



Issue cross-pressures and time of voting decision



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ABSTRACT

Undecided voters are often regarded by political parties and candidates as the group that determines the outcome of an election. This paper discusses the concept and measurement of issue cross-pressures and explores to what extent they influence the time of voting decision in different political systems. Using survey data from national election studies in the Netherlands (1994–2012), Germany (1994–2013) and the United Kingdom (1992–2010), this study finds that issue cross-pressures do influence the time of voting decision regardless of voters' personal consideration set size, demographic background and political attribute. The effect of issue cross-pressures in the Netherlands is most pronounced. In the United Kingdom it is more moderate, while it is least prevalent in Germany. This partially demonstrates that party systems may constrain the role of issue cross-pressures.

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1. Introduction

Since the era of democratization, there has been a long-term trend of electors delaying their voting decisions until the election campaign, or often even the final polling day. The proportion of late-deciding voters has increased considerably in recent decades in all 12 democracies analyzed by Dalton et al. (2000), except in Denmark. The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Germany are no exception to this rule. With respect to the Netherlands, the share of late deciders has increased from 10 percent in 1971 to more than 40 percent in 2006 (Irwin and Van Holsteyn, 2008a). The most recent Dutch election studies (2010, 2012) even point to a majority of voters who made up their mind in the last week of the campaign. In the United Kingdom, only 12 percent of voters in 1970 reported that they made their decision in the final days before Election Day, while the figure was 26 percent in 1997 (McAllister, 2002). The trend is similar in Germany: between the federal elections of 1965 and 2009, the proportion of voters making up their minds in the latter stages of the campaign increased from less than 5% to 40% (Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller, 2012).

With the increasing number of people who delay their voting decisions, the study of who these late-deciding voters are has attracted the attention of many scholars (Gopioian and Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Fournier et al., 2004; Irwin and Van Holsteyn, 2008a; Nir and Druckman, 2008; Kosmidis and Xezonakis, 2010; McGregor, 2012; Schmitt-Beck and

Partheymüller, 2012; Orriols and Martinez, 2014). Late deciders are found to be less partisan, less interested in politics and more easily persuaded by campaign information and media coverage. As a result, late-deciding voters are regarded by political actors - especially parties and candidates - as the group that determines the outcome of the election (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980).

This paper attempts to study voters' time of voting decision by focusing on the effect of cross-pressures emerging from holding policy preferences across various issues that push a person in different directions politically: the so-called issue cross-pressures (Therriault et al., 2011). Going back in history, the decline of party identification and social cleavages has been confirmed by various scholars since the 1970s (Dalton, 1984; De Graaf et al., 2001; Berglund et al., 2005; Oskarson, 2005; Arzheimer, 2006; Irwin and Van Holsteyn, 2008b; Franklin et al., 2009). General models of political behavior perform increasingly poorly in understanding and explaining the way in which voters make their voting choices. Political scientists responded by turning their attention to short-term cues, especially issues (Borre, 2001; Van Wijnen, 2001; Clarke et al., 2004; Aardal and Van Wijnen, 2005; Wessels, 2014). Although the findings with regard to the extent of issue voting are inconsistent, the consensus is that issues are significant motives behind voting choice, at least for some particular voters. It is in this context that issue cross-pressures get their meaning in understanding voting behavior.

The important role of issue cross-pressures in determining the time of voting decision can be deduced from two dominant schools

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in voting behavior. In the sociological model of electoral behavior, Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) suggested that individual voting choice was largely determined by socio-demographic factors. Simultaneously, they argued that if a person's social group affiliation was the predominant factor influencing his/her voting choice, conflicts and inconsistencies among these variables would make the person's voting choice more difficult. With respect to the Michigan school, scholars developed a socio-psychological model in which party identification was assumed to be in the core position. They also argued that, if party identification was most important to voters' voting decision, individuals with varying levels of party identification would differ considerably in the time of voting decision. According to the reasoning of both the Columbia School and the Michigan School, we can expect that, if a person's issue positions are the principal motivations behind voting, conflicts among these stances (i.e., pushing people towards different political objects) may lead to late decision. However, scholars have seldom paid attention to the aforementioned question. This paper discusses the concept and measurement of issue cross-pressures and explores to what extent they influence the time of voting decision.

