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Patterns and Sources of Electoral Volatility and Late Decision Making in Belgium

Abstract

This paper aims to identify the causes of uncertainty and instability in voters' party choices at the 2014 Belgian federal elections. To this end, we analyse the determinants of three phenomena often depicted as three dimensions of party dealignment: inter-election volatility, campaign volatility and late decision making. Using panel data from the *2014 PartiRep Belgian Voter Survey*, we simultaneously test old and new hypotheses in order to explain these three aspects of electoral change. The results of our analysis indicate that strategic considerations can cause voters to change their vote intention in the weeks preceding the election and to delay their electoral decision until the campaign is under way. Similarly, candidate-centred voting is found to increase campaign volatility and late decision making. By contrast, preferential voting significantly reduces the levels of uncertainty and instability in voting choices. Those voters who cast a preferential vote for one or several candidate(s) are less volatile and less likely to be late deciders than are those who cast a party list vote. Besides, it appears that voters with a low level of political interest are more prone than highly interested voters to change their vote preferences during the campaign and to make their electoral decision in the last weeks before the election. Moreover, the degree of affection for the favourite party emerges as a strong predictor of inter-election volatility and late deciding; electors with a low level of affect towards their most preferred party are more likely to shift their votes from one election to the next and to make their voting choice a short time before Election Day. Results also show that voters with a low level of external political efficacy are more inclined than other voters 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 election 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 from election to election 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). Electoral volatility, late deciding and split-ticket voting are often considered as different dimensions of a broader phenomenon which is commonly termed "party dealignment". 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 still 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 uncertainty and instability in voting choices in the context of the 2014 Belgian federal elections. More precisely, we seek to identify the factors that explain three phenomena associated with party dealignment: inter-election volatility (i.e. vote switching between two consecutive elections), campaign volatility (i.e. shifts in vote intentions during the campaign) and late decision making (i.e. taking one's vote decision in the last weeks before the election). To this end, we simultaneously test a series of old and new hypotheses on the determinants of these three phenomena. Drawing on panel data from the *2014 PartiRep Belgian Voter Survey*, our study aims to empirically assess the explanatory power of several factors that are argued to influence both types of volatility as well as timing of the vote decision. These factors are the following: strategic considerations, candidate-centred voting, political sophistication, political satisfaction and ideological extremeness. Our analysis should bring some new insights into the causes of the three phenomena under scrutiny. On the basis of

our results, we will also investigate whether or not inter-election switchers, campaign switchers and late deciding voters share the same sociodemographic and attitudinal characteristics. This will allow us to test the validity of the claim that late decision making and the two types of volatility are underlain by the same causal mechanisms and that they can thus be regarded as three different components of the same phenomenon, namely partisan dealignment. In the final step of our analysis, we will attempt to identify the determinants of party dealignment as such, by using an index of dealignment which distinguishes those electors who display at least one of the three dimensions of dealignment from the rest of the electorate.

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).

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 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 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 inter-election volatility, campaign volatility and late decision making.

Strategic voting is a first factor that is thought to induce uncertainty and instability in voting choices. Choosing what party to vote for undoubtedly becomes a more complex task when the voter decides to take strategic considerations into account than when this is not the case. Increasing the number of factors incorporated into the vote decision calculus can – if voters behave rationally – be expected to lead to a greater indecision and a greater instability in their party choices. Before dealing with the relationship between tactical voting and electoral instability, it is necessary to define the concept of strategic voting. Students of electoral behaviour usually distinguish two types of individuals: sincere voters and strategic voters. Sincere voters are those individuals who simply cast a ballot for their most preferred party regardless of the consequences of their choice on election outcomes, seat allocation and government

formation. Strategic voters, on the other hand, are those individuals who decide to cast a vote for a less preferred party option, in order to influence the outcome of the election or the government formation (Blais *et al.*, 2001). In fact, the main goal of these voters is to prevent a party that they dislike from winning the elections. Being aware of the relative competitive position of each party, strategic voters acknowledge that their favourite party has little or no chance of success. Since they want to avoid wasting their votes, they refrain to vote for that party and decide to cast a ballot for a less preferred party that seems to be the most capable of defeating their least preferred party option (Blais *et al.*, 2001). There are two main types of tactical voting: *seat-maximizing* and *government-maximizing* voting (Cox, 1997). The willingness to maximize seats means that the voter cares about the consequences of his/her voting choice on seat allocation. In this perspective, a vote is wasted when it is cast for a party that seems to have no chance of garnering the vote share necessary to win seats. The other type of strategic voting, namely *government-maximizing* voting, means that the voter wants to choose a party that can play a role in the process of government formation. In other words, he/she wants to avoid wasting his/her vote on a party that is not capable of influencing the coalition formation, even if it can win seats (Cox, 1997).

As mentioned above, there are theoretical reasons to expect that strategic voting will increase the level of instability in voters' party preferences. In their seminal study on electoral change in Western Europe between 1885 and 1985, Bartolini and Mair (1990) hypothesize that institutional incentives for tactical voting lead to higher levels of inter-election volatility. They suggest a causal mechanism linked to changes in the viability of parties, which can occur between two consecutive elections. A party does experience a change in viability when its ability (real or perceived) to win seats or to affect the process of government formation changes between two successive elections (Bartolini & Mair, 1990). The explanation for why strategic incentives can stimulate vote switching is straightforward. In systems that provide no incentive for strategic voting, electors can switch from one party to another for substantive reasons, namely shifts in their own political opinions or changes in parties' policies or platforms from one election to the next. In countries where the electoral system provides strategic incentives, voters can switch parties not only for these substantive reasons, but also for tactical reasons related to changes in the viability of parties between two successive elections. Thus, the level of inter-election volatility should be higher in systems that provide strategic incentives. According to Bartolini and Mair, rational voters who factor tactical considerations into their vote decision should be more likely than sincere voters to change parties from one election to the next. For instance, if a strategic voter thinks that the party he/she voted for in the previous elections has become less capable of winning seats or influencing government formation, he/she will probably abandon that party and choose a more viable party option. In contrast, if a sincere voter believes that the party he/she previously endorsed has become less competitive, he/she will probably remain loyal to that party regardless of the efficacy of his/her vote in terms of seat allocation or coalition formation. Admittedly, Bartolini and Mair's argument appears to be quite convincing from a theoretical standpoint, but it must be pointed out that the results of their analysis

did not provide empirical evidence in support of their hypothesis. In her comparative study on the determinants of inter-election volatility in 22 countries, Bischoff (2013) further examined the relationship between strategic voting and party switching. Choosing another type of operationalization than that offered by Bartolini and Mair, she managed to demonstrate that tactical voting did induce instability in voters' partisan choices. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Bartolini and Mair' study as well as Bischoff' study were only based on aggregate-level data and that their findings must therefore be interpreted with caution due to the methodological problem of the ecological fallacy.

Until now, no previous research based on individual-level data has explicitly investigated whether vote switching can be triggered by strategic considerations related to voters' perceptions about the viability of parties in terms of influencing government formation. The present paper precisely aims to determine whether citizens' evaluations of the coalition potentials of parties¹ may have an effect on the stability of their voting behaviour. We hypothesize that the probability of inter-election volatility can be strongly influenced by the way in which voters evaluate the coalition potential of the party they had voted for in the previous elections. According to this hypothesis, if a voter considers that the party he/she voted for in the previous election has a good chance of joining the government coalition after the coming election, he/she should continue to vote for that party. Conversely, if a voter thinks that the party he/she endorsed in the previous election has little chance of entering the governmental coalition after the coming election, he/she should desert that party and cast a ballot for another party that exhibits a better coalition potential.

Hypothesis 1A: The higher the perceived coalition potential of the party the respondent voted for in the previous election, the lower will be the probability of switching parties between two successive elections.

Just like the relationship between strategic voting and inter-election volatility, the relationship between strategic voting and campaign volatility remains an understudied topic. In the literature, the empirical evidence establishing the existence of this relationship is rather scant. Using panel data from the Canadian Elections Studies, McGregor (2012) found strategic voters to be much more likely than sincere voters to change their vote intention over the course of the campaign. In their study on campaign volatility in Germany, Blumenstiel and Plischke (2015) drew a somewhat different conclusion. The results of their analysis also revealed that strategic voters tended to switch more often than their sincere counterparts, but the difference between these two groups of voters were very small and did not achieve statistical significance. The present paper should bring some new insights into whether tactical considerations can cause voters to change their vote intention in the weeks preceding an election. We hypothesize that voters can decide to change their vote preferences during the campaign due to strategic considerations related to their perceptions about the coalition potential of the party they intend to vote for at the launch of the campaign. If a voter believes that the party he/she plans to vote for at the start of

¹ As explained earlier, two types of tactical voting can be distinguished: *seat-maximizing* and *government-maximizing* voting. In our analysis, we will not examine *seat-maximizing* voting. We will focus on *government-maximizing* voting.

the campaign displays a relatively good coalition potential, he/she should stick to his/her vote intention and cast a ballot for that party on Election Day. By contrast, if a voter considers that the party he/she intends to vote for at the beginning of the campaign has little or no chance of joining the governmental coalition, he/she should be more likely to change his/her mind during the campaign period and to shift to a more viable party option.

