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Why Are Belgian Voters Uncertain and Unstable in their Party Preferences? A Study on the Sources of Inter-Election Volatility, Campaign Volatility, Ballot Splitting and Late Decision Making at the Simultaneous Regional, Federal and European Elections of May 2014 in Belgium

Abstract

This paper aims to identify the causes of uncertainty and instability in voters' party preferences in the Belgian concurrent federal, regional and European elections of May 2014. To this end, we analyse the determinants of four phenomena associated with electoral instability, namely inter-election volatility, campaign volatility, split-ticket voting and late decision making. Using the data from the 2014 PartiRep Belgian Voter Survey, we test a series of hypotheses drawn from different theories often referred to in the literature to account for electoral change.

The results of our analysis indicate that party identification forms a barrier against the two types of volatility, ballot splitting and late deciding. Conversely, indecision in the start of the campaign proves to be a factor that induces uncertainty and instability in voting behaviour. Besides, we demonstrate that voters with a low level of political interest are more likely than highly interested voters to change their vote intention in the months preceding the election and to delay their electoral decision until the campaign is under way. Moreover, the degree of affection for the favourite party emerges as a strong predictor for each of the four phenomena under scrutiny, with a low level of affect towards the preferred party leading to instability in party preferences. Results also show that voters with a low level of external political efficacy are more inclined to switch from one party to another both between two consecutive elections and during the campaign. Finally, we find the ideological profile of the voter to significantly influence timing of the voting choice; late deciders are more likely to be drawn from the ranks of voters with moderate ideological orientations.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, strong empirical evidence has accumulated demonstrating that voting behaviour is changing in Western Europe. While the 1950s and 1960s had been characterised by a high degree of electoral stability in most European democracies, the last four decades have been marked by an increasing electoral instability (Crewe & Denver, 1985; Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Drummond, 2006; Mair, 2005; Pedersen, 1979). One nowadays observes larger changes in vote shares between two consecutive electoral contests, which makes elections results much more unpredictable than in the past. Some new parties appear and immediately make a significant breakthrough by garnering more than 10 % of the votes, but then fail to reach the threshold of 5 % in the subsequent elections. This higher level of variability in elections results seems to contradict Lipset and Rokkan's hypothesis of a freezing of European party systems (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967).

In line with the indications provided by aggregate elections statistics, individual-level survey data unambiguously show that European voters tend to switch parties between successive elections more often than they did some decades ago (Dalton *et al.*, 2000). Besides leading to an increase in the level of inter-election volatility, the growing uncertainty in voters' preferences also translates into other phenomena all related to each other. Voters shift their vote intention during the weeks preceding the election, take their voting decision late in the campaign and split their ballot between different parties when different electoral contests are held simultaneously (Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Lachat, 2007). All these signs of electoral change clearly challenge traditional models of voting behaviour formulated between the 1940s and the late 1960s which emphasized the image of a stable and loyal voter whose party choice was largely determined by long-term factors such as sociodemographic characteristics (Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968) or partisan allegiances (Campbell *et al.*, 1960).

The present paper examines the causes of this instability in citizens' party preferences by means of a case study on voting behaviour at the Belgian simultaneous federal, regional and European elections of 25 May 2014. More precisely, we seek to identify the factors that explain the four main phenomena associated with electoral change, namely inter-election volatility (i.e. vote switching between two consecutive elections), campaign volatility (i.e. shifts in vote intentions during a campaign), split-ticket voting and late decision making. To this end, we test a wide range of hypotheses which have been suggested in previous research to account for uncertainty in voters' party preferences. Drawing on the data from the two wave PartiRep Belgian Voter Survey, our study aims to empirically assess the predictive power of several factors which are argued to influence electoral volatility, ballot splitting and timing of the voting choice. These factors are party identification, indecision in the start of the campaign, political sophistication, political disaffection and ideological extremeness.

The Belgian case seems to provide an ideal setting for analysing the phenomenon of electoral change. After having experienced a high degree of electoral stability between the mid-1940s and the mid-1960s

because of the pillarization of the society, the Belgian political system has undergone some major transformations for the last half century. The depillarization process as well as the emergence of new parties have undermined the domination of the three main political forces (the socialist party, the Christian-democratic party and the liberal party) and have led to a gradual increase in the degree of party system fragmentation and to a rise in the level of electoral volatility (Deschouwer, 2012; Dewinter *et al.*, 2006). Belgian voters have become more uncertain and more unstable in their party preferences (Dewinter *et al.*, 2006; Walgrave *et al.*, 2010).

Furthermore, the elections of 25 May 2014 appear to be an ideal case for studying the phenomenon of ballot splitting in a multilevel political system. Indeed, these elections can be regarded as an exceptional political event; for the first time since 1999 and only for the second time in the Belgian electoral history, citizens were invited to vote simultaneously for the three highest tiers of government: the European, federal and regional levels. They could decide either to cast a straight-ticket vote in favour of a given party or to split their votes between two or even three parties across the different levels. In addition, it is worth noting that the 2014 elections took place in a quasi-experimental context in which the electoral system and the political supply (i.e. the competing parties) were the same for the three concurrent contests.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first part is dedicated to our theoretical framework and reviews different types of potential explanations for electoral volatility, split-ticket voting and late decision making. The second section presents the data and describes the operationalization of the dependent and independent variables. The third part deals with the results of our empirical study on the determinants of inter-election volatility, campaign volatility, ballot splitting and timing of the voting choice. The final section contains some concluding remarks on the implications of our findings and some suggestions for further research.

Theoretical framework

In this section, we consider five different types of possible explanations for electoral volatility, ticket splitting and late decision making.

The strength of partisan attachment is a first factor that may influence the stability of voters' party preferences. In the electoral research literature, party identification is considered as a key variable in understanding political attitudes and voting behaviours. According to the researchers of the Michigan school (Campbell *et al.*, 1960), partisanship provides the average citizen with an invaluable cue that allows him/her to deal with the complexity of politics, to interpret political stimuli and to make voting choices with a minimal cognitive effort. Campbell and his colleagues have further stressed the stabilizing effect of partisan attachments on electoral behaviours, by demonstrating that party identifiers almost invariably remained party loyalists voting in line with their partisanship. Party identification was thus thought to form a barrier against party defection, electoral volatility, ballot splitting and late

decision making. In the 1952 and 1956 US elections, voters who reported no partisan affiliation were found to be more inclined than party identifiers to be late deciders, to switch from one party to another between two consecutive electoral contests (Campbell *et al.*, 1960) and to split their ballot in simultaneous elections (Campbell & Miller, 1957).

In line with these early findings, a large number of recent studies clearly show that despite the ongoing process of partisan dealignment, party identification still has a stabilizing impact on voting choices. First, partisanship often proves to be a good, and maybe the best, predictor of electoral volatility. In previous research, voters without a partisan affiliation have been shown to be more volatile than those who felt close to a particular party (Crow, 2005; Dalton, 2013; Dassonneville & Dejaeghere, 2014; Lachat, 2007; Lisi, 2010; Soderlund, 2008). This observation holds for inter-election volatility as well as for campaign volatility. Second, strong empirical evidence has accumulated demonstrating that party identification increases the chance of casting a straight-ticket vote in simultaneous elections. In other words, ballot-splitters are more likely to be drawn from the ranks of voters who report no partisan attachment (Beck *et al.*, 1992; Crow, 2005; Dalton, 2013; Lachat, 2007; Rallings & Thrasher, 2003). Finally, many scholars have pointed at the existence of a strong relationship between partisan affiliation and timing of the voting choice, with independents being more prone than party identifiers to be late deciders (Cautrès & Jadot, 2007, 2009; Dalton, 2013; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Jaffre & Chiche, 1997; Lachat, 2007; Lisi, 2010; McAllister, 2002; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012).

