



It's not always the campaign – Explaining inter-election switching in Germany, 2009–2013



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ABSTRACT

Inter-election volatility is essential for the functioning of democracy. In accounting for the underlying processes prior research focused on campaign volatility, while neglecting between-campaign volatility. This neglect is not warranted however. Between-campaign periods may include multiple events that set the stage for electoral competition and shape citizens' political cognitions, attitudes and party preference until the next election. Depending on the flow of political communication, between-campaign periods may considerably contribute to inter-election volatility. Drawing on a data set from an intra- and inter-election panel survey conducted in the 2009 and 2013 German federal elections, the evidence suggests that between-campaign changes in party preferences and political attitudes were at least as important as within-campaign changes in contributing to inter-election switching. Moreover, political involvement is less powerful in conditioning electoral volatility than suggested by conventional wisdom. The analysis thus provides a first step toward a general account of inter-election volatility.

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1. Introduction

¹In an era of dealigned and volatile electorates, inter-election vote switching (e.g., Dalton et al., 2000; Schoen, 2003) as well as campaign volatility have attracted much scholarly attention (e.g. Fournier et al., 2001; Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Kogen and Gottfried, 2012; Plischke, 2014). Although referring to different time frames, prior research treated switching within and between elections as closely related phenomena. Both kinds of volatility are similarly connected to voter characteristics like political involvement (Granberg and Holmberg 1990, 1991; Rattinger and Wiegand, 2014; Lachat, 2007, pp. 124–132).² What is more, in an influential line of reasoning intra-campaign volatility is the main source of inter-election volatility. As Converse (1962, p. 579) puts it: “individuals who vacillate in forming their voting decisions during the campaign period are likely to contribute disproportionately to such

inter-election shifts” (see also Lachat, 2007, p. 111). By implication, between-campaign volatility is deemed virtually irrelevant for inter-election volatility (but see Dassonneville, 2012, 2014). In this vein, between-campaign periods are “lengthy lulls” (e.g. Dreyer, 1971, p. 553) which lead to changes in party preference that prove irrelevant for the next election because “electoral change cancels rather than cumulates, even at the level of individuals” (Miller et al., 1990, p. 10). This fits nicely with theories of campaign effects suggesting that campaigns serve as a means of bringing vote choices back in line with long-standing predispositions (Finkel, 1993; Finkel and Schrott, 1995; Gelman and King, 1993; Campbell, 2008), thereby giving rise to a “homing tendency” (Butler and Stokes, 1974, p. 271). Likewise, the literature on the timing of electoral decision-making (e.g., Fournier et al., 2004; Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller, 2012) treats voters who report having made up their mind before the campaign as if they did not switch party preferences. By conflating between-campaign changes with non-changing, this strategy dismisses periods between campaigns as irrelevant for inter-election switching.

While it is beyond any doubt that campaign-volatility contributes to inter-election volatility, it is not reasonable to treat between-campaign periods as irrelevant for inter-election volatility. We argue that conventional wisdom builds on overly simple

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² Given this state of affairs, it is tempting to disregard the specific time period when studying stability and change in party preference (Bakker et al., 2015; Kuhn, 2009; van der Meer et al., 2014; van der Meer et al., 2012).

assumptions about the streams of political communication during and between campaign periods and voters' responsiveness to it. To be sure, campaigns provide voters with intense and obtrusive communication intended to affect vote choice (e.g., [Brady et al., 2006](#)). However, streams of political communication between campaigns may also exert lasting effects on voters' party preferences until the next election. For example, in the period between campaigns political entrepreneurs may form new parties as well as existing parties may shift policy positions or replace leaders. These between-campaign changes set the stage for the next election because parties are unlikely to undo them during the campaign. By implication, voters who switch party preferences in response to these events between campaigns are likely to stick to their new party preference until Election Day. Depending on the streams of political communication, between-campaign periods could thus play an important role in contributing to inter-election switching.

In the remainder of this paper, we discuss the role of campaign and non-campaign periods in contributing to electoral volatility from a theoretical perspective. Building on this discussion, we derive testable hypotheses on inter-election switching from the 2009 to the 2013 German federal elections. As in the period between the 2009 and the 2013 campaigns new issues and parties emerged and parties shifted policy positions, we expect between-campaign changes to contribute considerably to inter-election switching. Relying on data from an intra- and inter-election multi-wave panel survey conducted on behalf of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), we demonstrate that for voters at different levels of political involvement between-campaign changes in party preferences contribute considerably to inter-election switching in the 2009-to-2013 period. The evidence also indicates that between-campaign changes in candidate and issue attitudes, in addition to within-campaign changes, considerably account for inter-election changes in party choice. We conclude by summing up key findings and discussing implications and limitations.