Hypothesis 1B: *The higher the perceived coalition potential of the party the respondent planned to vote for at the start of the campaign, the more stable will be the vote intention in the weeks preceding the elections.*

Besides inducing a greater instability in vote preferences, strategic considerations are also argued to lead to late decision making. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that citizens' evaluations of the relative competitive positions of parties may have an effect on the time at which they take their electoral decision. Kirkpatrick (1972) has shown that some American voters postpone their electoral decision for the presidential elections until the last weeks of the campaign, when they think that their most preferred candidate has little chance of winning. In their study on the Dutch case, Irwin and Van Holsteyn (2008) have attempted to demonstrate that some late deciders delay their voting choice, because they are waiting to gather information on how other voters intend to vote. These voters are not seeking new or additional substantive information concerning parties, candidates and policy proposals. Instead, they are waiting for strategic information on the expected election outcomes, the expected size of the parliamentary groups of parties and the likelihood of the emergence of various possible coalitions (Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2008). Some voters make their voting choice not only on the basis of their own political preferences, but also on the basis of their competitive expectations. Since a large number of public opinion polls are usually conducted during the campaign period, strategic information on the relative competitive positions of parties is frequently updated in the weeks preceding the elections (Andersen, 2000). Consequently, voters who factor these strategic considerations into their vote decision will tend to make up their mind late in the campaign. In contrast, those individuals who do not base their electoral decision on their competitive expectations will be much less susceptible to opinion polls results or to any other source of strategic information and, as a result, they will be less inclined to postpone their voting choice until the last weeks before Election Day. Consistent with these expectations, recent studies conducted in Germany and Canada have clearly shown that strategic voters are more likely than sincere voters to delay their vote decision until the campaign is under way (Blumenstiel & Plischke, 2015; McGregor, 2012). Given these previous findings, we hypothesize that the probability of having a late timing of the vote decision will be higher for tactical voters than for their sincere counterparts.

Hypothesis 1C: *Strategic voting increases late decision making.*

Candidate-centred voting is a second factor that may be related to uncertainty and instability of voting choices. Existing research on electoral change tends to assume that the growing electoral instability in

Western democracies can be attributed to major shifts in the relative weights of the determinants of voting behaviour, with voters becoming more susceptible to “short-term” factors in general and candidate evaluations in particular (Dalton *et al.*, 2000; McAllister, 2007). In the 1950s and 1960s, “long-term” variables such as social class, religious denomination and party identification largely determined voting choices. Over the last four decades, the influence of these factors on electoral behaviour has gradually decreased due to the erosion of traditional social cleavages and the weakening of partisan attachment (Crewe & Denver, 1985; Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Franklin *et al.*, 2009; Rose & McAllister, 1986; Walczak *et al.*, 2012). As the impact of “long-term” variables is waning, voters nowadays are claimed to be more vulnerable to “short-term” forces such as issues, candidates, campaign events and past performances, when choosing what party to vote for (Crewe & Denver, 1985; Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Franklin *et al.*, 2009; Rose & McAllister, 1986; Walczak *et al.*, 2012). It goes without saying that these “short-term” forces are much more variable than “long-term” ones. While sociodemographic characteristics and party identification usually remain quite stable over time, issues, candidate evaluations, government performances and specific campaign events change from one election to the next. Hence, the growing importance of “short-term” factors in the voting decision process is argued to have made voters more uncertain, more unpredictable and more unstable in their party choices (Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Franklin *et al.*, 2009; Rose & McAllister, 1986).

In the past two decades, scholars have devoted considerable attention to a “short-term” factor in particular, namely candidate evaluations or party leader evaluations. A large number of studies have been dedicated to the personalization of electoral behaviour and have attempted to measure the effect of candidate evaluations and leader evaluations on voters’ party choices. This rich literature has produced contradictory conclusions. On the one hand, the results of some analyses lend support for the personalization thesis which posits that the relative importance of candidate/leader evaluations in the electoral decision process has grown over the last decades (Bean & Mughan, 1989; Lobo & Curtice, 2015; Garzia, 2014). On the other hand, several authors have found that the influence of candidate/leader orientations on voting choices has not increased over time (Curtice & Holmberg, 2005; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2011; Karvonen, 2010; King, 2002). Given these divergent findings, the question whether there is a trend towards the personalization of voting behaviour remains unclear. Irrespective of their opinion on this question, all scholars seem to agree with the general idea that citizens’ evaluations of candidates and party leaders can be seen as an important predictor of party choices and that at least some voters make their electoral decisions on the basis of their candidate/leader orientations instead of relying on partisan cues. As Miller and Niemi have pointed out, leaders as well as candidates come and go and their level of popularity may sharply rise or decline from one election to the next (Miller & Niemi, 2002). One may therefore expect that those individuals who base their party choices on their candidate/leader evaluations will display a higher level of instability in their vote preferences than will those who mainly rely on party cues to guide their electoral decisions.

Some researchers have recently explored the relationship between candidate-centred voting and party dealignment. Two longitudinal studies on the German electorate showed that the impact of leader evaluations on vote decisions was much stronger among voters without partisan attachments than among those who reported having a party identification (Brettschneider & Gabriel, 2002; Brettschneider *et al.*, 2006). In his study of the personalization of voting behaviour in six European countries between 1961 and 2001, Karvonen (2010) analysed the link between leader effects and inter-election volatility by looking at whether the intensity of party leader evaluations was stronger among voters who switched parties between two consecutive elections than among those who remained loyal to the same party. Surprisingly, he found that it was party loyalists rather than party switchers who had more intense opinions about party leaders (Karvonen, 2010). In her study on Italy, Spain and Portugal, Lobo (2015) has also examined the relationship between leader-oriented voting and inter-election volatility, by comparing the relative importance of leader evaluations in the voting decision process among party switchers and loyal voters. In Italy and Portugal, vote switchers were found to be more susceptible to leader effects than loyal voters, whereas in the Spanish case, the difference between the two groups of voters proved to be very small and not statistically significant (Lobo, 2015). Using data gathered in the context of the 2007 and 2011 Finish parliamentary elections, Soderlund (2012) has explicitly investigated whether candidate-oriented voting could increase the probability of switching from one party to another between two successive elections. The results of his analysis demonstrated that voters who considered candidates as being more important than parties for their voting choice were more volatile than those who mainly based their electoral decision upon party evaluations rather than candidate evaluations (Soderlund, 2012). Similarly, in their comparative study on the relationship between leader-centred voting and electoral volatility in 32 recent elections held in 19 European countries, Flacco and Willocq (2015) observed that leader-oriented voters were more likely than party-oriented voters to switch parties from one election to the next. On the basis of these previous findings, we have decided to test the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2A: The more candidate-centred the vote decision, the higher will be the probability of changing parties between two consecutive elections.

To the extent that candidate-centred voting is assumed to lead to a greater instability of vote preferences, it is also reasonable to expect that the level of campaign volatility will be higher among candidate-oriented voters than among party-oriented voters. Yet, the results of a recent study on German campaign switchers did not corroborate the hypothesis that voters who regard candidates as being the most important reason for their electoral choice are more likely than other voters to change their vote intention in the weeks preceding the election (Blumenstiel & Plischke, 2015). With the exception of that study, there has so far been very few work done on the relationship between candidate-centred voting and campaign volatility. In our analysis, we attempt to shed light on this understudied topic. Our hypothesis is the following.

Hypothesis 2B: *The more candidate-centred the vote decision, the higher will be the probability of changing one's vote intention over the course of the campaign.*

Furthermore, it has been suggested in previous research that candidate-oriented voting could affect timing of the electoral decision. Blumenstiel and Plischke (2015) pointed out that voters who regarded candidate evaluations as the most important factor for their voting choice were more inclined than other voters to delay their final decision until the last weeks of the campaign. In her study on the relationship between leader effects and timing of the electoral decision in Italy, Spain and Portugal, Lobo (2015) compared the relative impact of party leader evaluations on voting choices among early deciders and late deciders. In the Italian and Portuguese cases, leader orientations were shown to matter more to late deciding voters than to early deciders, while in the Spanish case, the two groups of voters did not really distinguish themselves from each other regarding the strength of leader effects (Lobo, 2015). Given these previous findings, we expect candidate-oriented voters to be more likely than other voters to postpone their final electoral decision until the campaign is under way.

Hypothesis 2C: *The more candidate-centred the vote decision, the higher will be the probability of being a late decider.*

We can also investigate the relationship between candidate-centred voting and party dealignment, by examining the influence of preferential voting on inter-election volatility, campaign volatility and late decision making. The Belgian electoral system is a PR system with semi-open lists; it allows voters either to cast a party list vote or to cast preference votes for one or several individual candidate(s) within a single party list. In the Belgian context, casting preference votes has often been considered as a form of candidate-centred voting and as an indication of the personalization of electoral behaviour (André *et al.*, 2012). Given that candidate-oriented voting is assumed to increase electoral instability, it may be hypothesized that voters who cast one or several preference vote(s) are more likely than other voters to switch parties between two consecutive elections, to change their vote intention in the weeks preceding the election and to delay their final vote decision until the campaign is under way.