Hypothesis 1A: *Party identification decreases inter-election volatility.*

Hypothesis 1B: *Party identification decreases campaign volatility.*

Hypothesis 1C: *Party identification decreases split-ticket voting.*

Hypothesis 1D: *Party identification decreases late decision making.*

Voter's indecision is a second factor that may induce uncertainty and instability in voting behaviour. Undecided voters who hesitate between two or three parties at the launch of the campaign usually display a high degree of variability in their party preferences during the weeks preceding the elections. Self-evidently, indecision in the start of the campaign leads to late decision making; compared to voters who enter the campaign with a clear vote intention in the start of the campaign in favour of one single party, those electors who still waver between different parties are much more likely to be last minute deciders (Cautrès & Jadot, 2007; Jaffre & Chiche, 1997). Besides having an impact on timing of the voting choice, indecision is argued to stimulate inter-election volatility. In previous studies, voters who reported having hesitated between different party options during the campaign were found to be more volatile than those who indicated having never considered voting for another party than the one they eventually endorsed (Flacco & Willocq, 2015; Jaffre & Chiche, 1997). Similarly, indecision is claimed to trigger campaign volatility, since undecided voters are, by definition, more prone than other voters to change

their vote intentions during the weeks preceding the elections. Using panel data, Walgrave and his colleagues (2010) observed that the probability of shifting party preferences during the weeks prior to the elections was the highest among voters who were undecided in the beginning of the campaign.

Finally, voter's hesitation between different political alternatives is often seen as one of the main sources of ticket splitting. For voters who vacillate between two or three parties that they almost equally favour, choosing what party to vote for on Election Day often proves to be a very difficult task. Yet, when different elections take place simultaneously, these hesitant voters can easily solve the dilemma of their indecisiveness by splitting their ticket. For instance, in their study on split-ticket voting at the 1979 and 1997 concurrent general and local elections in the United Kingdom, Rallings and Thrasher (2003) have noticed that citizens' indecision about their vote for the general elections played a crucial role in explaining ballot splitting between the two levels of government. Voters who had seriously considered casting a vote for another party than the one they eventually voted for at the general elections were considerably more inclined to split their ticket than were those who had never thought of voting for another party (Rallings & Thrasher, 2003).

Hypothesis 2A: Voters who hesitate between two parties in the start of the campaign are more likely to switch from one party to another between two successive elections.

Hypothesis 2B: Voters who hesitate between two parties in the start of the campaign are more likely to change their vote intention during the weeks preceding the elections.

Hypothesis 2C: Voters who hesitate between two parties in the start of the campaign are more likely to split their ballot.

Hypothesis 2D: Voters who hesitate between two parties in the start of the campaign are more likely to be late deciders.

The level of political sophistication is a third factor that may contribute to the explanation of instability in voting behaviour. Although over the last half century, scholars have widely investigated the influence of political sophistication on volatility, ticket splitting and timing of the electoral decision, their opinions still differ on the question whether a high level of political expertise increases or decreases uncertainty and instability in voters' party preferences. In their pioneer work, the researchers of the Columbia school have put forward the floating voter theory which holds that electoral instability is higher among voters with a low level of political sophistication (Berelson *et al.*, 1963; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968). More precisely, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues observed the existence of a negative relationship between the level of political sophistication and electoral volatility, with uninterested and uninformed citizens being more inclined than highly sophisticated voters to switch from one party to another between two consecutive elections or during a campaign. In addition, the results of their studies indicated the existence of a link between political sophistication and the time of vote decision; compared to early

deciding voters, late deciders displayed a lower level of interest in politics (Berelson *et al.*, 1963; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968). In a similar vein, scholars of the Michigan school demonstrated that the frequency of ticket splitting was the highest among those with a low level of political expertise. Electors who were not interested in politics and who did not care about the outcomes of the elections were shown to be more prone than other voters to split their ballot in concurrent elections (Campbell & Miller, 1957). In sum, these findings of the 1940s and 1950s sketched the negative image of an apathetic floating voter whose unstable electoral behaviour could be attributed to his/her lack of political interest and his/her indifference about the electoral process.

Since the 1980s however, the traditional floating voter hypothesis has been largely contradicted by the results of several studies which have pointed at the emergence of a new floating voter (Dalton, 2013; Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Habert & Lancelot, 1988). Based on these observations, the cognitive mobilization theory developed by Dalton suggests that uncertainty and instability in voting behaviour are the highest among highly sophisticated voters. According to this theory, the appearance of a sophisticated floating voter can be seen as a consequence of the process of cognitive mobilization. That process encompasses two distinct aspects: on the one hand, the spread of education which increases citizens' cognitive skills, and on the other hand, the development of mass media which decreases the cost of acquiring political information (Dalton, 1984; see also Inglehart, 1977). According to Dalton and his colleagues (2000), these two evolutions have led to the emergence of a growing group of sophisticated voters who possess the necessary skills and resources to manage the complexity of politics and who are able to make their own independent electoral choices. While less sophisticated voters would tend to rely on their "long-term" partisan loyalties to guide their voting decisions, cognitively mobilized voters would not have to use these partisan cues and would be more susceptible to "short-term" forces such as issues, candidates and past performances when choosing what party to vote for. Since "short-term" factors are, by definition, much more dynamic and much more erratic than partisan allegiances, voters with a high level of political sophistication should be more uncertain and more unstable in their voting preferences than less sophisticated voters (Dalton, 1984, 2007, 2013; Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Habert & Lancelot, 1988). Previous work has provided empirical evidence in support of the cognitive mobilization theory by showing that political sophistication could lead to higher levels of instability in voting behaviour. In several studies, better educated and well-informed citizens proved to be more volatile than less sophisticated voters (Dalton, 2007, 2013; Habert & Lancelot, 1988). Moreover, some authors have found that ballot-splitters were more likely to be drawn from the ranks of highly sophisticated voters (e.g. Beck *et al.*, 1992; De Vries & Tarrance, 1972; Maddox & Nimmo, 1981). Regarding timing of the voting choice, Dalton (2013) noticed that voters with a high level of political expertise were more inclined than other voters to delay their electoral decision until the last weeks of the campaign. While the traditional floating voter theory of the Columbia school describes an apathetic floating voter, the cognitive mobilization theory puts forward a rational voter making his/her electoral choices on the basis of issues

and past performances, who comes close to the image of the ideal citizen depicted in classic theories of democracy.

Even though the cognitive mobilization hypothesis has received some empirical support in the above mentioned literature, its validity is questioned by recent findings. Indeed, a large number of studies conducted in the last two decades clearly demonstrate that political sophistication does not contribute to volatility and late deciding, but to stability and early decision making. Less educated and poorly informed citizens are often found to be more prone than sophisticated voters to switch parties between two successive elections and to alter their vote intention during a campaign (Albright, 2009; Boy & Dupoirier, 1990; Jaffre & Chiche, 1997; Marthaler, 2008; Tiberj, 2015; Walgrave *et al.*, 2010). In addition, researchers frequently observe that electors with a low level of political sophistication are more prone than sophisticated voters to postpone their electoral decision until the campaign is under way (Cautrès & Jadot, 2007, 2009; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012). These recent findings largely concord with the traditional floating voter hypothesis (Berelson *et al.*, 1963; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968).

In this debate on the influence of political sophistication on the stability of party preferences, a third hypothesis developed by Converse (1962) assumes that political expertise has neither a stabilizing impact, nor a destabilizing impact on electoral behaviour. In fact, this hypothesis suggests that the relationship between the level of political sophistication and voters' volatility is curvilinear. Some scholars point at the existence of such a relationship, with the predicted probability of volatility being the highest among voters with a moderate level of political expertise (Converse, 1962; Dassonneville & Dejaeghere, 2014; Kuhn, 2009; Lachat, 2007; Van Der Meer *et al.*, 2015). As there are many contradictory results in the literature, we may not have clear expectations about what effect political expertise may have on electoral volatility, ticket splitting and timing of the voting choice. In the current paper, we test the floating voter hypothesis and thus expect political sophistication to have a stabilizing impact on voters' party preferences.

