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### **Why Do They Take Longer to Make up Their Mind?**

#### **A Comparative Study on Late Deciding Voters in Western Democracies**

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##### **Introduction**

Over the last years, the phenomenon of voter's indecision has undoubtedly become one of the most salient topics in the media coverage of election campaigns, but also one of the main fields of interest for students of voting behaviour (Cautres & Jadot, 2009). In many Western democracies, opinion polls conducted during the weeks preceding an election often reveal that a noteworthy proportion of respondents are uncertain about how they will vote and even about whether or not they will vote, which makes election outcomes highly unpredictable. There is increasing evidence that vote intentions nowadays crystallize substantially later than they did some decades ago (Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Lachat, 2007; McAllister, 2002). Indeed, less and less citizens know before the start of the election campaign which party they are going to vote for. A growing segment of the electorate enters the campaign without a firm vote intention and remains undecided until the last weeks before the election or even until Election Day itself.

In a large number of established democracies, scholars have observed a long-term trend for citizens to delay their voting choice until a later stage of the campaign. Previous work demonstrates that in the United States, there has been a gradual increase in the percentage of voters who postpone their vote decision until the campaign is under way (Box-Steffensmeier *et al.*, 2015; Flanigan & Zingale, 1994; McAllister, 2002). In the 1948 presidential elections, only 28 % of the respondents reported that they had made up their mind during the campaign period. In the 2000 presidential contest, this share of late deciding voters rose to 44 % (Box-Steffensmeier *et al.*, 2015; McAllister, 2002). In Germany, the

proportion of campaign deciders went up from 5 % in 1965 to 40 % in 2009 (Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012). In France, it increased from 19 % in 1988 to 49 % in 2007 (Cautres & Jadot, 2007). Similar upward trends have been observed in Switzerland (Lachat, 2007), Sweden (Granberg & Holmberg, 1991), the Netherlands (Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2008), Australia and the United Kingdom (McAllister, 2002). In their comparative cross-national analysis of changes in time of voting decision, Dalton and his colleagues (2000) have shown that in 11 of the 12 countries covered by their study, the proportion of late deciding voters has grown considerably over recent decades. As campaign deciders nowadays make up an important segment of the electorate, their voting choices play a crucial role in determining the eventual outcome of the election and can thus affect the balance of power (Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012). Besides, this phenomenon of late decision making is also thought to induce some major consequences on how party strategists organize and conduct election campaigns (McAllister, 2002).

Previous research tends to assume that the rise in the number of late deciders is a consequence of the process of partisan dealignment (i.e. the weakening of the bonds between parties and voters) (Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Lachat, 2007). In the 1950s and 1960s, “long-term” forces such as socio-structural attributes (social class, religious affiliation, union membership, etc.) and party identification largely determined voting preferences and predisposed electors to remain loyal to the same party election after election (Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968). In this context marked by electoral stability and “frozen” cleavages, a vast majority of the voters already knew before the campaign began for whom they were going to vote. Over the past few decades, however, the influence of “long-term” forces on vote choices has gradually waned due to the erosion of traditional social cleavages and to the decline of partisan attachments (Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Franklin *et al.*, 2009). As a consequence of this process of dealignment, a smaller share of voters enter the campaign with a firm vote preference based on their sociological predispositions or their partisan allegiances. Today’s electorates display higher levels of indecision, since a growing number of dealigned voters waver between different party options at the beginning of the campaign and wait until the last minute to make their final choice (Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Lachat, 2007). Compared to early deciders, late deciding voters are argued to be more strongly influenced by “short-term” forces such as issues, candidate evaluations, campaign events and strategic considerations, when deciding what party to vote for (Blumenstiel & Plischke, 2015; Box-Steffensmeier *et al.*, 2015; Fournier *et al.*, 2004; McGregor, 2012). Given that late deciders appear more susceptible to campaign effects and “short-term” stimuli, their voting behaviours are claimed to be more uncertain, less predictable, more erratic and more volatile (Box-Steffensmeier *et al.*, 2015; Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994). In this respect, some recent studies have found that late deciding voters were more likely than early deciders to switch from one party to another between two consecutive elections (e.g. Lobo, 2015), to change their vote intention over the course of the campaign (e.g. Fournier *et al.*, 2004) and to split their ticket between different parties when different elections took place

simultaneously (e.g. Chaffee & Rimal, 1996; McAllister, 2002). According to several scholars, electoral volatility, split-ticket voting and late decision making can be regarded as different components of a broader phenomenon which can be termed “party dealignment” (Dalton, 2013; Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Lachat, 2007; Lisi, 2010; Lobo, 2015).

Although electoral researchers have long paid attention to time of vote decision (e.g. Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968), it has become a topic of high interest quite recently because of the rise in the number of late deciders. A large number of studies have attempted to identify the socio-structural and attitudinal factors that delay or precipitate the voting choice. Their findings suggest that a wide range of factors such as age (e.g. Cautres & Jadot, 2007), gender (e.g. Kenski, 2007), party identification (e.g. Blumenstiel & Plischke, 2015), attitudinal ambivalence (e.g. Lavine, 2001) and strategic considerations (e.g. McGregor, 2012) influence the time at which voters make their final choice. In this theoretical debate on the causes of late deciding, considerable attention has also been devoted to the question of whether political sophistication delays or hastens the crystallization of voting preferences. According to several authors, late deciders are more likely to be drawn from the ranks of uninterested and uninformed citizens (e.g. Gopioian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012), whereas other scholars state that voters with a high level of political sophistication tend to make up their mind later than do their less sophisticated counterparts (e.g. Chaffee & Choe, 1980; Dalton, 2013). Admittedly, this rich literature on the determinants of time of vote decision has brought interesting insights into why some voters arrive at a clear-cut choice even before the campaign starts, while others take their electoral decision during the campaign period. Nevertheless, previous studies have tended to focus on only one specific type of explanation at the time without testing alternative hypotheses, so that it was impossible to directly compare the explanatory power of competing theories. With the exception of Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller’s analysis of late deciding in Germany (Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012), no previous study has offered a simultaneous test of various hypotheses.

The present paper precisely aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of late decision making, by assessing the explanatory power of different theoretical approaches in direct comparison to one another. To this end, we simultaneously test three competing hypotheses which have been suggested in the literature to explain time of vote decision. While a large majority of the previous studies have focussed on one single case (i.e. one single election in a particular country), our paper offers a broad comparative analysis of the sources of late deciding in a wide range of recent elections held in four Western countries: Canada, France, Germany and Spain. Drawing on data from 23 panel surveys conducted in the framework of the *Making Electoral Democracy Work* project, our analysis covers not only national parliamentary elections, but also municipal, regional and European elections.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first part offers an extended literature review and presents different types of potential explanations for time of vote decision, from which we derive three main hypotheses. The second section introduces the data and describes the operationalization of the dependent and independent variables. The third section deals with the results of separate and simultaneous tests of our three hypotheses about the potential determinants of late decision making. The final section contains some concluding remarks on the implications of our findings as well as some suggestions for further research.

