Abstract

The increase of electoral volatility in established democracies is typically interpreted as proof that short-term factors are increasingly important determinants of vote choice. The empirical evidence to support this assertion, however, is relatively weak. This paper addresses this question by investigating the impact of both long and short-term determinants on the vote choices of stable and volatile voters in Britain. Analysis of three British election panels (1992-1997, 1997-2001 and 2005-2010) indicates that short-term factors – especially economic issues – do have more weight in determining the vote choices of volatile voters compared with stable voters. However, we also reveal that the growth in instability of voting behaviour is driven mainly by the weakening impact of long-term factors and not by increasing importance of short-term determinants of the vote choice. Short-term predictors are becoming more important, therefore, but this gain in strength is in relative rather than absolute terms.

Keywords: Short-term determinants; Volatility; Voting behaviour; Great Britain.

1 Introduction

The notion that electorates have a range of more or less fixed determinants of their vote choice is one that has been widely accepted in the literature since the influential work of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960). The increasing erosion in the linkages between voters and parties in advanced democracies has been seen as an indication that the longer-term structural forces shaping voting behaviour that were identified by Campbell and his colleagues are giving way to shorter-term determinants (Dalton, 2013). The distinction between the two types of determinants has been summarized neatly by Lewis-Beck et al. in the following statement (2008, p. 26):

"Social demographic factors such as gender, race, and social class are long term. Two important political predispositions are also considered long term: party identification and political ideology. By contrast, the candidates competing in a campaign and the issues raised in it are considered short-term factors."

As long term factors decline in importance, the expectation is essentially that factors closer to the tip of the funnel – such as issue-positions, aspects of accountability and leader-images – should gain in importance within the vote choice process (Schmitt and Wüst, 2006, Walczak et al., 2012). While an eminently logical assumption, the extent to which this process of decline and substitution has occurred among electorates has not been the subject of extensive scholarly attention to date. Moreover, the empirical evidence that has been produced thus far does not in fact appear to corroborate the view that short-term factors are indeed becoming increasingly important (Thomassen, 2005).

Short-term factors and their impact on the vote are particularly relevant in light of the observed increase in levels of volatility in advanced democracies. Thanks to a rich literature on volatility, we know which voters are more likely to change their votes from one election to another (Lachat, 2007), but less is known about what ultimately determines the vote of an increasingly large group of the electorate. This knowledge, however, is highly important for qualifying the impact of volatility. That a part of the electorate changes parties from one election to another is considered essential for the functioning of representative democracy, as it implies that politicians can be held to account (Przeworski et al., 1999). Investigating the factors that determine the choices of volatile voters implies gaining insights into whether vote switchers are indeed fulfilling this role; are they switching because of parties' positions on particular issues, or because of how incumbents perform in office? This article addresses this gap in the literature by investigating the importance of different vote determinants of stable and volatile voters.

2 From long-term predispositions to short-term factors

'The funnel of causality' is a metaphor for understanding how multiple factors, through a 'converging sequence of causal chains' affect voters' choices (Campbell et al., 1980). The contrast between long- and short-term factors within the funnel is regularly invoked in studies of vote choice. As noted in the quotation from Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) above, socio-demographics, along with value orientations and partisanship are typically regarded as long-

term factors; whereas short-term forces, such as issue attitudes, performance assessments and candidate evaluations, affect the vote much closer to Election Day (Schmitt and Wüst, 2006, Walczak et al., 2012). Long-term determinants, while generally seen as more stable than short-term factors, are of course not entirely immune to change. Similarly, while short-term factors are more changeable, they are not constantly in flux. Overall, long-term factors are expected to stabilize the vote (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967, Dalton, 2013).

Previous research has documented important changes in voting behaviour in advanced democracies and in Great Britain more specifically, with a trend towards dealignment on the one hand and indications of increasing volatility on the other. The concept of party identification was introduced in British electoral research by Butler and Stokes (1969), who also stressed its importance for explaining voting behaviour in Great Britain. About a decade later, however, it was already pointed out that partisan attachments were eroding, and Särlvik and Crewe (1983) labeled the 1970s a 'decade of dealignment'. This trend of waning party identifications has continued since (Clarke and Stewart, 1998). A closer look at questions on partisanship in the British Election Studies highlights this downward trend, as the proportion of respondents who indicate that they identify very strongly or fairly strongly with a party has decreased from 83% in 1964 to 54% in 2010 (BES 1964-2010). Alongside this marked decline of partisan attachments, it seems that voting in Great Britain is becoming increasingly unstable. Recall data indicate that the percentage of vote switchers increased from 18% in 1964 to 28% in 2010. Furthermore, the proportion of those who switch their vote over the course of the campaign is increasing as well (Denver et al., 2012). These over-time trends are only suggestive, but it seems as if the process of dealignment – and the erosion of party attachments in particular – causes voting behaviour in Great Britain to become unstable.