Hypothesis 3A: *Political sophistication decreases inter-election volatility.*

Hypothesis 3B: *Political sophistication decreases campaign volatility.*

Hypothesis 3C: *Political sophistication decreases split-ticket voting.*

Hypothesis 3D: *Political sophistication decreases late decision making.*

Political disaffection is another factor that is claimed to induce instability in voters' party preferences. Over the last two decades, several studies have pointed to the existence of a strong relationship between political dissatisfaction and voters' volatility. The notion of the frustrated floating voter was put forward by Zelle (1995). While the cognitive mobilization theory stresses the image of a rational and well-educated citizen whose relationship to parties is mainly grounded on instrumental considerations (e.g.

Dalton, 1984), the frustrated floating voter denotes a model of a citizen who wants to preserve an affective positive relationship to his favourite party. If this party eventually proves to be unworthy of his trust, disappointment about that individual party may elicit a feeling of frustration that translates into general dissatisfaction with the party system and the political system (Zelle, 1995). According to Zelle, this kind of political disaffection stimulates electoral volatility; the frustrated voter would shift to another party in the subsequent elections in order to express his dissatisfaction with political actors and institutions. In other words, whenever a voter switches from party A to party B between two consecutive elections, this should not be interpreted as a sincere vote in favour of party B, but rather as a protest vote against parties and the political system in its whole. "Thus, the frustrated floating voter does not primarily perform a positive change to the new party, but turns his back to his old party in a mood of protest." (Zelle, 1995, p: 332). As Zelle has pointed out, volatile voters display a lower level of trust in parties, a lower degree of satisfaction with democracy and a lower level of affection for their favourite party.

Using data from national elections studies in five countries (Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States), Dalton and Weldon (2005) also observed that distrust in parties induced higher levels of electoral volatility. In the Belgian case as well, political dissatisfaction has been found to trigger party switching. Dassonneville (2012) showed that external political efficacy strongly correlated with both inter-election volatility and campaign volatility during the 2009 regional elections. Similarly, trust in local and national institutions as well as external political efficacy emerged as good predictors of vote switching in the 2012 Belgian local elections (Dassonneville *et al.*, 2014).

Rather than focussing on long-term attitudes linked to general disaffection such as trust in parties, satisfaction with democracy or external political efficacy, Soderlund (2008) examined whether or not voter's volatility could be explained by a short-term attitude, namely retrospective evaluations of party performances. He demonstrated that the probability of vote switching was strongly influenced by retrospective evaluations of performances of the party the respondent had voted for in the previous elections. Citizens tended to remain loyal to the party they had previously voted for if they thought that it had done a good job during the inter-election period, and conversely, voters were inclined to change parties if they considered that their previously endorsed party had performed poorly (Soderlund, 2008). More importantly, the relationship between perceived party performances and vote switching remained robust even after controlling for the variables associated to general dissatisfaction with politics. According to Soderlund, this finding seems to indicate that shifts in voting behaviour should be interpreted as the products of rational judgments about past performances instead of being seen as symptoms of political frustration. This also means that disappointment about a particular party does not necessarily translate into general dissatisfaction with the political system, which contradicts the frustrated floating voter hypothesis (Soderlund, 2008).

Even though retrospective evaluation of party performances is claimed to be an important determinant of electoral volatility, we cannot include this short-term explanatory variable in our analysis because of the absence of data thereon¹. Consequently, we devote our attention to long-term attitudes that allow to measure voter's level of political satisfaction. In previous work, researchers have mentioned four long-term attitudes influencing the probability of vote switching: affect towards the favourite party, trust in parties, satisfaction with democracy and external political efficacy (Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Dassonneville, 2012; Zelle, 1995).

As it has been stated by some scholars (Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Soderlund, 2008; Zelle, 1995), party switching is not the only option offered to individuals who seek to express their disappointment about politics. Distrustful and dissatisfied citizens may also decide to abstain from voting. Volatile voters and non-voters seem to share the same characteristics regarding political dissatisfaction (Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Soderlund, 2008; Zelle, 1995). In fact, party switching and abstention can be seen as two different behavioural reactions that both reflect political disaffection. In Belgium however, citizens may not choose the second kind of behaviour, since the electoral law is characterised by a system of compulsory voting. This does not necessarily imply that vote switching is the only option left for Belgian dissatisfied voters. Indeed, split-ticket voting could be another type of electoral behaviour that could allow voters to express their political frustration. Although up so far, no empirical study has explicitly investigated the relationship between disaffection and ballot splitting, one may expect dissatisfaction with institutions and political actors to lead to higher levels of split-ticket voting. Voters with a low level of trust in parties should be more inclined to split their ballot, since they basically think that no party is worthy of receiving a straight-ticket. Besides, one may assume that some voters decide not to cast a straight-ticket in favour of their preferred party, because they are dissatisfied with its performances and want to send it a signal.

Finally, it seems that in the literature, there is a lot of uncertainty about what effect political disaffection might have on timing of the voting choice. Cautrès and Jadot (2007) noticed that voters with a low level of satisfaction with democracy were more prone than other voters to delay their electoral decision until a later stage of the campaign. By contrast, McAllister (2002) as well as Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous (1994) found no statistically significant relationship between political trust and time of vote decision. In our analysis, we expect political dissatisfaction to lead to late decision making. In sum, we hypothesize that political dissatisfaction may affect the four main aspects of electoral instability.

Hypothesis 4A: *Political satisfaction decreases inter-election volatility.*

Hypothesis 4B: *Political satisfaction decreases campaign volatility.*

¹ In the PartiRep survey questioner, respondents were not asked to evaluate the past performances of the party they had voted for in the previous elections.

Hypothesis 4C: *Political satisfaction decreases split-ticket voting.*

Hypothesis 4D: *Political satisfaction decreases late decision making.*

Voter's ideological profile is often argued to be one of the main determinants of electoral volatility, ticket splitting and timing of the voting choice. As far as volatility is concerned, some scholars state that ideological extremeness decreases the probability of switching from one party to another between two successive elections as well as during the campaign (Crow, 2005; Dassonneville, 2012; Lisi, 2010; Van Der Meer *et al.*, 2015). Voters with a radical ideological profile (i.e. those who place themselves to the far left or to the far right on the left-right axis) usually exhibit a high degree of stability in their political opinions and tend to report strong partisan attachments. Hence, they are expected to remain loyal to the same party elections after elections (Crow, 2005; Dassonneville, 2012; Lisi, 2010; Van Der Meer *et al.*, 2015). By contrast, citizens with a moderate ideological profile (i.e. those who place themselves close to the ideological centre) are thought to be less committed to a particular party and much more ambivalent to the different political alternatives that are available on the electoral market. As a consequence, they should be more inclined to change parties between two consecutive electoral contests and to alter their vote intention during the weeks preceding the elections. In line with these expectations, some recent studies have shown that the level of volatility was the highest among voters with moderate ideological orientations (Crow, 2005; Lisi, 2010; Van Der Meer *et al.*, 2015).

Besides, the degree of ideological extremeness is also claimed to influence time of vote decision. Some recent studies demonstrate that moderate voters are more likely than radical voters to delay their electoral decision until the campaign was under way (Cautrès & Jadot, 2007; Lisi, 2010). Since moderate voters are more ambivalent to the different political forces, they are more likely to waver between two or three party options until the last weeks (or even until the last days) of the campaign. By contrast, citizens with extremist ideological orientations are restricted to a particular party or at least to a particular side of the political spectrum. As a result, they are less prone to hesitation and usually make up their mind before the start of the campaign. The more radical the ideological profile of a voter is, the lower will be his/her probability of being a late decider (Cautrès & Jadot, 2007; Lisi, 2010).