### **Literature review and hypotheses**

In this section, we consider three competing hypotheses which have been suggested in the literature to explain the phenomenon of late decision making. A first type of potential explanation for late deciding puts forward the notion of cross-pressure (or ambivalence) and was first proposed –like so many other classic hypotheses in electoral research- by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (1968) in their groundbreaking work. Using data from a multi-wave panel survey conducted in Erie County (Ohio) during the 1940 US presidential election campaign, they compared socio-structural and attitudinal characteristics of early deciders with those of late deciders in order to identify the main determinants of time of vote decision. They found that those individuals who made their voting choice in the last weeks before the election often experienced a conflict between opposite pressures in their environment. The tensions between contradictory influences voters faced were termed “cross-pressures” defined as “the conflicts and inconsistencies among the factors which influence the vote decision” (Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968:53). Some factors in the environment of the respondent predisposed him/her to support the Democrats, whereas other factors pushed him/her towards the Republicans. In other words, voters affected by cross-pressures were driven in opposite political directions.

In *The People Choice*, the researchers of the Columbia school mentioned several sources of cross-pressures: contradictory sociodemographic characteristics that influenced the voter in different political directions, inconsistent attitudes and political disagreements between the voter and some members of his/her personal network such as family members, friends and colleagues. For instance, wealthy white collar voters were said to be under cross-pressure, since they were torn between their socio-economic status which encouraged them to vote for the Republicans and their religious affiliation which operated in favour of the Democrats. As voters exposed to cross-pressures had good reasons to support both parties, they found it difficult to decide which candidate to vote for and thus took substantially longer to make their voting choice in comparison to those voters who were not subject to contradictory influences (Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968). Lazarsfeld and his colleagues demonstrated the existence of a positive relationship between the number of cross-pressures experienced and late decision making. The higher the number of contradictory pressures, the later the voter will arrive at his/her final choice.

In their seminal book *The American Voter*, Campbell and his colleagues (1960) drew the same conclusion and also claimed that attitude inconsistency delayed the final vote decision. Drawing on data from the 1952 and 1956 American National Election Study, they showed that voters with a high level of attitude conflict were much more likely to decide late in the campaign than were those voters who displayed a high degree of attitudinal consistency. To illustrate the delaying effect of attitudinal cross-pressures, Campbell and his colleagues gave the classic example of the 1956 voter who remained undecided until the last days of the presidential campaign because he was torn between his party identification which predisposed him to support the democratic candidate and his candidate evaluations which clearly favoured the republican incumbent president, D. Eisenhower.

In the early 2000s, several scholars replaced the notion of cross-pressure by the concept of ambivalence (Lavine, 2001; Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2005). More importantly, they offered a refinement of the original cross-pressures theory, since they considered that the operational definition of cross-pressures proposed by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (1968) was too encompassing and did not differentiate internal and external sources of conflicting influences. According to this line of thought, the results of the 1940 Erie County study did not allow to determine whether internal tensions (i.e. inconsistent political attitudes) or external cross-pressures (i.e. discrepant social positions or disagreement within one's personal network) caused a delay in time of vote decision. Therefore, Mutz (2002) and Nir (2005) developed an alternative conceptualization of cross-pressures which distinguished the two main sources of conflicts: internal (i.e. attitudinal) ambivalence and external (i.e. sociological or network-level) ambivalence.

Internal ambivalence can be defined as the "individual's endorsement of competing considerations relevant to evaluating an attitude-object" (Lavine, 2001: 915). It must not be confounded with neutrality or indifference: while indifference simply reflects a lack of political opinion, ambivalence denotes a willingness to reconcile strong, but conflicting opinions. Instead of embracing one side of a political debate and rejecting the other, ambivalent individuals endorse central elements of both sides (Lavine, 2001). A major internal source of cross-pressure is the attitudinal ambivalence towards the parties and candidates. A voter is in an ambivalent choice situation when he/she perceives several parties or several candidates as being similarly attractive (Lavine, 2001; Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2005). Another important internal source of cross-pressure stems from issue ambivalence. An individual is affected by issue ambivalence when some of his/her issue positions encourage him/her to support one party (or one ideological bloc of parties), while his/her other issue positions push him/her towards another party (or another bloc of parties). For instance, a voter exhibits ambivalent issue positions when he/she is in favour of redistributive policies in the field of economic and social issues and in favour of authoritarian policies in the field of "law and order" issues. His/her pro-redistribution orientations drive him/her towards left-wing parties, whereas his/her authoritarian orientations operate in favour of right-wing parties.

External ambivalence, on the other hand, refers either to a situation in which the voter is exposed to perceived disagreement with his/her political opinions in his/her social environment (cross-cutting social network) or to a situation in which the voter belongs to a social network totally split into two political factions, with some members sharing his/her opinions and others endorsing the opposite viewpoints (network ambivalence). A cross-cutting network denotes the voter's isolation within a discussion network whose members unanimously oppose his/her own viewpoint. Membership in a cross-cutting network thus implies that the individual perceives all his/her discussants as being at odds with his/her own political position (Mutz, 2002). Network-level ambivalence captures another type of configuration in which the individual perceives his/her environment as being politically divided between supporters and opponents of his/her own position. Network ambivalence can be defined as "the balance of competing considerations perceived by the individual within his or her social network" (Nir, 2005: 425). At one extreme, the discussion network is homogeneous and unanimously endorses one side of the political debate, while at the other extreme, it is heterogeneous and evenly divided between both sides. Voters embedded in such a heterogeneous network are subject to cross-pressures, since their discussants send them contradictory political messages (Nir, 2005).

Over the last years, some scholars have attempted to assess the relative impact of internal and external ambivalence on time of voting decision, in order to disentangle the effect of one source from another (Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2005; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012). They found that attitudinal ambivalence toward the parties and candidates substantially delayed the crystallization of vote intentions. Since ambivalent voters held different parties and different candidates in similar esteem, they were unable to make a clear-cut choice long in advance of the election and, as a result, they postponed their vote decision until the last weeks of the campaign (Blumenstiel & Plischke, 2015; Lavine, 2001; McGregor, 2012; Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2005; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012). Besides, the external sources of ambivalence, namely cross-cutting social networks and network ambivalence, were also shown to be significantly and positively associated with late decision making. Exposure to dissonant political messages within discussion networks led voters to take their final decision later in the campaign (Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2005; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012). In the present study, however, we cannot examine the influence of external ambivalence on time of voting decision, because the *Making Electoral Democracy Work* dataset does not enable us to measure the respondent's exposure to perceived disagreement with his/her own views in his/her social environment nor the degree of network ambivalence. Consequently, our attention will be entirely devoted to internal ambivalence and its impact on the time at which electoral choices are finalized. More precisely, we will analyse the effect of two internal sources of cross-pressures: ambivalence toward parties and issue ambivalence. The former is often considered as a good predictor of late deciding (see above) and the latter can also be expected to delay the formation of voting choices. Indeed, although no previous empirical study has already investigated the relationship between issue ambivalence and time of electoral decision, it seems

reasonable to suggest that those individuals who display ambivalent issue positions should be more prone than other voters to vacillate between different party options and that they should therefore take longer to reach a crystallized vote intention.