In addition, scholars are pointing out that the impact of particular determinants of the vote choice is changing, with long-term factors becoming less important. For example, a number of scholars have shown a decline in the impact of social cleavages – prime examples of long-term factors – on vote choices (Clarke and Lipset, 1991, Franklin et al., 2009). It is, however, important to point out that the scientific debate on the waning importance of cleavages on the vote choice process is on-going, and the British case is exemplary in this regard. The first election studies conducted in Great Britain highlighted the importance of class for explaining voting behaviour, but since the 1950s the impact of class on voting has waned. The sources of this decline, however, are disputed (Evans and Tilley, 2012). The continued relevance of factors as class or religion on the vote is thus debated (Jansen et al., 2013, Knutsen, 2004), but it could be concluded that the impact of demographic factors on voting behaviour has eroded over the last couple of decades (Evans and Tilley, 2012, Franklin et al., 2009, van der Brug, 2010). Additionally, as partisanship is eroding (Dalton, 2013, Nie et al., 1979), its impact on the vote choice is likely to weaken as well.

The expectation that the decreasing impact of long-term factors is followed by an increasing importance of short-term factors has already been addressed in previous research. Scholars have analyzed changes over time and looked at generational differences in vote choice determinants but have found only weak empirical evidence supporting the claim that dealignment implies more weight for short-term factors. In a number of publications in the 1970s it was argued that the decrease of partisanship in the United States was associated with more issue voting (Nie et al., 1979, Pomper, 1972). More recently, Walczak et al. (2012)

investigated variations in the vote choice determinants of different generations of voters and found issues to have more explanatory power on the vote choice of younger generations. They did not, however, observe a similar trend when it came to the impact of performance evaluations. Similarly, Sanders (2003) does not find that economic perceptions have become stronger determinants of the vote in British elections. Most work on the alleged increase of short-term factors in the vote choice has focused on investigating the impact of candidates on the vote choice, and the literature suggests that leaders should become stronger predictors of vote choices as the process of dealignment unfolds. A pattern of personalization is regularly invoked and considered self-evident, but empirical support for the expectation that dealignment is indeed associated with stronger effects of leaders on the vote is thin or simply non-existent in the empirical work published on this topic (Gidengil, 2013, Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2013, Karvonen, 2010).

In sum, at an aggregate level it can be observed that the process of dealignment is associated with increasingly unstable voting behaviour. It is assumed that part of the explanation for this growing instability is that short-term factors have become more important, but studies examining how short-term factors fare over time offer mixed and inconclusive findings. The validity of the claim that voting behaviour is becoming increasingly unstable over time *because* short-term factors are becoming more important, however, hinges on an association between short-term factors and unstable voting behaviour. Only if that is the case, is it reasonable to assume that an increased importance of short-term factors over time is indeed driving growing levels of electoral instability. This paper takes a step back from the over-time analyses conducted on this topic so far and investigates whether – at a particular point in time – we observe a link between the reliance on short-term vote choice determinants and volatile electoral behaviour. The hypothesis that will be tested is therefore that the vote choices of volatile voters are determined more strongly by short-term factors than is the case for stable voters.

In focusing on what determines the choices of party switchers and how their vote calculus differs from how stable voters decide what party to vote for, the approach is similar to previous work investigating the vote choices of late deciding voters (Blumenstiel and Plischke, 2015, Irwin and van Holsteyn, 2008, Kosmidis and Xezonakis, 2010). This research also starts from the observation that voting behaviour is changing, with a growing number of voters deciding late in the campaign which party to vote for. These scholars further assume that, for the group of voters on whom they are focusing, short-term determinants are more important. Results suggest that issue voting, candidates, economic evaluations and strategic considerations in particular are indeed associated with deciding late in the election which party to vote for (Blumenstiel and Plischke, 2015, Irwin and van Holsteyn, 2008, Kosmidis and Xezonakis, 2010).

3 Data and method

To investigate whether short-term factors are more important for voters who switch parties, we use the data from three recent British election panels (1992-1997, 1997-2001 and 2005-2010). Panels allow operationalizing switching and stability by means of independent reports of the vote choice in each of the elections. This avoids the pitfalls of relying on recall

questions when operationalizing party switching, which underestimate the true amount of vote switching (van der Eijk and Niemöller, 2008). Panel data, however, are not flawless, and are known to suffer from panel-conditioning effects (Warren and Halpern-Manners, 2012) and from attrition (Frankel and Hillygus, 2013).