Finally, the level of ideological extremeness is often seen as a good predictor of ballot splitting. The policy balancing theory developed by Fiorina (1996) in the US context holds that voter's location in the ideological space plays a crucial role in explaining split-ticket voting. According to this model, ticket-splitters in the US simultaneous presidential and congressional elections are centrist voters who seek to favour a divided electoral outcome, in such a manner that Democrats and Republicans would have to share the power (with one party holding the presidency and the other holding the Congress), thereby producing a situation of policy balancing and mutual control (Alesina & Rosenthal, 1995; Fiorina, 1996). In other words, ballot-splitters would be moderate citizens who perceive Democrats as being too liberal and Republicans as being too conservative and who therefore vote simultaneously for candidates

of both parties in order to obtain centrist policies associated with divided government. Following the policy balancing model, moderate voters who are located within the ideological space defined by the positions of the two main parties on the liberal-conservative axis would be more likely to split their ticket than would be voters who display a radical ideological profile and who are thus located outside the space between the two parties (Alesina & Rosenthal, 1995; Fiorina, 1996). This theory can be easily adapted to European countries; it only requires to replace the liberal-conservative dimension by the left-right axis which is more suitable to the classic structure of the European electoral competition. Although the policy balancing model was originally proposed to account for ballot splitting in the particular context of the US two party system, it maintains all its significance in European multiparty systems (Sanz, 2008).

In the Belgian fragmented party system, ideological spaces between the different political alternatives appear relatively small, since a large majority of the main parties (i.e. those represented in the federal parliament) exhibit a quite moderate ideological profile and are located close to the centre (see Walgrave *et al.*, 2010). Socialists and greens position themselves to the centre-left, Christian-democrats to the centre and liberals to the centre-right. Belgian voters with moderate ideological preferences are therefore located within the small ideological spaces defined by the positions of the main parties on the left-right axis. Thus, they have a plethora of possible party choices and should be prone to split their ticket between different parties when different elections take place simultaneously. Conversely, voters with a radical ideological profile are located outside the ideological spaces between the main political forces and most of the time, there is only one single party that is close to their position. As a consequence, they should be less inclined to split their votes.

Hypothesis 5A: *Ideological extremeness decreases inter-election volatility.*

Hypothesis 5B: *Ideological extremeness decreases campaign volatility.*

Hypothesis 5C: *Ideological extremeness decreases split-ticket voting.*

Hypothesis 5D: *Ideological extremeness decreases late decision making.*

Data and operationalization

Our study draws on data from the 2014 PartiRep Belgian Voter Survey which was conducted among a random sample of eligible voters from the two biggest regions of the country, namely Flanders and Wallonia². This dataset contains individual-level information on respondents' political attitudes and voting choices in the federal, regional and European elections of May 25. The PartiRep survey had a

² There are three regions in Belgium: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. In the present paper, Brussels is left out of our analysis, since Brussels citizens were not interviewed in the 2014 PartiRep Belgian Voter Survey. This panel survey was only conducted in the two other regions.

two wave panel design; it consisted of a pre-electoral wave and a post-electoral wave. The pre-electoral wave took place between March 20 and May 17 and consisted of face-to-face interviews. It resulted in a total of 2019 interviews (1011 in Wallonia and 1008 in Flanders). The post-electoral wave with telephone interviews was conducted between the end of May and the end of June. A total of 1528 respondents (702 in Wallonia and 826 in Flanders) participated in this second wave.

The dependent variables

This paper focusses on uncertainty and instability of voters' party preferences. In our analysis, we consider four main dependent variables: inter-election volatility, campaign volatility, split-ticket voting and late decision making. These four phenomena have often been interpreted as the most important symptoms of the growing instability of voting choices (Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Lachat, 2007). Scholars usually postulate that these four phenomena exhibit quite similar characteristics and that they can be explained by the same factors (Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Lisi, 2010). However, as it has been shown in previous research, the dynamics at work behind inter-election volatility slightly differ from the dynamics that underlie campaign volatility (Dassonneville, 2012; Lachat, 2007). Similarly, there may be some dissimilarities between the determinants of inter-election volatility and those of split-ticket voting (Crow, 2005). Yet, as far as our hypotheses are concerned, there is no theoretical reason to anticipate observing different results for the four dependent variables. Hence, we expect the two types of volatility, ballot splitting and late decision making to be affected in a quite similar manner by the different independent variables.

The first dependent variable, Inter-election volatility, can be defined as the fact of switching from one party to another between two consecutive elections (Lachat, 2007). In order to measure inter-election vote switching, we use reports of electoral behaviour in the 2014 federal elections as well as a recall question on respondent's voting choice in the previous federal elections held in 2010. Respondents who indicate having changed parties between the 2010 and 2014 elections are considered as volatile voters (coded 1), while those who report having supported the same party in these two successive elections are deemed as loyal voters (coded 0). Table 1 shows that 44.6 % of the respondents report having switched parties between 2010 and 2014. This proportion is somewhat higher than figures reported in previous studies on inter-election volatility in Belgium (Dewinter *et al.*, 2006; Walgrave *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, it is worth noting that the level of volatility between the 2010 and 2014 Belgian federal elections is definitely higher than the average level of inter-election volatility observed in other European countries (see Dassonneville & Dejaeghere, 2014; Flacco & Willocq, 2015).

Table 1: Proportion of inter-election switchers in the 2014 Belgian federal elections

Stable	Volatile	Total	n
55.4 %	44.6 %	100 %	1330

Our second dependent variable, campaign volatility, can only be operationalized by means of panel survey data which allow to compare respondent's vote intention in the start of the campaign with his/her actual voting choice on Election Day. The panel design of the PartiRep survey enables us to measure campaign volatility by examining whether respondents shifted their party preferences between the pre-electoral wave (vote intention in the beginning of the campaign) and the post-electoral wave (reported electoral behaviour). Campaign switchers are those respondents who report having cast a ballot in favour of another party than the one they intended to vote for in the start of the campaign. These voters are coded 1, whereas respondents whose vote intentions remained stable during the campaign are coded 0. Table 2 indicates that about a third (32.8 %) of the respondents have changed their mind during the months preceding the 2014 federal elections. Interestingly, this level of campaign volatility turns out to have been relatively high when compared to figures observed in other Western countries such as Canada, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland or the United States (Blais, 2004; Granberg & Holmberg, 1991; Lachat, 2007).

Table 2: Proportion of campaign switchers in the 2014 Belgian federal elections

Stable	Volatile	Total	n
67.2 %	32.8 %	100 %	1316

Our third dependent variable is split-ticket voting. Ballot splitting occurs when an elector simultaneously votes for at least two different parties in different elections that take place concurrently (Burden & Helmke, 2009). The 2014 Belgian elections of 25 May 2014 provide an ideal setting for studying the phenomenon of ticket splitting, since elections were held concurrently at three tiers of government: the federal, regional and European levels. This means that voters might choose either to cast a straight ticket in favour of a given party or to split their ballot in one of the following four ways: to vote for party A in the federal and regional elections and for party B in the European elections (I); to support party A in the federal contest and party B in the regional and European contests (II); to endorse party A at the federal and European levels and party B at the regional level (III); to vote for party A at the federal elections, for party B at the regional elections and for party C at the European elections (IV). The dependent variable is dichotomous; straight-ticket voters are coded 0, while those respondents who opted for one of the four kinds of ballot splitting are coded 1. Table 3 shows that 34.7 % of the respondents report having distributed their votes among different parties in the 2014 multilevel elections.

