 6 issues and the Labour party as the owner of 3 issues, whilst the other five parties do not own any issue. For the Liberal party the exposure to the 6 issues is summed and for the Labour party the exposure to the 3 issues is summed. For the other five parties the value for the issue exposure variable is zero.

Data analysis

In order to estimate a model across parties, we created a stacked data set, so that the unit of analysis is the respondent-party combination. As a consequence, each respondent is included 7 times in the data set, one time for each party included in the analysis. In order to correct our estimates for possible errors introduced by the duplication of observations in the stacked data set (Steenbergen & Jones, 2002), we employ logistic regressions with clustered standard errors (respondents being the clusters).

Results

We begin our results section with a description of the media variables. Table 3.3 shows the average party visibility in the news for the included television programs and newspapers. Overall, party visibility is slightly higher on television than in newspapers, and across the different outlets the Liberal party (the incumbent party) is the most and the Green party the least visible. Table 3.2 shows the average party evaluations in the news for the television programs and newspapers. Overall, the tone towards parties is

more negative than positive, and across the different outlets the Democratic party is most positively and the Green party most negatively evaluated.

As Table 3.2 and Table 3.3 demonstrate, both visibility and evaluations vary between parties as well as between media outlets. Therefore, we can assume that the degree of party visibility and party evaluations that individuals are exposed to depends on the media outlets they use.

Table 3.1 shows the total attention for each issue in each media outlet. In general, the European Union issue receives the most attention across all outlets. The second most salient issues in the media are employment, social security and health care. The issues immigration, safety, and the environment receive the least attention.

However, there are differences in issue attention between the various media outlets. Overall, newspapers pay more attention to issues than television programs, with the infotainment programs paying least attention to issues. More specifically, although the issue attention for immigration and safety is generally low, these issues are quite salient in the tabloid newspapers. Additional analyses on issue importance in voters indicated that the issue salience in the media largely matches the issue salience in voters. Only for the European Union we find a discrepancy: although the European Union receives a lot of media attention, it is one of the least important issues for voters.

Table 3.1: Issue attention in the news (not related to actors).

	Employment	Immigration	Safety	Social security	Health care	Housing	European Union	Education	Environment
<i>Broadsheet Newspapers</i>									
Volkskrant	5	2	2	10	6	7	14	9	5
NRC Handelsblad	9	5	3	13	10	8	20	8	7
<i>Tabloid Newspapers</i>									
Telegraaf	9	8	14	10	12	6	11	7	3
AD	11	7	4	9	4	5	13	1	0
<i>Free Dailies</i>									
Metro	3	0	2	6	3	2	3	6	2
Spits	3	1	2	4	2	2	3	4	2
<i>TV News</i>									
NOS	3	2	0	2	0	0	6	1	0
RTL Nieuws	2	0	1	1	1	1	3	2	0
HVNL	2	0	3	3	4	2	4	4	2
<i>Current Affairs Programs</i>									
EenVandaag	8	3	0	5	3	7	8	4	2
Nieuwsuur	10	3	3	15	8	3	16	2	3
<i>Infotainment programs</i>									
DWDD	1	0	3	0	2	0	6	0	0
Pownews	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
RTL Boulevard	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
<i>Talkshow</i>									
Knevel en vd Brink	2	1	2	0	10	4	9	0	0
Total	69	34	39	78	66	47	116	48	26

Table 3.2: Party evaluations in the news.

	Liberal party	Labour party	Freedom party	Christ. Dem. party	Socialist party	Democratic party	Green party
<i>Broadsheet Newspapers</i>							
Volkskrant	-0.14	0.02	-0.21	-0.23	-0.17	-0.17	0.00
NRC Handelsblad	-0.13	0.09	-0.16	0.02	-0.05	0.03	0.00
<i>Tabloid Newspapers</i>							
Telegraaf	0.01	0.06	-0.07	0.07	-0.38	0.41	-0.17
AD	-0.25	-0.09	-0.07	-0.13	-0.13	0.00	-0.25
<i>Free Dailies</i>							
Metro	-0.04	-0.03	-0.21	-0.04	-0.04	0.00	-0.07
Spits	-0.02	-0.08	-0.08	-0.18	0.04	0.00	0.00
<i>TV News</i>							
NOS	-0.11	-0.13	-0.17	-0.14	-0.06	0.00	0.00
RTL Nieuws	-0.13	-0.07	0.07	-0.14	-0.04	0.00	-0.50
HvNL	0.08	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
<i>Current Affairs Programs</i>							
EenVandaag	-0.17	0.05	-0.13	-0.14	-0.15	0.00	-0.29
Nieuwsuur	-0.05	-0.03	-0.20	-0.09	-0.11	0.08	-0.09
<i>Infotainment programs</i>							
DWDD	-0.18	0.08	-0.20	-0.11	-0.06	0.07	-0.25
Pownews	0.25	-0.06	-0.20	-0.42	-0.33	0.00	-0.38
RTL Boulevard	0.32	0.33	-0.20	0.00	0.25	-	-
<i>Talkshow</i>							
Knevel en vd Brink	-0.07	0.00	0.10	0.00	-0.09	-0.05	0.00
Total	-0.04	0.01	-0.12	-0.10	-0.09	0.03	-0.14

Note: Average value of party evaluations in each medium. Scale runs from -1 to +1, where -1 denotes 'unfavorable', 0 'neutral' and 1 'favorable'.