Voters changing parties are treated as volatile, but so too are voters switching to or from abstention. Similarly, respondents who consistently abstained from voting are treated as stable. I therefore do not distinguish between the two main sources of instability identified by previous research in the field of electoral volatility (Key, 1966). This choice is driven by the fact that both types of change contribute to the aggregate-level electoral instability that Campbell linked to the influence of short-term forces. Additionally, on a more pragmatic note, including abstainers increases the sample size for the analyses, thus enhancing the estimations. Combining both sources of instability in a single indicator could lead to claims that the inferences are flawed. Previous empirical research has indeed indicated that the determinants for party switching differ from those that lead voters to abstain (Dassonneville et al., 2015). Therefore, as a robustness test the analyses were performed on a reduced sample in which only party switching was accounted for, resulting in largely similar results.[1] The focus on Great Britain implies that voting behaviour is investigated in a context affected by patterns of dealignment and a waning impact of social cleavages (Clarke and Stewart, 1998). Furthermore, election studies in Britain have a tradition of measuring long- and short-term determinants of the vote, allowing for a simultaneous investigation of the impact of different types of factors. Comparative studies of changes in voting behaviour do not portray Great Britain as an exceptional case (Franklin et al., 2009). Findings observed in the context of British elections are thus likely to be generalizable to other advanced democracies as well.

Combining analyses from three panel studies ensures that conclusions are not driven by the idiosyncrasies of one particular election. The panel datasets employed are the 1992-1997 BES Panel Study (Heath et al., 1998), the 1997-2001 BES Panel survey (Heath et al., 2002) and the 2005-2010 BES 9 Wave Panel Study (Clarke et al., 2014).[2] The time frame covered by the analyses is thus the relatively short time period from the end of the 1990s until 2010. This is a period that is furthermore quite particular in a number of ways, with Labour renewing itself and a presumably strong role of Tony Blair in attracting voters who previously did not vote Labour (Bartle, 2003, Clarke, et al., 1999). As a result, the analyses cannot shed light on a trend towards dealignment – a process that began several decades earlier. We know, however, that the British context has been strongly affected by this pattern towards dealignment, resulting in large numbers of dealigned and volatile voters and allowing a thorough analysis of differences between stable and volatile voters.

The interview method for the first two panels was face-to-face, but the 2005-2010 panel was conducted online, with respondents sampled from a large database of registered YouGov-users. As active panelists are likely to be different from the population at large, weights are applied in the analyses of the 2005-2010 election panel.

The interest of this paper lies not in the effect size of particular variables, but in the extent to which different types of determinants contribute to explaining the vote. Therefore, I employ an analytical strategy that allows for an investigation of the relative strength of different sets of vote factors, shedding light on how much long- and short-term determinants respectively contribute to explaining the choices of stable and switching voters separately.

First, I estimate multinomial logit models explaining the vote choice in British elections. Four choice options are distinguished; voting Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or any other option (including abstention).[3] Adding abstainers to the 'other' category implies a loss of information. Treating abstainers as a separate (additional) category, however, reduces the number of respondents per category and weakens the estimation of the vote choice models, but preliminary analyses with abstention treated as a separate choice option indicate the same general patterns.[4]

After estimating these multivariate models, I simulate how many voters would have voted differently if particular sets of variables had zero effect on their vote choice. Doing so, I closely follow the strategy used by Blais et al. (2004) to estimate the gross effect of economic evaluations and issues on the vote. Blais et al. present this approach as the counterpart of the estimation of net effects introduced by Alvarez et al. (2000). First, I estimate how each of the respondents included in the model voted under the full model. The assumption in this step is that the respondent chooses the option with the highest estimated vote probability. Next, the coefficient of a particular set of predictors – economic evaluations for example – is set to zero, while the values of all other coefficients are kept constant. Following this, I then calculate a new prediction of the vote for all respondents. Comparing the predictions of the full model with these new predictions we can then assess how many voters would have voted differently if this set of variables indeed had no effect on the vote choice. Thus, the focus is on shifts in the outcome option for which a respondent is estimated to have the highest probability to vote.

As an example, under the full model a voter could have the highest predicted probability of voting Labour. If setting for example the coefficients of the indicators of respondents' economic evaluations to zero and calculating anew the probability that this voter votes Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or any other option, we could find that the voter no longer is most likely to vote Labour, but rather Liberal Democrat. In this example, we would state that if economic evaluations did not affect this voter's choice, she would have voted differently. By investigating what proportion of the respondents would have voted differently if a particular set of vote choice determinants did not affect their vote choice, we gain insights into the importance of particular variables compared to other vote choice determinants. This analytical strategy is implemented for stable and volatile voters separately, shedding light on the *relative importance* of different sets of vote choice determinants for both groups of voters. Furthermore, we can use the standard errors around the mean probability of switching under each scenario to construct 95%-confidence intervals. These give us an indication of the degree of certainty of our estimations, and allow us to compare whether within a particular group (either stable or volatile voters) the impact of specific vote choice determinants differs significantly. Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that the main limitation of our analytical approach lies in the inability to assess whether effects for volatile voters are significantly different from what we observe for stable voters.