Table 3: Proportion of ticket-splitters in the 2014 Belgian simultaneous federal, regional and European elections

Straight-ticket voters	Ticket-splitters	Total	n
65.3 %	34.7 %	100 %	1387

This overall amount of ballot splitting appears to be very high, especially if we compare it to figures observed in the 2009 regional and European elections. In 2009, about one fifth (21 %) of the Belgian electorate voted differently in the regional and European contests (Van Aelst & Lefevere, 2011), but this lower level of ticket splitting can be partially explained by the fact that there were only two (and not three) concurrent elections. In fact, the level of split-ticket voting in 2014 should rather be compared to that observed during the 1999 elections which was also an exceptional electoral contest, with federal, regional and EP elections taking place simultaneously. In 1999, the proportion of ticket splitters among the electorate was 29 % (Maddens & Hajnal, 2002), which is quite comparable to the 2014 numbers. From a cross-national comparative perspective, Belgian figures seem somewhat higher than those observed in countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany (Heath *et al.*, 1999; Pappi & Thurner, 2002). However, such a comparison is far from being straightforward, because the level of ticket splitting depends on a series of factors such as the number of concurrent elections, the types of elections or the number of relevant parties competing in the different contests.

Finally, the fourth dependent variable designed to measure electoral instability is timing of the voting choice. The PartiRep survey questioner included the following question: When did you decide to vote for that party at the federal elections? Three options were offered to respondents: before the campaign; during the campaign; on Election Day. We have decided to merge the second and the third answer categories in order to transform the variable “time of the voting choice” into a dichotomous variable. Respondents who indicate having already taken their electoral decision before the start of the campaign are coded 0, whereas those who report having made up their mind during the campaign or on Election Day are coded 1. As can be read from table 4, a large majority (56.1 %) of the respondents indicate having made their voting choice during the campaign or on Election Day. The proportion of late deciders among the Belgian electorate is relatively high, but not exceptional in a cross-national comparative perspective (Cautrès & Jadot, 2009; McAllister, 2002; Lachat, 2007).

Table 4: Proportion of late deciders in the 2014 Belgian federal elections

Pre-campaign deciders	Late deciders	Total	n
43.9 %	56.1 %	100 %	1375

The independent variables

This study aims to identify the various factors which influence the two types of volatility, ballot splitting and late deciding. As explained above (see section “Theoretical framework and hypotheses”), we include in our models a large number of independent variables. The first one, party identification, is a dummy variable; it takes the value 1 for respondents who indicate feeling close to a particular party and the value 0 for other voters.

The second independent variable, indecision in the start of the campaign, is operationalized by means of two successive questions asked in the pre-electoral wave of the survey: If the federal elections were held today, what party would you vote for? Is there another party you seriously consider voting for? On the basis of the second question, we can distinguish two groups of voters. Respondents who considered voting for another party than the one they mentioned in their first vote intention are coded as undecided voters (=1), whereas those who did not consider voting for another party are coded as decided voters (=0).

The third explanatory factor, political sophistication is a complex and multidimensional concept that may be operationalized by means of a wide range of indicators (Lachat, 2007). In our analysis, we make use of two distinct indicators for measuring voter's level of sophistication, namely political knowledge and political interest. We construct an index of political knowledge that corresponds to the respondent's score on five political knowledge questions asked in the PartiRep survey. This score takes values ranging from 0 ("no political knowledge at all") to 5 ("high political knowledge"). The variable "political interest" consists of the self-reported level of interest in politics on an 11-point scale where 0 means "no interest at all" and 10 means "very much interest".

The fourth explanatory factor, political satisfaction, encompasses many distinct dimensions and, as a result, it can be operationalized by means of a large number of indicators (Soderlund, 2008; Zelle, 1995). We include four independent variables designed to assess respondent's level of political satisfaction: trust in parties, affect towards the preferred party, satisfaction with democracy and external political efficacy. Trust in political parties is measured through an 11-point scale where 0 means "no trust at all" and 10 means "complete trust". In order to assess affect directed to the favourite party, we look at respondent's self-reported degree of affection for each political party on an 11-point sympathy scale. The highest sympathy score given by the respondent to one out of all Belgian parties represents his/her level of affection for his/her preferred party. Satisfaction with democracy consists of respondent's self-reported degree of satisfaction with the Belgian democratic process on a 4-point scale where 1 means "not satisfied at all" and 4 means "highly satisfied". The variable "external political efficacy" is constructed by means of the average score on three items that deal with the feeling of external political efficacy (see these items in appendix). This average score may take values ranging from 1 ("low political efficacy") to 5 ("high political efficacy").

The last independent variable, "ideological extremeness", is constructed on the basis of the respondent's left-right self-placement on an 11-point scale where 0 means "the left" and 10 means "the right". For each respondent, we calculated the distance between his/her self-reported position on the left-right axis and the ideological centre (i.e. the position 5 on that axis). Thus, the level of ideological extremeness is ranging from 0 (when the position 5 was reported) to 5 (when the position 0 or 10 was reported).

Furthermore, we control for a series of sociodemographic characteristics³. First, we examine the effect of age which is often seen as one of the best predictors of electoral instability. According to the socialization model of the Michigan school (Campbell *et al.*, 1960), young citizens tend to frequently change their party preferences because of the weakness of their partisan ties and their high susceptibility to “short-term” forces. By contrast, older voters usually develop a strong feeling of party identification making them more loyal and more stable in their voting behaviour. A large number of studies demonstrate that young voters are more likely than their elders to be late deciders e.g. (Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994), to split their ticket (e.g. Van Aelst & Lefevere, 2011) and to switch from one party to another between two successive elections (e.g. Converse, 1969; Soderlund, 2008; Schmitt-Beck *et al.*, 2006; but see Van Der Meer *et al.*, 2015).

Second, we control for gender. In most studies, this variable has been found to have no significant effect on electoral volatility, ticket splitting and timing of the voting decision (e.g. Beck *et al.*, 1992; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Soderlund, 2008; Tiberj, 2015; Van Der Meer *et al.*, 2015; Walgrave *et al.*, 2010). Nevertheless, gender sometimes affects the stability of electoral behaviour; in some cases, women proved to be more volatile than men (e.g. Hayes & McAllister, 2001) while in other cases, men were more inclined to alter their party preferences (e.g. Van Der Meer *et al.*, 2015).

Our third socio-structural variable, the level of education, is often claimed to influence the stability of political opinions. The cognitive mobilization theory developed by Dalton holds that a high level of education leads to uncertainty and instability in electoral preferences (Dalton, 1984; Dalton *et al.*, 2000). While less educated voters rely on their party affiliation as a heuristic cue to guide their voting decision, highly educated citizens don't have to use such a cue, since they are able to make a well-motivated choice on the basis of short-term factors such as issues and evaluation of past performances. As a result, these sophisticated voters are expected to exhibit the highest probability of party switching, ballot splitting and late decision making (Dalton, 1984, 2007; Dalton *et al.*, 2000; De Vries & Tarrance, 1972).

Respondent's household income level constitutes the fourth socio-demographic control variable. The social modernization theory assumes that the highest frequency of vote switching is to be found among new middle class citizens (Zelle, 1995). Working class voters as well as upper class voters usually develop a class-based political identity that makes them loyal to the parties defending the interests of their respective social groups - namely socialist parties for the former and “bourgeois” parties for the later. Contrary to these voters, new middle class citizens don't identify themselves with a particular social stratum and are much less concerned with class polarization. Consequently, they appear more likely to waver between the different political alternatives (Van Der Meer *et al.*, 2015; Zelle, 1995). Using data from the Dutch panel survey 1VOP, Van Der Meer and his colleagues (2015) have demonstrated the existence of a non-linear relationship between income level and electoral volatility,

³ For the coding details of the control variables, see Appendix.

with the highest probability of changing vote intentions among voters with an intermediate income level. Therefore we take the squared value of the variable “household income level” in order to capture the expected curvilinear effect.

Fifth, we control for religiousness which is argued to have a stabilizing effect on voting behaviour (Dassonneville, 2012; Kuhn, 2009). Church communities form relatively homogenous groups whose members usually share the same values, the same beliefs and the same norms. Individuals who are socialized in these communities are thus exposed to many ideologically consistent messages which reinforce the stability of their political opinions. Hence, voters with a high frequency of religious service attendance are less likely to shift party preferences than other voters (Dassonneville, 2012; Kuhn, 2009; but see Van Der Meer *et al.*, 2015).

