

## **Electoral Volatility, Political Sophistication, Trust and Efficacy.**

### **A Study on Changes in Voter Preferences during the Belgian Regional Elections of 2009**

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#### ***Abstract***<sup>1</sup>

In this article we investigate voter volatility and analyze the causes and motives of switching vote intentions. We test two main sets of variables linked to volatility in literature; political sophistication and ‘political (dis)satisfaction’. Results show that voters with low levels of political efficacy tend to switch more often, both within a campaign and between elections. In the analysis we differentiate between campaign volatility and inter-election volatility and by doing so show that the dynamics of a campaign have a profound impact on volatility. The campaign period is when the lowly sophisticated switch their vote intention. Those with higher levels of interest in politics have switched their intention before the campaign has started. The data for this analysis are from the three wave PartiRep Belgian Election Study (2009).

**Keywords:** Political sophistication, political trust, political efficacy, campaign volatility, inter-election volatility, timing of vote decision

## **Introduction**

Voters are much more volatile than they were some decades ago (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Mair, 2002). People no longer vote for the same party election after election and are much more hesitant what party to vote for on Election Day. All this leads to election results being more unpredictable, larger seat changes in parliament than was common in the past and the rise of new parties. The phenomenon of ‘electoral volatility’ comes in different guises, all related to each other; voters split tickets when possible, decide ever later what party to vote for and change party preferences from election to election (Lachat, 2007). The aim of this article is to broaden insights on shifting party preferences and the causal mechanisms behind this kind of volatility. Within the literature and depending on the design of the analysis, two types of switching party preferences are distinguished. Inter-election volatility, on the one hand, measures switching party choices from election to election. Campaign volatility, on the other hand, is about changing party preferences during an election campaign. In this article we explicitly make the distinction between both types and refer to campaign switchers when speaking about campaign volatility and to inter-election switchers when inter-election volatility is being dealt with. Electoral volatility is expected to be on the rise, as the alignments between parties and voters weakens (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). Moreover, voters who change party preferences or vote choices are seen as key voters for determining the final election results. This is why parties tend to focus on those voters who are undecided or might change their party preferences during the campaign (Hayes and McAllister, 1996). Although an essential role is ascribed to voters who switch preferences, relatively little is known about their characteristics.

In general, there are two theoretical perspectives on the link between (political) sophistication and individual electoral volatility. The first perspective, put forward by scientists of the Columbia school, was a negative one. They sketched an image of an uninformed and uninterested volatile voter: “*Stability in vote is characteristic of those interested in politics and instability of those not particularly interested*” (Berelson *et al.*, 1963, p. 20). These findings were in contradiction to an ideal situation, in which highly

sophisticated citizens change opinions, in order to prevent parties from relying on “*simplistic or demagogic appeals*” during campaigns (Granberg and Holmberg, 1988, p. 181). A second group of scholars have a more optimistic view on volatility. They assume that the volatile voter comes close to the image of the ‘ideal citizen’. Such a citizen is highly informed and makes his own, independent (voting) choices instead of relying on sociological predispositions. The educational and media revolutions cause a process of dealignment. This then leads to election results being more unpredictable and higher levels of volatility (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). According to the second school of thought, sophistication thus leads to more volatility, while the Columbia school stressed the stabilising impact of political sophistication. Both perspectives are not only diametrically opposed to each other, they also have a different focus. While the Columbia school scholars focus on individual voters, the second perspective is dealing with volatility on an aggregate level and gives a time perspective. Then, the inference is made to the characteristics of individual voting behaviour.

As mentioned before, we distinguish between two types of volatility; campaign volatility and inter-election volatility. The distinction between changing during a campaign and between campaigns was already made by Berelson and his colleagues (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1963). Although both kinds of volatility are related, there is no logical connection between the two and they should be distinguished analytically from each other (Lachat, 2007). Campaign switching might be expected to be directly driven by campaign information and efforts to converse voters, while inter-election volatility is not. Lachat (2007) is one of the few authors explicitly investigating the difference between both dynamics. He did find some fundamental differences in the factors causing both types of volatility. In this article we therefore analyze both phenomena at the same time and explicitly make the distinction. We focus on similarities and differences in the dynamics at work in inter-election and campaign volatility. Moreover, we opt for a stringent distinction between the two types of volatility. While the common analytical design of both types of volatility implies a partial overlap between both, we explicitly avoid such. Within this article inter-election volatility implies a change in party preferences between one election and the

beginning of the next election campaign. Campaign volatility, as is common in other analyses too, signifies a change in party preference from the start of the election campaign to Election day. By doing so, we differ from common operationalizations and lose the possibility to fully compare our results with other data. The advantage of this specific operationalization, however, is that we can fully differentiate between types of volatile voters according to the timing of their switch, either between election campaigns or during the campaign.

Volatility is best studied by means of panel data, they provide the most correct accounts of voting preferences and shifts in voting behaviour. Recall-questions, on the other hand, tend to overrate consistency (Crow, 2005; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Granberg and Holmberg, 1990). For analyzing both inter-election and campaign volatility at the same time, a long-term panel is thus appropriate. As we do not have such a dataset, we make use of a short-term panel (giving insight on campaign volatility) that includes a recall question on previous voting behaviour (used to analyze inter-election volatility). By doing so, and aware of the limitations of our data, we follow the working method of Lachat (2007). The Partirep-survey provides such data for the Belgian context. A survey was conducted preceding the 2009 regional elections. It had a three-wave panel design and is therefore suitable to measure campaign volatility. The first wave of the survey also contained a recall-question on voting behaviour during the 2007 federal elections in Belgium.