*Hypothesis 1: Attitudinal ambivalence increases the probability of being a late decider.*

Another type of hypothesis dating back to the pioneer work of the Columbia school focuses on the role of political sophistication. Besides pointing at the importance of cross-pressures, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues observed that early and late deciders also differed significantly with regard to their levels of political involvement (Berelson *et al.*, 1963; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968). Those voters who had already taken their final vote decision before the start of the campaign were found to be well-educated, interested in politics, attentive to the election campaign and knowledgeable about the political system. They made their electoral choice on the basis of a substantial amount of political information provided by the mass media (Berelson *et al.*, 1963; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968). By contrast, those voters who made up their mind during the campaign seemed to be largely detached from politics and displayed low levels of political interest and political knowledge. They did not really care about the outcome of the election and did not seek to gather substantive information on issues, candidates and the campaign to make a thoughtful and well-motivated choice. Since these voters lacked cognitive skills and political information, they faced difficulty to choose a party or a candidate and thus took longer to form their vote preferences. They made their final determination only shortly before the election when voting decisions could no longer be delayed (Berelson *et al.*, 1963; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968). In light of these findings, the researchers of the Columbia school concluded that a lack of political sophistication hindered the formation and the crystallisation of voting preferences, thereby leading to a delay in time of electoral decision. In these early studies, late deciders were viewed as floating voters (i.e. apolitical and apathetic voters whose electoral behaviours were volatile, erratic and unpredictable).

Since the 1980s, however, this traditional floating voter hypothesis has been largely challenged and alternative theories have been proposed to explain time of voting decision (Chaffee & Choe, 1980; Chaffee & Rimal, 1996; Dalton, 2006; Dalton 2013; Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Whitney & Goldman, 1985). Philip Dalton (2006) points at the emergence of a new late decider who exhibits a high level of political involvement and whose profile therefore differs fundamentally from that of the uninformed and uninterested last minute decider of the 1940s and 1950s. Drawing on data from national election studies in six countries (Australia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States), Russel Dalton (2013) shows that late deciding voters nowadays are more likely to be found among highly sophisticated citizens than among their less sophisticated counterparts. Hence, the phenomenon of late deciding should no longer be interpreted as a symptom of apathy and political disengagement, but it should rather be regarded as a positive sign indicating that well-informed and

politically knowledgeable voters seek to make a careful and thoughtful choice on the basis of an attentive scrutiny of the election campaign.

Russel Dalton argues that the arrival of sophisticated late deciders can be seen as a consequence of the process of cognitive mobilization. That process encompasses two complementary dimensions: on the one hand, the spread of education which has increased citizens' cognitive abilities, and on the other hand, the expansion of mass media which has made political information widely available (Dalton, 1984; see also: Inglehart, 1977). These two evolutions have gradually reduced the functional value of party identification as a shortcut for electoral decision making, since fewer voters have to use partisanship as a heuristic cue to guide their voting choice. The process of cognitive mobilization has led to the emergence of a growing group of highly sophisticated voters who possess the necessary skills and resources to manage the complexity of politics and who can thus make well-considered electoral choices on the basis of issues, candidate evaluations and past performances, without relying on partisan cues. According to Dalton, these cognitively mobilized voters tend to take their final vote decision shortly before Election Day, because they wait until the last minute in order to collect the maximal amount of information on issue positions, party platforms and candidate characteristics. If they made up their mind several months before the election, they would neglect the information provided by the media over the course of the campaign (Dalton, 2013; Dalton *et al.*, 2000).

In line with this cognitive mobilization hypothesis, several studies conducted in Canada and in the United States have shown that those voters who took their final decision during the campaign were more attentive to political information in the media than were those who already knew before the start of the campaign for whom they would vote (Chaffee & Choe, 1980; Chaffee & Rimal, 1996; McGregor, 2012; Whitney & Goldman, 1985). In a similar vein, in his analysis of the sources of late deciding in Switzerland between 1971 and 2003, Lachat (2007) has pointed out that voters with a high level of political sophistication were more inclined than less sophisticated voters to delay their electoral decision until the campaign was under way.

Although Dalton's cognitive mobilization hypothesis has received some empirical support in the above mentioned studies, its validity has been frequently called into question. Indeed, a large number of recent studies lend no support to the claim that voters with high levels of political interest and political involvement tend to take longer to make up their mind. Instead, their results clearly indicate that the opposite holds true and that uninterested voters are more prone than highly sophisticated voters to take their electoral decision shortly before the election (Cautres & Jadot, 2007, 2009; Fournier *et al.*, 2004; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Kenski, 2007; Lavine, 2001; Lisi, 2010; McAllister, 2002; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012). For instance, Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous state that compared to early deciders, "late deciders are significantly less likely to follow government on a regular basis, less likely to see differences between the political parties, less likely to be politically active, less



likely to express much interest in the campaign, and less likely to care about the outcome of the election.” (Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994:64). These findings are consonant with the traditional floating voter theory of the Columbia school (Berelson *et al.*, 1963; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968).

While the relationship between political sophistication and timing of the voting choice has been intensively studied for more than a half century, scholars’ opinions still differ on the question whether a high level of political expertise increases or decreases the likelihood of postponing one’s electoral decision. As there are different views and contradictory results in the literature, we may not have clear expectations about what type of effect political sophistication might have on timing of the voting choice (encouraging early decision making or leading to late deciding?). In our analysis, we test the original floating voter hypothesis whose validity has been confirmed by recent research and we therefore expect political sophistication to hasten voting decisions.

*Hypothesis 2: Political sophistication decreases the probability of being a late decider.*

Political disaffection is another factor that is sometimes thought to affect the time at which voting decisions are finalized. There have so far been very few studies on the influence of political dissatisfaction on timing of the voting choice and their results have not led to straightforward conclusions. In their analysis of the determinants of late deciding in the 2012 French presidential elections, Cautres and Jadot (2007) noticed that voters who were dissatisfied with the way democracy worked in France were somewhat more likely than other voters to delay their electoral decision until a later stage of the campaign. Besides, in his work on the 2006 and 2008 Canadian federal elections, McGregor (2012) investigated the time of voting decision patterns of protest voters in order to determine whether they made up their mind later than did sincere voters. According to his definition, an individual could be classified as a protest voter if he/she was dissatisfied with democracy, political parties and politicians in general and if he/she sought to express his/her political discontent by voting for an uncompetitive non-traditional party that was not his/her first preference. McGregor found that protest voters were much more likely than their sincere counterparts to postpone their electoral decision until the campaign was under way. In contrast, Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous (1994) demonstrated that voter’s degree of political trust did not significantly influence time of electoral decision in US presidential elections. Similarly, in his comparative study of late deciding voters in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, McAllister (2002) observed that the standard indicators of political satisfaction and political trust had no significant impact on timing of the voting choice. Given that previous research on this topic is rather scant and inconclusive, there is a lot of uncertainty about whether or not political disaffection can contribute to the explanation of late deciding. In the present study, however, we hypothesize that politically dissatisfied voters will tend to form their electoral decision later than will satisfied voters.

*Hypothesis 3: Political satisfaction decreases the probability of being a late decider.*

## **Data and operationalization**

### ***Data***

The present study draws on the data from the *Making Electoral Democracy Work* project<sup>1</sup>. This project offers a cross-national dataset that consists of 27 online panel surveys covering virtually all elections held in Canada, France, Germany, Spain and Switzerland between 2010 and 2015. These surveys use identical question wordings as well as identical coding of answers, which allows electoral researchers to undertake comparative cross-national studies. The *MEDW* dataset provides individual-level information on respondent' sociodemographic and attitudinal characteristics, on respondent's voting behaviour and on the influence of the specific electoral context on this behaviour. The online surveys were conducted on representative samples of the population and for each country, two or three regions were covered: Ile-de-France and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur in France, Madrid and Catalonia in Spain, Bavaria and Lower Saxony in Germany, Lucerne and Zurich in Switzerland, British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec in Canada. Each of the 27 surveys had a panel design. A large majority of them consisted of a pre-electoral wave and a post-electoral wave; respondents were first interviewed during the last two weeks of the election campaign and were then reinterviewed shortly after Election Day. In Bavaria, a five-wave panel survey was conducted, with respondents being interviewed five times between September 2013 and June 2014: (1) before the regional elections; (2) between the regional and the federal elections; (3) after the federal elections; (4) before the European elections; (5) after the European elections. In the pre-electoral wave of the *MEDW* surveys, a total of 41165 individuals were interviewed and 32268 of them also participated in the post-electoral wave.

