



Changing motivations, time of the voting decision, and short-term volatility – The dynamics of voter heterogeneity



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ABSTRACT

The notion of “voter heterogeneity” – that different voters decide according to different sets of choice criteria – has become widely accepted. But while in a given election some voters are candidate-oriented and others are issue-oriented, little is known about the temporal dimension of heterogeneity: are candidate voters at t1 also candidate voters at t2? We argue that individual voters' motivations can change over time and expect that the extent of inter- as well as intra-individual heterogeneity impacts the process of individual decision-making. Using panel data collected in the run-up to the German Federal Election 2009 we demonstrate that certain choice motivations and intra-individual changes in these motivations lead to later vote decisions and contribute to the explanation of vote switching.

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1. Introduction

In deciding how to vote, voters are not all alike but rather apply different decision-making strategies and differ as to the motivation of their choice. Some voters, e.g., might be policy-driven, others may put a special emphasis on candidates, and still others may simply vote habitually. Such differences in the influence of decision criteria on their vote choice can cause two voters with identical policy preference to elect different parties (Bartle, 2005; Rivers, 1988). However, ignoring this variation in assuming homogenous voting calculi has until recently been the standard in electoral choice. In the meantime, several studies (e.g. Bartle, 2005; Blumenstiel, 2014; Blumenstiel and Rattinger, 2012; Peterson, 2005; Rivers, 1988; Roy, 2011) have both demonstrated considerable heterogeneity in electoral decision-making and have started to analyze the

sources of variations in voters' voting calculi, but research on the topic is still limited.

Among other things, the consequences of heterogeneity and its longitudinal dynamics are still largely unknown. Regarding possible consequences of voter heterogeneity, we will focus on the timing of the vote decision and on short-term fluctuations of the vote intention. As to the longitudinal dynamics, previous research almost exclusively focused on cross-sectional data, thus the temporal (in)stability of voter heterogeneity has been largely disregarded. Therefore, we differentiate between two types of heterogeneity to uncover the temporal dimension of voter heterogeneity. The first type concerns differences in the importance voters assign to various considerations in their decision at one point in time. An example for this type of heterogeneity would be that voter A places more weight on her issue orientations than voter B, who primarily bases her decision on her impression of the candidates. In the following, these differences between voters will be referred to as “inter-personal heterogeneity”. The second type concerns the individual stability of consideration weights. An example of this type of heterogeneity would be that

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voter A consistently makes issue-oriented decisions in two consecutive elections, whereas the decision calculus of voter B changes over time. In the following, the instability of consideration weights will be referred to as “intra-personal heterogeneity”.

Against this background, we will focus on two research questions: First, do inter- and intra-personal heterogeneity affect the time when voters make their decision? Second, do both types of heterogeneity influence the likelihood of vote switching during an electoral campaign? To analyze these questions, we use data from a seven-wave online campaign panel conducted as part of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES).

The article proceeds as follows. In section 2, we define our research question in more detail by discussing previous research on inter- and intra-individual heterogeneity. Section 3 introduces our measure of voter heterogeneity which is based on voters' self-reports of their most important reasons for their voting decision. In section 4, we postulate more specific hypotheses about how inter- and intra-individual heterogeneity may affect the voter decision process in terms of the timing of the decision and short-term volatility. After describing data and the coding process of the self-reported motivations in section 5, we present the results of our analyses in section 6. In the conclusion, we discuss the consequences of heterogeneity for voter decision making and also their wider ramifications, but also refer to some limitations of our study and questions to be addressed in future research.

2. Inter- and intra-personal heterogeneity

Voter heterogeneity by no means is a new concept (see Blumenstiel, 2014 for a summary of previous findings). As Roy (2011) notes, individual differences in decision-making have already been stressed by Campbell and colleagues (1960). It has been argued in *The American Voter*, for instance, that for voters who are well informed about the parties' candidates and policy positions, party identification should be less important for their decision than for those who are, apart from feeling attached to a party, little involved in politics (Campbell et al., 1960: 136). However, more often than not the insight that voters are not all alike as to their choice motivation has been widely disregarded in the discipline, possibly for a lack of both adequate research methods and theoretical grounds. What has been denoted as the ‘homogeneity assumption’ became the default (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008: 81). So it was up to Douglas Rivers in his seminal article (1988: 737) to bring the argument that disregarding voter heterogeneity might be misleading back to the agenda:

“In fact, if two voters have identical policy preferences and demographic characteristics, then any of the standard methods of analyzing voting behavior would predict that the two would cast identical votes. Yet it is easy to think of situations where such a prediction would be unwarranted. If issues have different levels of salience to voters, then identical policy preferences do not necessarily imply identical (or even similar) voting patterns for voters.”

In assuming homogenous consideration weights for all voters, previous studies have thus assumed a simplistic and direct relationship between attitudes and behavioral intentions, where in fact the influence of each attitude on a behavioral intention should be weighted by the personal importance of this attitude to an individual (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). As Bartle (2005) illustrates, including voter heterogeneity as an additional independent variable to the explanation of voting decisions can help to understand why voters with identical political preferences decide for different parties.

If there are hence enough reasons to assume that the electorate has never been homogenous, the argument has been fostered by the finding of declining social determination of voting decisions. According to Dalton (2008: 184f.), partisan dealignment is accompanied by increasing electoral volatility, a tendency of voters to decide later in the campaign and growing importance of short-term factors such as issues and candidates, so that party choice for most voters now actually is a decision rather than a pre-determined routine. In short, the electorate is likely to have become even more heterogenous over time. Furthermore, while the authors of *The American Voter* clearly had been aware of voter heterogeneity, their failure to include individual weights of the considerations in their model has been criticized (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008: 81).

Including the time horizon into the study of individual variations in the voting motivation, a further distinction can be made between *inter-personal* and *intra-personal heterogeneity*. If the former is being studied, the aim is to find and to explain variations between voters in the importance they assign to various considerations in their decision at one point in time. In studying this type of heterogeneity, one could for example try to identify those voters who primarily base their decisions on their candidate orientations and analyze how these voters differ from other groups of voters. Most previous research devoted to the study of voter heterogeneity focused on this type of heterogeneity, i.e. on differences between voters (cf. e.g. Rivers, 1988; Bartle, 2005; Clarke et al., 2008; Roy, 2011; Blais et al., 1998; Blumenstiel and Rattinger, 2012). If however intra-personal heterogeneity is to be studied, the focus shifts to the temporal stability of individual consideration weights. Regarding this type of heterogeneity, one could for example ask “Are candidate voters at t1 also likely candidate voters at t2?”. Depending on the time period studied, t1 and t2 could either be consecutive elections or, as in this article, different points in time during one electoral campaign.

Implicitly the notion of e.g. candidate-oriented voters is suggestive of an assumed stability of voting motivations at least in short-term perspective. However, only very few studies have actually addressed the temporal aspect of voter heterogeneity. As far as we are aware, Peterson (2005) first explicitly mentioned the individual-level dynamics of voter heterogeneity and later argued that changes in voters' uncertainty about the candidates during the campaign can affect the weights of attitudes in the voting decision (Peterson, 2009). Using longitudinal panel data, Blumenstiel (2014) demonstrated that voters' attitude weights are moderately associated between two

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