### ***Theoretical aspects***

#### **Political sophistication and volatility**

Political sophistication is a concept often cited when thinking about an ideal democracy, where citizens are expected to be fully informed about politics and make well-reasoned voting choices (Dalton, 2000; Granberg and Holmberg, 1990; Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1965). With regard to electoral volatility, the question arises whether voters switching party preferences or vote choices are those fully informed or those with a very low level of political sophistication. In the first case, voters start floating

exactly because they know a lot and see the pros and cons of different parties. In the latter case, a voter is volatile because he or she has really no idea what parties stand for and is not interested in it either.

There are different aspects in political sophistication and consequently different ways of measuring the level of political sophistication of voters. Lachat (2007) describes citizens with a high level of political sophistication as following:

*Experts should have a higher level of political knowledge and display better organized and better developed political schemas. Furthermore, it is more likely that they will be exposed to political information, will be more engaged in political activities and will be politically more involved*

(Lachat 2007, p. 56).

When analyzing political sophistication, we thus can take political knowledge, political schemas, exposure to political information, political participation and involvement in politics into account. Depending on the data available and personal judgements about what matters most, different authors measure political sophistication by means of different factors or sets of factors. Political knowledge is said to be the best indicator for political sophistication (Lachat, 2007).

Over the past decades, political sophistication is expected to have increased, as a consequence of both higher levels of education and a media revolution. Dalton calls this evolution a process of cognitive mobilisation. It has become easier to obtain information about politics and because of higher levels of education, people are also better equipped to comprehend and deal with that information. According to Dalton, the main consequence of cognitive mobilization is that voters now make their vote choices independently and are no longer guided by partisan cues. An ever smaller part of the electorate thus consists of party identifiers (Dalton, 1984; Dalton, 2006). The loosening of the bonds between voters and parties subsequently creates the potential for greater volatility (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). This cognitive mobilisation theory is questioned by some empirical findings. Some researchers show that people with a high level of cognitive mobilisation tend to be strong party identifiers (Albright, 2009;

Marthaler, 2008). According to these results, political sophistication does not lead to volatility, but to stability in party preferences. These findings concord with the original ‘floating voter hypothesis’ of the Columbia school, who stated that especially the uninformed and uninterested voters are volatile (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1963; Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1965).

There is clearly a lot of uncertainty about what effect political sophistication might have on volatility. Voters with high levels of political sophistication might both be either more or less volatile (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). As there are different opinions on the relationship between political sophistication and volatility, some scholars tried to find explanations for the paradoxes and contradictory findings. In one single analysis, Granberg and Holmberg (1990) found volatile voters both to be more and less informed. The volatile voter was uninformed in the United States, while in Sweden, volatile voters are mostly interested non-partisans. In their search for an explanation for this remarkable finding, Granberg and Holmberg point to the differences in party systems between both countries. In Sweden, parties are the primary actors, while in the United States, election campaigns are much more focused on candidates. According to the researchers, in a candidate-centred system, the apathetic voters are more likely to change their preferences during a campaign. Another way out of the conundrum is by saying that both scholars stating that more sophistication leads to volatility and those saying that less sophistication induces volatility are right. When doing so, the relationship between volatility and sophistication is expected to be non-linear. Both Zaller and Kuhn point at such a relationship, they expect volatility to be highest among those voters with a moderate level of political sophistication (Zaller, 2000; Kuhn, 2009). Lachat (2007) stays within this tradition in his analysis of voter volatility. Moreover, he thinks that two different processes can lead to stability in voting behaviour. Some people are stable in their vote choice because of strong sociological predispositions. Others have stable voting preferences because of a high level of political sophistication. For the Belgian context, an analysis of the 2009 regional elections shows that political interest has a stabilising effect on the vote choice in Flanders. For the French-speaking part of Belgium, no significant effect in either direction is found (Walgrave, Lefevere and Hooghe, 2010).

Literature on the impact of political sophistication on voter volatility clearly is inconclusive. What effect sophistication has on voter volatility –stabilizing, leading to more volatility or a non-linear effect– is unclear. We, however, follow the traditional ‘floating voter hypothesis’, also confirmed by recent findings and expect political sophistication to lead to stability in vote intentions.

*Hypothesis 1: Political sophistication decreases voter volatility.*

### **The disaffected volatile voter**

Carsten Zelle was not convinced about different theories trying to explain volatility by means of levels of education, political interest or social characteristics. After showing that those theories insufficiently explain volatile behaviour, he develops the ‘frustrated floating voter’-hypothesis. The main argument is that voters behave volatile because of a ‘mood of protest’. According to Zelle, floating voters are: “*somewhat less satisfied with the political system, less trusting in parties, and less happy about their favoured party*” (Zelle 1995, p. 340). More recently, Dalton and Weldon (2005) investigated the impact of distrust in parties on electoral behaviour. They state “*distrust in parties stimulates a marked increase in voter volatility*” (Dalton and Weldon 2005, p. 944). Moreover, they also demonstrate that trust in parties is correlated to satisfaction with democracy and the democratic process in general. Peter Söderlund (2008), then, investigated whether volatility is mainly caused by voters’ opinion on a specific party or by “*attitudes towards politics in general*” (Söderlund 2008, p. 218). His findings point to the first possibility, volatility is significantly related towards how voters perceive the performance of their preferred party. This last approach fits within ‘reward-punishment’-theories developed by rational choice scholars who state that voters judge the performances of parties and vote accordingly (Fiorina, 2002; Key, 1966). While dissatisfaction about parties’ performances is an important reason for changing party preferences or vote choices, it cannot be considered as a fundamental voter characteristic. Rather than such a short-term and fluid attitude, we are interested in the impact of long-term stable political attitudes on volatility. The long-term stable political attitudes having an impact on volatility mentioned by Zelle (1995) and Dalton and

Weldon (2005) –satisfaction with democracy and political trust– are aspects of the ‘political disaffection’-concept. This concept has two aspects, on the one hand there is institutional disaffection, and on the other hand there is political disengagement. Indicators for institutional disaffection are institutional confidence and external political efficacy. Political disengagement can be operationalized by means of political interest, political salience and internal political efficacy (Torcal and Montero, 2006). Political disengagement could be considered as the opposite of political sophistication and is thus taken into account within our analysis. Institutional disaffection, is what Zelle (1995) and Dalton and Weldon (2005) point at and should also be included in an analysis about characteristics of volatile voters.