### ***The dependent variable***

In previous work, scholars have employed two types of methods to measure timing of the voting choice: retrospective self-report and panel reconstruction (Chaffee & Rimal, 1996; Fournier *et al.*, 2001; Plumb, 1986). On the one hand, exit polls and post-election surveys generally contain a recall question about time of electoral decision; respondents are asked to indicate when they decided how they would vote. Multi-wave panel surveys, on the other hand, allow to reconstruct time of decision, since respondents are usually asked to report their vote intention at different points in time throughout the election year. By examining stability and change of vote intentions from one panel wave to the next, it is possible to identify the different stages of the electoral decision process and to assess with a relative accuracy the time at which vote intentions crystallised. In the present study, however, we cannot use the panel reconstruction method, because the online surveys conducted in the framework of the *MEDW* project do not allow us to examine the pattern of respondents' voting intentions at different points in time during the electoral year. Admittedly, all these surveys had a panel design, but as mentioned earlier, most of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://electoraldemocracy.com/voter-behaviour>

them consisted of only two waves, with the pre-election interviews being completed in the last two weeks before the election. The time of decision variable can only be reconstructed by means of a multi-wave panel survey that covers a longer time span, namely the year preceding the election or at least the entire campaign period. In our analysis, we must therefore make use of retrospective self-reports to measure respondent's timing of the voting choice. A recall question on time of final decision was included in the post-electoral wave of the *MEDW* surveys.

Before looking at the proportions of early and late deciders within the sample, it is necessary to briefly review the debate on the validity of time of vote decision recall. While the panel reconstruction method is thought to provide valid and objective measures based on the observed pattern of vote intentions, retrospective self-report is sometimes claimed to be an unreliable indicator (Chaffee & Rimal, 1996; Plumb, 1986). In fact, the validity and the accuracy of respondent's reported time of electoral decision can be strongly affected by different factors such as memory problems or the willingness to provide socially desirable answers. Some individuals may be unable to remember the point in time at which they took their final vote decision. Moreover, there might be intentional distortion of information in the hope of giving more socially acceptable answers. In other words, some respondents might be inclined to consciously provide an inaccurate answer, if they think that they will be more favourably perceived by responding in this way. Intentional distortion of answers may push in both directions: some respondents may be prone to report an early decision in order to emphasize their decisiveness, whereas others may tend to report a delayed decision, so that they can appear to have made a thoughtful voting choice on the basis of party platforms, candidate evaluations and TV debates (Fournier *et al.*, 2001; Plumb, 1986).

Over the past three decades, scholars have empirically tested the validity of time of voting decision recall. Using data from the four-wave 1980 American National Elections Panel Study, Plumb (1986) investigated whether or not the reported time of decision was consistent with the evolution of voting preferences across panel waves. More precisely, Plumb compared the reported timing of the voting choice with the point in time at which the respondent seemed to have reached a crystallised vote intention. For a large majority of respondents, the crystallisation of vote intentions did not occur at the reported time of final decision. Only 40 % of the sample showed consistency between answers to the recall question and the observed patterns of vote intentions (Plumb, 1986). Employing the same technic with panel data from the 1992 California Election Study, Chaffee and Rimal (1996) also observed a low degree of concordance between the two measures of time of voting decision. They found that only 58 % of the respondents were classified similarly by retrospective self-reports and by the panel reconstruction method. While American data indicated that time of decision recall was plagued by a considerable amount of misreporting, Fournier and his colleagues (2001) demonstrated that in the Canadian case, retrospective self-reports turned out to be highly reliable. Drawing on data from the 1997 Canadian Election Study, their analysis revealed that 80 % of the respondents gave an answer to the recall question which corresponded to the evolution of their voting preferences across panel waves.

Similarly, in their study of late deciders in the 2005 and 2009 German federal elections, Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller (2012) reported high levels of concordance between both measures.

According to Fournier and his colleagues (2001), the discrepancy between the results of American studies and those of other studies can be largely attributed to differences in political context. In the US presidential system, the election campaign lasts 10 months (from the beginning of the primary season in January to the general elections in November). With such a long timeframe for the campaign and the voting decision process, the American setting increases the probability of memory problems affecting the quality of responses to the recall question. In parliamentary systems such as Canada and Germany, campaigns are much shorter, which could explain the greater validity of retrospective self-reports in those countries (Fournier *et al.*, 2001). Additionally, during the first months of the US presidential electoral year, there may be a lot of uncertainty about who the two main candidates will be. As a consequence, some respondents might have difficulty to understand what the recall question on time of decision is asking. If an individual knew all along that he/she would cast a ballot for the republican candidate if the right one was nominated, should he/she report that he/she made up his/her mind after the convention or should he/she indicate that he/she knew all along for whom he/she would vote? In parliamentary systems, by contrast, citizens usually vote for a candidate or for a candidate list belonging to a well-established party whose leader is chosen a long time before the start of the campaign. In such a context, the time of decision question creates much less confusion, as it refers to a situation in which the set of options offered to the electorate were known well in advance and remained stable over the course of the campaign (Fournier *et al.*, 2001). On the basis of these considerations, Fournier and his colleagues (2001) conclude that retrospective self-report can be considered as a highly reliable indicator in parliamentary systems.

As mentioned earlier, the *MEDW* post-election survey questionnaire contains a recall question on time of vote decision. Nevertheless, it must be noted that this recall question was not asked in the surveys conducted in Switzerland at the 2011 Lucerne federal elections, the 2011 Lucerne cantonal elections, the 2011 Zurich federal elections and the 2011 Zurich cantonal elections. These elections were thus excluded from the analysis, which somewhat reduced the sample size of the dataset. Moreover, the time of voting choice question was not asked to those respondents who reported that they abstained from voting in the election. As a result, we restricted our analysis to those individuals who indicated that they voted in the election. The exclusion of abstainers led to an additional reduction of the sample size. Finally, missing values for answers to the time of decision question further reduced the sample size to 22917 respondents interviewed in 23 surveys in four countries: Canada, France, Germany and Spain.