2. Theory and hypotheses

For the analysis of inter-election, intra-campaign, and between-campaign volatility we build on a model of voting behavior in which attitudes toward issues, candidates, and other features feed into vote choice (e.g., [Campbell et al., 1960](#)). These attitudes respond to changes in the real world and ultimately lead to changes in voting behavior. In this setup, the issue of whether inter-election volatility derives from intra-campaign or between-campaign volatility boils down to the question in which period the political environment changes and whether voters perceive as well as respond to these changes. Because campaigns provide many stimuli that may give rise to switches in party preference in the run-up to election day it is straightforward to expect that campaign volatility contributes to inter-election volatility (e.g., [Converse, 1962](#); [Miller et al., 1990](#); [Lachat, 2007](#)).

At the same time, it is not reasonable to dismiss between-campaign periods as “lengthy lulls” (e.g. [Dreyer, 1971](#), p. 553) that do not contribute to inter-election volatility. Rather, they comprise manifold events that provoke obtrusive streams of communication. Moreover, some of these events are likely to durably change the options from which voters choose and thus have a lasting impact on voters' party preference until the next election. To begin, new parties competing for votes are likely to be launched before, rather than during, campaigns. In addition, existing parties establish manifestos before the campaign starts (e.g., [Däubler, 2012](#); [Dolezal et al., 2012](#)). In some cases, they shift policy positions as a response to defeat in the previous election or other events (e.g., [Janda et al.,](#)

[1995](#); [Meyer and Schoen, 2015](#)). Likewise, parties replace leaders and nominate candidates before the start of a campaign. In this vein, voters appreciating a party's revised program or its new leadership may switch to it between the campaigns. These between-campaign changes set the stage for the next election because parties are unlikely to re-change positions and personal during the campaign. By implication, voters who switch party preferences during the between-campaign period are likely to stick to their new party preference until election day. Similar shifts may result from voter responses to the performance of incumbent government and opposition parties between campaigns including accomplishments and scandals (e.g., [Box-Steffensmeier and Franklin, 1995](#)). At the same time, performance is somewhat more variable and may thus not give rise to enduring changes in party preference. In any case, between-campaign periods comprise many events that set the stage for the campaign and might contribute to inter-election volatility.

Prior research suggests that political involvement may moderate voter responses to changes in the environment ([Zaller, 1992](#)). Highly involved voters are likely to witness much political information but are not eager to respond to them by changing attitudes or party preference because of motivated reasoning ([Kunda, 1990](#); [Lodge and Taber, 2013](#)). Although partisan motivated reasoning is important, it does by far not predetermine voters' responses to new information ([Redlawsk et al., 2010](#); [Schoen et al., 2016](#)). Even highly involved voters may thus respond to events between campaigns by shifting party preferences. Lowly involved voters, by contrast, will be easily swayed by new information but are unlikely to encounter new information in the first place ([Zaller, 1992](#)). As many of the above-mentioned events, such as changes in parties' leaderships and programs, major accomplishments and failures of incumbents, and the launch of promising parties are likely to be broadly and obtrusively covered by mass media, we argue that even lowly involved voters will respond to these changes, thereby calling prior research into question ([Dassonneville, 2014](#)). Still we have to keep in mind that some voters, especially at lower levels of political involvement, may not bother coming up with a vote choice between campaigns, although their party preference changed, because they do not feel the need to form a vote intention when election day is far away ([Enns and Richman, 2013](#)).

Taken together, it is an oversimplification to assume that inter-election volatility derives from campaign volatility but not from between-campaign volatility. Both periods may provide streams of communication that make lowly and highly involved voters switch parties. Inter-election changes may thus be fueled by changes in both periods. The relative contribution of between- and within-campaign volatility to inter-election volatility thus depends on the specific contents of communication in both periods. Put differently, between-campaign periods may be more important in bringing about changes in vote choice than previously suggested.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore the role of specific contents in conditioning the contribution of between- and within-campaign volatility to inter-election volatility. Rather, we focus on a case that is suited to test the claim that provided suitable events between-campaign and within-campaign changes contribute to inter-election volatility among voters at different levels of political involvement. This case is the 2009-to-2013 legislative period in Germany. During this period economic conditions in Germany improved considerably from the international economic crisis in 2008 ([Mader, 2014](#)). We expect larger changes in economic evaluations between the campaigns than within the 2013

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