Although, up so far, there is very few work done on the impact of institutional disaffection on volatility, results unambiguously point at its destabilising effect. Consequently we expect voters with low levels of political trust and external political efficacy, variables used to measure institutional disaffection, to be more volatile in their party preferences and vote choices.

*Hypothesis 2: Political trust and external political efficacy decrease voter volatility.*

## **Party identification**

A central concept in the accounts on volatility of Dalton and his colleagues (Dalton, 1984; Dalton, 2007; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002) is party identification. As the amount of people having a fixed party identification decreases (this process is called dealignment), people are much more volatile. Ever since the concept of party identification has been put forward by the Michigan school scholars, it has been seen as a central voting choice cue (Campbell *et al.*, 1964). As a consequence, faced with higher levels of volatility, decreasing levels of party identification are expected to cause this phenomenon. Although the concept of party identification is generally accepted within American literature, its presence and applicability outside the United States has been questioned. As has been convincingly shown by Thomassen and Rosema (2009), it is not possible to use party identification as conceptualised within the United States, as a voting cue within a European context. As a consequence, partisanship should not be used to explain voter

volatility within Europe either. Moreover, because of the difficulties with the applicability and operationalization of party identifications within Europe and Belgium more specifically, party identification is not commonly asked for within voter surveys. The Partirep survey too, did not include measures on party identification.

### **Campaign volatility versus inter-election volatility**

Most of the literature dealing with both kinds of volatility (campaign volatility and inter-election volatility), does not postulate a different drive for the two types. Voters volatile from election to election are expected have the same characteristics as voters changing party preferences within a single campaign. At least, this is what is commonly expected and assumed when analyzing volatility in general (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1963; Granberg and Holmberg, 1990). Lachat (2007) was among the first to explicitly differentiate campaign volatility from inter-election volatility. He empirically separated both and investigated the dynamics behind the two phenomena. Lachats results indeed point to some fundamental differences, both concerning the long-term trend of the two types and concerning what drives campaign and inter-election volatility (Lachat, 2007).

Guided by the few findings of previous research on the two types of volatility (campaign and inter-election) and their causes, we expect to see some fundamental differences between campaign switchers and inter-election changers. Moreover, as we use a more stringent differentiation between both types of volatility without any overlap, if there are fundamental differences between the two types of volatility, they should be more pronounced with our operationalization.

*Hypothesis 3: Campaign switchers and voters switching preferences from one election to the beginning of another election-campaign can be empirically differentiated from each other.*

### **Data and methods**

We make our analysis by means of the Partirep Belgian election survey, at the occasion of the Belgian regional elections of 7 June 2009. The survey had a panel-design, with respondents interviewed three

times. During the first wave, between the end of February and the end of May 2009, respondents were interviewed face-to-face. A follow-up interview, by telephone, was conducted in the last two weeks before Election Day. The post-electoral wave again consisted of telephone interviews and took place between the end of June and the end of August 2009. For the first wave, a total of 2331 interviews were conducted, the response rate was 48,3%. In the second wave, 1845 respondents were interviewed again and 1698 participated in the post-electoral wave (Partirep, 2009).

The panel-design of the Partirep survey provides us with the appropriate data to analyze campaign volatility. Just as Lachat (2007) has done, we make use of a recall question in the survey to compare the dynamics of campaign volatility and inter-election volatility. The advantage of this method is that it allows us to analyze different kinds of volatility for the same respondents, although the panel is short-term. The biggest disadvantage of this method is that it makes use of data collected by means of a recall-question.

As voter volatility is a dichotomous variable, we made our analyses by means of binary logistic regressions. A voter that was entitled to vote for the 2007 election either indicated that he or she would vote in the same wave (0) or the to vote in a different manner in 2009 (1) (Table 1).<sup>2</sup> For the analysis, we consider a respondent inter-election volatile when he or she indicated different voting behaviour for the 2007 election than the party-preference in the first wave of the 2009 survey. By doing so, we completely distinguish inter-election volatility from campaign volatility. There is no overlap between the two and the 2009 campaign does not influence our measurement of inter-election volatility. Concerning campaign volatility, as there were three waves, different possibilities could lead to a voter being coded as an intra-campaign switcher (see Table 2).<sup>3</sup>