Hypothesis 2D: *Preferential voting increases inter-election volatility.*

Hypothesis 2E: *Preferential voting increases campaign volatility.*

Hypothesis 2F: *Preferential voting increases late decision making.*

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 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 revealed the presence of a strong 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 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. He demonstrated that voters who regarded candidates as being more important than parties for their vote decision were more likely than other voters to switch parties from one election to the next (Soderlund, 2012).

Since the 1980s however, the traditional floating voter hypothesis has been challenged, with several scholars pointing at the emergence of a new floating voter (Dalton, 2013; Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Habert & Lancelot, 1988). The cognitive mobilization theory developed by Dalton suggests that uncertainty and instability in voting choices nowadays 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, candidate evaluations and judgments about 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 vote 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, 2012, 2013; Habert & Lancelot, 1988). 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 volatile 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 interested 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; Muxel, 2009; Tiberj, 2015; Walgrave *et al.*, 2010). In addition, researchers frequently observe that electors with a low level of political sophistication are more inclined than sophisticated voters to postpone their electoral decision until the campaign is under way (Cautrès & Jadot, 2007, 2009; Fournier *et al.*, 2004; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012). These recent findings are consonant with the traditional floating voter hypothesis (Berelson *et al.*, 1963; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968).

In this rich debate on the influence of political sophistication on the stability of party preferences, there is a third theoretical perspective developed by Converse (1962), which rejects both the traditional floating voter hypothesis and the cognitive mobilization hypothesis. Indeed, this third perspective assumes that political expertise neither has a stabilizing effect on voting choices, nor stimulates voter's volatility. It rather suggests that the relationship between political sophistication and electoral volatility is curvilinear. Some scholars have empirically established the existence of such a relationship, with the predicted probability of party switching 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 sophistication may have on electoral volatility and timing of the voting choice. In the present paper, we test the traditional floating voter hypothesis confirmed by recent studies and thus expect political sophistication to have a stabilizing impact on vote preferences and to lead to early decision making.

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

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

Hypothesis 3C: *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 shown that electoral volatility can be partially attributed

to political dissatisfaction. 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/her favourite party. If this party eventually proves to be unworthy of his/her 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/her 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 as a 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. Similarly, in her study on the sources of voter's volatility at the 2007 French presidential and parliamentary elections, Muxel (2009) noticed that political disaffection was one of the main catalysts of vote switching. Voters with a low degree of trust in the French political system were more prone than other voters to change parties between two successive elections (Muxel, 2009). 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. Furthermore, 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). Remarkably, the relationship between perceived party performances and vote switching remained robust even after controlling for the variables associated with 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 Zelle's frustrated floating voter hypothesis (Soderlund, 2008). In their analysis of the determinants of party switching in 36 elections held in 22 advanced democracies, Dassonneville, Blais and Dejaeghere (2015) came to the same conclusion as that drawn by Soderlund. They pointed out that dissatisfaction with the party previously voted for significantly increased the probability of shifting to another party. By contrast, a general feeling of political dissatisfaction did not significantly affect the likelihood of vote switching. In sum, party switchers were not frustrated about politics in general, but they clearly were disappointed about the performances of the party they had voted for in the previous elections (Dassonneville *et al.*, 2015).

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 thereon². 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 institutions and political actors, 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 usually 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. As a result, vote switching seems to be the only option left for Belgian dissatisfied voters.

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

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

Besides, it appears 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 postpone their

² 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.

electoral decision until a later stage of the campaign. In 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.

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

Voter's ideological profile is often argued to be one of the main determinants of electoral volatility 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; Ysmal, 1981). 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; Ysmal, 1981). Conversely, 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 in 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; Dassonneville, 2012; Lisi, 2010; Van Der Meer *et al.*, 2015; Ysmal, 1981).

Furthermore, the degree of ideological extremeness is 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 is under way (Cautrès & Jadot, 2007; Lisi, 2010). Since moderate voters are more ambivalent to the different political forces, they are more inclined 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, the lower will be his/her probability of being a late decider (Cautrès & Jadot, 2007; Lisi, 2010).

In the Belgian fragmented party system, ideological spaces between the different political alternatives are 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 switch their vote preferences and to make their electoral decision in the last weeks before Election Day. 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 volatile and less likely to be late deciders.

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

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

Hypothesis 5C: *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 Wallonia³. 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 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 (1018 in Wallonia and 1001 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 three dependent variables: inter-election volatility, campaign volatility and late decision making. These three phenomena are often seen as components of party dealignment and as symptoms of the growing instability of voting choices (Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Lachat, 2007). Scholars usually postulate that these three 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 the determinants of late decision making (Lisi, 2010). Yet, as far as our hypotheses are concerned, there is no theoretical reason to anticipate observing

³ 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.

different results for the three dependent variables. Hence, we expect the two types of volatility and late decision making to be affected in a quite similar manner by the different independent variables.

The first dependent variable, namely 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, namely campaign volatility, can only be operationalized by means of panel survey data that allow to compare respondent’s vote intention at the start of the campaign with his/her actual voting choice on Election Day. The panel design of the PartiRep survey enables us to determine whether or not respondents changed their mind during the campaign. In the pre-electoral interview, they were asked to indicate which party they intended to vote for at the federal elections, and in the post-electoral interview, they were asked to mention which party they had eventually chosen on Election Day. By comparing the vote intention reported in the pre-electoral wave with the actual electoral behaviour reported in the post-electoral wave, we can distinguish two groups of respondents: stable voters and campaign switchers. Stable voters are those respondents who expressed a vote intention for a given party at the beginning of the campaign and who then cast a ballot for that party in the federal elections. Campaign switchers are those respondents who expressed a vote intention for a given party at the launch of the campaign, but who eventually cast a ballot for another party in the federal elections. The variable “campaign volatility” is dichotomous; it takes the value 1 for campaign switchers and the value 0 for stable voters. Table 2 indicates that about a third (32.8 %) of the respondents report having changed their vote intention over the course of the 2014 election campaign. 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

Finally, the third dependent variable is timing of the voting choice. The PartiRep survey questionnaire 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 start of 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 as early deciders (=0), whereas those who report having made up their mind during the campaign or on Election Day are coded as late deciders (=1). As can be read from table 3, 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 3: Proportion of late deciders in the 2014 Belgian federal elections

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

Table 4: Correlations between inter-election volatility, campaign volatility and late decision making

	Correlations	p-value
Inter-election volatility and campaign volatility	0.86	0.000
Late decision making and inter-election volatility	0.89	0.000
Late decision making and campaign volatility	0.88	0.000

As mentioned above, previous research tends to assume that inter-election volatility, campaign volatility and late deciding can be seen as three dimensions of a broader phenomenon which can be termed “party dealignment”. In order to test the validity of this assumption, it is necessary to examine the correlations between the three variables. As can be read from table 4, the correlations between the three variables achieve statistical significance and are in the expected direction. Late decision making is positively correlated with both inter-election volatility and campaign volatility. Moreover, those electors who

switch parties between two consecutive elections are more likely than other electors to change their vote intention during the campaign.

Since there are significant correlations between the three phenomena, we have decided to construct an index of dealignment which distinguishes those voters who display at least one dimension of party dealignment from the rest of the electorate. This index is a dichotomous variable; it takes the value 1 for dealigned voters (i.e. those who exhibit at least one component of dealignment) and the value 0 for aligned voters (i.e. those who remained loyal to the same party at two successive elections, who did not change their vote intention in the months preceding the 2014 federal elections and who had already taken their final vote decision before the start of the campaign). Table 5 shows that 64.8 % of the respondents display at least one of the three aspects of party dealignment. In the present study, we will first attempt to explain each of the three phenomena separately. Then, we will analyse the determinants of party dealignment as such, by using a model in which the index of dealignment will be the dependent variable.

Table 5: Proportion of dealigned voters in the 2014 Belgian federal elections

Aligned voters	Dealigned voters	Total	n
35.2 %	64.8 %	100 %	1238

The independent variables

This study aims to identify the various factors that influence the two types of volatility and late deciding. As explained above (see section “Theoretical framework”), we include in our models a large number of independent variables⁴. The first set of independent variables aim to capture the phenomenon of strategic voting. Hypothesis 1A holds that a voter can switch parties between two consecutive elections because of tactical considerations linked to his/her evaluation of the coalition potential of the party he/she had voted for in the previous elections. Therefore, our model dedicated to inter-election volatility includes the variable “Perceived coalition potential of the party voted for in previous elections” as an independent variable. In the pre-electoral interview, respondents were asked to rate how much of a chance the party they had voted for at the 2010 federal elections had of entering the governmental coalition after the 2014 elections. They gave an answer on an 11-point scale where 0 meant “The party has no chance of joining the governmental coalition” and 10 meant “The party has a very good chance of joining the governmental coalition”.