**Table 1.** Time of voting decision across the various subsamples

<b>Election</b>	<b>Months before (%)</b>	<b>Few weeks before (%)</b>	<b>Few days before (%)</b>	<b>On Election Day (%)</b>	<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>n</b>
IDF national (Jun. 2012)	53.8	22.0	16.3	7.9	100	558
PACA national (Jun. 2012)	59.3	18.1	17.0	5.7	100	565
Catalonia national (Nov. 2011)	46.3	18.2	20.9	14.6	100	676
Catalonia regional (Nov. 2012)	36.9	25.7	25.3	12.2	100	681
Madrid national (Nov. 2011)	62.6	13.2	15.3	8.9	100	711
Lower Saxony national (Sep. 2013)	42.5	26.0	20.5	11.0	100	628
Lower Saxony regional (Jan. 2013)	43.8	25.1	17.9	13.2	100	630
Bavaria national (Sep. 2013)	34.9	30.8	21.8	12.4	100	3,417
Bavaria regional (Sep. 2013)	28.1	27.7	20.2	23.9	100	3,897
Ontario regional (Oct. 2011)	45.2	26.9	17.5	10.4	100	714
Quebec regional (Sep. 2012)	37.9	29.1	18.0	15.0	100	639
PACA Europe (May 2014)	44.6	18.9	23.8	12.7	100	583
IDF Europe (May 2014)	39.4	20.8	23.9	15.8	100	606
Lower Saxony Europe (May 2014)	46.2	20.4	19.6	13.8	100	550
Bavaria Europe (May 2014)	35.2	29.9	20.1	14.8	100	1674
Catalonia Europe (May 2014)	48.9	18.6	21.0	11.5	100	601
Madrid Europe (May 2014)	36.3	17.5	28.0	18.2	100	576
Paris municipal (Mar. 2014)	52.5	19.4	18.6	9.5	100	665
Marseille municipal (Mar. 2014)	54.2	18.2	18.4	9.2	100	380
Madrid regional (May. 2015)	44.5	21.3	22.1	12.1	100	652
Ontario national (Oct. 2015)	48.3	28.0	15.4	8.3	100	1,246
British Columbia nat. (Oct. 2015)	50.0	26.3	15.3	8.4	100	1,135
Quebec national (Oct. 2015)	40.2	27.9	19.0	13.0	100	1,133
<b>Total</b>	<b>40.8</b>	<b>25.4</b>	<b>19.9</b>	<b>13.9</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>22,917</b>

The exact wording of the recall question was: When did you decide which party/candidate you were going to vote for? Respondents were offered four answer categories: months before the election (coded 1); a few weeks before the election (coded 2); a few days before the election (coded 3); on Election Day (coded 4). Table 1 presents the breakdown of voters into the four time of voting decision categories. As can be read from the table, early deciders (i.e. those respondents who knew several months before the election how they were going to vote) make up about 40 % of the sample and form the largest group in each of the 23 surveys. It should be pointed out, however, that the proportion of early deciders varies significantly according to the election, with figures ranging from 28.1 % in the 2013 Bavarian regional elections to 62.6 % in the 2011 Spanish national elections in Madrid. Those respondents who made their voting choice a few weeks before Election Day constitute about a quarter of the sample and represent the second largest group in a large majority of the surveys. One in five voters falls in the third category

which consists of those who arrived at their final vote decision in the last days of the campaign. Finally, those individuals who made up their mind on Election Day form the smallest category (13.9 % of the sample), but their weight varies considerably from one election to another. Election Day deciders are particularly numerous in the 2013 Bavarian regional elections, the 2012 Quebec regional elections and the 2014 European elections in Madrid and in Ile de France. By contrast, they make up less than 8 % of the sample in the 2012 French national elections in Ile-de-France and in Provence-Alpes-Côte-d’Azur. Interestingly, the distribution of the four time of decision groups within the different subsamples reveals that in each of the four countries, voters tend to decide somewhat earlier in “first-order” national parliamentary elections than they do in “second-order” elections (i.e. European, regional and local elections). This observation concords with previous findings drawn by Eisinga and his colleagues (1998) who demonstrated that in “first-order” national elections, Dutch voters took their voting decision earlier than in “second-order” elections.

### *The independent variables<sup>2</sup>*

The main goal of this study is to identify the factors that explain late decision making. More precisely, we seek to assess the explanatory power of three factors: attitudinal ambivalence, political sophistication and political disaffection. To measure the degree of attitudinal ambivalence, our models include two indicators: ambivalence towards parties and issue ambivalence. The variable “ambivalence toward parties” is created on the basis of answers to party thermometer scales. In the pre-electoral wave of the survey, respondents were asked to evaluate each political party on a 0 to 10 scale where 0 indicated “I really dislike this party” and 10 indicated “I really like this party”. In order to determine the extent to which the voter was in an ambivalent choice situation vis-à-vis the different party options, we have calculated the distance in feeling thermometers scores between the best rated and the second best rated party. Logically, this distance might vary from 0 (when the respondent holds his/her two favourite parties in similar estim) to 10 (when the respondent really likes a particular party and totally rejects all other party options). In fact, the values we observe in our sample are ranging from 0 to 6. To construct our indicator, the distance is inverted, so that the value 0 represents the largest distance in feeling thermometers between the two best rated parties (i.e. the lowest level of ambivalence) and the value 6 represents zero distance (i.e. the highest level of ambivalence).

The other indicator of ambivalence, namely issue ambivalence, is a dichotomous variable that distinguishes those individuals who display ambivalent issue positions from the rest of the electorate. There are two types of respondents with ambivalent issue positions: left-wing voters with authoritarian voters and right-wing libertarian voters. To identify those voters affected by issue ambivalence, we make

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<sup>2</sup> For the coding details of the independent variables, see Appendix.

use of respondents' answers to four questions which aim at assessing their positions on different issues: economic policies, fiscal policies, justice and migration. Where would you place yourself on an 11-point scale where 0 means "favour reducing taxes" and 10 means "favour improving services"? Where would you place yourself on an 11-point scale where 0 indicates "favour redistribution" and 10 indicates "oppose redistribution"? Where would you place yourself on an 11-point scale where 0 means "favour tougher sentences" and 10 means "favour rehabilitation programs"? Where would you place yourself on an 11-point scale where 0 indicates "favour more immigrants" and 10 indicates "favour fewer immigrants"? To be classified as a left-wing authoritarian voter, a respondent must meet four criteria. He/she has to indicate favouring an improvement of services (i.e. a self-reported score strictly higher than 5 on the first scale), redistribution (i.e. a self-reported score strictly lower than 5 on the second scale), tougher sentences (i.e. a self-reported score strictly lower than 5 on the third scale) and fewer immigrants (i.e. a self-reported score strictly higher than 5 on the fourth scale). To be categorized as a right-wing libertarian voter, a respondent must meet the four symmetric criteria. He/she has to indicate supporting tax reductions (i.e. a self-reported score strictly lower than 5 on the first scale), opposing redistribution (i.e. a self-reported score strictly higher than 5 on the second scale) and favouring rehabilitation programs (i.e. a self-reported score strictly higher than 5 on the third scale) as well as more immigrants (i.e. a self-reported score strictly lower than 5 on the fourth scale). Left-wing authoritarians and right-wing libertarians are similarly treated as voters affected by issue ambivalence, whereas all other respondents are assumed to have non-ambivalent issue positions.