Table 3.3: Party visibility in the news.

	Liberal party	Labour party	Freedom party	Christ. Dem. party	Socialist party	Democratic party	Green party
<i>Broadsheet Newspapers</i>							
Volkskrant	19%	15%	3%	7%	12%	2%	3%
NRC Handelsblad	22%	14%	6%	8%	9%	8%	5%
<i>Tabloid Newspapers</i>							
Telegraaf	22%	12%	6%	13%	10%	4%	1%
AD	31%	10%	8%	7%	8%	1%	1%
<i>Free Dailies</i>							
Metro	24%	10%	8%	12%	10%	6%	5%
Spits	15%	12%	14%	9%	8%	2%	6%
<i>TV News</i>							
NOS	18%	12%	6%	11%	15%	6%	2%
RTL Nieuws	24%	17%	7%	11%	14%	5%	3%
HvNL	15%	10%	7%	6%	7%	5%	5%
<i>Current Affairs Programs</i>							
EenVandaag	19%	14%	9%	13%	15%	9%	9%
Nieuwsuur	24%	16%	6%	11%	15%	6%	5%
<i>Infotainment programs</i>							
DWDD	22%	21%	3%	10%	13%	12%	4%
Pownews	12%	12%	9%	9%	6%	0%	5%
RTL Boulevard	58%	14%	11%	3%	4%	0%	0%
<i>Talkshow</i>							
Knevel en vd Brink	24%	9%	6%	12%	15%	7%	4%
Total	23%	13%	7%	9%	11%	5%	4%

Table 3.4 shows voters' perceptions on issue ownership at the aggregate level. It shows that there is no general agreement about issue ownership on most issues, except for the environment issue, which is clearly owned by Green party. Table 3.4 also shows that the incumbent Liberal party is on average most often perceived as issue owner.

The disagreement about issue ownership might partly be due to the endogeneity with party preference. A correlation analysis between how often respondents mentioned one and the same party as issue owner on multiple issues and party preference (measured as propensity to vote) showed a correlation of .61. This supports our decision to control for the tendency to name one (preferred) party as the owner of almost any issue.

Table 3.5: Logistic regression for effect of issues, party visibility and party evaluations in the news on vote change.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Issues				
Party evaluations		0.016 (0.006) [0.143]*	0.052 (0.010) [0.471]***	0.018 (0.007) [0.164]*
Party visibility		0.032 (0.006) [0.317]***	0.038 (0.006) [0.374]***	0.053 (0.010) [0.479]***
Sex	0.283 (0.150) [0.142]	0.309 (0.150) [0.154]*	0.274 (0.151) [0.137]	0.279 (0.151) [0.140]
Education	-0.018 (0.042) [-0.033]	0.001 (0.045) [0.003]	0.008 (0.045) [0.016]	-0.001 (0.045) [-0.001]
Age	-0.002 (0.004) [-0.037]	-0.005 (0.004) [-0.093]	-0.003 (0.004) [-0.046]	-0.003 (0.004) [-0.058]
Ideological proximity	0.381 (0.043) [0.935]***	0.373 (0.045) [0.915]***	0.373 (0.044) [0.916]***	0.360 (0.045) [0.882]***
Political interest	0.050 (0.048) [0.084]	-0.029 (0.050) [-0.048]	0.025 (0.051) [0.041]	0.004 (0.053) [0.006]
Partisanship		-1.015 (0.526) [-0.176]		-1.088 (0.525) [-0.189]*
Intercept	-6.971 (0.623)	-7.009 (0.641)	-7.108 (0.635)	-6.839 (0.655)
Log Likelihood	-699.632	-683.928	-674.095	-670.582
AIC	1411.263	1385.857	1364.191	1361.165

Note. N = 5355. To correct for each respondent being included seven times in the data set, robust standard errors clustered around each respondent are computed (N=765). Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Standardized coefficients are reported in brackets. ***p < 0.01. **p < 0.05. *p < 0.10.

Table 3.5 presents the effects of issues, party visibility and party evaluations in the news on electoral volatility^x. Model 1 includes only the socio-demographics and individual predispositions, which are assumed to be related to vote switching. We find that when people are ideologically close to a party, they are more likely to switch to that party.

In model 2, party visibility and issue news are added. We find a significant positive effect of issue news on vote switching. This confirms hypothesis 1, which stated that when one is exposed to a party's owned issue, one is more likely to switch to that party. We also find a significant positive effect of party visibility on vote switching, which confirms hypothesis 2. More exposure to news about a party, increases switching to that party. Partisanship has a negative effect on vote switching, meaning that people who name one preferred party as issue owner on every issue are more stable in their electoral choice. This effect is marginally significant in model 2 and significant at the .05 level in model 4.

Figure 3.1: The marginal effect of issues in the news on vote change.