A number of socio-demographic variables that are regularly linked to party preferences in Britain are controlled for: gender; age; education; religious denomination; whether a voter is member of a minority (vs. being white); social class and working in the public sector. Additionally, I control for differences in voting behaviour between Scotland and the other regions. Partisanship – the prime factor that is said to be in decline – is included

as well.[5]

The impact of different types of short-term factors is then assessed. Issues, economic evaluations and leadership evaluations are taken into account. The choice to include these factors is based on what theorists of the funnel of causality describe as factors that are situated more proximate to the vote choice. These three types vote choice determinants – issues, economic evaluations and leaders – are also the factors that previous work on short-term factors has investigated (van der Brug, 2010, Walczak et al., 2012). Additionally, these indicators are consistently measured in British election studies and are included in the panel studies relied on here as well.

The variants of issue voting described in the literature are manifold.[6] I focus here on the impact of issues by including distance variables.[7] Economic evaluations are investigated by means of standard items that cover sociotropic and egotropic economic evaluations, both retrospectively as well as prospectively (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2013). Leader effects, finally, are operationalized as a summary score of assessments of the leadership traits of leaders. Using a combined summary measure of different traits included in an election study instead of a more direct feeling thermometer rating should help us to avoid the pitfall of reciprocal causation when investigating leader effects on the vote choice (Bellucci et al., 2015).[8]

I focus on the impact of different sets of vote choice determinants, long- and short-term factors respectively. This distinction between long- and short-term factors is a theoretical one, mainly based on the assumed position of these factors within the funnel of causality (Campbell et al., 1980). This paper is therefore not shedding light on change and stability with respect to these factors. Instead, it investigates the importance of the so-called long-term structural factors on the one hand and short-term factors on the other for explaining citizens' vote choices.[9]

In addition to investigating the extent to which different vote choice determinants contribute to explaining the choices of stable and volatile voters, I also analyze the contribution of long- and short-term determinants to overall levels of electoral volatility. Therefore, multinomial vote choice models were estimated explaining the vote choice of voters in the 1997, 2001 and 2010 general elections. Unlike the main analyses, where stable and volatile voters are considered separately, one single model is estimated for every election. As a consequence, sample sizes are larger for these estimations, which allows for a consideration of abstention as a separate outcome option. After estimating the models, the voter's choice is predicted, assuming that a voter will choose the option for which she has the highest predicted probability. In line with the main analyses, different scenarios are then investigated: a series of predictions are calculated, each time with a different group of vote choice determinants set to have no impact on the vote choice. The predicted vote choices of these simulations are compared to a respondent's reported vote choice in the previous election. It can then be assessed how many voters are predicted to be volatile, not only under the full model, but also under different scenarios in which particular variables (e.g., leadership evaluations) are assumed to not affect vote choices at all. These additional analyses thus indicate the overall extent to which particular vote choice determinants contribute to the stability or instability of voting behaviour

4 Main results

Table 1 lists the extent to which British voters switched parties in recent general elections. About 37% of voters switch votes from one election to another, and this number is fairly constant over time. There is therefore a substantial amount of volatility in British elections, allowing for reliable analyses of what determines the vote choices of stable and volatile voters.

Table 1 about here

Next, the vote choice models are estimated for stable and volatile voters separately (see Appendix 2). The model fit statistics in these tables not surprisingly indicate that the explanatory power of the models is considerably higher for stable voters than for unstable voters.

The estimates of the vote choice models are subsequently used to calculate the probability that stable and volatile respondents vote Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or any other option (including abstention). Following the approach of Blais et al. (2004), the option with the highest predicted probability is considered a respondent's estimated vote choice. The prediction of the full model is the baseline to which simulations will be compared. Next, several counterfactual scenarios are tested, in which a different set of vote choice predictors is assumed to not affect the vote each time. This is done for socio-demographic variables, party identification, issue distance variables, economic evaluations and for the leadership trait variables. For each counterfactual scenario, a new prediction of the vote choice of all respondents is calculated. Comparing the predictions for the baseline model with different counterfactual scenarios gives an estimate of the percentage of respondents that would have voted differently if particular vote choice factors had not affected their vote.