The last socio-demographic factor considered in our study is respondent’s region (Wallonia or Flanders). This variable must always be taken into account when analysing electoral behaviour in Belgium, because the Belgian political spectrum is totally split into two separate party systems: a French-speaking one and a Dutch-speaking one. Francophone parties only field candidates lists in Wallonia (the southern part of the country) and in Brussels, whereas Dutch-speaking parties only field candidates lists in Flanders (the northern part of the country) and in Brussels. As it has been stated in previous research (Dassonneville, 2012; Van Aelst & Lefevere, 2011; Walgrave *et al.*, 2010), one may expect the levels of both volatility and split-ticket voting to be higher in Flanders than in Wallonia. The reason therefor is that the amount of vote switching and ballot splitting may be strongly influenced by the number of relevant parties competing in the elections. The higher the effective number of parties, the higher will be the levels of volatility and ticket splitting (Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Burden & Helmke, 2009; Pedersen, 1979; Roberts & Wibbels, 1999). To the extent that the Dutch-speaking party system displays a higher degree of fragmentation than its French-speaking counterpart, Flemish voters should be more unstable in their voting preferences than Walloon citizens.

Results

Given that the four dependent variables are dichotomous, we perform four binary logistic regressions in order to test our hypotheses. First, let us focus on the determinants of inter-election volatility. Table 5 presents the results of our regression analysis.

It appears that most coefficients are in the expected direction. The hypothesis that party identification decreases inter-election volatility (H1A) is totally confirmed. Voters who feel close to a particular party prove to be less volatile than those who report no partisan attachment. Results also provide empirical evidence in support of the hypothesis that voter’s indecision in the start of the campaign stimulates inter-election vote switching (H2A). Respondents who wavered between two party options at the launch of the campaign are more inclined to change parties between two consecutive elections than are those who entered the campaign with a clear vote intention in favour of one single party. By contrast, the hypothesis

that political sophistication has a stabilizing effect on electoral behaviour (H3A) must be rejected, since none of the two indicators of sophistication (political interest and political knowledge) is significantly related to inter-election volatility.

Table 5: The determinants of inter-election volatility in the 2014 Belgian federal elections (binary logistic regression)

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Region (1=Wallonia; 2=Flanders)	.196	.136	.150	1.216
Gender (1=Male; 2=Female)	.296	.140	.035	1.344
Age	-.023	.004	.000	.978
Level of Education (ref.: No degree or elementary school degree)				
Unfinished high school degree	-.393	.288	.172	.675
Finished high school degree	-.334	.279	.231	.716
Higher education or university degree	-.336	.291	.249	.715
Religious Practice (ref.: Never)			.788	
Less than once a Year	-.176	.257	.493	.838
Once a year	-.370	.292	.205	.691
Several times a year	-.013	.188	.947	.987
Once a month	-.169	.429	.695	.845
Several times a month	.218	.390	.576	1.244
At least once a week	-.275	.307	.371	.760
Household's income level	-.033	.029	.254	.967
Political interest	.005	.030	.873	1.005
Political knowledge	-.024	.053	.651	.976
Ideological extremeness	.010	.048	.829	1.010
Party identification	-.715	.146	.000	.489
Indecision in the start of the campaign	.576	.146	.000	1.779
External political efficacy	-.199	.090	.026	.819
Trust in parties	-.075	.043	.081	.927
Satisfaction with democracy	-.069	.112	.539	.934
Affection for the favourite party	-.125	.048	.009	.883
Constant	2.780	.509	.000	16.113
Nagelkerke R ² = .155				

As can be read from table 5, the hypothesis that vote switching is triggered by political disaffection (H4A) can only be partially confirmed, because only two out of the four variables measuring political satisfaction (namely external political efficacy and affection for the favourite party) have a significant

impact on inter-election volatility. In accordance with the frustrated floating voter theory, voters with a low level of external political efficacy are more likely to switch parties between two successive elections. As expected, we also find the degree of affection for the preferred party to negatively correlate with volatility. The higher the level of affect towards the favourite party, the lower will be the probability of being volatile. It is noteworthy that the two other indicators of political satisfaction, namely trust in parties and satisfaction with democracy, do not reach an acceptable level of statistical significance. Besides, regression results lend no support for the hypothesis that ideological extremeness leads to stability in voting behaviour (H5A). Indeed, there is no statistically significant relationship between ideological extremeness and inter-election volatility.

Regarding the control variables, results indicate that only two socio-structural characteristics, gender and age, have a significant effect on vote switching. Interestingly, women prove to be more volatile than men. Unsurprisingly, age has a stabilizing impact on voting behaviour; young voters are more prone than their elders to switch from one party to another between two consecutive elections. The other sociodemographic characteristics (the level of education, household income, region and religious practise) are not significantly related to inter-election vote switching.

Then, we may examine the factors explaining campaign volatility. The results of our multivariate analysis are displayed in table 6. At first glance, it seems that the mechanisms accounting for campaign volatility do not differ fundamentally from the mechanisms underlying inter-election volatility. Regression results clearly confirm the validity of the hypothesis that party identification decreases the chance of shifting vote intentions during the campaign (H1B). Voters who report no partisan affiliation are considerably more inclined than party identifiers to change their mind during the weeks preceding the elections. Hypothesis 2B also receives strong empirical support, since voter's indecision in the start of the campaign emerges as a strong predictor of campaign volatility. Indeed, respondents who hesitated between two parties in the beginning of the campaign are much more likely to be campaign switchers than are those who had a clear vote intention for one single party.

More interestingly, our results seem to partially confirm the hypothesis that political sophistication contributes to the stability of vote intentions (H3B). In line with our expectations, political interest has a significant effect on campaign volatility and this effect is in the negative direction. The higher the level of political interest, the more stable will be the vote intention. This finding does contradict the cognitive mobilization thesis (Dalton, 1984), but is consonant with the traditional floating voter thesis of the Columbia school which holds that the level of volatility is the highest among uninformed and uninterested voters (Berelson *et al.*, 1963; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968). Nevertheless, hypothesis 3B can only be partially confirmed, because the other indicator of political sophistication, political knowledge, is not significantly associated with campaign volatility.

Table 6: The determinants of campaign volatility in the 2014 Belgian federal elections (binary logistic regression)

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Region (1=Wallonia; 2=Flanders)	-.030	.142	.832	.970
Gender (1=Male; 2=Female)	.281	.146	.055	1.324
Age	-.012	.005	.007	.988
Level of Education (ref.: No degree or elementary school degree)				
Unfinished high school degree	.361	.305	.237	1.434
Finished high school degree	-.062	.299	.836	.940
Higher education or university degree	.483	.310	.119	1.621
Religious Practice (ref.: Never)				
Less than once a Year	.143	.265	.590	1.153
Once a year	-.192	.318	.547	.826
Several times a year	-.137	.199	.493	.872
Once a month	-.579	.493	.240	.561
Several times a month	.157	.405	.698	1.170
At least once a week	.077	.314	.807	1.080
Household's income level	-.032	.030	.298	.969
Political interest	-.071	.030	.019	.931
Political knowledge	.022	.055	.690	1.022
Ideological extremeness	-.033	.051	.522	.968
Party identification	-.763	.149	.000	.466
Indecision in the start of the campaign	.630	.157	.000	1.878
External political efficacy	-.377	.096	.000	.686
Trust in parties	-.043	.045	.335	.957
Satisfaction with democracy	-.030	.117	.801	.971
Affection for the favourite party	-.153	.048	.001	.858
Constant	2.404	.516	.000	11.069
Nagelkerke R ² = .184				

Similarly, the hypothesis that shifts in vote intentions during the campaign can be attributed to political disaffection (H4B) is partially confirmed, since two out of the four indicators of political satisfaction (external political efficacy and affection for the preferred party) significantly correlate with campaign switching. As expected, voters with a low level of external political efficacy are more prone than other voters to switch from one party to another during the weeks preceding the elections. Furthermore, we may point at the existence of a strong negative relationship between affection for the favourite party and campaign volatility. The higher the level of affection for the preferred party, the lower will be the probability of changing vote intention in the weeks preceding the elections. By contrast, the two other

variables measuring the level of political satisfaction (namely trust in parties and satisfaction with democracy) have no significant impact on campaign switching. As can be seen in table 6, the hypothesis that ideological extremeness leads to stability in vote intentions (H5B) must be rejected, since the effect of ideological extremeness does not reach the conventional level of statistical significance.