Both for inter election volatility and campaign volatility, the majority of the respondents reports stable voting behaviour. About 33% of the respondents indicated in the first wave of the survey to vote for

another party in the 2009 regional elections than he/she had done for the 2007 federal elections. To assess the level of volatility in 2009 and for comparing with previous elections, we also calculated the percentage of the respondents that changed preferences between 2007 (the recall) and the 2009 elections (the reported voting behaviour in wave three of the survey). Of all respondents that participated in the three waves of the survey, 40.4% indicated a different vote choice for 2009 than for 2007 (see appendix 1). This figure is somewhat higher than previous findings on individual inter-election volatility in Belgium (Baudewyns, Frogner and Swyngedouw, 2009; De Winter, Swyngedouw and Dumont, 2006). Of all respondents participating in the three waves of the survey, about 37% changed party preferences during the campaign. When we compare this figure with numbers of campaign volatility in other political systems (Blais, 2004), the degree of volatility during the 2009 campaign turns out to have been quite high. As is stated in another analysis of the 2009 campaign (Walgrave, Lefevere and Hooghe, 2010), we should nuance this high number somewhat. The campaign period covered by the Partirep survey is three months, while research on campaign volatility usually focuses on changes in the month before Election Day (Blais, 2004).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

This analysis focuses on voter volatility in the Belgian electoral context. Some peculiarities about the Belgian political system should thus be clarified. First, Belgium has a multiparty-system. The number of parties is expected to have an impact on the amount of volatility. More parties lead to a higher level of volatility, as there are more possibilities for voters to give their vote to (Pedersen, 1979). Second, within Belgium there are two completely separate party-systems. All parties either focus on the Dutch speaking voters or on the French speaking citizens. As a result of this integral separation, both the amount of parties and their ideological positioning differ strongly in each part of the country (Deschouwer, 2009). Third, the

Belgian political landscape is marked by the presence of a system of compulsory voting. Casting a ballot is not obligated, but enfranchised citizens should come to the polling station on Election Day. As a result, turnout levels are very high in Belgium, usually more than 90% (Quintelier *et al.*, forthcoming). The analysis is based on the Belgian regional elections of 2009, Belgian regional elections are perceived as first order especially when, as in 2009, they do not coincide with federal elections (Rihoux *et al.*, 2007).

In our analysis we focus on the impact of political sophistication and (institutional) disaffection. The variables dealing with political sophistication we include in our analysis are ‘the regular suspects’ political knowledge and interest in politics. Further we include political participation, exposure to the media and talking about politics to acquaintances, as Lachat mentions that the highly sophisticated are more involved in politics and more exposed to it (Lachat, 2007). Further, we add internal political efficacy and levels of education to the set of political sophistication measures. We include the level of education of respondents as a categorical variable. The reference category is no or an elementary school degree, this is contrasted to unfinished high school, finished high school and higher education degree levels respectively. Modernists state that with increasing educational levels, volatility should rise. The argument is that people with more cognitive skills are better informed and more independent. People with a higher education no longer stick to a certain party because of their social status or religious denomination (Dalton, 1984). Education is expected to have an indirect impact on volatility; it is of importance because it affects both political knowledge and political interest (McAllister, 2002). Empirical results, however, do not find any effect of education on the level of volatility (Crow, 2005; McAllister, 2002). Taking different aspects of political sophistication into account (instead of constructing a single index of political sophistication), allows for a differentiation between their effects (Krosnick, 1990).<sup>4</sup> For political knowledge we used the scores of respondents on five political knowledge questions. The variable interest in politics was measured by means of a self-reporting 0-10 scale of interest in politics. The variable ‘political participation’ was constructed by means of some traditional participation-questions. As the distribution of answers on these items was very unequal (most respondents indicated ‘never’), we decided to transform the items into

dummies. We then made the sum of these dummies, resulting in a participation score between zero and ten. The effect of exposure to the media was included in the analysis by means of self-reported scores for exposure to TV news, newspapers and radio. The variable ‘talking about politics’ consists of a sum scale of self-reported talking about politics to friends, colleagues and family. For institutional disaffection, the variable political trust was measured by means of the scores respondents gave for their trust in different political actors and institutions. Finally, both internal and external efficacy were measured by means of a battery of questions focussing on political efficacy (for coding details and factor analyses of the variables, see appendix 2).

Furthermore, we also control for socio-structural variables, we include age, religion, language, gender, and social class. First, age is expected to have a stabilizing impact on volatility. The argument is that older people, having voted several times in the past and having made up their minds at those instances, are less responsive to new information. That is why they are also expected to be less volatile in their vote choice, both between elections and within a certain campaign (Dalton, 1984). As some scholars point at a declining stability of political attitudes in old age (Alwin and Krosnick, 1991; Sears, 1981), we also test for a non-linear effect of age on electoral volatility. A second socio-structural variable we control for is religiousness. Religion is one of the main societal cleavages on which parties have developed in Belgium. Religious denomination is still significantly correlated to party choice (Knutsen, 2004; Botterman and Hooghe, forthcoming). If a voter is inclined to vote for a certain party because of religion, we expect his/her voting behaviour to be quite stable. As Walgrave and his colleagues (2010) state, we expect religiousness to be a predictor of non-volatility. The key variable determining electoral stability should be religious practice (Kuhn, 2009). Language is our third socio-structural factor and it is specific for the Belgian case. Volatility is anticipated to be higher when there are more parties or relevant parties competing in elections (Pedersen, 1979; Kuhn, 2009). In Flanders, this number is definitely higher than in the French-speaking part of Belgium. Moreover, controlling for language should take cultural differences between the two regions into account. Fourth, we control for gender, there are some indications that

women are somewhat more volatile than men in their vote choice (Hayes and McAllister, 2001). We also control for the impact of social class on volatility. Carsten Zelle (1995) states that, within the modernist school, especially members of the new middle class are expected to be more volatile in their party preferences.