Table 2 lists the gross effect of different vote choice determinants. As estimations are based on separate analyses for stable and volatile voters, one has to be careful when directly comparing the results of the two groups. Within a particular column, however, the estimations offer a clear indication of the relative impact of a certain set of vote choice factors compared to other predictors of the vote, and the 95%-confidence intervals allow for an assessment of whether particular variables have significantly more or less weight in the vote choice process compared to others. The results in Table 2 offer indications of a higher relative importance of short-term factors for volatile voters than what holds for stable voters. For issue distances and economic evaluations, gross effects are estimated to be of substantial importance for the choice of volatile voters in each election sample. Issue distances appear to hardly affect the vote choices of stable voters. Only 3% to 7% of the stable voters are predicted to vote differently if issue distances did not affect their vote choice. For the volatile group, in contrast, issue distances change the predicted vote of about one on five respondents. In terms of the relative impact, issues have an equal or even stronger effect on the vote choice than party identification for volatile voters in the 1997 and 2010 elections. For stable voters, however, issues affect the vote significantly less than partisanship. Economic evaluations as well appear to more strongly affect the vote choices of the volatile voters than what holds for stable respondents, but the size of the gross effect differs considerably from one election to

another. Economic evaluations are estimated to have had the second strongest impact on volatile voters' choices in 1997 and the strongest impact on the vote choices of this same group in 2001. For the stable voters, by contrast, economic evaluations are not among the most influential predictors of the vote choice.

Table 2 about here

Results for leadership evaluations are more mixed. The size of this effect varies strongly from election to election. It is by far the most important determinant for stable and volatile voters alike in the 1997 and 2010 elections, but has a much smaller impact in the 2001 election. As the estimated gross effects in Table 2 indicate, only 3% of stable voters would have voted differently if leaders did not affect the vote in 2001. For volatile voters, by contrast, even in an election context when leaders are not very salient, about one voter in three is predicted to have voted differently because of leadership effects.[10] The estimated gross effect of party identification and the socio-demographic variables highlight the continued relevance of long-term predispositions for explaining the vote choice. Partisanship has a strong impact on the vote choices of stable voters, but between 17% and 35% of the volatile voters is also estimated to have voted differently if partisanship did not affect their choices at all. For the socio-demographic predictors, finally, it can be observed quite surprisingly that these only marginally affect the vote choices of stable voters. If socio-demographic characteristics had no effect on their vote, less than 10% of the stable voters would have voted differently in the 1997 or 2001 elections. These characteristics, however, have quite a strong effect on the vote of the volatile voters. It seems that even though socio-demographic variables do not stabilize vote choices, they still structure how voters eventually choose.

By not limiting the analyses to a single election study and by looking at patterns in three different elections we have aimed to offer a more general picture, one that is not driven by the idiosyncrasies of one particular election. Our results highlight the risk of relying on a single election study, as we note substantial differences in the importance of particular vote choice determinants from one election to another. For unveiling general patterns in voting behaviour, we must therefore look beyond the dynamics at work in the context of one particular election. In general, across the three election panels, a limited number of factors dominate in explaining the vote choice of stable voters. Their choices seem to be driven mainly by what party they identify with and how they evaluate the leaders of the main parties. For the volatile voters, in contrast, the contribution of different vote choice predictors is more balanced, and the importance of issues and economic evaluations in particular is worth noting.

The data from the 1997-2001 British election study only allowed for the construction of leadership trait measures for two of the three party leaders. Consequently, the estimated impact of leaders on the vote choice reported in Table 2 could be considered an underestimation. As an additional test, vote choice models were estimated with a single item measuring respondents' assessment of how each of the three party leaders (Blair, Hague and Kennedy) would perform as a prime minister rather than with a leadership traits measure. The estimated gross effect of different vote choice factors, based on these additional estimations, is presented in Appendix 4. The results indicate a somewhat stronger impact of leaders on the vote compared to the main results. Overall, however, the same conclusions can be drawn from

these estimates: the impact of leaders was smaller in the 2001 election compared to what holds for the 1997 and 2010 elections, and the difference between stable and volatile voters is more pronounced in 2001 compared to the 1997 and 2010 elections.

Further, the directional operationalization of issue voting implies that only a limited number of issues were included, covering a small segment of all of the issues affecting voters' choices on Election Day. As an additional test, more issues – for which respondents' positions only were measured – were included to each of the vote choice models. What issues were included in the models depends on data availability in each of the panel studies, leading to some variation in the exact model specification in each election year.[11] Gross effects of different sets of vote choice factors, based on these additional estimations, are presented in Appendix 5. These results offer further evidence strengthening the observation that short-term factors are of more relative weight in determining the vote choice of volatile voters compared to stable voters.

5 Vote choice determinants contributing to (in)stability

The analyses presented so far shed light on the extent to which different sets of vote choice factors determine the vote of stable and volatile voters, in other words what the funnel of causality looks like for both groups and what the relative importance of different factors is within these funnels. In what follows, we investigate to what extent particular vote choice determinants ultimately contribute to stability and instability in voting behaviour.