As far as the sociodemographic characteristics are concerned, one may observe that only age significantly influences campaign volatility. Once again, age has a stabilizing impact on party preferences, with young citizens being more likely than their elders to change their mind during the weeks preceding the elections. The other socio-structural variables (gender, region, the level of education, religious practise and household income) are not significantly related to campaign switching.

After having examined the factors explaining both types of volatility, we look at the determinants of split-ticket voting in the 2014 simultaneous federal, regional and European elections. Table 7 presents the results of our multivariate analysis. To put it bluntly, the large majority of the potential predictors included in the model have no significant effect on ballot splitting. Only two out of the five hypotheses on ticket splitting receive empirical support. Compared to the two types of volatility (see above) and late decision making (see below), the phenomenon of split-ticket voting seems to be somewhat more difficult to account for.

Table 7: The determinants of split-ticket voting in the 2014 Belgian simultaneous federal, regional and European elections (binary logistic regression)

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Region (1=Wallonia; 2=Flanders)	.093	.136	.497	1.097
Gender (1=Male; 2=Female)	.214	.140	.127	1.239
Age	-.014	.004	.002	.986
Level of Education (ref.: No degree or elementary school degree)				
Unfinished high school degree	.375	.323	.246	1.455
Finished high school degree	.168	.315	.594	1.183
Higher education or university degree	.546	.323	.091	1.726
Religious Practice (ref.: Never)				
Less than once a Year	-.086	.264	.744	.917
Once a year	-.558	.316	.078	.572
Several times a year	-.015	.186	.937	.985
Once a month	-.288	.427	.500	.750
Several times a month	.264	.382	.490	1.301
At least once a week	.057	.309	.853	1.059
Household's income level	.025	.029	.392	1.025
Political interest	.037	.030	.217	1.038
Political knowledge	.034	.053	.522	1.034

Ideological extremeness	-.015	.049	.765	.985
Party identification	-.495	.147	.001	.609
Indecision in the start of the campaign	.767	.150	.000	2.152
External political efficacy	-.007	.091	.940	.993
Trust in parties	-.058	.044	.184	.944
Satisfaction with democracy	-.001	.113	.991	.999
Affection for the favourite party	-.128	.048	.007	.880
Constant	.789	.491	.108	2.201
Nagelkerke R ² = .108				

First, the hypothesis that party identification decreases the probability of ballot splitting (H1C) is totally confirmed; voters without a partisan affiliation are much more prone than party identifiers to split their votes in concurrent elections. Regression results also provide strong empirical evidence in support of the hypothesis that voter's indecision in the beginning of the campaign induces split-ticket voting (H2C). Indeed, ballot-splitters are more likely to be found in the ranks of voters who hesitated between two parties for the federal elections in the start of the campaign. On the basis of this finding, we may suggest that some Belgian voters decided to split their ballot in the 2014 elections, because they wavered between two party options at the federal level and dividing their votes between these two parties across the three electoral contests was an easy way to solve the dilemma of their indecision.

As evident from table 7, our results lend no support for the hypothesis that political sophistication leads to higher levels of straight-ticket voting (H3C). None of the two indicators of sophistication (political knowledge and political interest) has a significant effect on ticket splitting. Moreover, the results of our analysis do not allow to confirm the hypothesis that political dissatisfaction induces split-ticket voting (H4C). Of the four variables linked to political satisfaction, only affection for the preferred party significantly influences ballot splitting. As expected, voters with a low level of affect towards their favourite party are more inclined than other voters to divide their votes between different parties in concurrent elections. By contrast, the other indicators of political satisfaction (trust in parties, external political efficacy and satisfaction with democracy) are not significantly associated with ticket splitting. In addition, we must reject the hypothesis that ideological extremeness decreases the chance of voting for different parties in simultaneous elections (H5C). Admittedly, the effect of ideological extremeness on ballot splitting is in the expected negative direction, but it is far from achieving statistical significance.

For the sake of completeness, it is worth noting that most sociodemographic factors have no significant impact on split-ticket voting. In fact, age proves to be the only sociodemographic characteristic that significantly correlates with ticket splitting. As it has already been shown in many previous studies,

young citizens are more inclined than their elders to divide their votes between different parties in simultaneous elections.

Finally, we analyse the determinants of late decision making in the 2014 federal elections. Regression results are reported in table 8. It is worth emphasizing that the statistical model dedicated to late decision making exhibits a relatively strong explanatory power (with a Nagelkerke R² = 0.228 against 0.184 for the model devoted to campaign volatility, 0.155 for the model on inter-election volatility and 0.108 for the model devoted to split-ticket voting).

Table 8: The determinants of late decision making in the 2014 Belgian federal elections (binary logistic regression)

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Region (1=Wallonia; 2=Flanders)	.130	.138	.346	1.138
Gender (1=Male; 2=Female)	.392	.141	.006	1.479
Age	-.021	.004	.000	.979
Level of Education (ref.: No degree or elementary school degree)				
Unfinished high school degree	.023	.292	.936	1.024
Finished high school degree	-.240	.284	.397	.786
Higher education or university degree	.293	.296	.323	1.340
Religious Practice (ref.: Never)				
Less than once a Year	-.081	.264	.758	.922
Once a year	.124	.288	.666	1.132
Several times a year	-.082	.192	.670	.922
Once a month	-.402	.415	.333	.669
Several times a month	.767	.399	.054	2.153
At least once a week	.072	.295	.807	1.075
Household's income level	.006	.030	.845	1.006
Political interest	-.087	.030	.004	.917
Political knowledge	.018	.053	.728	1.019
Ideological extremeness	-.114	.048	.017	.892
Party identification	-.875	.154	.000	.417
Indecision in the start of the campaign	.901	.146	.000	2.461
External political efficacy	-.091	.091	.315	.913
Trust in parties	-.039	.044	.375	.962
Satisfaction with democracy	.168	.115	.144	1.182
Affection for the favourite party	-.149	.049	.002	.861
Constant	2.935	.523	.000	18.828
Nagelkerke R ² = .228				

As evident from the table, the results of our analysis unambiguously confirm the validity of the hypothesis that party identification decreases the chance of being a late deciding voter (H1D). Compared to party identifiers, voters who report no partisan attachment display a higher probability of delaying their electoral decision until the campaign is under way. Not surprisingly, hypothesis 2D also receives strong empirical support, since we find indecision in the start of the campaign to be a strong predictor of late decision making. Voters who wavered between two party options at the launch of the campaign are considerably more likely to be late deciders than are those who entered the campaign with a clear preference for one single party.

More interestingly, the hypothesis that political sophistication leads to early decision making (H3D) can be partially confirmed. In accordance with our expectations, we observe the presence of a strong negative relationship between the level of political interest and late decision making. In other words, voters who are interested in politics tend to make up their mind before the start of the campaign, whereas less interested voters are more prone to take their electoral decision during the weeks preceding the elections. This finding concords with the conclusions of several recent studies which demonstrate that late deciders are more likely to be drawn from the ranks of voters with a low level of political interest (Cautrès & Jadot, 2007, 2009; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012). Nonetheless, hypothesis 3D cannot be totally confirmed, because the other indicator of political sophistication, political knowledge, is not significantly related to timing of the voting choice.