Besides socio-structural variables, we also control for the impact of ideology on voter volatility. Depending on the specific dynamics of a campaign, scientists from time to time expect either voters on the right or on the left to be more volatile. Sometimes, the left side of the ideological spectrum is crowded with parties, causing especially left voters to hesitate what party to vote for. At other instances, party-competition is focused on the right side of the spectrum. In 2009 more volatility was anticipated among right-wing voters (Walgrave, Lefevere and Hooghe, 2010). Another way of taking political ideology into account is by looking at ideological extremeness, as Lisi (2010) has shown. People with a more extreme ideological profile are then expected to have more stable vote choices, because those voters are expected to be least dealigned. Political parties also tend to focus on the moderate voter. As a consequence, the political competition is strongest at the centre of the ideological spectrum. Voters with a moderate ideological profile should therefore be more volatile. As the concepts of left and right are quite familiar within the Belgian political context, a large majority of respondents was able to place him-/herself on the left-right axis. As a consequence, contrasting those respondents with an ideological position to those not able to place themselves on a left-right scale was not an option for the analysis.

## **Results**

We test our hypotheses by means of two binary logistic regressions. The advantage of testing for campaign volatility as a dichotomous variable (respondents could mention one, two or three different parties) is exactly that it allows for a comparison with inter-election volatility (hypothesis 3). In both regression analyses, we control for language, but do not make separate analyses for each region. We do

this because, regardless of the completely different electoral systems and differences in numbers of parties, volatility in both regions was about equal in size, especially for inter-election volatility.<sup>5</sup>

Although both phenomena –inter-election volatility and campaign volatility– are expected to be related, we analyze them separately. We do, however, check for the correlation between both types of volatility in our dataset. This results in a significant Pearson correlation of 0.26 ( $p \leq 0.001$ ). This rather low number strengthens our assumption that the two types of volatility are related but different and should thus be distinguished from each other when analyzing volatility. Of those voters who reported the same preference in the first wave of the 2009 survey as they recalled from 2007, 72.1% stuck with this preference throughout the campaign. From those that switched between 2007 and 2009, 45% was stable throughout the following campaign. The crosstab of inter-election and campaign volatile voters can be found in appendix 3.

Regression results are presented in Table 3, logit coefficients (B), standard errors (S.E.), odds ratios (Exp(B)) and levels of significance are given. As we use a binary logistic regression, these odds should be interpreted as following; odds smaller than one indicate that the predictor decreases chances for volatility. Odds with a value over one increase chances for volatility (Field, 2009). Most effects are in the expected directions. Of the political sophistication variables, only interest in politics has a significant impact on both types of volatility. Further, those that have higher levels of political participation switch significantly less during the election campaign. Remarkably, the effect of political interest within a campaign is in the opposite direction of the effect from election to election. Within the campaign period, voters with a higher level of interest in politics tend to switch their voting preference less. Over the longer inter-election period, however, higher interest in politics increases volatility. The analysis of campaign volatility lends support to the Columbia-school ‘floating voter hypothesis’. They stated that a volatile voter is highly uninterested in politics. The inter-election volatility analysis, on the other hand, is in line with Daltons cognitive mobilisation theory. The volatile voters are those with the highest level of political

sophistication. This reversal of the effect of interest in politics is surprising, and was not anticipated. There might be a logical explanation for these seemingly contradictory results, however. Part of the explanation might be found in the fact that we strictly separated campaign volatility from inter-election volatility. The difference between interested and non-interested voters is thus in the timing of their vote choice. An interested voter has made up his mind before the election campaign. We can assume that a highly interested voter has made a deliberate choice and consequently sticks with this choice during the campaign. As an interested voter probably follows politics more regularly, this voter has the time to screen parties and make a vote choice. Neither the ideas of the interested voter, nor the position of the different parties on fundamental issues still changes during the campaign. Therefore, there is no reason for the interested voter to change his/her vote intention during that period. A voter with a low level of interest, on the other hand, still has to make up his mind when the election campaign takes off. This voter has to make a vote choice in the heat of the campaign, as a consequence, there is more reason for hesitation. Besides political participation, only interest in politics has a significant impact on volatility. Although political knowledge is said to be the most important indicator for political sophistication, because it is driven by both political interest and cognitive aspects, not political knowledge but interest in politics proves to be the key variable in our analysis of political sophistication. This finding is consistent with what Luskin (1990, p. 348) has shown about political sophistication. He found interest in politics to be by far the most influential variable for political sophistication. In a sense, the other political sophistication variables included in the analysis could thus be considered as deviates from the key variable; interest in politics, that is significantly related to volatility. As only political interest has a significant effect on both types of volatility, the explanatory power of the 'political sophistication'-variables for volatile behaviour is limited. Especially within a campaign period, however, political sophistication is of importance when predicting vote switching. Our first hypothesis, that political sophistication decreases volatility, can only be partially confirmed. Interest in politics is significantly related to volatility, but surprisingly the direction of the effect changes depending on the time before Election Day. Except for political participation, the other political sophistication variables do not reach an acceptable level of significance. The effect of

sophistication on volatility is linear (adding the squared variants of political knowledge and interest in politics did not result in significant effects in the model), but the direction changes depending on the time before Election Day.

Our second hypothesis; that the (institutionally) disaffected are more volatile, can be partially confirmed too. Only one of our indicators to take disaffection into account, external efficacy, is significant but it is highly significant. The higher the external efficacy of voters, the more stable their vote intentions and voting behaviour. Especially people with low levels of external efficacy, voters who think their vote makes no difference and has no impact, switch vote intentions more often. There is no significant relationship between volatility and political trust.