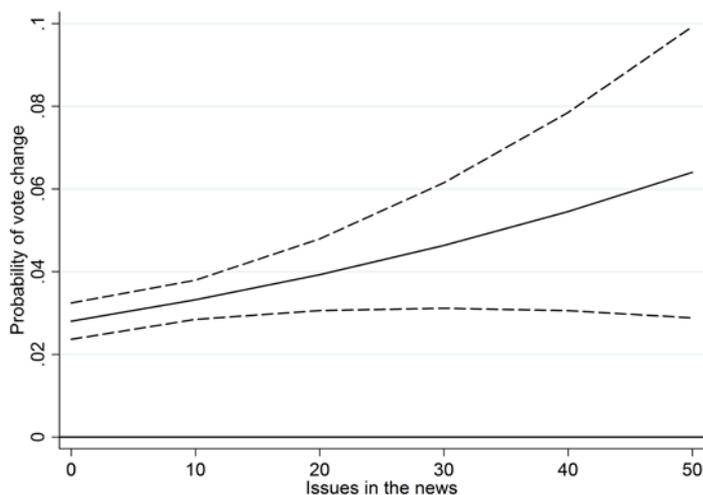
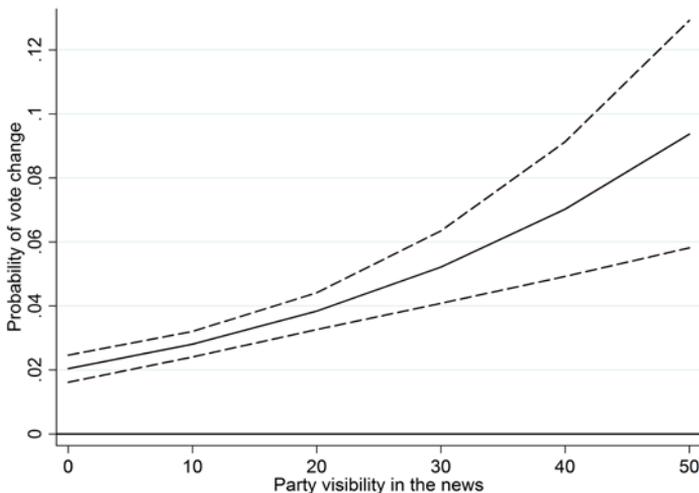


Figure 3.1 illustrates the marginal effect of issue news on vote change.^{xi} Among respondents with an average level of exposure to issue coverage ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 9.19$) the predicted probability of vote change was .03. By comparison, among respondents

whose exposure to issue news was two standard deviations above the mean the predicted probability of vote change was .04.

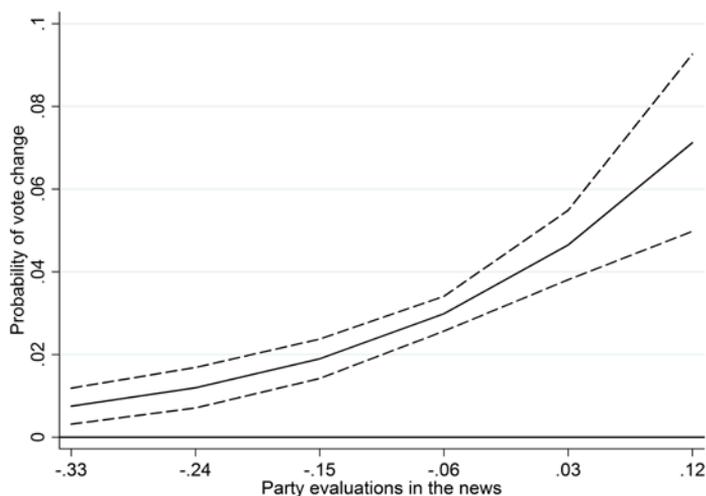
Figure 3.2 illustrates the marginal effect of party visibility on vote change. Among respondents with an average level of exposure to party visibility ($M = 12.01$, $SD = 9.83$) the predicted probability of vote change was .03. By comparison, among respondents whose exposure to party visibility was two standard deviations above the mean the predicted probability of vote change was .06.

Figure 3.2: The marginal effect of party visibility in the news on vote change.



Model 3 includes party evaluations and party visibility in addition to the control variables. In this model the effect of visibility on vote change is still significant. Party evaluations also have a significant positive effect on volatility, which confirms hypothesis 3. More exposure to positive news about a party increases switching to that party. Figure 3.3 illustrates the marginal effect of party evaluations on vote change. Among respondents with an average level of exposure to party evaluations ($M = -.07$, $SD = .09$) the predicted probability of vote change was .03. By comparison, among respondents whose exposure to positive party evaluations was two standard deviations above the mean the predicted probability of vote change was .07.

Figure 3.3: The marginal effect of party evaluations in the news on vote change.