Hypothesis 1B posits that a voter can change his/her vote intention in the weeks preceding the elections due to strategic considerations related to his/her perception about the coalition potential of the party he/she intended to vote for at the launch of the campaign. Thus, our model dedicated to campaign

⁴ For the coding details of the independent variables, see Appendix.

volatility incorporates the variable “Perceived coalition potential of the party the respondent planned to vote for in the pre-electoral wave” as an independent variable. In the pre-electoral interview, respondents were asked to evaluate how much of a chance the party they intended to vote for had of joining the federal governmental coalition after the elections. They assessed this coalition potential on an 11-point scale where 0 meant “The party has no chance of entering the governmental coalition” and 10 meant “The party has a very good chance of entering the governmental coalition”.

Hypothesis 1C suggests that strategic voters are more likely than sincere voters to delay their vote decision until the campaign is under way. In order to test this hypothesis, we have to categorise respondents as being either sincere or tactical voters. To this end, we identify strategic voters on the basis of some criteria and we assume all other individuals to be sincere voters. A strategic vote can be defined as a vote for a party that is not one’s most preferred, cast in the hope of influencing the election outcomes or the government formation (*Blais et al., 2001*). On the basis of this definition, a strategic voter must meet two criteria. First, he/she must report having cast a ballot for a party that is not his/her favourite. In order to determine which party the respondent likes the most, we look at party thermometer ratings. In the PartiRep survey, respondents were asked to evaluate each political party on an 11-point thermometer scale. The favourite party of a respondent is the party that receives the highest thermometer rating. An individual can be classified as a tactical voter, if he/she gives a lower thermometer rating to the party voted for than to at least one other party. Strategic voters must also meet a second criterion that is related to their competitive expectations. A tactical voter has to consider that the party he/she votes for has a better chance of gaining office than his/her most preferred party. In the PartiRep survey, respondents were asked to evaluate the coalition potential of each party on an 11-point scale where 0 meant “The party has no chance of entering the governmental coalition” and 10 meant “The party has a very good chance of entering the governmental coalition”. An individual can be considered as a strategic voter, if he/she attributes a better coalition potential to the party voted for than to his/her favourite party. By combining the two above mentioned criteria, we find that the proportion of strategic voters among the sample is 7.5 %.

The second explanatory factor is candidate-centred voting. We include in our models two indicators of candidate-oriented voting: the degree of candidate-centeredness of the voting choice (see H2A, H2B and H2C) and preferential voting (see H2D, H2E and H2F). The PartiRep survey allows to measure the self-reported degree of candidate-centeredness of the vote decision, as respondents were presented with the following question: What was more important for your voting choice: the party or the candidate(s)? They could give an answer on an 11-point scale where 0 meant “Only the party was important” and 10 meant “Only the candidate(s) was (were) important”. This answer represents the degree of candidate-centeredness of their electoral choice. The other indicator of candidate-oriented voting, namely preferential voting, is a dichotomous variable which takes the value 1 for those respondents who cast a preferential vote for one or several candidate(s) and the value 0 for those who cast a party list vote.

The third explanatory factor, namely political sophistication (see H3A, H3B and H3C), 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 three distinct indicators for measuring voter's level of sophistication, namely political knowledge, political interest and campaign attention. 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". In order to measure the degree of campaign attention, respondents were asked to indicate how often they had paid attention to political information in the media (newspapers, TV and radio) during the campaign. Respondents gave an answer on a 4-point scale where 0 meant "Never", 1 "One or several time(s) a month", 2 "One or several time(s) a week" and 3 "Every day".

The fourth explanatory factor, namely political satisfaction (see H4A, H4B and H4C), encompasses many distinct dimensions and, as a result, it can be operationalized by means of a large number of indicators (Soderlund, 2008; Zelle, 1995). Our models incorporate four independent variables designed to assess respondent's level of political satisfaction: political trust, affect towards the most preferred party, satisfaction with democracy and external political efficacy. Political trust is measured through the average score for self-reported degree of trust in a series of institutions and political actors: the justice, the police, media, political parties, the regional government, the regional parliament, the federal government, the federal parliament, social movements, politicians and the European Union. For each of these 11 institutions, respondents gave a value on an 11-point scale where 0 meant "No trust at all" and 10 meant "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 thermometer scale. The highest thermometer rating given by the respondent to any one out of all Belgian parties represents his/her level of affection for his/her most 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 0 means "not satisfied at all" and 3 means "highly satisfied". The variable "external political efficacy" is constructed by means of the average score on 14 items that deal with the feeling of external political efficacy (see these items in appendix). This average score may take values ranging from 0 ("low political efficacy") to 4 ("high political efficacy").

The last independent variable, namely ideological extremeness (see H5A, H5B and H5C), 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 include in our models some control variables: age, gender, the level of education and party identification. 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. Blumenstiel & Plischke, 2015; Fournier *et al.*, 2004; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; McGregor, 2012) and to switch from one party to another between two successive elections as well as during a campaign (e.g. Converse, 1969; Dassonneville, 2012; Kuhn, 2009; Muxel, 2009; Soderlund, 2008; 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 and timing of the voting decision (e.g. Dassonneville, 2012; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Kuhn, 2009; Soderlund, 2008; Tiberj, 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, namely 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 vote 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, well-educated voters are expected to exhibit the highest probability of party switching and late decision making (Dalton, 1984, 2007, 2013; Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Habert & Lancelot, 1988).

In addition to these socio-demographic characteristics, we also control for party identification which is argued to form a barrier against electoral volatility and late deciding. A large number of studies clearly show that voters who report no partisan attachment are much more volatile than those who feel close to a particular party (e.g. Blumenstiel & Plischke, 2015; Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Crow, 2005; Dalton, 2013; Dassonneville & Dejaeghere, 2014; Granberg & Holmberg, 1991; Lachat, 2007; Lisi, 2010; Soderlund, 2008). This observation holds for inter-election volatility as well as for campaign volatility. Besides, many scholars have pointed at the existence of a strong relationship between party identification and timing of the voting choice, with independents being more prone than party identifiers to delay their electoral decision until the campaign is under way (e.g. Cautrès & Jadot, 2007, 2009; Chaffee & Rimal, 1996; Dalton, 2013; Fournier *et al.*, 2004; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Jaffre & Chiche, 1997;

Lisi, 2010; McAllister, 2002; McGregor, 2012; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012; Whitney & Goldman, 1985).

Results

In this section, we will deal with the findings of our statistical analysis. First, we focus on the determinants of inter-election volatility. To start with, we perform some bivariate analyses. Results are reported in table 6. In order to determine whether inter-election volatility is triggered by strategic considerations, we compare how loyal voters and vote switchers evaluated the coalition potential of the party they had voted for in the previous federal elections held in 2010. As can be seen in the table, loyal voters considered that the party they had previously voted for had a good chance of entering the federal government after the 2014 elections (mean perceived coalition potential = 7.21 out of 10), while volatile voters thought that their previously endorsed party displayed a somewhat lower coalition potential (mean perceived coalition potential = 7.02 out of 10). Nevertheless, the difference between the two groups of respondents in terms of perceived coalition potential is relatively small and does not reach the conventional level of statistical significance. Thus, hypothesis 1A cannot be confirmed.

Table 6: The determinants of inter-election volatility (bivariate analyses)

Variables	Loyal voters (Mean score)	Volatile voters (Mean score)	T-value	p-value
Perceived coalition potential of the party voted for in previous elections (0-10)	7.21	7.02	1.60	0.109
Candidate-centeredness of the voting choice (0-10)	2.72	2.94	-1.39	0.163
Preferential voting (party list vote = 0; preference vote(s) = 1)	0.55	0.43	4.54	0.000
Political knowledge (0-5)	2.47	2.16	3.87	0.000
Campaign attention (0-3)	2.15	2.01	2.64	0.008
Political interest (0-10)	5.53	4.74	5.32	0.000
External political efficacy (0-4)	1.85	1.70	5.06	0.000
Satisfaction with democracy (0-3)	1.76	1.67	2.50	0.012
Political trust (0-10)	5.27	4.98	3.59	0.000
Affection for the favourite party (0-10)	7.80	7.20	6.84	0.000
Ideological extremeness (0-5)	1.82	1.54	3.44	0.000

Second, we explore the relationship between candidate-oriented voting and inter-election volatility, by comparing the relative importance of candidates in the electoral decision process among loyal voters and switchers. The results of this comparison do not corroborate hypothesis 2A. Admittedly, candidates matter more to volatile voters than to party loyalists, but the difference between these two electorates is small and not statistically significant. We also attempt to determine whether or not there is a link between preferential voting and inter-election volatility. According to our hypothesis 2D, the use of preference

votes should be more frequent among vote switchers than among loyal voters. Yet, the results of the bivariate analysis indicate that it is party loyalists rather than volatile voters who display a higher level of preferential voting and that this difference between the two groups of respondents is statistically significant.