Then we come to our control variables, Flemish voters are indeed more volatile than their French-speaking compatriots. This difference, however, is only visible for campaign volatility. Gender is not significantly related to volatility. Age has a stabilizing impact on campaign volatility, but not on inter-election volatility. The squared variant of age is not significantly related to any of the types of volatility, meaning that the effect of age is not curvilinear. Religiousness, as anticipated, has a stabilizing effect on voting behaviour too. The effect, however, is only significant between election periods. Although this variable is not significantly related to campaign volatility, it is a strong predictor for inter-election volatility. Religion used to be one of the main societal and political cleavages within Belgium. The figures in Table 3 show that religion is still an important stabilizer for voting behaviour between elections, but religiousness does not prevent voters from switching preferences throughout the campaign and thus from hesitating during the campaign period. The control variable social class has no significant impact on inter-election volatility. The model based on socio-structural variables explains 3.2% of the variance in inter-election volatility and 4.1% of the campaign volatility variance.

The left-right position of voters is not related to volatility. There is thus no clear image of either voters on the left or on the right of the ideological spectrum being more volatile. This variable was checked for both language groups separate too, as the different constellation of the party system at each side of the language border might have an impact on this variable. In none of the language-groups, however, the left-right position of voters had a significant impact on volatility. Our second ideological variable is ‘ideological extremeness’. This variable is significantly related to volatility, voters who report a more extreme ideological position on the left-right scale are more stable in their vote intention.

In the third hypothesis we stated that we expected fundamental differences between voters volatile within a single campaign and voters switching vote intentions from election to election. This hypothesis can be confirmed. First, inter-election switchers have different sociological profile than campaign switchers, other factors determine campaign and inter-election volatility. Second, concerning political sophistication, the effect of political interest on volatility within a campaign is in the opposite direction of the effect on volatility between elections. The two types of volatility therefore can and should be clearly distinguished from each other.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

### ***Conclusion***

Research on what drives voter volatility is often coloured by a normative dimension. The fundamental question then is whether ‘the floating voters’ are those with high levels of political sophistication, political efficacy and trust in politics or those disaffected from politics and with low levels of political sophistication. This discussion is normative because of our general understanding of how democracy should function and how an ‘ideal democracy’ should look like. In an ideal context, voters make informed choices and cast their votes after having considered the programs, policy proposals and past realizations of

the different parties. If the more sophisticated voters are most volatile, this would mean that deliberate choices precede electoral switching. If, on the other hand, people who switch parties are those with significant lower levels of political sophistication and the highly frustrated, the question arises what determines the gains and losses of parties on Election Day.

With regard to the concept 'disaffection' the image of the 'typical floating voter' is clear. Both inter-election and campaign switchers are more likely to have a low level of external efficacy. These findings are in accordance with the negative view on volatility. For political sophistication, results differ depending on the type of volatility. Campaign switchers are significantly less interested in politics. Between elections, on the other hand, switchers have significantly higher levels of political sophistication. The main difference between both is the timing of the vote intention switch. The highly sophisticated have made their vote choice before the campaign takes off and stick with it (as can be seen in appendix, of those that switched between 2007 and 2009, 45% remained stable throughout the campaign). People with low levels of interest in politics, on the other hand, change preferences during the campaign. The results in this article make clear that generalizations about volatile voters are not possible. The differentiation between inter-election and campaign-switchers is a necessary condition when analyzing voter volatility, especially when focussing on the link between political sophistication and voter volatility.

The results might mean that those voters who change during the campaign, switch at random, cause uninformed. On the other hand, this result might also point to the importance of political campaigns for the lowly political sophisticated and those apathetic from politics. The campaign is then the incentive for those voters to think about their party preferences and to change them when they feel the need to do so.

Our results point to a different timing for changing voting preferences depending on the level of political sophistication of voters. The analysis, however, has some limits. First, we make use of panel data to study campaign-volatility, but are dependent on recall-questions for analyzing inter-election volatility. A full

panel-design might provide more precise data and make comparisons more accurate. Second, the analysis focuses on a snapshot in time, the 2009 regional elections and it is limited to one geographical area; Belgium. Further research should therefore make clear whether the results can be generalized to other contexts and moments in time. Moreover, the use of experiments might provide more straightforward indications about the effects of campaigning for both low and high sophisticated voters.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> I gratefully acknowledge the generous support provided by the Belgian Federal Science Agency to the ‘Partirep’ (Participation and Representation) project, as part of the Inter-University Attraction Pole program ([www.partirep.eu](http://www.partirep.eu)). I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Acta Politica* for their critical but very useful comments and insights.

<sup>2</sup> An important difference between the 2007 and the 2009 elections is the cartels that took part in the election. In 2007 both CD&V/N-VA and SP.A/Spirit were on the election ballots as cartels. At the time of the 2009 election, both cartels had split up. CD&V, N-VA, SP.A and SLP (the heir of Spirit) all formed a separate list. As a consequence whenever a respondent indicated to have voted for a cartel in the 2007 federal election and for one of its now independent parts in the 2009 election, this was coded as stable voting behaviour. This might mean that we somewhat underestimate inter-election volatility, it is for example quite plausible that some Christian-democrat voters shifted to the Flemish nationalists in 2009. For 2007 however, we have no other data than voting behaviour for the cartels, we have no way of registering what party a respondent would have voted for if the cartel consisted of two separate lists.

<sup>3</sup> The reported voting behaviour in each wave might be a certain party, but might as well be an indication to cast a blank or invalid vote or an indication not to turn out to vote. Non-voters are also included in the analysis, non-voting is seen as a voting preference, just as party preferences are. Whenever a voter switches from a party preference to ‘non-voting’ or vice versa, the voter is coded as a volatile voter. A voter that indicates not to vote throughout the waves in the survey is coded as a stable voter.