The second explanatory factor, political sophistication, is a broad and complex concept which encompasses two distinct dimensions: cognitive skills and the general political involvement. Political sophistication can thus be operationalized by means of a wide range of variables such as the level of education, political knowledge, interest in politics, the degree of media exposure, internal political efficacy and political participation (Lachat, 2007). In our analysis, we assess respondent's level of political sophistication by means of four indicators: interest in the election, campaign attention, difficulty of voting and internal political efficacy. The variable "interest in the election" is constructed on the basis of the score for self-reported level of interest in the election on an 11-point scale where 0 means "no interest at all" and 10 means "a great deal of interest". To measure the degree of campaign attention, respondents were asked to indicate how much attention they had paid to the election campaign in four types of media: television, newspapers, radio and internet. For each type of media, they gave an answer on an 11-point scale where 0 meant "no attention at all" and 10 meant "a lot of attention". The variable "campaign attention" consists of the average score the respondent gave for his/her self-reported degree of campaign attention in the different types of media. It may thus take values ranging from 0 to 10. In order to evaluate the perceived difficulty of voting, the *MEDW* survey questionnaire included the following question: Is it convenient or difficult to vote? Respondents could provide an answer on a 0 to 3 scale where 0 indicated "Voting is very difficult" and 3 indicated "Voting is very easy". We have

decided to reverse this scale, with the result that the indicator takes higher values the more difficult voting is. The level of internal political efficacy is measured by means of respondents' opinions about the following statement: Sometimes, politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on. Respondents could give their opinion on a 4-point scale where 0 meant "strongly disagree" and 3 meant "strongly agree". We have inverted this scale, so that a low score corresponds to a low level of internal political efficacy and a high score corresponds to a high level of internal political efficacy.

The third explanatory factor, political disaffection, is operationalized by means of three indicators: satisfaction with democracy, external political efficacy and judgment about corruption. The variable "satisfaction with democracy" consists of the score for self-reported level of satisfaction with the way democracy works at the level of government at which the election is held (i.e. the national, regional, municipal or European level according to the type of election). This score may take values ranging from 0 ("no satisfied at all") to 10 ("very satisfied"). To assess the level of external political efficacy, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they agree with the following statement: Politicians make campaign promises they have no intention of keeping. Respondents gave their opinion on a 4-point scale where 0 meant "strongly disagree" and 3 meant "strongly agree". This scale has been reversed and, as a result, a low value reflects a low level of external political efficacy and a high value reflects a high level of external political efficacy. Finally, in order to measure voters' judgments about corruption, panel respondents were asked to give their opinion about how much corruption existed at the level of government at which the election was held (i.e. the national, regional, municipal or European level according to the type of election). They were offered a list of four possible answers: hardly any corruption (coded 0); a little corruption (coded 1); some corruption (coded 2); a lot of corruption (coded 3).

### ***The control variables***

Our models include some control variables: age, gender, party identification and ideological extremeness. First, we look at the effect of age which is often argued to influence time of vote decision. Previous research demonstrates that young citizens are more likely than their elders to make their voting choice late in the campaign (Blumenstiel & Plischke, 2015; Cautres & Jadot, 2007, 2009; Fournier *et al.*, 2004; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; McGregor, 2012; Mutz, 2002; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012). As Cautres and Jadot (2007) have pointed out, the impact of age on time of decision can be seen as a consequence of the political socialization process. Since old voters have already been given the opportunity to participate in a large number of elections during their lifetime, they are quite familiar with the political system and the electoral process. Moreover, they often have stable ideological orientations as well as stable party preferences. Hence, old citizens usually know before the start of the campaign for whom they are going to vote. By contrast, young voters have taken part in a



smaller number of elections and, as a result, they still face difficulty in dealing with the complexity of the electoral supply and party platforms. Consequently, they tend to be more uncertain in their vote preferences and they are more inclined to postpone their electoral decision until the last weeks before the election (Cautres & Jadot, 2007).

Second, we control for gender. Scholars' opinions differ on the question whether or not gender may affect timing of the voting choice. On the one hand, some studies show that women are more prone than men to delay their vote decision until the campaign is under way (Cautres & Jadot, 2007, 2009; Kenski, 2007; McGregor, 2012). On the other hand, several authors have found that gender had no significant impact on time of electoral decision (Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012).

Our third control variable, namely party identification, is usually considered as one of the most important predictors of timing of the voting choice. In previous work, strong empirical evidence has accumulated demonstrating that partisanship hastens the vote decision. Compared to voters who report no partisan attachment, party identifiers are much more inclined to make up their mind before the campaign begins (Blumenstiel & Plischke, 2015; Chaffee & Choe, 1980; Chaffee & Rimal, 1996; Dalton, 2013; Fournier *et al.*, 2004; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Kenski, 2007; Lavine, 2001; Lisi, 2010; McAllister, 2002; McGregor, 2012; Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2005; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012; Whitney & Goldman, 1985).

Finally, we control for the degree of ideological extremeness. Some recent studies reveal that voters with moderate ideological orientations are more likely to be late deciders than are those voters who exhibit a radical ideological profile (Cautres & Jadot, 2007; Lisi, 2010; Willocq, 2016). The logic is straightforward. Voters with radical ideological preferences (i.e. those who place themselves to the far left or to the far right on the left-right axis) usually report strong partisan attachment and display a high level of stability in their voting behaviour from election to election, because they consider that there is only one single party that is close to their extremist position. Consequently, these voters seldom wait until the last minute to make their voting choice and, most of the time, they arrive at their final decision prior to the start of the election campaign (Cautres & Jadot, 2007; Lisi, 2010; Willocq, 2016). Conversely, voters with a moderate ideological profile (i.e. those who position themselves close to the ideological centre on the left-right axis) are not restricted to one side of the political spectrum and thus tend to be more ambivalent to the different political alternatives which are available on the electoral market. They should therefore be more prone to vacillate between different party options and to delay their vote decision until the last weeks before the election (Cautres & Jadot, 2007; Lisi, 2010; Willocq, 2016).

### ***Modelling technique***

Given that the dependent variable is measured with an ordinal 5-point scale, we will perform ordered logistic regressions, with higher values corresponding to later stages of decision making. The analysis will proceed in three steps. First, time of voting decision will be regressed on the control variables. Second, each of the three hypotheses will be tested separately in a specific model. In the final step of the analysis, we will estimate a full model including all independent and control variables in order to directly compare the explanatory power of the competing models. Since the distribution of early and late deciders within the sample varies considerably from one panel survey to another (see table 1), we will control for these variations by adding in all models dummy variables for each *MEDW* survey.

Besides, it should be noted that the sample size slightly differs from one model to another. The reason therefor is that several important questions, which allow us to measure some of the independent variables, are not systematically included in each of the 23 panel surveys. Some survey questionnaires are somewhat less complete than others and do not contain all the questions we need in order to operationalize the potential predictors of time of voting decision. Self-evidently, these surveys can only be incorporated in the models including the independent variables for which they provide data, and they must be excluded from the models including the variables for which they provide no data. As a consequence, the number of observations (i.e. the number of respondents included in the analysis) will vary according to the predictors incorporated in the model.

### **Results**

Table 2 presents the results of our multivariate analysis. As can be seen in model 1, the four control variables significantly influence timing of the voting choice and their respective effects operate in the expected directions. Unsurprisingly, regression results show that party identification precipitates the electoral decision. Voters who feel close to a particular party are much less likely to be late deciders than are those who report no partisan attachment. In addition, we find that ideological extremeness significantly reduces the probability of delaying one's vote decision until the last minute. Voters with a radical ideological profile tend to make their voting choice earlier than do moderate voters. Consistent with the conclusions of previous studies, age is significantly and negatively related to late deciding, with young citizens arriving at their final choice later in the campaign. Interestingly, gender also emerges as a relevant predictor of time of electoral decision. Compared to men, women tend to take longer to choose which party they are going to vote for. It is worth noting that the effects of age, party identification and ideological extremeness remain strong and statistically significant in all other models. The impact of gender still reaches the conventional level of significance in models 2 to 4, but in the full model (model 5), it does not achieve statistical significance anymore.