In order to investigate the relationship between political sophistication and inter-election volatility, we look at differences between party loyalists and volatile voters with regard to their levels of political interest, political knowledge and campaign attention. Results lend support for hypothesis 3A, as they indicate that vote switchers are less interested in politics, less knowledgeable about the political system and less attentive to information on the election campaign. For each of the three indicators of political sophistication, the difference between loyal and volatile voters achieves statistical significance.

Next, we try to determine whether political disaffection can stimulate inter-election volatility. We make use of four different indicators in order to compare the average level of political satisfaction of loyal voters with that of vote switchers. The results of this bivariate analysis provide strong empirical evidence in support of hypothesis 4A. Compared to party loyalists, volatile voters exhibit a lower degree of satisfaction with democracy, a lower level of political trust, a lower degree of affection for their favourite party and a lower level of external political efficacy. The differences between loyal voters and switchers are statistically significant for each of the four indicators.

Finally, we examine whether ideological extremeness significantly correlates with inter-election volatility. To this end, we compare the average degree of ideological extremeness of switchers with that of loyal voters. In line with hypothesis 5A, the ideological profile of volatile voters proves to be more moderate than that of party loyalists and the difference between these two electorates in terms of ideological extremeness achieves statistical significance.

In addition to conducting these bivariate analyses, we carry out a multivariate analysis; we regress inter-election volatility on all the independent and control variables. Given that the dependent variable is dichotomous, we perform a binary logistic regression in order to test the different hypotheses. Regression results (reported in table 7) do not corroborate the hypothesis that strategic considerations lead voters to switch from one party to another between two consecutive elections (H1A). Indeed, the probability of inter-election volatility is not significantly affected by voters' perceptions about the coalition potential of the party they had voted for in the previous federal elections.

Table 7: The determinants of inter-election volatility (binary logistic regression)

Independent Variables	B	SE	Sign.	Exp (B)
Intercept	3.313	0.537	<0.001	27.460
Gender (male = 0; female = 1)	0.355	0.135	0.008	1.427

Age	-0.026	0.004	<0.001	0.974
Level of education	-0.069	0.076	0.364	0.934
Party identification	-0.655	0.142	<0.001	0.520
Perceived coalition potential of the party voted for in previous elections	-0.054	0.032	0.091	0.947
Candidate-centeredness of the voting choice	0.047	0.026	0.070	1.048
Preferential voting	-0.396	0.140	0.005	0.673
Political interest	-0.019	0.031	0.535	0.981
Political knowledge	-0.006	0.051	0.911	0.994
Campaign attention	0.083	0.078	0.287	1.086
External political efficacy	-0.523	0.152	<0.001	0.593
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.057	0.116	0.621	0.945
Political trust	0.079	0.064	0.213	1.082
Affection for the favourite party	-0.109	0.049	0.027	0.897
Ideological extremeness	-0.058	0.045	0.200	0.944
Nagelkerke R ²	0.161			
Log likelihood	-714.651			
n	1151			

Similarly, the findings of the multivariate analysis do not allow to confirm the hypothesis that voters who consider candidates as more important than parties for their voting choice are more likely than other voters to change parties from one election to the next (H2A). As expected, candidate-centred voting has a negative effect on inter-election volatility, but this effect does not reach an acceptable level of statistical significance. Furthermore, results totally contradict our hypothesis 2D. While preferential voting was expected to lead to higher levels of vote switching, the analysis reveals that those individuals who cast preference votes for individual candidates are less volatile than those who cast a party list vote.

Besides, regression results lead us to reject the hypothesis that political sophistication has a stabilizing effect on voting behaviour (H3A). None of the three indicators of sophistication (political interest, campaign attention and political knowledge) is significantly related to inter-election volatility.

At the same time, the hypothesis that vote switching can be attributed to political disaffection (H4A) is partially confirmed, since two out of the four indicators of political satisfaction, namely external political efficacy and affection for the favourite party, significantly influence inter-election volatility. In accordance with our expectations, voters who exhibit a low level of external political efficacy are more likely than other voters to switch from one party to another between two successive elections. Moreover, we may point at the presence of a negative relationship between affection for the favourite party and inter-election volatility. The higher the degree of affection for one's most preferred party, the lower will be the probability of changing parties between two consecutive elections. The two other variables measuring political satisfaction, namely political trust and satisfaction with democracy, are not significantly associated with inter-election switching.

As can be seen in the table, results do not support the hypothesis that voters with radical ideological orientations are less prone than moderate voters to switch parties from one election to the next (H5A). Indeed, the degree of ideological extremeness has no significant impact on inter-election volatility.

Regarding the control variables, the analysis shows that party identification forms a barrier against vote switching. Those individuals who identify with a particular party prove to be much less volatile than those who report no partisan attachment. It is also worth noting that two sociodemographic factors, gender and age, significantly correlate with inter-election volatility. Women are more inclined than men to shift their votes from one election to another. Unsurprisingly, there is a negative relationship between age and inter-election volatility, with young voters being more likely than their elders to switch parties between two successive elections. The last control variable, namely the level of education, does not significantly influence inter-election switching.

Then, we may examine the factors explaining campaign volatility. Table 8 presents the results of the bivariate analyses. For each of the variables under scrutiny, the difference between stable voters and switchers achieves statistical significance and a large majority of our hypotheses receive empirical support. First, we investigate the relationship between strategic voting and campaign volatility, by comparing how stable voters and switchers evaluated the coalition potential of the party for which they expressed a vote intention at the beginning of the campaign. As can be read from the table, the results of this comparison lend support for hypothesis 1B. At the start of the campaign, stable voters thought that the party they intended to support had a relatively good chance of joining the federal governmental coalition after the elections (mean perceived coalition potential = 7.06 out of 10). Campaign switchers, on the other hand, considered that the party they planned to vote for at the launch of the campaign displayed a lower chance of gaining office (mean perceived coalition potential = 5.48 out of 10). Hypothesis 2B can also be confirmed, as we find that candidates are more important for switchers than for stable voters. By contrast, results seem to contradict hypothesis 2E, since they indicate that the level of preferential voting is higher among stable voters than among campaign switchers. As far as political sophistication is concerned, campaign switchers are less interested in politics, less attentive to information on the campaign and less knowledgeable about the political system, which is in line with hypothesis 3B. The results of our bivariate analyses also give credit to the frustrated floating voter hypothesis (H4B), as they clearly show that compared to stable voters, campaign switchers exhibit a lower level of satisfaction with democracy, a lower degree of trust in institutions and political actors, a lower level of external political efficacy and a lower degree of affection for their favourite party. Regarding ideological extremeness, results seem to confirm hypothesis 5B, since the average ideological profile of switchers proves to be more moderate than that of stable voters.

Table 8: The determinants of campaign volatility (bivariate analyses)

Variables	Stable voters (Mean score)	Campaign switchers (Mean score)	T-value	p-value
Perceived coalition potential of the party the respondent planned to vote for at the start of the campaign (0-10)	7.06	5.48	9.29	0.000
Candidate-centeredness of the voting choice (0-10)	2.63	3.10	-2.70	0.007
Preferential voting (party list vote = 0; preference vote(s) = 1)	0.53	0.42	3.74	0.000
Political knowledge (0-5)	2.41	2.17	2.86	0.004
Campaign attention (0-3)	2.15	1.95	3.35	0.001
Political interest (0-10)	5.54	4.45	6.96	0.000
External political efficacy (0-4)	1.84	1.66	5.41	0.000
Satisfaction with democracy (0-3)	1.76	1.67	2.15	0.031
Political trust (0-10)	5.27	4.83	5.09	0.000
Affection for the favourite party (0-10)	7.78	7.01	7.79	0.000
Ideological extremeness (0-5)	1.79	1.59	2.26	0.024

After having presented the findings of these bivariate analyses, we may discuss the results of our multivariate analysis, which are reported in table 9. First, regression results corroborate the hypothesis that strategic considerations can cause voters to change their vote preferences during an election campaign (H1B). Indeed, the probability of campaign volatility is significantly influenced by voters' perceptions about the coalition potential of the party they planned to vote for at the launch of the campaign. The higher this perceived coalition potential, the lower is the probability that the voter changes his/her vote intention in the weeks preceding the elections. In other words, if the voter believes that the party he/she intends to vote for at the start of the campaign is capable of joining the governmental coalition after the elections, he/she will tend to remain stable in his/her vote preference during the campaign and will probably cast a ballot for that party on Election Day. Conversely, if the voter considers that the party he/she plans to support exhibits a low coalition potential, he/she will be much more likely to change his/her vote intention over the course of the campaign and to shift to another party that seems to have a better chance of gaining office.

At the same time, it appears that candidate-centred voting significantly increases the chance of switching parties in the weeks preceding the elections. In accordance with hypothesis 2B, voters who regard candidates as more important than parties for their voting choice are more likely than other voters to shift their vote intention during the campaign. Surprisingly, our results totally contradict hypothesis 2E. While preferential voting was expected to induce instability in vote intentions, the analysis reveals that the probability of campaign volatility is definitely lower among those individuals who cast one or several preference vote(s) than among those who endorse a party list.

