Always late? Stability and change in individuals' time of vote decisions

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Abstract:

In contrast to assumptions in the literature, voters do not make up their mind about which party to vote for at around the same time relative to the election date in different campaigns. By using a unique intra- and inter-campaign panel survey of German voters in the 2009 and 2013 federal campaigns, this analysis demonstrates that voters arrived at their final voting decision at different points of time because they were subjected to different streams of political communication in these two campaigns. Thereby, this chapter makes a case for acknowledging more variation in campaigning by examining individuals' decision making in more than just a single campaign. Furthermore, it calls for future research to put analyses of campaign effects into context by studying non-campaign periods as well.

Keywords:

late decider, time of voting decision, campaign effects, vote switching, campaign switching

I. Introduction

Among a host of factors known to influence the timing of final voting decisions, political predispositions have emerged as the most powerful predictors (see Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller 2012). The weaker party identification and involvement in politics in general, the later an individual makes up his mind which party to vote for. Popular accounts argue that it is the long-term decline of such political predispositions due to generational replacement that is responsible for an alleged rise of late deciding voters in Western electorates (Dalton et

al. 2000). Political predispositions by their very nature, however, should be stable within the same individual over at least a time span of several years. Therefore, one might be tempted to conclude that voters habitually make up their mind about which party to vote for at the same time in different elections – those with weak predispositions are always late and those with strong predispositions are always early. Indeed, some have treated the timing of final voting decision as an individual trait in research about voter heterogeneity (e.g. Catellani and Alberici 2012; Fournier et al. 2004). The sparse evidence on intra-individual variation in decision times, however, tells quite a different story: Voters make up their mind at different points of time at different elections. Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous (1994) report that around 80% of those voters classified as late deciders in the US presidential elections in 1976 had not been late deciders in the previous presidential election of 1972. O'Keefe et al. (1976) who compare individuals' decision times in the US presidential election of 1972 and a state election two years later find variation on a slightly smaller scale.

Why the same individuals decide at different times in different contests, however, is not well understood by current research. It has long been assumed that features of the electoral context in which vote decisions occur may be important for the explanation of decision times – may it be the number of available decision alternatives in a contest, the question of an incumbent or an otherwise familiar candidate running for office or the level of government the campaign is fought for (see Chaffee and Rimal 1996: 276; Eisinga et al. 1998; McAllister 2002; Whitney and Goldman 1985). Presumably, these institutional features lead to different streams of campaign communication – in terms of sheer frequency, competitiveness or partisan bias – to which voters react. Numerous works have demonstrated that campaign communication under certain conditions makes voters change their party preference and – by implication – influences their time of final vote decision (Matthes 2012; Nir and Druckman 2008; Plischke 2014). Accounts of context effects in the time-of-vote literature are based on cross-sectional studies which report different aggregate shares of "late deciders" in different contexts but

cannot test the individual-level mechanisms that are assumed to mediate these effects. In contrast, the "campaign effects" strand of the time-of-vote literature delivers in-depth analysis of voters' decision making processes in a single campaign and therefore does not tell us why voters decide at different points of time in different campaigns. This chapter seeks to fill this gap by examining if the same individuals make up their mind at different points of time in different campaign contexts because they are subjected to different streams of communication in these contexts.

Specifically, we focus on voters' decision processes in the campaigns for the German Bundestag in 2009 and 2013. Although both campaigns were regarded as "boring" by the public, scholarly research reports substantial campaign effects on voting behavior in both contexts (Schoen et al. 2016). The campaigns studied here are quite similar in the sense that they started from and resulted in a CDU/CSU-led government under Chancellor Angela Merkel and were characterized by low polarization in CDU/CSU's and Socialdemocrats' campaigning. If we found that in such similar campaigns individuals were nonetheless subject to different streams of communication and consequently made their final decision at different points of time, such a finding would present a convincing argument concerning the importance of communication effects.