Before continuing the study, it is important to bear in mind that the effect of issue cross-pressures on time of voting decision is not necessarily the same in different contexts. This study observes three different countries, using survey data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES) (1994–2012), the British Election Study (BES/BGES) (1992–2010), and the German Election Study (GES/GLES) (1994–2013). On the one hand, with the number of parties increasing, voters may be more likely to experience higher issue cross-pressures. On the other hand, when political contexts are equally dominated by several parties, those who suffer from issue cross-pressures may hesitate more between two or more parties. Due to the varying average effective number of parties from the 1990s to the 2010s in the Netherlands (5.5), Germany (3.8) and the United Kingdom (2.3), these three countries are ideal cases to demonstrate whether the role of issue cross-pressures in time of voting decision is conditioned by political systems or not.

In order to answer the research questions, this study will be divided into five sections. The first section discusses the factors that influence people's time of voting decision. The next part elaborates on the concept and measurement of issue cross-pressures. In the third section, data and methods are presented. The fourth section provides the results of the empirical analysis. The final section concludes with the implications of the findings.

2. Background: what factors influence voters' time of voting decision?

Undecided voters are often regarded by political parties and candidates as the group that determines the outcome of an election. When the election are close, those who vote during the later stages of a political campaign, or even on polling day, can determine who wins the election. As Hillygus and Shields (2008) said, "as many elections are decided at the margins, moving even a few votes during the campaign can make all the difference" (p.8). In this regard, political scientists have never questioned the importance of late deciders and have long examined the factors that determine if voters make their decisions late in the campaign.

Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) were the pioneers in studying why individuals make their voting decisions when they do. Based on the survey data from the 1940 US presidential election in Erie, Ohio, Lazarsfeld et al. found that voters' time of voting decision differed significantly. While exploring possible explanations for this phenomenon, Lazarsfeld et al. focused on cross-pressures arising from multiple socio-demographic affiliations. Their findings showed that voters exposed to cross-pressures were more likely to delay their

voting decisions. In the landmark book: *The American Voter*, Campbell et al. (1960) contended that those who decided early differed from those who decided late primarily in the degree to which they experienced cross-pressures. In the Michigan school, the cross-pressures stem from holding conflicting attitudes towards candidates, issues and groups.

Yet in the late 1960s, as negative evidence regarding the effects of cross-pressures on voting behavior increased (Pool et al., 1965; Horan, 1971; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Knoke, 1990), its explanation of the time of voting decision waned. Instead, scholars started focusing their attention on the other attributes of late deciders. Among these, partisanship was the main concern. Party identification has been a central factor in understanding and explaining voters' voting behavior. Therefore, many researchers argued that voters' time of voting decision was mainly determined by their partisanship; voters with partisan identities would make their decisions earlier, before the campaign, even. By contrast, those without or with weak party identification would make up their minds at a very late stage in an election (Gopioian and Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Fournier et al., 2004).

However, since the 1970s, partisan dealignment has set in. One remarkable feature of dealignment is the decreasing number of party identifiers. With younger generations being less partisan than older generations, the proportion of non-partisans is likely to further increase in the future (Dalton, 2014). It can thus be expected that party identification will perform increasingly worse as a predictor of citizens' voting behavior. For that reason, it is worthwhile to look elsewhere for insight into voters' time of voting decision. This paper attempts to study voters' time of voting decision from the perspective of issue cross-pressures. As a response to dealignment, scholars in political science concentrated on the significant role of issues, and highlighted individual issue positions as one of the most predominant factors for voting choice. When voters' issue positions lead them to different candidates or parties, we can expect these conflicts to point to a late decision. However, this phenomenon was seldom studied.

Nevertheless, some of the literature concerning individuals' inner psychological conflict imply that issue cross-pressures may be an important factor influencing people's time of voting decision. Firstly, researchers on political ambivalence have found that people with ambivalent views were less stable (Armitage and Conner, 2000; Conner and Sparks, 2002), more easily persuaded (Armitage and Conner, 2000), and their behavior was harder to predict (Conner et al., 2002). These results suggest that, compared to unambivalent individuals, those who hold competing attitudes towards a candidate or party are more likely to change their minds during the election campaign, which by definition makes them late deciders.

Secondly, inspired by the work of Lazarsfeld et al. on socio-demographic cross-pressures, scholars focusing on cross-pressures stemming from heterogeneous discussion networks found that cross-pressures had a negative effect on the time of voting decision. Based on two representative national surveys from the 1992 election, Mutz (2002) found that people whose network involved greater political disagreement were more likely to make up their minds later on in the campaign. By conceptualizing political disagreement in a person's social network as exposed to two conflicting points of view, Nir (2005) found that mixed messages from network discussants affected the time of voting decision but said influence would be moderated by ambivalence.

Thirdly, political scientists working on campaign effects have contributed to an understanding of how issue cross-pressures may affect a person's decision time as well. Nir and Druckman (2008) studied the role of cross-pressures coming from mass-mediated contexts in people's time of voting decision based on data from

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