Table 9: The determinants of campaign volatility (binary logistic regression)

Independent Variables	B	SE	Sign.	Exp (B)
Intercept	2.919	0.534	<0.001	18.523
Gender (male = 0; female = 1)	0.397	0.148	0.007	1.487
Age	-0.013	0.005	0.005	0.987
Level of education	0.032	0.082	0.694	1.033
Party identification	-0.683	0.151	<0.001	0.505
Perceived coalition potential of the party the respondent planned to vote for at the start of the campaign	-0.216	0.029	<0.001	0.805
Candidate-centeredness of the voting choice	0.093	0.029	0.001	1.097
Preferential voting	-0.429	0.154	0.006	0.651
Political interest	-0.083	0.033	0.012	0.920
Political knowledge	0.011	0.055	0.849	1.011
Campaign attention	0.017	0.086	0.847	1.017
External political efficacy	-0.426	0.167	0.011	0.653
Satisfaction with democracy	0.022	0.127	0.864	1.022
Political trust	0.053	0.070	0.446	1.055
Affection for the favourite party	-0.090	0.052	0.080	0.914
Ideological extremeness	-0.035	0.050	0.486	0.966
Nagelkerke R ²	0.227			
Log likelihood	-616.853			
n	1149			

Besides, our analysis partially confirms 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 contradicts 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 campaign volatility is the highest among uninformed and uninterested citizens (Berelson *et al.*, 1963; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968). Nevertheless, hypothesis 3B can only be partially confirmed, because none of the two other indicators of political sophistication (campaign attention and political knowledge) is significantly associated with campaign switching.

Furthermore, regression results provide little evidence in support of the hypothesis that shifts in vote intentions are triggered by political disaffection (H4B). Three out of the four indicators of political satisfaction (affection for the favourite party, political trust and satisfaction with democracy) have no significant impact on campaign volatility. The only variable linked to political satisfaction that significantly correlates with campaign switching is external political efficacy. As expected, voters with a low level of external political efficacy are more prone than other voters to switch from one party to another in the weeks preceding the elections.

As evident from the table, regression results do not support the hypothesis that voters with a radical ideological profile are less likely than moderate voters to change their mind in the last weeks before

Election Day (H5B). Admittedly, the effect of ideological extremeness on campaign volatility is in the expected negative direction, but it is far from achieving statistical significance.

Concerning the control variables, results indicate that party identification significantly reduces the probability of switching one’s vote intention during the campaign. Electors who report no partisan attachment are much more inclined than party identifiers to change their vote preferences in the weeks preceding the elections. Moreover, one may observe that two sociodemographic characteristics, gender and age, significantly influence campaign switching. Interestingly, women prove to be somewhat more volatile than men. As it has already been shown in previous research, age has a stabilizing effect on vote preferences; young citizens are more prone than their elders to switch parties in the last weeks before Election Day. Finally, the last sociodemographic variable, namely the level of education, is not significantly related to campaign volatility.

After having examined the determinants of both types of volatility, we look at the factors explaining late decision making at the 2014 Belgian federal elections. Table 10 presents the results of our bivariate analyses. First, we compare the rate of strategic voting among early deciders and late deciders, in order to determine whether tactical considerations can cause voters to delay their vote decision. The results of this comparison give credit to hypothesis 1C, as they indicate that the level of strategic voting is much higher among campaign deciders than among pre-campaign deciders and that this difference between the two groups of respondents is statistically significant.

Second, we investigate the relationship between candidate-oriented voting and timing of the voting choice, by comparing the relative importance of candidates in the electoral decision process among early deciders and late deciders. Compared to those individuals who take their final vote decision before the start of the campaign, those who make up their mind in the last weeks before the election tend to pay more attention to candidates, which is in line with hypothesis 1C. The difference between early and late deciders concerning the degree of candidate-centeredness of their voting choice reaches the conventional level of statistical significance.

Third, we compare the levels of preferential voting among pre-campaign and campaign deciders. On the basis of our hypothesis 2F, we expected the use of preference votes to be more frequent among late deciding voters than among early deciders. The results of the bivariate analysis, however, contradict our expectations, since they demonstrate that the proportion of voters who cast preference votes for individual candidates is larger among pre-campaign deciders than among campaign deciders and that the difference between these two groups of respondents is statistically significant.

Table 10: The determinants of late decision making (bivariate analyses)

Variables	Early deciders (Mean score)	Late deciders (Mean score)	T-value	p-value
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Strategic voting (sincere vote = 0; strategic vote = 1)	0.05	0.15	-6.20	0.000
Candidate-centeredness of the voting choice (0-10)	2.47	3.09	-4.22	0.000
Preferential voting (party list vote = 0; preference vote(s) = 1)	0.53	0.46	2.68	0.008
Political knowledge (0-5)	2.49	2.19	3.83	0.000
Campaign attention (0-3)	2.21	2.00	4.18	0.000
Political interest (0-10)	5.75	4.70	7.34	0.000
External political efficacy (0-4)	1.79	1.77	0.87	0.385
Satisfaction with democracy (0-3)	1.70	1.75	-1.39	0.162
Political trust (0-10)	5.15	5.13	0.24	0.805
Affection for the favourite party (0-10)	7.87	7.20	7.81	0.000
Ideological extremeness (0-5)	1.97	1.50	5.77	0.000

Then, we explore the relationship between political sophistication and timing of the voting choice, by looking at differences between pre-campaign and campaign deciders regarding their levels of political knowledge, political interest and campaign attention. As expected, late deciding voters display a lower level of interest in politics, a lower degree of campaign attention and a lower level of political knowledge. For each of these three sophistication variables, the difference between pre-campaign and campaign deciders achieves statistical significance. Thus, hypothesis 3C can be totally confirmed.

By contrast, the results of the bivariate analyses provide little evidence in support of our hypothesis 4C which posits that political satisfaction decreases the probability of postponing one's vote decision until the campaign is under way. For three out of the four indicators of political satisfaction (namely external political efficacy, political trust and satisfaction with democracy), there is no statistically significant difference between early and late deciders. Affection for the favourite party proves to be the only satisfaction variable for which a significant difference can be observed. Compared to pre-campaign deciders, campaign deciders exhibit a lower level of affection for their most preferred party, which is consistent with our expectations.

Finally, we attempt to determine whether ideological orientations may influence the time at which vote decisions are finalised. To this end, we compare the average degree of ideological extremeness of early deciders with that of late deciding voters. In accordance with hypothesis 5C, the ideological profile of campaign deciders is found to be somewhat more moderate than that of pre-campaign deciders and this difference between the two groups of voters in terms of ideological extremeness achieves statistical significance.

In addition to these bivariate analyses, we carry out a multivariate analysis in order to identify the main determinants of late decision making. The results of the binary logistic regression (reported in table 11) lend support for the hypothesis that strategic voters are more likely than sincere voters to delay their

vote decision until the campaign is under way (H1C). The probability of being a campaign decider is much higher (Exp B = 3.348) for those voters who factor tactical considerations into their vote calculus than for those who cast a sincere ballot for their favourite party. It is reasonable to suggest that strategic voters make their voting choice in the last weeks before the election, because they are waiting to collect enough tactical information on how other voters intend to vote, what the election results will be and how this will impact the process of governmental coalition formation.

Table 11: The determinants of late decision making (binary logistic regression)

Independent Variables	B	SE	Sign.	Exp (B)
Intercept	2.340	0.545	<0.001	10.376
Gender (male = 0; female = 1)	0.279	0.147	0.058	1.322
Age	-0.015	0.005	0.002	0.986
Level of education	0.085	0.082	0.298	1.089
Party identification	-0.612	0.159	<0.001	0.542
Strategic voting	1.208	0.278	<0.001	3.348
Candidate-centeredness of the voting choice	0.091	0.029	0.002	1.095
Preferential voting	-0.296	0.151	0.050	0.744
Political interest	-0.073	0.033	0.028	0.929
Political knowledge	-0.016	0.055	0.770	0.984
Campaign attention	-0.008	0.085	0.927	0.992
External political efficacy	-0.093	0.166	0.576	0.911
Satisfaction with democracy	0.269	0.126	0.033	1.309
Political trust	0.099	0.070	0.159	1.104
Affection for the favourite party	-0.220	0.056	<0.001	0.803
Ideological extremeness	-0.127	0.049	0.010	0.881
Nagelkerke R ²	0.213			
Log likelihood	-606.423			
n	1009			

Results also give credit to the hypothesis that candidate-centred voting leads to a delay in timing of the vote decision (H2C). The more candidates matter for the voting choice, the higher will be the probability of making that choice in the last weeks of the campaign. One may assume that voters who consider candidates as more important than parties for their vote decision usually seek to gather information on candidates' characteristics before making their final determination. Since this type of information mainly comes from the election campaign, those candidate-oriented voters tend to postpone their final decision until the last weeks (or even until the last days) before the election. Surprisingly, the hypothesis that the use of preference votes increases the chance of being a late decider (H2F) must be rejected. The effect of preferential voting on late decision making almost reaches the conventional level of statistical significance ($p = 0.050$), but instead of being in the expected positive direction, this effect is in the negative direction. This means that those individuals who cast a party list vote are more likely to be campaign deciders than are those who cast preference votes for individual candidates.