**Table 2.** The determinants of time of vote decision (ordered logistic regressions)<sup>3</sup>

DV : Time of vote decision <i>Independent variables</i>	Model 1 (Control variables)			Model 2 (Ambivalence hypothesis)			Model 3 (Floating voter hypothesis)			Model 4 (Disaffection hypothesis)			Model 5 (Full model)		
	B	S.E.	t-value	B	S.E.	t-value	B	S.E.	t-value	B	S.E.	t-value	B	S.E.	t-value
Age	-0.016***	0.001	-15.453	-0.014****	0.001	-13.438	-0.013***	0.001	-11.992	-0.016***	0.001	-12.564	-0.011***	0.001	-8.445
Gender	0.194***	0.0290	6.684	0.174***	0.029	5.930	0.105***	0.030	3.518	0.157***	0.036	4.330	0.061	0.038	1.625
Ideological extremeness	-0.117***	0.0107	-10.917	-0.093***	0.011	-8.457	-0.104***	0.011	-9.520	-0.099***	0.013	-7.514	-0.064***	0.014	-4.675
Party identification	-0.829***	0.030	-27.224	-0.677***	0.031	-21.748	-0.668***	0.032	-20.868	-0.791***	0.038	-20.738	-0.506***	0.041	-12.385
Ambivalence towards parties				0.306***	0.010	29.391							0.296***	0.013	22.894
Issue ambivalence				0.130*	0.062	2.102							0.133	0.075	1.772
Interest in the election							-0.060***	0.007	-8.642				-0.055***	0.009	-6.130
Perceived difficulty of voting							0.318***	0.021	15.202				0.267***	0.026	10.214
Internal political efficacy							-0.006	0.016	-0.341				-0.008	0.021	-0.391
Campaign attention							-0.023***	0.007	-3.319				-0.017*	0.009	-2.026
Satisfaction with democracy										-0.008	0.009	-0.908	-0.005	0.010	-0.553
External political efficacy										-0.075**	0.027	-2.802	-0.037	0.028	-1.341
Judgement about corruption										0.034	0.020	1.669	0.034	0.021	1.641
Cut-point 1	-1.846***	0.073	-25.371	-0.305***	0.089	-3.409	-1.894***	0.088	-21.642	-1.705***	0.136	-12.576	-0.192	0.163	-1.178
Cut-point 2	-0.738***	0.072	-10.308	0.857***	0.090	9.565	-0.763***	0.087	-8.815	-0.577***	0.135	-4.281	1.007***	0.163	6.174
Cut-point 3	.481***	0.072	6.659	2.101***	0.091	23.121	0.486***	0.087	5.587	0.596***	0.135	4.401	2.228***	0.164	13.558
Observations deleted due to missingness		13,341			13,417			13,691			14,266			14,467	

<sup>3</sup> Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. \*: p<0.05; \*\*: p<0.01; \*\*\*: p<0.001. All models include dummy variables for each *MEDW* survey (results not displayed in the table).

In model 2, regression results provide compelling evidence in support of the hypothesis that electors affected by attitudinal ambivalence are more inclined than other electors to postpone their voting decision until a later stage of the campaign (H1). As expected, ambivalence towards political parties significantly increases the probability of deciding late. Those individuals who rate their two most preferred parties as similarly attractive are unable to make a clear-cut choice long in advance of the election. They tend to waver between their two favourite party options at the start of the campaign and therefore take longer to reach a crystallized vote intention. Moreover, the other indicator of attitudinal ambivalence, namely issue ambivalence, is significantly and positively associated with late decision making. Voters with ambivalent issue positions are subject to cross-pressures, because some of their issue preferences encourage them to support left-wing parties, while their other issue orientations push them toward right-wing parties. These voters find themselves driven in opposite political directions, which makes their electoral decision process extremely complex. As a result, they are more likely than other electors to remain undecided about their voting choice until the last days of the campaign or even until Election Day itself. In sum, both indicators of ambivalence turn out to be reliable predictors of late deciding, when the expectations derived from our hypothesis 1 are tested separately in model 2. In the full model, however, only ambivalence towards parties still has a significant impact on time of electoral decision.

As can be read from model 3, the results of our multivariate analysis largely corroborate the traditional floating voter hypothesis which posits that the phenomenon of late deciding can be attributed to a lack of political sophistication (H2). In line with our expectations, a high level of interest in the upcoming election significantly decreases the probability of delaying one's vote decision until the last minute. Citizens who are really interested in the election tend to make up their mind earlier in comparison to those who display a low level of interest in the electoral contest. In the same vein, we observe the presence of a significant and negative relationship between the degree of campaign attention and late decision making. In other words, voters who pay a lot of attention to information on the election campaign provided by the mass media (television, newspapers, radio and internet) are less likely to be late deciders than are those who pay little attention to this type of information. Furthermore, it appears that the perceived difficulty of voting is significantly and positively associated with late deciding. Compared to citizens who find it very easy to vote, those who consider voting as a difficult task tend to arrive at their final decision substantially later in the campaign. Even though these findings meet the expectations derived from the traditional floating voter theory, our hypothesis 2 cannot be totally confirmed, because the last indicator of political sophistication, namely internal political efficacy, does not contribute to the explanation of late decision making. Admittedly, the effect of internal political efficacy is in the expected negative direction, but it does not reach the conventional level of statistical significance. Overall, three out of the four variables measuring political sophistication (campaign attention, interest in the election and the perceived difficulty of voting) significantly affect the timing of

vote decision, when hypothesis 2 is tested separately in model 3. Remarkably, these three indicators still emerge as good predictors of late deciding in the full model where the competing hypotheses are simultaneously tested. We can thus conclude that there is a robust negative relationship between the level of political sophistication and late decision making. The higher the level of political sophistication, the smaller will be the probability of postponing one's voting choice.

In model 4, regression results provide little support for the hypothesis that political disaffection leads to a delay in time of vote decision (H3). Indeed, only one of the three indicators of political satisfaction – external political efficacy- significantly affects the time at which voters choose which party they are going to vote for. As expected, voters with a low level of external political efficacy (i.e. those who strongly agree with the idea that politicians make campaign promises they have no intention of keeping) are somewhat more likely to be late deciders than are those who exhibit a high level of external political efficacy. By contrast, the two other variables measuring political disaffection, namely judgment about corruption and satisfaction with democracy, are not significantly associated with late decision making. In the full model, our results lend no support to any of the expectations derived from hypothesis 3, since none of the three indicators of political satisfaction has a significant impact on time of voting decision. This hypothesis must therefore be rejected.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has investigated the patterns and the sources of late decision making in a series of recent elections held in Canada, France, Germany and Spain. The data from the *Making Electoral Democracy Work* project indicate that only 40 % of the panel respondents knew before the campaign began for whom they were going to vote. Thus, a vast majority of the respondents made their final voting choice over the course of the campaign, with one in four voters deciding a few weeks before the election, one in five voters deciding a few days before the election and one in seven voters deciding on Election Day. Nevertheless, the distribution of early and late deciders within the sample varied considerably from one election to another. Consistent with the findings of a previous study (Eisinga *et al.*, 1998), we have observed that in each of the four countries covered by our study, vote intentions tended to crystallize earlier in “first-order” elections (i.e. national elections) than in “second-order” elections (i.e. municipal, regional and European elections).