The full model, model 4, includes all three media variables -issues, party visibility and party evaluations- in addition to the control variables.^{xii} In this model the effects of all three media variables remain significant: issues, party visibility and party evaluations do not cancel each other out when modeled together. We compare the standardized coefficients of the media variables within the full model to judge the relative importance of the media variables. The final model shows that the standardized coefficient for party visibility (0.330) is higher than the standardized coefficient for issues in the news (0.164). The graph in figure 3.2 also shows a steeper increase for the marginal effect of party visibility on vote change as compared to the marginal effect of issue news on vote change, which is displayed in figure 3.1. Party visibility in the news is thus a stronger predictor for vote switching than the news coverage of a party's owned issues. Additionally, visual inspection of figure 3.1-3.3 suggests that party visibility and party evaluations play a larger role than issue news. The standardized coefficient for party evaluations (0.479) is higher than the standardized coefficient for visibility (0.330) and even more than twice as high as the standardized coefficient for issues in the news (0.164). This indicates that positive coverage of a party is even more important for changing party preference than mere visibility in the media.

Discussion

The stability of voters' electoral choices has declined over the past decades and short-term factors like media coverage on issues, parties and candidates during the campaign have become more important for voters' decisions. Previous studies have shown that different types of campaign news can induce change in voting intentions (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Takens, 2013). However, research focused on explaining how the different aspects of campaign news lead to volatile voting behavior is lacking. Building on theories of agenda setting, priming, affective priming and issue ownership, this article examined how issues, party visibility and party evaluations in the news lead to vote switching.

The impact of issue, party visibility and evaluations on vote switching

We found that media exposure to issue news, linked through issue ownership, leads to vote switching. Thus, (1) when an issue received much attention in the media which a voter is exposed to, and (2) a voter considers a certain party to have the best solution for that issue, he or she will probably switch to that party. The results corroborate the assumptions of previous studies on an aggregate level (Kleinnijenhuis & De Ridder, 1998; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007) and suggest that issue ownership indeed underlies the effect of issue news on electoral volatility. The finding that issue news leads to vote switching challenges earlier findings by Takens (2013), who concluded that issue coverage stabilizes vote choice. Voters do not necessarily stay with their party when exposed to issue news. This study shows that it depends on *which* issues dominate the news and *which* parties are perceived to be owner of these issues.

It should be noted that issue ownership does not only link issue attention in the media to voting behavior, but issue ownership itself might also be influenced by media coverage (Kleinnijenhuis & Walter, 2014; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). Our content analysis of three weeks campaign news is too short to examine how issue ownership functions both as an outcome variable of media coverage and as an explanatory variable for voting behavior. Examining this causal chain might be an interesting step for future research.

With regard to evaluative news coverage about parties, we found that party evaluations in the media indeed have an impact on electoral volatility. Exposure to favorable news coverage about a party makes a voter more likely to switch to that party. We also found that more party visibility leads to more vote switching, which supports the traditional agenda setting and priming hypothesis. This is in line with previous research which showed that party visibility affects party preference positively (e.g., Hopmann et al., 2010; Oegema & Kleinnijenhuis, 2000). Independent from other factors, like issues and evaluations, mere visibility has a strong impact on vote switching. This highlights the necessity to take into account the (visibility of a) party when studying the impact of campaign news on vote change. Party visibility in itself can affect voter volatility in two ways. First, voters switch to the most salient party in the news, as a consequence of priming. Second, in a multiparty system, when media pay attention to multiple parties, more parties become a viable alternative to vote for.

Still, the effect of party visibility was weaker than the effect of party evaluations. In line with Hopmann et al. (2010) we believe that visibility can change voters' decisions, if this leads to a process where they consequently evaluate the performance of the visible parties and candidates. We find, that it is the evaluative aspect attached to a party that has a stronger effect on voting for or against a party. Different from visibility, evaluations can function as a heuristic that gives voters an indication on whether to evaluate a party positive or negative and whether to vote for that party. As such, this study provides support for the notion of affective priming (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2010; Sheaffer, 2007). This is consistent with the general assumption (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Takens, 2013) that contest and strategic coverage, by evaluating the performance of parties, leads to volatile voter behavior.

From a party perspective, the findings of our study show that there is merit in employing campaign strategies to get a party's owned issues in the news and to increase ones' visibility in the media, in order to gain electoral success. Especially smaller parties profit during an election campaign, since they are more visible than they are in routine periods (Strömbäck, 2016). However, our results show that evaluative news has the most impact. It are journalists who choose to portray a party positively or negatively, which indicates a certain degree of media interventionism (Strömbäck & Dimitrova,

2011). As such, an important aspect of campaign coverage that induces vote switching is one that parties are less able to influence.

One can wonder how we should interpret our findings from a normative perspective. According to most normative democratic theories, citizens should be well-informed on political issues and base their vote on their position on these issues and choose the party that best represents that position (i.e., Downs, 1957). Our finding that party evaluations have the strongest impact on vote switching could signal that volatile voters are indecisive and uninformed (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948), making random vote changes, using media's evaluation of a party as a heuristic to vote for or against a party. Yet, even if evaluations in the media function as a running tally, voters could still come to a 'correct' vote. Moreover, according to the 'interpreting' citizen model, voters can fulfill the expectations of democratic theory if these expectations are understood in terms of "citizens' ability to interpret political reality, as opposed to the demand of being well-informed" (Porto, 2007, p. 312). 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.