Table 3 presents the results of a series of simulations of the extent to which voters choose to vote differently when compared to the previous general election. As a baseline for comparison, the bottom line of Table 3 lists the estimated amount of volatility obtained from estimating a full vote choice model. Other lines include the estimated percentage of voters predicted to be volatile if a particular set of vote choice determinants (e.g., socio-demographics) had not affected their vote choice at all.

First, partisanship does indeed have a strong stabilizing impact on the vote. The estimated amount of volatility in a scenario without partisanship is significantly higher than the baseline estimates in all three elections. In each of the elections considered here, levels of volatility would be substantially higher if partisanship had not affected voter choice. For socio-demographic factors, for both the 1997 and 2010 elections the estimated level of volatility under a scenario with no impact of socio-demographics is significantly higher than the estimated level of volatility under the full vote choice model. For the 2001 election, however, the level of volatility is estimated to be only marginally higher if socio-demographics had no impact on the vote.

For short-term factors, in line with the main analyses, results are mixed. Even though leadership evaluations are generally considered a short-term factor that increase instability, in two of the three elections levels of volatility are estimated to be substantially higher if leadership evaluations had had no effect. The implication is that instead of leading to instability, leadership evaluations are actually a stabilizing force in the vote choice process. Without their impact, levels of volatility would have been considerably higher in both the 1997 and 2010 elections. For economic evaluations we observe that – contrary to the expectation that short-term factors lead to instability – these variables acted to stabilize voting

behaviour in the 2001 election, but not in the 1997 and 2010 elections. For issues, finally, levels of volatility are estimated to not change significantly if these variables had not affected voters' choices on Election Day. Interestingly, while issues do not stabilize the vote choice, they cannot be labeled a source of the observed levels of volatility either. If that had been the case, we would have observed predicted levels of volatility significantly decrease compared to the predictions based on the full model.

In sum, these results demonstrate which vote choice determinants contribute most to stability and instability in voting behaviour. In contrast to claims that short-term determinants serve as the main source of change from one election to another, it is clear that structural factors are of greatest importance. It can be observed that the waning of the impact of long-term factors, most notably of partisanship, substantially increases levels of volatility. Short-term factors are not rendering the vote choice unstable, and leadership variables even appear to stabilize electoral behaviour.

Table 3 about here

6 Discussion

Dealignment is generally assumed to structurally alter the vote choice process. The impact of long-term predispositions is eroding, leading to volatile electoral behaviour. While the erosion of long-term factors is relatively well documented, this does not hold for the expectation that this is gives more weight to short-term factors in the vote choice process. Addressing this gap in the literature, this article investigates the weight of different sets of vote choice determinants on the vote choice of stable and volatile voters in Britain.

The empirical tests indicate that short-term factors are *relatively* more important for those switching their votes from one election to another than they are for stable voters. Importantly, however, there is substantial variation in terms of the types of short-term factors considered. The evidence is strongest for issues, and the results offer some indications of stronger mechanisms of economic voting for volatile voters, even though the impact of economic evaluations is comparatively rather weak. For leadership evaluations – the indicator that is perhaps cited most often as an example of the alleged rise of short-term factors – the evidence is mixed. With exception of the 2001 election, the vote choices of stable voters are also strongly affected by how they evaluate party leaders. Overall, the vote choice process of stable voters is dominated by the impact of partisanship. For volatile voters, in contrast, there is not a single factor that dominates the vote choice process. We note that a large number of factors are of near equal importance in affecting their vote choice, and short-term factors have thus become *relatively* more important.

Importantly, this shift in the relative importance of different vote choice determinants cannot be taken to suggest that short-term factors are *causing* vote switching. A closer look at how long- and short-term factors contribute to levels of volatility highlights that weak long-term factors are related to volatility, but we find no indications that stronger short-term factors have a similar impact. While levels of volatility would be substantially higher if partisanship or socio-demographics did not affect vote choices, there are no indications that volatility would be reduced if short-term factors such as issues or economic evaluations did not affect voters' choices. On the contrary, the results indicate that if leaders did not affect vote choices,

levels of volatility would increase even more. As a result, it cannot be concluded that there is a true shift from long- to short-term factors. What seems to be going on is that the weakening of long-term determinants automatically results in the increased *relative* weight of short-term factors.

As an important nuance to the results presented, a lot of variation is left unexplained in the vote choice models. The indicators of model-fit are disappointingly low for the volatile voters, despite the large number of indicators accounted for which the model accounts. To a considerable extent, we simply cannot explain what exactly determines the vote of switchers. Perhaps more indicators, which were not a part of the analyses presented here, should be considered in the future. An alternative answer would be that the volatile are choosing parties almost randomly. Such a conclusion contrasts with previous research on vote switching, however, that indicates that volatility is strongly ideologically constrained (Dassonneville and Dejaeghere, 2014, van der Meer et al., 2015).