Interestingly, the hypothesis that political sophistication reduces the probability of being a late decider (H3C) can be partially confirmed. In accordance with our expectations, we observe the presence of a significant and negative relationship between the level of political interest and late decision making. In other words, voters who are not interested in politics are more prone than highly interested voters to take their electoral decision in the last weeks before Election Day. 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 (e.g. Cautrès & Jadot, 2007, 2009; Fournier *et al.*, 2004; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012). Nonetheless, hypothesis 3C can only be partially confirmed, since the two other indicators of political sophistication, namely campaign attention and political knowledge, are not significantly related to timing of the voting choice.

Besides, regression results do not corroborate the hypothesis that political disaffection leads voters to postpone their vote decision (H4C). Two out of the four indicators of political satisfaction –external political efficacy and political trust- have no significant impact on timing of the voting choice, whereas the two other satisfaction variables, namely affection for the favourite party and satisfaction with democracy, have significant effects that somewhat contradict each other. On the one hand, affection for the favourite party negatively correlates with late decision making, which is compatible with hypothesis 4C. The higher the degree of affect directed to the most preferred party, the lower will be the probability of deciding late. On the other hand, satisfaction with democracy is positively associated with late decision making, which does not concord with our expectations. Citizens who are satisfied with the way democracy works in Belgium are more likely than dissatisfied citizens to make their voting choice in the last weeks before the election.

As can be seen in the table, the results of our analysis provide compelling evidence in support of the hypothesis that voters with radical ideological orientations are less inclined than moderate voters to delay their electoral decision until the campaign is under way (H5C). Indeed, there is a significant and negative relationship between the degree of ideological extremeness and late deciding. The more radical the ideological profile, the lower will be the probability of having a late timing of the voting choice.

Regarding the control variables, it appears that party identification significantly decreases the chance of being a late decider. Compared to those voters who report no party affiliation, those who identify with a particular party are much less likely to postpone their vote decision until the last weeks before the elections. It is also worth noting that age emerges as a good predictor of timing of the voting choice. As expected, age has a negative impact on late decision making, with young citizens being more prone than their elders to make their final choice in the last weeks of the campaign. Furthermore, the effect of gender on timing of the vote decision almost achieves statistical significance ($P = 0.058$). Compared to men, women tend to take longer to make up their mind. For the sake of completeness, it must be pointed out that the level of education is not significantly associated with timing of the voting choice.

In the final step of the analysis, we seek to identify the main determinants of party dealignment. As explained earlier, we use an index of dealignment that allows us to distinguish those voters who display at least one dimension of dealignment from the rest of the electorate. The results of our bivariate analyses, which are presented in table 12, reveal some major differences between aligned and dealigned voters. First, the rate of strategic voting proves to be higher among dealigned voters than among their aligned counterparts and the difference between these two groups of respondents achieves statistical significance. Second, we find that the voting choices of dealigned voters are more candidate-centred than the vote decisions of aligned voters and that this difference between the two subsamples is statistically significant. Third, results show that the proportion of voters who cast preference votes for individual candidates is larger among aligned voters than among their dealigned counterparts and that this difference between the two electorates achieves statistical significance. Moreover, we observe that those individuals who have at least one dimension of dealignment are less politically sophisticated than the rest of the electorate. Compared to aligned voters, dealigned voters are less knowledgeable about the political system, less interested in politics and less attentive to information on the election campaign. For each of the three indicators of political sophistication, the difference between aligned and dealigned citizens reaches the conventional level of statistical significance. Next, we try to determine whether party dealignment can be attributed to political disaffection. For three out of the four indicators of political satisfaction (namely political trust, affection for the favourite party and satisfaction with democracy), our results reveal no significant difference between aligned and dealigned electors. In fact, external political efficacy is the only satisfaction variable for which a significant difference can be observed between the two electorates. Compared to aligned voters, dealigned voters display a lower level of external political efficacy. Finally, there is a significant difference between the two groups of respondents in terms of ideological extremeness, with dealigned voters having more moderate ideological orientations.

Table 12: The determinants of party dealignment (bivariate analyses)

Variables	Aligned voters (Mean score)	Dealigned voters (Mean score)	T-value	p-value
Strategic voting (sincere vote = 0; strategic vote = 1)	0.03	0.14	-7.08	0.000
Candidate-centeredness of the voting choice (0-10)	2.39	3.00	-3.94	0.000
Preferential voting (party list vote = 0; preference vote(s) = 1)	0.57	0.46	3.86	0.000
Political knowledge (0-5)	2.54	2.28	3.11	0.002
Campaign attention (0-3)	2.22	2.04	3.20	0.001
Political interest (0-10)	5.89	4.94	6.09	0.000
External political efficacy (0-4)	1.84	1.78	2.09	0.036
Satisfaction with democracy (0-3)	1.75	1.73	0.70	0.485
Political trust (0-10)	5.29	5.13	1.92	0.054

Affection for the favourite party (0-10)	8.73	7.74	1.30	0.194
Ideological extremeness (0-5)	1.95	1.62	3.68	0.000

Table 13: The determinants of party dealignment (binary logistic regression)

Independent Variables	B	SE	Sign.	Exp (B)
Intercept	3.605	0.639	<0.001	36.770
Gender (male = 0; female = 1)	0.289	0.162	0.074	1.335
Age	-0.017	0.005	<0.001	0.983
Level of education	0.079	0.088	0.370	1.083
Party identification	-0.710	0.185	<0.001	0.492
Strategic voting	1.591	0.389	<0.001	4.909
Candidate-centeredness of the voting choice	0.111	0.032	<0.001	1.117
Preferential voting	-0.446	0.163	0.006	0.640
Political interest	-0.063	0.037	0.090	0.939
Political knowledge	0.026	0.060	0.668	1.026
Campaign attention	0.028	0.093	0.762	1.029
External political efficacy	-0.115	0.181	0.525	0.892
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.002	0.136	0.991	0.998
Political trust	0.032	0.076	0.679	1.032
Affection for the favourite party	-0.218	0.064	<0.001	0.804
Ideological extremeness	-0.071	0.054	0.189	0.931
Nagelkerke R ²	0.204			
Log likelihood	-522.098			
n	922			

Then, we perform a multivariate analysis in order to identify the factors explaining party dealignment. As can be seen in table 13, regression results indicate that strategic voters are much more inclined than sincere voters to exhibit at least one dimension of dealignment. We can also point at the existence of a significant and positive relationship between candidate-centred voting and party dealignment. The more candidates matter for the voting choice, the higher will be the probability of being dealigned. At the same time, it appears that preferential voting significantly decreases the chance of displaying at least one form of dealignment. Electors who cast a preference vote for one or several candidate(s) are less likely to be dealigned than are those who cast a party list vote. Another interesting finding of the multivariate analysis is that the level of political sophistication does not contribute to the explanation of party dealignment. None of the three indicators of political sophistication has a significant effect on the probability of being a dealigned voter. Furthermore, regression results provide little evidence in support of the claim that electoral dealignment is triggered by political disaffection. Three out of the four variables measuring political satisfaction (namely external political efficacy, political trust and satisfaction with democracy) are not significantly related to partisan dealignment. Affection for the favourite party proves to be the only indicator of political satisfaction that significantly influences the probability of being dealigned. As expected, voters with a low level of affection for their most preferred party are more prone to exhibit at least one dimension of dealignment than are those who have a high

level of affect towards their favourite party. As can be read from the table, results demonstrate that the degree of ideological extremeness is not significantly associated with party dealignment. Not surprisingly, party identification is found to form a barrier against voter's dealignment. Party identifiers are much less likely than non-identifiers to display one or several aspect(s) of dealignment. Concerning the sociodemographic characteristics, the level of education does not significantly affect the probability of being dealigned. By contrast, age emerges as a strong predictor of voter's dealignment; young citizens are more inclined than their elders to be either inter-election switchers, campaign switchers or late deciders. Finally, the effect of gender almost achieves statistical significance and is in the positive direction, with women having a higher probability of being dealigned.

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 federal 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. Moreover, a large majority of the citizens have delayed their vote decision until the campaign was under way.

The present paper has examined the causes of this uncertainty and this instability in voting choices at the 2014 Belgian federal elections. More precisely, we have attempted to identify the determinants of three phenomena linked to party dealignment: inter-election volatility, campaign volatility and late decision making. Different types of potential explanations have been tested for each of these three aspects of dealignment and most hypotheses have received at least partial empirical support. First, the results of our analysis have partially corroborated the hypothesis that strategic voting can induce indecision and instability in voters' party choices. We have found that tactical considerations could cause voters to change their vote intention over the course of the campaign. Similarly, strategic voters have been shown to be more inclined than sincere voters to take their electoral decision in the last weeks before the election. By contrast, it appears that strategic considerations do not significantly affect the probability of switching parties between two consecutive elections.