From a psychological perspective, it depends on how voters use issues or party evaluations in the decision making process (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). Both can function as either a heuristic or substantive argument when deciding which party to vote for. Party evaluations in the news can be regarded as a peripheral cue if voters mindlessly vote for the party that is portrayed most positively (Lodge et al., 1991). On the other hand, it might as well be that voters are actually politically involved and use this information to cast a strategic vote (Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2008). Likewise, voters who base their vote 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.

Meanwhile, this study methodologically advances previous research on the effect of media exposure on electoral volatility. While previous studies were mostly conducted on the aggregate level (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2010; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007; Sheaffer & Weimann, 2005), we were able to tell how voters switch their vote choice on a micro level by taking into account individual differences in media exposure, and by using individual measures of issue ownership. Yet, even though our rich data set allows us to test our hypotheses in a real life setting, we do acknowledge the difficulty of isolating the independent impact of the separate content characteristics with observational data. For instance, issue performance in the media is also part of evaluative news (Walgrave et al., 2009). Accordingly, there might be some overlap between our operationalization of evaluative news and issue news, causing the effect of issue news to be somewhat underestimated. Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to test to what extent the evaluative tone in the media refers to the issues discussed. Future research should therefore test our hypotheses in an experimental study in which the different elements (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. In such a design one can also examine whether these effects are moderated by individual predispositions like age, education, partisanship and political interest (Hillygus, 2010). Finally, one can wonder whether a part of the large impact of party evaluations is tautological in the sense that more support for a party leads to more positive party evaluations. However, this study examines the change in vote preference between two waves. The content analysis of campaign news is conducted prior to the second wave of the panel survey. This temporal order indicates that party evaluations in the news are more likely to influence party support instead of the other way around. This does not mean that evaluations between the two waves are not affected by an increase in support prior to the first wave (see Green-Pedersen, Mortensen, & Thesen, 2015). Whether the relation between evaluative news and party support is reciprocal can be addressed in future studies.

The focus on the Dutch 2012 election campaign ensures high validity, the opportunity to do more in-depth research, and overcomes the problem of heterogeneity

of cases (Gerring, 2006). 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, we are confident that our findings also extend to at least central and northern European countries. Future, comparative, studies could test this, and extend our research by including more than one election campaign, gaining more insight into the long-term changing relationship between media and political behavior.

In conclusion, this study adds important empirical evidence to our understanding of how specific aspects of campaign news affect electoral volatility. It extends earlier political scientific work on the same subject, which mainly focused on individual predispositions in explaining vote change and paid little attention to how people change their vote intention at the end of the funnel (Dassonneville, 2011; Kuhn, 2009; Van der Meer et al., 2013). As a consequence, campaign coverage as a possible explanation for vote switching has often been disregarded (e.g., Baker et al., 2006; Bybee et al., 1981). The results in this article clearly demonstrate that campaign news does matter. This study therefore not only contributes to research on electoral volatility, but also to the literature on campaign effects by showing, on the individual level, that people change their mind on which party to vote for as a result of exposure to campaign news (Erikson & Wlezien, 2012).

Notes

ⁱ For each wave, the initial 1,537 respondents were re-contacted.

ⁱⁱ Panel attrition does not seem to affect our findings. Most respondents dropped out between May and June. Those are probably the respondents who found it too much effort to participate in the whole panel survey. The respondents that we finally included in our study did not differ to a large extent from the dropouts on the most important variables, such as political interest and media use.

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

^{iv} Respondents who reported “refuse” and “no right to vote” on the dependent variable in the last wave were treated as missing.

^v For newspaper exposure we also included exposure to newspaper websites.

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

^{vii} For certain issues the number of cases per issue were too sparse to calculate inter-coder reliability properly. Two issues (income policy and public finance) were dropped from the analyses, because of low inter-coder reliability (values below .40). For two other issues (social security and education) the Krippendorff's Alpha was also fairly low. Yet, we decided to keep these issues in the analyses as Holsti's method showed high inter-coder reliability (values above .90). As robustness check, we also estimated models with only 7 issues (excluding also ‘social security’ and ‘education’ from the analyses). Results were similar to the ones reported in Table 3.5.

^{viii} Although scholars are still debating on the most reliable and valid measure of media exposure, they agree that this measure of exposure per medium overcomes at least some of the limitations of conventional news exposure measures (for a more elaborate discussion see, Dilliplane, Goldman, & Mutz, 2013; Price & Zaller, 1993; Slater, 2004).

^{ix} By employing the average exposure to media content instead of the sum, we control for potential overreporting of news exposure (see criticisms on self-reported news exposure measures, Prior, 2009).

^x We also estimated models with a slightly different operationalization of electoral volatility: a model with vote choice as outcome variable and previous vote choice as control variable and a model with vote probability as outcome variable and previous vote probability as control variable. Results are similar. In addition, we estimated the same model for a smaller sample, including only the respondents who actually changed their vote between the two waves ($N = 167$). Results for media variables are similar. Results for control variables are somewhat different: the impact of ideological proximity is no longer significant, education has a significant positive effect on vote switching and political interest has significant negative effect on vote switching.

^{xi} Figure 3.1-3.3 are based on the same model (model 4), enabling us to compare them to judge the relative importance of the media variables. The marginal effect of issue news (illustrated in figure 3.1) looks similar when estimated on the basis of model 2. This also applies to the marginal effects of visibility and party evaluations based on model 3.