Similarly, the hypothesis that political disaffection induces late deciding (H4D) can only be partially confirmed, since only one out of the four indicators of political satisfaction, namely affection for the preferred party, has a significant impact on time of vote decision. As hypothesis 4D suggests, citizens with a low degree of affection for their favourite party are more inclined to be late deciding voters. None of the three other variables measuring political satisfaction (external political efficacy, trust in parties and satisfaction with democracy) reaches the conventional level of statistical significance. As can be seen in table 8, the results of our analysis provide strong empirical evidence in support of the hypothesis that voters with a radical ideological profile are less prone than moderate voters to postpone their electoral decision until the campaign is under way (H5D). As expected, there is a negative relationship between the level of ideological extremeness and late decision making. The more radical the ideological orientations of a voter are, the lower will be his/her probability of being a late decider.

Furthermore, it appears that two sociodemographic characteristics, gender and age, significantly influence timing of the voting choice. Women tend to make up their mind later than men do. Age negatively correlates with late deciding, which means that old voters are more likely than young voters to take their electoral decision before the start of the campaign. By contrast, the other socio-structural factors (the level of education, religious practise, region and household income) are not significantly associated with timing of the voting choice.

Conclusion

Like many other Western countries, Belgium has witnessed a gradual increase in the level of electoral instability over the past few decades. Individual-level data on voting behaviour at the 2014 simultaneous federal, regional and European elections allow to observe several phenomena that reflect the growing uncertainty of Belgian voters' party preferences. Almost 45 % of the respondents report having switched from one party to another between the 2010 and 2014 federal elections and about a third of the voters indicate having altered their vote intention during the campaign. In addition, 35 % of the respondents have split their ticket between different parties across the three electoral contests and a large majority of the citizens have delayed their voting decision until the campaign was under way.

The present paper has examined the causes of this instability in voters' party preferences at the 2014 Belgian multilevel elections. More precisely, we have attempted to identify the determinants of the four phenomena linked to electoral instability, namely inter-election volatility, campaign volatility, ballot splitting and late decision making. Different types of potential explanations have been simultaneously tested for each of these four dimensions of the voting decision process. Most hypotheses have received at least partial empirical support. First, the results of our analysis clearly demonstrate that party identification forms a barrier against the two types of volatility, ticket splitting and late deciding. Citizens who report no partisan affiliation are more inclined than party identifiers to make their voting choice late in the campaign, to split their ticket and to switch from one party to another between two consecutive elections as well as during the weeks preceding the electoral contest.

Second, we find indecision in the start of the campaign to be a reliable predictor for each of the four dependent variables; voters who seriously hesitated between different parties at the launch of the campaign are much more prone than other voters to be late deciders, ballot-splitters, campaign switchers and inter-election switchers.

Third, our results partially confirm the hypothesis that political sophistication leads to stability in party preferences. While political knowledge has no significant impact on the dependent variables, the other indicator of sophistication, political interest, significantly influences campaign volatility as well as late deciding and its effect is in the expected negative direction. This means that voters with a low level of political interest are more likely than highly interested voters to change their vote intention during the weeks preceding the elections and to delay their voting decision until the campaign has begun.

Fourth, the hypothesis that political dissatisfaction induces uncertainty and instability in electoral behaviour can also be partially confirmed. Affection for the favourite party proves to be the only indicator of political satisfaction that significantly correlates with the four dependent variables. In accordance with the frustrated floating voter theory, citizens with a low degree of affect towards their preferred party are more inclined to switch parties, to split their ballot and to postpone their electoral decision until a later stage of the campaign. Moreover, we have observed the existence of a strong

negative relationship between external political efficacy and both types of volatility. The higher the level of external political efficacy, the lower will be the probability of changing parties during the campaign or between two successive elections. By contrast, the other indicators of political satisfaction, namely trust in parties and satisfaction with democracy, are not significantly associated with the four phenomena under scrutiny.

Finally, the results of our study indicate that ideological extremeness has a significant effect on timing of the voting choice. Indeed, pre-campaign deciders are more likely to be found among voters with a radical ideological profile, whereas late deciders are more likely to be drawn from the ranks of moderate voters. However, it should be pointed out that ideological extremeness is not significantly related to the other dependent variables, namely ticket splitting and the two types of volatility.

In the light of these findings, we can conclude that the four phenomena under scrutiny appear to be underlain by quite similar mechanisms. Campaign switchers, inter-election switchers, ticket-splitters and late deciders seem to share several characteristics. For each of the four phenomena associated with uncertainty in party preferences, we may sketch the image of a young floating voter who reports no partisan attachment, who wavers between different political alternatives in the start of the campaign and who displays a low degree of affection for his/her favourite party. Nevertheless, we may also point at some major dissimilarities between the determinants of the four phenomena, especially regarding the roles of political interest, external political efficacy and ideological extremeness. Furthermore, the results of our analysis clearly show that among the four main dimensions of electoral instability, split-ticket voting is, without any doubt, the most difficult one to explain.

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Appendix

Coding details of the independent variables

Region: Wallonia = 1; Flanders = 2

Gender: Male = 1; female = 2

Age: In years calculated by subtracting the reported year of birth from 2014 (the year that survey was conducted in).

Level of education: Respondent's level of education is a categorical variable coded as follows. No degree or elementary school degree = 1; unfinished high school degree = 2; finished high school degree = 3; higher education or university degree = 4

Religious practise: Self-reported frequency of religious service attendance on a 7-point scale with values ranging from 1 ("never") to 7 ("at least once a week").

Household's income level: Respondents were asked to indicate what category of income level their household belonged to. There were 11 categories of household's income level ranging from category 1 ("less than 1000 Euros a month") to category 11 ("more than 6000 Euros a month").

Political interest: Self-reported level of interest in politics on an 11-point scale where 0 means "no interest at all" and 10 means "very much interest".

Political knowledge: Respondent's score on five knowledge questions that were asked in the PartiRep survey. Scores were thus ranging from 0 ("no knowledge") to 5 ("high knowledge").

Ideological extremeness: This variable is constructed on the basis of the respondent's left-right self-placement on an 11-point scale where 0 means "the left" and 10 means "the right". For each respondent, we calculated the distance between his/her self-reported position on the left-right continuum and the ideological centre (i.e. the value 5 on that continuum). Thus, the variable "ideological extremeness" takes values ranging from 0 (when 5 was reported) to 5 (when 0 or 10 was reported).

Party identification: Party ID is a dichotomous variable which takes the value 1 for respondents who feel close to a particular party and the value 0 for other voters.

Indecision in the start of the campaign: This variable is operationalized by means of two successive questions asked in the pre-electoral wave of the PartiRep survey. If the federal elections were held today, what party would you vote for? Is there another party you seriously consider voting for? On the basis of the answers to the second question, we distinguish between two groups of voters. Respondents who consider voting for another party are coded as undecided voters (coded 1), whereas citizens who do not consider voting for another party are coded as decided voters (coded 0).

Affection for the favourite party: Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of affection for each political party on an 11-point sympathy scale. The highest score given by a respondent to one out of all parties represents his/her degree of affection for his/her favourite party.

Trust in parties: Self-reported level of trust in political parties on an 11-point scale where 0 means "no trust at all" and 10 means "complete trust".

Satisfaction with democracy: Self-reported level of satisfaction with the democratic process on a 4-point scale with values ranging from 1 ("not satisfied at all") to 4 ("highly satisfied").

External political efficacy: This variable consists of the respondent's average score on three items dealing with external political efficacy.

- *During the election campaign, parties make many promises, but eventually, nothing happens anyway.*
- *An average citizen may have an impact on politics and what the government is doing.*
- *Voting makes no sense; parties do what they want anyway.*

For each item, respondents gave a score on a 5-point scale with values ranging from 1 ("totally agree") to 5 ("totally disagree"). These scores were converted to so that all low scores meant "low external political efficacy" and high scores meant "high external political efficacy". We then calculated the average score taking values ranging from 1 ("low external political efficacy") to 5 ("high external political efficacy").