Second, the hypothesis that candidate-oriented voting stimulates electoral instability has been partially confirmed. The degree of candidate-centeredness of the voting choice has proved to be a good predictor of campaign volatility and late decision making. Electors who consider candidates as more important than parties for their vote decision are more prone than other electors to change their vote preferences during the campaign and to make their final voting choice in the last weeks before Election Day. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the degree of candidate-centeredness of the electoral choice does not significantly correlate with the other dependent variable, namely inter-election volatility.

Third, the results of our bivariate and multivariate analyses have totally contradicted the hypothesis that preferential voting increases electoral volatility and late decision making. While the use of preference votes was expected to lead to higher levels of uncertainty and instability in electoral preferences, our study has demonstrated that preferential voting has a negative impact on late deciding as well as on both types of volatility. Compared to those individuals who cast a party list vote, those who cast a preferential vote for one or several candidate(s) are less likely to make their vote decision a short time before the election and to switch parties both during the campaign and between two successive elections. On the basis of our analysis, we cannot provide a plausible explanation for why the use of preference votes has a stabilizing effect on voters' party choices. The complex relationship between preferential voting and party dealignment in the Belgian context undoubtedly deserves further investigation.

Fourth, our results have partially supported the hypothesis that political sophistication decreases uncertainty and instability in voters' party preferences. 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 inclined than highly interested voters to change their vote intention in the weeks preceding the elections and to delay their vote decision until the campaign is under way. By contrast, the two other indicators of political sophistication, namely campaign attention and political knowledge, have no significant impact on the three dependent variables.

Fifth, the hypothesis that uncertainty and instability in voting behaviours are triggered by political disaffection has also been partially confirmed. In line with our expectations, we have observed the presence of a significant and negative relationship between external political efficacy and both types of volatility. Citizens with a low level of external political efficacy are more prone than other citizens to switch parties from one election to the next and to shift their vote intention over the course of the campaign. Furthermore, the degree of affection for the favourite party has been found to significantly influence inter-election volatility and timing of the voting choice. Compared to voters with a high level of affect towards their most preferred party, those who exhibit a low degree of affection for their favourite party are more inclined to change parties between two consecutive elections and to postpone their vote decision until the campaign is under way. Surprisingly, satisfaction with democracy has been shown to be positively associated with late decision making, which contradicts our expectations. Electors with a high level of satisfaction with democracy are more likely to be late deciders than are those who are dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Belgium. For the sake of completeness, it is worth noting that the other indicator of political satisfaction, namely political trust, has no significant effect on the three dependent variables.

Finally, results indicate that ideological extremeness has a significant effect on timing of the voting choice. Indeed, those individuals who exhibit a moderate ideological profile are more likely to be late deciders than are those who have radical ideological orientations. However, it should be pointed out that

ideological extremeness is not significantly related to the other dependent variables, namely the two types of volatility.

In addition to providing these new insights into the causes of the three phenomena under scrutiny, this study has demonstrated that inter-election switchers, campaign switchers and late deciders share a series of sociodemographic and attitudinal characteristics. In a similar vein, we have pointed out that late decision making, inter-election volatility and campaign volatility all correlate positively with each other and that they can thus be regarded as three facets of a same phenomenon, namely partisan dealignment. In the last step of our analysis, we tried to identify the factors explaining party dealignment as such, by using an index of dealignment. In light of our results, it appears that dealigned voters are more likely to be drawn from the ranks of young citizens who report no party identification, who factor strategic considerations into their vote decision, who consider candidates as more important than parties for their electoral choice, who cast a party list vote rather than preference votes and who exhibit a low degree of affection for their favourite party. To sum up, the empirical evidence we have presented here seems to confirm previous findings on the connexion between party dealignment and the growing importance of “short-term” factors such as candidate evaluations and tactical considerations. In future research, it would be necessary to undertake a comparative cross-national study on the questions that have been dealt with in this paper.

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Appendix

Coding details of the independent variables

Gender: Male = 0; female = 1

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 = 0; unfinished high school degree = 1; finished high school degree = 2; higher education or university degree = 3

Party identification: Party id is a dummy variable; it takes the value 1 for respondents who feel close to a particular party and the value 0 for other respondents.

Perceived coalition potential of the party voted for in previous elections: In the pre-electoral interview, respondents were asked to evaluate how much of a chance the party they had voted for in the 2010 federal elections had of joining the federal governmental coalition after the 2014 elections. They gave a value on an 11-point scale where 0 meant "No chance of entering the governmental coalition" and 10 meant "A very good chance of entering the governmental coalition".

Perceived coalition potential of the party the respondent planned to vote for at the start of the campaign: In the pre-electoral interview conducted at the beginning of the campaign, respondents were asked to rate how much of a chance the party they intended to vote for had of joining the federal governmental coalition after the elections. They gave a value on an 11-point scale where 0 meant "No chance of entering the governmental coalition" and 10 meant "A very good chance of entering the governmental coalition".

Strategic voting: This variable is dichotomous; it takes the value 1 for strategic voters and the value 0 for sincere voters. To be considered as a strategic voter, an individual must meet two criteria. First, he/she must report having voted for a party other than that which is his/her most preferred. In order to determine which party is the respondent's genuine first preference, it is necessary to look at party thermometer ratings. Respondents were asked to evaluate each party on an 11-point thermometer scale where 0 meant "I dislike the party" and 10 meant "I like the party". Self-evidently, the favourite party of a respondent is the party that receives the highest score on this thermometer scale. A voter can be classified as tactical, if he/she gives a lower thermometer rating to the party voted for than to at least one other party. A strategic voter also has to meet a second criterion that is linked to his/her competitive expectations. He/she must consider that the party he/she votes for has a better chance of joining the government than his/her favourite party. In the pre-electoral interview, respondents were asked to assess the coalition potential of each party on an 11-point scale where 0 meant "The party has no chance of entering the governmental coalition" and 10 meant "The party has a very good chance of entering the governmental coalition". An individual is classified as strategic, if he/she attributes a better coalition potential to the party voted for than to his/her favourite party. Those respondents who meet the two above mentioned criteria are considered as tactical electors, whereas all other respondents are assumed to be sincere electors.

Candidate-centeredness of the voting choice: In the post-electoral interview, respondents were presented with the following question. What was more important for your voting choice: the party or the candidate(s)? Respondents gave an answer on an 11-point scale where 0 meant "Only the party was

important” and 10 meant “Only the candidate(s) was (were) important”. This answer allows to measure the degree of candidate-centeredness of their voting choice.

Preferential voting: This variable is dichotomous; it takes the value 1 for those respondents who cast a preference vote for one or several candidate(s) and the value 0 for those who cast a party list vote.

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’ score on five knowledge questions asked in the PartiRep survey. Scores were thus ranging from 0 (“no knowledge”) to 5 (“high knowledge”).

Campaign attention: The survey questionnaire allows us to assess the level of campaign attention, as it contains the following question: How often did you pay attention to political information in the media (newspapers, radio and TV) during the election campaign? Four options were offered to respondents: never (coded 0); one or several time(s) a month (coded 1); one or several time(s) a week (coded 2); every day (coded 3).

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 the self-reported position on the left-right axis and the ideological centre (i.e. the position 5 on that axis). Hence, the variable “ideological extremeness” takes values ranging from 0 (when 5 was reported) to 5 (when 0 or 10 was reported).

Political trust: This variable consists of the respondent’s average score for self-reported level of trust in a series of institutions and political actors: the justice, the police, media, political parties, the regional government, the regional parliament, the federal government, the federal parliament, social movements, politicians and the European Union. For each institution, respondents gave a value on an 11-point scale where 0 meant “No trust at all” and 10 meant “Complete trust”.

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 any one out of all parties represents his/her degree of affection for his/her favourite party.

Satisfaction with democracy: Self-reported level of satisfaction with the democratic process on a 4-point scale with values ranging from 0 (“not satisfied at all”) to 3 (“highly satisfied”).

External political efficacy: This variable consists of the respondent’s average score on 14 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.*
- *Political parties offer clear and differentiated electoral platforms.*
- *In my country, politicians are capable of solving problems.*
- *International politics is capable of solving problems.*
- *If a sufficient number of people like me give their opinion, politicians will take these opinions into account.*
- *Elections cannot influence policies anymore.*
- *Influencing politicians makes no sense, since they cannot do something.*
- *MPs’ opinions do reflect what voters think.*

- *Politicians are ready to lie to us, when this can serve their own interests.*
- *If a politician acts in accordance with his/her values and his/her ideas, his/her political career has little chance of being successful.*
- *I believe that politicians really care about people's well-being.*
- *Virtually all politicians are ready to forget the promises they have made, if this allows them to get more power.*

For each of these 14 statements, respondents gave an answer on a 5-point scale where 0 meant "Totally agree" and 4 meant "Totally disagree". These scores were converted to so that all low scores meant "low external political efficacy" and all high scores meant "high external political efficacy". We then calculated the average score taking values ranging from 0 ("low external political efficacy") to 4 ("high external political efficacy").