^{xii} We ran an additional analysis to test the interaction effect between political interest and the media variables. The findings revealed that the effect of party visibility and party evaluations on vote change are not moderated by political interest. We did find a small, but significant interaction between political interest and issue news: only voters with high levels of political interest do not change their vote when exposed to an average level of issue news.

^{xiii} Standardized coefficients are obtained by using the command `listcoef` in STATA.

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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

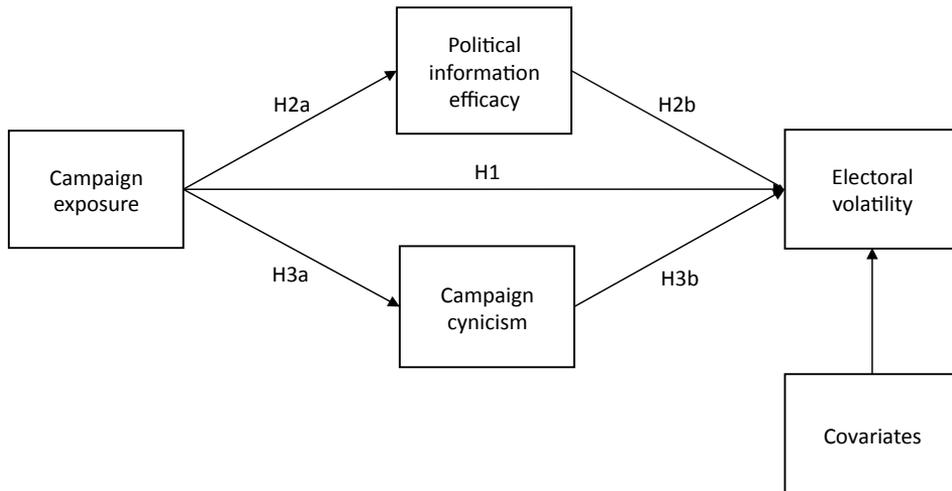
An alternative mechanism explaining the relationship between campaign exposure and vote switching is cynicism. According to the ‘frustrated floating voter’ hypothesis (Zelle, 1995), voters who are dissatisfied with democracy and have lower levels of trust are more likely to switch parties to voice their 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

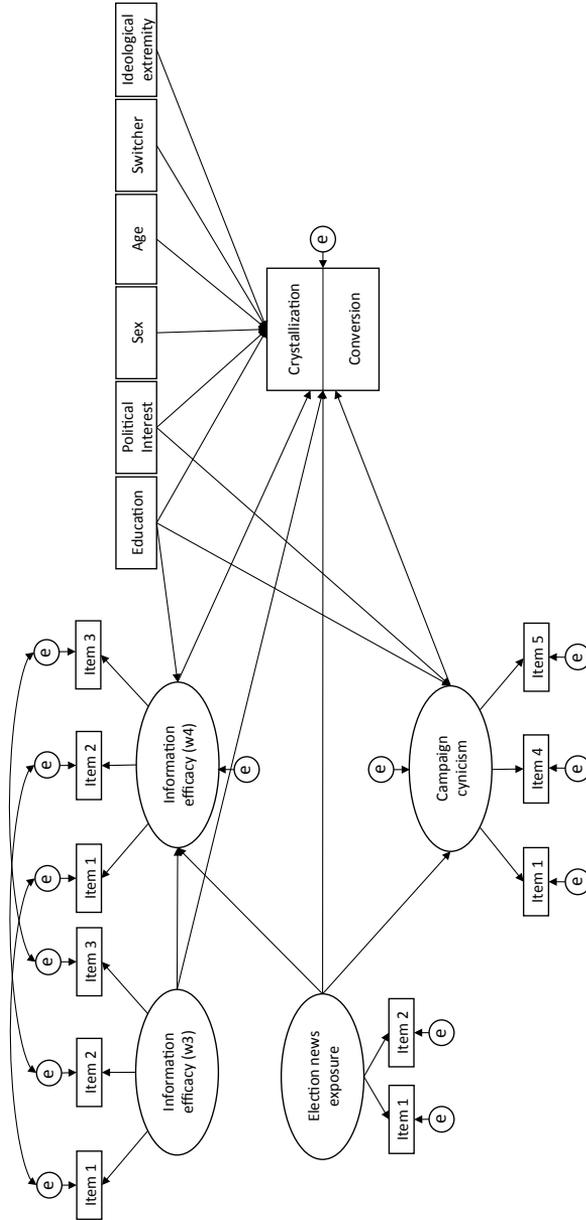
for H1a: exposure to the campaign leads to more vote switching. Hypothesis 1b stated that the effect of political campaign exposure on vote switching is stronger for crystallization than for conversion. First, table 4.1 shows that campaign exposure has a positive and significant effect on crystallization ($B = 0.209$, $SE = 0.087$, $p = 0.017$). 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	How often did you do any of the following during the past month? <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	During the European Parliamentary election campaign: <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	People like me don't have any say about what the EU does. <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.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

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, Vliegenthart, & 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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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.