There are a number of limitations to this paper, stressing the need for further research. First, for reasons of parsimony and to avoid multicolinearity between the variables included in the models, the impact of a limited number of indicators is investigated, and only a small number of issues are included. Especially for an investigation of volatility, it might be important to include election-specific issues or to control for particular events that were highly salient in one particular election. Additionally, only economic evaluations are included as indicators of voters' evaluation of the performance of parties. Given the small impact of economic evaluations, differences with respect to the evaluation of other policy domains could be of importance as well. Further, it is known that is it extremely difficult to separate the impact of different vote choice determinants; leadership effects in particular are in particular very difficult to isolate. A number of analytical choices have been made that should reduce this problem. First, instead of temperature scales of a single-item like/dislike scale of a particular leader, multiple items gauging for leadership traits are relied upon to construct a measure of respondents' evaluation of political leaders. Second, as leadership evaluations were measured in a pre-electoral survey and voting behaviour was only measured following the election, a small time lag between the measurements of both variables is introduced in two of the three elections investigated (2001 and 2010). Nevertheless, the leadership effect is still very high, and results for this variable in particular should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Clearly, more research is needed – perhaps making use of experimental methods – to disentangle the causal impact of leadership traits on voters' choices. Importantly, the analyses presented here only shed light on the main effects of particular variables that are assumed to be either structural long-term variables or more short-term factors. Further, research could clarify to what extent the importance of short-term factors lies in their variable nature, and whether it is changes in citizens' evaluations of government performance, changes in their assessment of politicians' leadership qualities or citizens' changing issue positions that are contributing to electoral volatility. As a final limitation, this paper investigates the vote choices of stable and volatile voters in Britain only, and it should be investigated whether the results can be generalized to other democracies.

The findings presented here have important implications for how to interpret the impact of volatility for the functioning of democracy. Most studies on volatility and the

characteristics of volatile voters offer reasons for concern about the process of dealignment and increasingly unstable electorates. Volatile voters are regularly found to be less educated, less interested in and less informed about politics, which leads to uneasiness regarding the quality of their vote. If scholars are more optimistic about the impact of dealignment for the quality of representative democracy, this optimism originates in the expectation that the vote choices of dealigned voters can be 'truly' informed and well-thought-out. Dalton (2013), for example, contrasts the potential for informed democratic choices with choices based on family traditions, and he claims that this type of habitual or partisan vote does not align with democratic ideals. The results presented could be interpreted as offering support for this optimism, as they indicate that issues and economic evaluations have relatively more weight in the vote calculus of the volatile than it does for stable voters. Volatility, thus, seems to imply strengthened mechanisms of proximity voting and of accountability, which are thought to be fundamental aspects of a good representative democracy (Przeworski et al., 1999). Importantly, however, the results also show that this shift in relative importance is a consequence of weak long-term factors, not of short-term factors or mechanisms of accountability becoming more important. Short-term predictors are becoming more important, therefore, but this gain in strength is in relative rather than absolute terms.

Notes

[1]. See Appendix 3.

[2]. The focus is on Great Britain, including Scotland and Wales (election panels do not cover Northern Ireland).

[3]. As an additional test, logit models predicting a vote for the incumbent were estimated. These analyses self-evidently resulted in lower estimates of voters having voted differently (as only voting for the incumbent or not is accounted for). Importance patterns of different vote choice determinants, however, were fairly similar for both approaches.

[4]. Results (for the 1997-2001 and the 2005-2010 panels only) available upon request.

[5]. Not the strength of partisanship, but merely the party one identifies with is included.

[6]. Examples are spatial and directional voting, the impact of issue saliency and issue ownership and valence issues.

[7]. For the 1992-1997 panel, selected issue distance items are (1) taxes versus cutting spending, (2) nationalization versus the privatization of national industries and (3) uniting with the EC versus independent Britain. For the 1997-2001 panel selected issue-distance items are (1) taxes versus cutting spending, (2) nationalization versus privatization of national industries and (3) uniting with the EU versus independent Britain. In the 2005-2010 panel available issue distance items are (1) cutting taxes versus increasing taxes and (2) reducing crime versus protecting rights. Some of these issue items are closely related to measures of the economy. The choice for these items is driven by their recurrence in multiple surveys, enhancing the comparability of the analyses of different election surveys. Additionally, the distance operationalization necessitates the measurement of respondents' as well as parties' positions on these issues.

[8]. More information on the leadership variables in Appendix 1.