<sup>4</sup> As a lot of variables introduced in the analysis could be expected to be related to each other, we checked for multicollinearity. Tolerance statistics, however, were never below 0.5 while the highest VIF estimate was 1.9. These estimates do not point to a collinearity problem.

<sup>5</sup> Between 2007 and 2009, 32.4 of the Dutch-speaking and 32.9% of the francophone voters was volatile. While 40.5% of the Flemish voters was volatile during the campaign, 32.8% of the French-speaking voters was.

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**Table 1. Inter-election Volatility (recall 2007 – wave 1 2009)**

<b>Recall 2007 (wave 1)</b>	<b>Vote intention 2009 (wave 1)</b>	<b>Volatile (1) or Not volatile (0)</b>	<b>% respondents (N = 2025)</b>
A	A	0	67.4%
A	B	1	32.6%

Coding and percentages of voters changing voting preferences from 2007 (recall) to the start of the 2009 campaign.  
Source: PartiRep Voter Study 2009. Unweighted data.

**Table 2. Campaign volatility (three waves 2009)**

<b>Week 14-3</b>	<b>Week 2-1</b>	<b>Post-electoral</b>	<b>Volatile (1) or Not volatile (0) - % respondents (N = 1388)</b>	
A	A	A	0	62.8%
A	A	B	1	37.2%
A	B	B	1	
A	B	A	1	
A	B	C	1	

Coding and percentages of voters changing voting preferences during the 2009 campaign. Source: PartiRep Voter Study 2009. Unweighted data.

**Table 3. Binary logistic regressions with campaign volatility and inter-election volatility as dependent variables**

	Campaign Volatility			Inter-election volatility		
	B	(S.E.)	Exp(B)	B	(S.E.)	Exp(B)
<b>Socio-structural</b>						
Language (ref: Dutch)	-0.577***	(0.136)	0.562	-0.072ns	(0.136)	0.931
Gender (ref: male)	0.013ns	(0.132)	1.013	-0.090ns	(0.135)	0.914
Age	-0.056*	(0.022)	0.946	-0.017ns	(0.024)	0.983
Age <sup>2</sup> (divided by 100)	0.042ns	(0.024)	1.043	0.006ns	(0.025)	1.006
Religious practice	-0.063ns	(0.034)	0.939	-0.126***	(0.035)	0.882
Social class (ref: other)						
Labour	0.035ns	(0.203)	1.035	-0.160ns	(0.209)	0.852
Middle class	0.109ns	(0.180)	1.116	-0.172ns	(0.184)	0.842
High class	0.021ns	(0.246)	1.021	-0.184ns	(0.242)	0.832
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>			<b>0.041</b>			<b>0.032</b>
<b>Ideological position</b>						
Left-right	-0.034ns	(0.033)	0.966	-0.002ns	(0.034)	0.998
Ideological extremeness	-0.142**	(0.045)	0.868	-0.121**	(0.046)	0.886
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>			<b>0.006</b>			<b>0.007</b>
<b>Political sophistication</b>						
Education (ref: no or elementary school degree)						
Unfinished high school	0.085ns	(0.236)	1.089	-0.130ns	(0.255)	0.878
Finished high school	0.289ns	(0.227)	1.335	0.411ns	(0.241)	1.509
Higher education or university degree	0.073ns	(0.256)	1.076	0.326ns	(0.267)	1.385
Political knowledge	-0.039ns	(0.047)	0.961	-0.041ns	(0.048)	0.960
Interest in politics	-0.072*	(0.033)	0.931	0.082*	(0.034)	1.085
Political participation (0-10)	-0.098*	(0.044)	0.907	-0.010ns	(0.044)	0.990
Exposure to media						
Newspapers	-0.053ns	(0.032)	0.948	-0.042ns	(0.032)	0.959
TV News	0.042ns	(0.045)	1.043	-0.046ns	(0.046)	0.956
Radio	0.057ns	(0.036)	1.059	0.060ns	(0.038)	1.062
Talking about politics (0-10)	0.029ns	(0.027)	1.029	0.023ns	(0.027)	1.023
Internal efficacy (0-10)	0.006ns	(0.037)	1.006	0.033ns	(0.038)	1.034
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>			<b>0.040</b>			<b>0.026</b>
<b>Political (dis)affection</b>						
Political trust	0.034ns	(0.048)	1.035	-0.086ns	(0.048)	0.918
External efficacy	-0.154***	(0.032)	0.857	-0.159***	(0.032)	0.853
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>			<b>0.025</b>			<b>0.018</b>
<b>Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> (full model)</b>			<b>0.135</b>			<b>0.105</b>

Logit coefficients, standard errors (between brackets) and odd ratios are given. Significance \* $\leq 0.05$  ; \*\* $\leq 0.01$  ; \*\*\* $\leq 0.001$ . Pseudo-explained variance given by Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup>. Because non-active people were overrepresented in the sample, data were weighted according to the social class of the respondents. Source: PartiRep Voter Study 2009.

## Appendix 1

### Inter-election Volatility (recall 2007 – wave 3 2009)

Recall 2007 (wave 1)	Vote intention 2009 (wave 3)	Volatile (1) or Not volatile (0)	% respondents (N = 1481)
A	A	0	59.6%
A	B	1	40.4%

Coding and percentages of voters changing voting preferences from 2007 (vote recall) to 2009 (vote recall). Source: PartiRep Voter Study 2009. Unweight data.

## Appendix 2

**Language:** Language of the survey, either Dutch (0) or French (1).

**Gender:** Male (0) or female (1).

**Age:** In years, calculated by subtracting the reported year of birth from 2009 (the year the survey was held in).

**Education:** No degree or elementary school degree (1), Unfinished high school degree (2), Finished high school degree (3) and Higher education or university degree (4)

**Religious practice:** Self-reported scale of religious practice, with values from 1 (never) to 7 (at least once a week).