Nederlandse Samenvatting

In de afgelopen decennia is het aantal zwevende kiezers in westerse democratieën aanzienlijk gestegen. Een toenemend aantal kiezers veranderen hun partijvoorkeur niet alleen tussen twee verkiezingen in, maar ook tijdens de verkiezingscampagne, wat leidt tot meer electorale volatiliteit. Het is van groot belang om inzicht te krijgen in de invloed van media op electorale volatiliteit, met name in Nederland waar sinds de jaren zestig de meest volatiele verkiezingen van West-Europa hebben plaatsgevonden.

Dit proefschrift onderzoekt hoe nieuws over de verkiezingscampagne electorale volatiliteit beïnvloedt. Hiermee draagt het bij aan kennis over de rol van de media in democratische en electorale processen. In het verleden hadden wetenschappers voornamelijk een pessimistische kijk op veranderlijke kiezers, ervan uitgaande dat kiezers niet goed geïnformeerd zijn over de politiek. Tegenwoordig hebben wetenschappers ook een meer optimistische kijk op electorale volatiliteit. Dit perspectief veronderstelt een geëmancipeerd electoraat bestaande uit geïnformeerde kiezers, die ervoor kiezen om van partij te wisselen op basis van rationele overwegingen. De mate waarin de burgers in staat zijn om een weloverwogen stemkeuze te maken hangt grotendeels af van de informatie waaraan zij worden blootgesteld. Dit proefschrift onderzoekt hoe zowel blootstelling aan campagnenieuws in het algemeen, als blootstelling aan specifieke aspecten van campagnenieuws, leidt tot veranderingen in stemvoorkeur. Op deze manier tracht dit onderzoek meer inzicht te krijgen in hoeverre burgers goed geïnformeerde stemkeuzes maken.

In drie empirische studies is onderzocht hoe verschillende soorten campagnenieuws, waaronder inhoudelijk nieuws over beleidskwesties en nieuws over peilingen, verschillende soorten volatiliteit beïnvloedt. Deze twee soorten volatiliteit zijn: *conversion*, het wisselen van de ene partij naar de andere partij, en *crystallization*, wanneer een kiezer zonder aanvankelijk partijvoorkeur uiteindelijk besluit te stemmen op een partij. Ook zijn de onderliggende mechanismen onderzocht die het effect van campagnenieuws op electorale volatiliteit mediëren, namelijk politiek zelfvertrouwen (*political information efficacy*) en politiek cynisme. Door deze drie aspecten te onderzoeken, wordt een empirisch gefundeerd antwoord gegeven op de algemene vraag hoe media electorale volatiliteit beïnvloedt.

Allereerst zijn de verschillende soorten campagnenieuws die verandering in stemvoorkeur veroorzaken bestudeerd. Uit *Hoofdstuk 2* blijkt dat zowel inhoudelijk

nieuws over beleidskwesties als nieuws over peilingen invloed hebben op electorale volatiliteit, maar beiden op een andere manier. Inhoudelijk nieuws leidt tot een stemkeuze voor kiezers zonder aanvankelijke partijvoorkeur (*crystallization*) of voor een stabiele stemkeuze voor kiezers met een bestaande partijvoorkeur. Nieuws over peilingen leidt tot een veranderende voorkeur van de ene partij naar de andere partij (*conversion*) of tot niet stemmen. Deze bevindingen zijn grotendeels gerepliceerd in *Hoofdstuk 3*, waarin de focus ligt op specifieke elementen van campagnenieuws. *Hoofdstuk 3* onderzoekt het effect van nieuws over beleidskwesties, zichtbaarheid van partijen en evaluaties over partijen in het nieuws op electorale volatiliteit. Uit het onderzoek blijkt dat alle drie de elementen van campagnenieuws leiden tot verandering van partijvoorkeur. Enerzijds laten kiezers zich in hun stemkeuze leiden door inhoudelijke informatie over beleidskwesties, en lijken daarmee dus een weloverwogen stemkeuze te maken. Anderzijds laten zij zich leiden door de evaluaties over een partij in het nieuws: hoe gunstiger het nieuws over een partij, hoe groter de kans dat een kiezer op deze partij stemt. Deze laatste bevinding is zorgelijk vanuit het normatieve perspectief dat kiezers zich goed moeten informeren over beleidskwesties en moeten stemmen vanuit rationele overwegingen.

In de tweede plaats is onderzocht of verschillende soorten volatiliteit op verschillende wijzen worden beïnvloedt door blootstelling aan campagnenieuws. In *Hoofdstuk 2* zijn campagne-effecten gevonden voor zowel *crystallization* als *conversion*. Waar aarzelende kiezers uiteindelijk een stemkeuze maken (*crystallization*) op basis van inhoudelijk nieuws over beleidskwesties, wisselen kiezers met een bestaande partijvoorkeur naar een andere partij (*conversion*) aan de hand van nieuws over peilingen. Media lijken dus zowel een informatieve rol te spelen door aarzelende kiezers te helpen om een stemkeuze te maken, maar ook een persuasieve rol te vervullen door kiezers aan te sporen hun partijvoorkeur te veranderen aan de hand van nieuws over peilingen. Uit *Hoofdstuk 4* blijkt dat blootstelling aan campagnenieuws wel leidt tot *crystallization*, maar niet tot *conversion*. Dit zou kunnen betekenen dat wisselende kiezers (*conversion*) een ongeïnformeerde stemkeuze maken, omdat ze hun stemkeuze schijnbaar niet door campagnenieuws, maar door andere factoren laten bepalen. Echter zijn deze veranderingen in partijvoorkeur niet geheel willekeurig: kiezers lijken voornamelijk te wisselen naar ideologisch verwante partijen. Bovendien lijkt campagnenieuws vooral