[9]. For all panels, socio-demographics were measured at the time of the previous election (i.e., 1992 in the case of the 1992-1997 panel). All other indicators were measured at the time of the second election (i.e., in 1997 in the case of the 1992-1997 panel). For the 1992-1997 panel, all 1997-measures – vote predictors as well as the vote choice – were recorded in a single post-electoral questionnaire. For the 1997-2001 and the 2005-2010 panels, by contrast, independent variables such as issue distances or leadership evaluations were measured in the pre-electoral questionnaire while the vote was recorded in a post-electoral questionnaire.

[10]. It should be noted that the 2001-data only allowed for the inclusion of evaluations of the leaders of Labour and the Conservative Party.

[11]. For the 1997 election, positions on crime, the death penalty, being strict on breaking the law, homosexual relations and whether Britain should be a single state were included. For 2001, positions on NHS and education spending, the death penalty, being strict on breaking the law, abortion and immigration were included. For 2010, positions on the war in Afghanistan and the financial crisis were included.

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Table 1. Stable and volatile voters in British General Elections (%)

	1992-1997	1997-2001	2005-2010
Stable voters	63.07	61.88	63.45
Volatile voters	36.93	38.12	36.55
N respondents	834	1,553	1,450

Note: Percentages of stable and volatile voters (included in the multivariate analyses) in BES 1992-1997, 1997-2001 and 2005-2010 panels. Sources: BEP 1992-1997, BEP 1997-2001 and 2005-2010.

Table 2. Estimated impact (and 95%-confidence intervals) of different sets of vote choice determinants on vote choice

	1997		2001		2010	
	Stable	Volatile	Stable	Volatile	Stable	Volatile
Socio-demographics	9.51 [6.99;12.02]	27.27 [22.27;32.27]	7.08 [5.45;8.70]	23.65 [20.22;27.08]	19.35 [16.79;21.91]	44.15 [39.91;48.39]
Party identification	30.99 [27.02;34.95]	21.43 [16.82;26.04]	42.66 [39.53;45.80]	34.97 [31.11;38.82]	24.78 [21.99;27.58]	17.36 [14.12;20.59]
Issue distances	6.84 [4.68;9.01]	22.40 [17.72;27.08]	2.81 [1.76;3.86]	17.57 [14.49;20.64]	7.39 [5.70;9.09]	23.96 [20.32;27.61]
Economic evaluations	21.29 [17.78;24.80]	29.55 [24.42;34.67]	18.00 [15.57;20.44]	53.55 [49.52;57.58]	9.57 [7.66;11.47]	15.09 [12.04;18.15]
Leadership evaluations	70.34 [66.43;74.26]	69.48 [64.31;74.65]	3.43 [2.28;4.59]	26.52 [22.95;30.09]	41.85 [38.65;45.04]	55.28 [51.04;59.53]
N respondents	526	308	961	592	920	530

Note: Percentage of voters that would have voted differently if the effect of a set of variables is set to zero. Percentages obtained by comparing predictions of full models with predictions of models were particular sets of variables are not included. In each simulation, the respondent is assumed to vote for the party (0 = other, 1 = labour, 2 = conservatives, 3 = liberal democrats) with the highest predicted value. Sources: BEP 1992-1997, BEP 1997-2001 and BEP 2005-2010.

Table 3. Percentage of volatile voters (and 95%-confidence intervals) if variables had no effect on the vote choice

	1997	2001	2010
Socio-demographics	**47.79**	40.05	**54.88**
	[44.4;51.18]	[37.62;42.48]	**[52.54;57.22]**
Party identification	**56.79**	**58.21**	**53.01**
	[53.43;60.14]	**[55.75;60.66]**	**[50.66;55.37]**
Issue distances	39.05	39.27	48.86
	[35.74**;**42.35]	[36.85;41.69]	[46.48;51.23]
Economic evaluations	43.94	**57.61**	49.32
	[40.58;47.30]	**[55.14;60.07]**	[46.94;51.70]
Leadership evaluations	**83.70**	43.44	**67.04**
	[81.01;86.38]	[40.97;45.90]	**[64.74;69.34]**
Full model – baseline	39.81	38.83	48.00
	[36.50;43.12]	[36.41;41.24]	[45.62;50.38]

Note: Percentage of voters that would have been volatile (compared to the previous election) if the effect of a set of variables is set to zero. Percentages obtained by comparing predictions of full models with predictions of models were particular sets of variables are not included. In each simulation, the respondent is assumed to vote for the party (0 = other, 1 = labour, 2 = conservatives, 3 = liberal democrats, 4 = abstain) with the highest predicted value. Sources: BEP 1997-2001 and BEP 2005-2010. Entries in bold are significantly different from the estimates of the full model.