**Social class:** Four categories, being non-active (1 = retired, unemployed, student or housewife/-men), labour (2), middle class (3 = farmer, entrepreneur with less than six employees and civil servants), higher class (4 = entrepreneur with more than six employees, profession, board of directors and staff member).

**Ideological profile (left-right):** Self-reported position on scale from 0 (left) to 10 (right).

**Ideological extremeness:** Distance from the ideological centre (5) on the left-right scale. Ranging from 0 (when a five was reported) to 5 (when zero or ten was reported).

**Political knowledge:** Score on five knowledge-questions in the survey, thus ranging from 0 (no knowledge) to 5 (high knowledge). The five questions in the Partirep-survey are sufficient for a solid measurement and analysis of political knowledge (Hooghe and Walgrave, 2010).

**Interest in politics:** Self-reported score for interest in politics, ranging from 0 (no interest at all) to 10 (very much interested).

**Political participation:** Variable composed by means of the scores on 10 participation items (excluding membership in political parties), with scores ranging from 1 (never), over 2 (seldom) and 3 (sometimes) to 4 (often). The items questioned were the following: How much have you done the following things during the past twelve months? ‘boycotting certain products’, ‘participating in manifestations’, ‘partaking in illegal protest actions’, ‘sending a letter to a politician’, ‘sending an e-mail to a politician’, ‘signing a petition’, ‘being in the media’, ‘being active in a volunteer organisation’, ‘debating on political issues on internetforums or on-line discussion groups’, ‘supporting a charity organisation’. As the distribution on these participation items was very unequal, the item scores were converted into dummies. The sum of those dummies then resulted in our participation variable, ranging from 0 to 10. (Cronbach’s alpha .62 ; Eigenvalue 2.45 ; 24.5% explained variance)

**Exposure to the media:** Scores of self-reported exposure to three different media channels (newspaper, news bulletin and radio) during the past two weeks. Questions were part of the first wave of the survey. Scores ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (systematically, each week-day).

**Talking about politics:** Sum-scale of self-reported scores for talking about politics during the previous month to friends, colleagues and family-members. Scores ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (often). Converted into a 0-10 scale. (Cronbach’s alpha .76 ; Eigenvalue 2.27 ; 67.55% explained variance)

**Internal political efficacy:** Composed out of the scores on four items in the survey, ‘I consider myself capable of participating in politics’, ‘I think I would do as good a job as most politicians we elect’, ‘I think I’m better informed about politics and government than most people’, ‘I think I have a rather good understanding of important problems society is dealing with’. Respondents gave a score from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (fully agree) on each question, the sum of the scores on each question was computed and put on a 0 to 10 scale. (Cronbach’s alpha .69 ; Eigenvalue 2.07 ; 51.72% explained variance)

**Political trust:** Average score of self-reported trust in six political institutions (Political parties, the regional government, the regional parliament, the federal government, the federal parliament and

politicians). Ranging from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust). (Cronbach's alpha .81 ; Eigenvalue 3.11 ; 54.76% explained variance)

**External political efficacy:** Composed by means of the scores on three questions in the survey, 'An average citizen does have an impact on politics and what the government is doing', 'Voting makes no sense, parties do whatever they want anyway' and 'In election times, one party promises more than the other, but eventually, nothing happens anyway'. The scores were ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) and were converted so that all high scores meant high efficacy and low scores meant low efficacy. The sum score was put on a 0 to 10 scale. (Cronbach's alpha .59 ; Eigenvalue 1.65 ; 54.93% explained variance)

### **Appendix 3**

#### **Crosstab Inter-election and Campaign Volatility (N=1300)**

	<b>Campaign Stable</b>	<b>Campaign Volatile</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Inter-election Stable</b>	72.1% (619)	27.9% (240)	100% (859)
<b>Inter-Election Volatile</b>	45.1% (818)	54.9% (242)	100% (441)

Source: PartiRep Voter Study 2009. Unweighted data.

### **Appendix 4**

#### **Descriptives independent variables**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Language	1549	.00	1.00	.3433	.47498
Gender	1549	.00	1.00	.5154	.49992
Age	1549	18.00	88.00	48.0502	17.30265
Age <sup>2</sup> (divided by 100)	1549	3.24	77.44	26.0801	17.14540
Religious practice	1549	1.00	7.00	2.4550	1.96779
Social class	1546	1.00	4.00	1.9968	1.06401
Level of education	1548	1.00	4.00	2.8540	.95658
Left-Right self-placement	1519	.00	10.00	4.9738	1.93668
Ideological extremeness	1519	.00	5.00	1.3377	1.40032

Political knowledge	1549	.00	5.00	2.2458	1.53051
Interest in politics	1548	.00	10.00	4.6605	2.52870
Political participation	1527	.00	9.00	1.8694	1.57760
Media use: Newspaper	1549	.00	5.00	2.6040	2.06161
Media use: TV News	1549	.00	5.00	3.8951	1.54441
Media use: Radio	1549	.00	5.00	3.7556	1.78831
Talking about politics	1549	.00	10.00	3.8269	2.78607
Internal political efficacy	1541	.00	10.00	4.0114	2.10721
Political trust	1511	.00	9.00	5.1132	1.49628
External political efficacy	1540	.00	10.00	3.8103	2.29432

Descriptives of the independent variables in the analysis. Data were weighted according to the social class of the respondents. Source: PartiRep Voter Study 2009.