invloed te hebben op aarzelende kiezers (*crystallization*), die media gebruiken als een bron van informatie om tot een stemkeuze te komen. Deze aarzelende kiezers zijn niet ongeïnteresseerd en onwetend, maar maken juist een weloverwogen, geïnformeerde stemkeuze.

Ten derde zijn de onderliggende mechanismen getest die het effect van blootstelling aan campagnenieuws op electorale volatiliteit mediëren. Uit *Hoofdstuk 4* blijkt dat blootstelling aan campagnenieuws het zelfvertrouwen in politieke kennis (*political information efficacy*) van aarzelende kiezers versterkt. Deze toename in politiek zelfvertrouwen moedigt hen aan om uiteindelijk een stemkeuze te maken (*crystallization*). De bevinding dat aarzelende kiezers meer politiek zelfvertrouwen krijgen door blootstelling aan campagnenieuws en daardoor een stemkeuze maken, leidt tot de conclusie dat deze aarzelende kiezers inderdaad geïnformeerde keuzes maken. De bevinding dat politiek cynisme en campagne cynisme geen effect hebben op electorale volatiliteit bevestigt deze conclusie. Dit pleit voor de meer optimistische kijk op de rol van de media tijdens verkiezingen. In plaats van het opwekken van cynisme, wat leidt tot grillige veranderlijkheid, vervullen media een informatieve rol door het zelfvertrouwen in politieke kennis te vergroten, wat vervolgens leidt tot meer geïnformeerde stemmen.

Kortom, media hebben zowel direct als indirect invloed op electorale volatiliteit. Dit onderzoek laat zien dat de invloed van media op electorale volatiliteit tijdens verkiezingscampagnes, afhangt van de aard van de media-inhoud waaraan de kiezer wordt blootgesteld, en van de aard van volatiliteit. Dit proefschrift gaat uit van het normatieve perspectief dat in een goed functionerende representatieve democratie burgers worden geacht hun stem rationeel te overwegen en zich goed te informeren over relevante beleidskwesties. De bevindingen van dit proefschrift duiden niet op een crisis van de representatieve democratie. Hoewel er een aantal kiezers zijn die ongeïnformeerd tussen de ene en de andere partij lijken te wisselen, is er nog steeds een groot deel van het electoraat dat ofwel stabiel blijft, ofwel aarzelt en uiteindelijk een stemkeuze maakt door zichzelf te informeren over belangrijke politieke kwesties. Electorale volatiliteit is dus hoogstwaarschijnlijk een gevolg van een continu proces van kiezersemancipatie, waarbij kiezers campagnenieuws gebruiken als input om tot een weloverwogen, geïnformeerde stemkeuze te komen.

Author Contribution

Chapter 2

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

Researchers involved: Sabine Geers (SG), Linda Bos (LB), Claes H. de Vreese (CV), Philip van Praag (PP).

	Limited Contribution	Substantial Contribution
Conceptualization (Main idea, Theory)	LB, CV	SG
Methodology (Design, Operationalization)	LB, CV	SG
Data Collection		SG, LB, CV, PP
(Statistical) Analysis	LB	SG
Writing (original draft preparation)	LB, CV	SG
Writing (review and editing)		SG, LB, CV
Visualization		SG
Funding acquisition		LB, CV

Chapter 3

Title: Priming Issues, Party Visibility, and Party Evaluations: The Impact on Vote Switching.

Researchers involved: Sabine Geers (SG), Linda Bos (LB), Claes H. de Vreese (CV), Philip van Praag (PP).

	Limited Contribution	Substantial Contribution
Conceptualization (Main idea, Theory)		SG
Methodology (Design, Operationalization)		SG
Data Collection		SG, LB, CV, PP
(Statistical) Analysis	LB	SG
Writing (original draft preparation)		SG
Writing (review and editing)		SG, LB, CV
Visualization		SG
Funding acquisition		LB, CV

Chapter 4

Title: Informed Switchers? How the Impact of Campaign Exposure on Vote Change Depends on Political Information Efficacy.

Researchers involved: Sabine Geers (SG), Linda Bos (LB), Claes H. de Vreese (CV), Judith Möller (JM), Rachid Azrout (RA).

	Limited Contribution	Substantial Contribution
Conceptualization (Main idea, Theory)	LB, CV	SG
Methodology (Design, Operationalization)	LB, CV	SG
Data Collection		SG, CV, JM, RA
(Statistical) Analysis	LB	SG
Writing (original draft preparation)		SG
Writing (review and editing)		SG, LB, CV
Visualization		SG
Funding acquisition		LB, CV