In our analysis, we have attempted to identify the factors that could influence time of voting decision. To this end, we have simultaneously tested three competing hypotheses which had been proposed in previous research to explain the phenomenon of late deciding. The results of our analysis have confirmed the validity of the hypothesis that attitudinal ambivalence leads voters to delay their electoral decision until a later stage of the campaign. Voters who were in an ambivalent choice situation because they considered their two most preferred parties as similarly attractive tended to wait until the last minute to

decide how they would vote. Moreover, we have shown that voters with ambivalent issue positions (i.e. left-wing authoritarians as well as right-wing libertarians) also took longer to arrive at their final choice. It should be noted, however, that the delaying effect of issue ambivalence emerged only when the ambivalence hypothesis was tested separately, not when it was viewed in conjunction with the two other hypotheses. Additionally, our results have provided compelling evidence in support of the hypothesis that voters with a low level of political sophistication are more inclined than their highly sophisticated counterparts to postpone their electoral decision until the last weeks of the campaign or even until Election Day itself. More precisely, the analysis has revealed that late deciders were more likely to be drawn from the ranks of voters who were not really interested in the election, who paid little or no attention to information on the campaign provided by the mass media and who found it hard to vote. These findings concord with the floating voter hypothesis already put forward by the researchers of the Columbia school in their pioneer work (Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968). It seems that the late deciding voters of the early 2010s display many similarities with their counterparts of the 1940s. By contrast, the hypothesis that political dissatisfaction delays the vote decision found virtually no support in our data.

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## Appendix: Coding details of the independent variables

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- **Gender:** male = 0; female = 1
- **Age:** in years calculated by subtracting the reported year of birth from the year the survey was conducted in.
- **Party identification:** The survey questionnaire includes the following question. Do you usually think yourself as close to any particular party? The variable “party identification” is dichotomous; it takes the value 1 for those respondents who reported that they felt close to a particular party and the value 0 for other respondents.
- **Ideological extremeness:** This variable is constructed on the basis of respondent’s left-right self-placement on an 11-point scale where 0 indicates “the far left” and 10 indicates “the far right”. For each respondent, we calculated the distance between the self-reported position on the left-right axis and the ideological centre (i.e. the position 5 on that axis). Hence, the variable “ideological extremeness” takes values ranging from 0 (when the position 5 was reported) to 5 (when the position 0 or 10 was reported).
- **Ambivalence towards parties:** This variable is constructed on the basis of party feeling thermometers. Panel respondents were asked to rate each political party on an 11-point thermometer scale, with values ranging from 0 (“I really dislike this party”) to 10 (“I really like this party”). In order to assess the extent to which the voter was in an ambivalent choice situation, we calculated the distance in feeling thermometer scores between the best rated and the second best rated party. This distance might evidently take values ranging from 0 (when the respondent rates his/her two most preferred parties similarly) to 10 (when the respondent has a very positive view of a particular party and a very negative view of all other parties). In fact, the values we observe in our sample are ranging from 0 to 6. To construct our indicator, the distance is inverted, with the result that the value 0 represents the largest distance between the two best rated parties (i.e. the lowest level of ambivalence) and the value 6 represents zero distance (i.e. the highest level of ambivalence).
- **Issue ambivalence:** Issue ambivalence is a dichotomous variable that distinguishes those individuals who exhibit ambivalent issue positions from the rest of the electorate. Two types of respondents are affected by issue ambivalence: right-wing libertarian voters and left-wing authoritarian voters. We identify these voters by means of four questions which aim to assess several important issues: economic policies, fiscal policies, justice and migration. Where would you place yourself on an 11-point scale where 0 indicates “favour reducing taxes” and 10 indicates “favour improving services”? Where would you place yourself on an 11-point scale where 0 means “favour redistribution” and 10 means “oppose redistribution”? Where would you place yourself on an 11-point scale where 0 indicates “favour tougher sentences” and 10 indicates “favour rehabilitation programs”? Where would you place yourself on an 11-point

scale where 0 means “favour more immigrants” and 10 means “favour fewer immigrants”? To be classified as a right-wing libertarian, a respondent must meet four criteria. He/she has to support tax reductions (i.e. a self-reported score strictly lower than 5 on the first scale), to oppose redistribution (i.e. a self-reported score strictly higher than 5 on the second scale) and to favour rehabilitation programs (i.e. a self-reported score strictly higher than 5 on the third scale) as well as more immigrants (i.e. a self-reported score strictly lower than 5 on the fourth scale). To be categorized as a left-wing authoritarian, a respondent must meet the four symmetric criteria. He/she has to indicate favouring an improvement of services (i.e. a self-reported score strictly higher than 5 on the first scale), redistribution (i.e. a self-reported score strictly lower than 5 on the second scale), tougher sentences (i.e. a self-reported score strictly lower than 5 on the third scale) and fewer immigrants (i.e. a self-reported score strictly higher than 5 on the fourth scale). Right-wing libertarians and left-wing authoritarians are similarly coded as voters affected by issue ambivalence, whereas all other respondents are assumed to have non-ambivalent issue positions.

- **Interest in the election:** This variable is measured by means of the score of self-reported level of interest in the election on a 0 to 10 scale where 0 means “no interest at all” and 10 means “a great deal of interest”.
- **Campaign attention:** In the post-electoral interview, panel respondents were asked to indicate how much attention they had paid to the campaign in four types of media: television, newspapers, radio and Internet. For each type of media, they gave a score on an 11-point scale, with values ranging from 0 (“no attention at all”) to 10 (“a lot of attention”). The variable “campaign attention” consists of the average score the respondent gave for his/her self-reported degree of campaign attention in the different types of media. This variable can thus take values ranging from 0 to 10.
- **Perceived difficulty of voting:** To determine whether voting is perceived as a difficult task, the *MEDW* survey questionnaire contains the following question. Is it convenient or difficult to vote? Respondents were offered four answer options ranging from 0 (“Voting is very difficult”) to 3 (“Voting is very easy”). Answers have been recoded in such a manner that the value 0 represents the lowest degree of perceived difficulty and the value 3 represents the highest degree of perceived difficulty.
- **Internal political efficacy:** To measure the level of internal political efficacy, we looked at respondents’ opinions about the following statement. Sometimes, politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on. Respondents could give their opinion on a 4-point scale where 0 meant “strongly disagree” and 3 meant “strongly agree”. This scale has been inverted, so that a low value reflects a low level of internal political efficacy and a high value reflects a high level of internal political efficacy.

- **External political efficacy:** To assess the level of external political efficacy, respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement. Politicians make campaign promises they have no intention of keeping. Respondents gave their opinion on a 4-point scale where 0 meant “strongly disagree” and 3 meant “strongly agree”. This scale has been reversed, so that a low values corresponds to a low level of external political efficacy and a high value corresponds to a high level of external political efficacy.
- **Satisfaction with democracy:** This variable consists of the score for self-reported degree of satisfaction with the way democracy works at the level of government at which the election is held (i.e. the national, regional, municipal or European level according to the type of election). Respondents could give a score on an 11-point scale where 0 indicated “not satisfied at all” and 10 indicated “very satisfied”.
- **Judgment about corruption:** In order to construct this variable, respondents were asked to give their opinion about how much corruption existed at the level of government at which the election was held (i.e. the national, regional, municipal or European level according to the type of election). They were offered a list of four possible answers: hardly any corruption (coded 0); a little corruption (coded 1); some corruption (coded 2); a lot of corruption (coded 3).