The analysis employs a survey of respondents who have been repeatedly interviewed during the campaign for the German Bundestag election in 2009 as well as during the campaign of 2013. By using this inter- and intra-election panel we are in a position to study the research question in a unique manner. The chapter is structured as follows: In the next section, a theory about the dependence of the timing of voting decisions on communication is elaborated and hypotheses are deduced. In Section III the research design is outlined. Section IV presents the findings of the empirical analysis. We find that different streams of communication do indeed explain why German voters made their voting decisions at different points of time in 2009 and

2013. Section V concludes and discusses several implications and ventures for further research.

II. Campaign communication contexts and the time of vote decisions

We define the time of the final vote decision as the point of time after which the vote intention does not change any more and is kept up "all the way into the voting booth" (Lazarsfeld et al. 1968: 52). Therefore the latest possible time of decision is Election Day itself. Voters can arrive at their final decision via different routes: They may not know whom to vote for, that is they are undecided[1], until a stable party preference crystallizes, they can switch between different parties, or they can show some combination of the first two paths (Lazarsfeld et al. 1968: 65–72). Possessing a vote preference instead of being undecided at a random point in time is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for having finally decided at this very point in time. Obviously, one has to remain true to this preference in order to be considered as "finally decided" (see Plischke 2014).

Any theoretical account of the question *when* voters decide which party they will vote for on Election Day has to, at the same time, be an account of *how* voters make up their minds. We conceive of the voting decision process as the result of the interplay between political predispositions and new political information (see Zaller 1992). Whereas political predispositions should remain stable for most individuals (at least) in a time span of several years, the information an individual is confronted with can change with changes in the political context. In the following section we will discuss how this interplay between predispositions and information should influence time of vote decisions and how a change in political context feeds back to this interplay.

[1] For the sake of brevity, we use the term "being undecided" to denote the absence of a vote intention for a specific party at one point of time.

Political predispositions such as political interest and partisan identity should motivate citizens to establish a party vote intention in the first place. Political interest motivates individuals to think about politics in general whereas party identification – beside the sheer motivation to get involved – provides a clear guidance which party to vote for (Campbell et al. 1960). Political interest and party identification are not necessarily "up and about" when the campaign starts. Strong partisans for whom politics is important may be able to voice a vote intention at any time. Still, according to activation theory a substantial portion of the electorate needs the increased amounts of political communication a campaign usually creates in order to grow politically interested and to get their partisan identity activated in the first place (Grant et al. 2010; Lazarsfeld et al. 1968: 75–86). Different campaigns might differ in their ability to activate voters' predispositions. Systematic comparative research is missing in this regard but there have been suggestions that the amount of information as well as the intensity of the political competition between relevant political actors are important explanatory factors (see Arceneaux 2006; Johnston et al. 2014; Preißinger and Meyer 2015; Stevenson and Vavreck 2000). If the reasoning is correct, the political communication context might have an indirect effect on decision times by influencing the strength of political interest and the accessibility of partisan identification and therefore the point in time of the crystallization of a first party preference.

As we have argued above, the formation of an initial party preference is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for arriving at a final decision. Party preferences have to be upheld until Election Day in order to be judged as "final." Based on research about motivated political reasoning we know that strong predispositions impede the reception, acceptance, interpretation, and recall of political information that is incongruent with these predispositions (Fazio 1995; Lodge and Taber 2000; Zaller 1992) although they do not perfectly shut out all countervailing information (Mummolo 2016; Schoen et al. 2016). After having led to the formation of an initial preference, therefore, predispositions prevent being easily persuaded

into changing the vote intention in favour of another party. Put differently: Voters with strong predispositions are more likely to uphold their initial preference in the face of countervailing information than voters with weak predispositions.

If voters are confronted with countervailing information depends on the political context. Campaigns differ regarding the number of days before Election Day they begin and consequently regarding the point in time when the first persuasive information is presented to the electorate (Stevenson and Vavreck 2000). Campaigns can also differ in the amount of countervailing messages provided to the electorate. The German campaigns in 2009 and 2013 which are analysed in this chapter are quite similar with regard to the overall intensity of political communication as well as in their length. There are, however, slight differences: In 2009, the TV debate between the chancellor candidates of the main parties, CDU/CSU and SPD, was aired two weeks before Election Day, compared to three weeks before Election Day in 2013. Given the effects of TV debates on voters' decision making (Maier et al. 2013), the timing of voters' decision making could differ. For *individual* decision times it matters which information reaches the *individual citizen* at which point in time. Aside from the differing time spans between TV debate and Election Day, individuals may be subject to different streams of communication for reasons that have nothing to do with politics but unfold political consequences nonetheless. The social communication network of individuals and therefore their "diet" of political messages might change. Similarly, an individual might overall receive the same amount of information through different channels with the same partisan bias in both campaigns, but happens to do so at different times before Election Day. Therefore, we deduce the following hypothesis: *Differences in the amount of political information, the partisan content of information and the timing of this information lead to differences in decision times of German voters in 2009 and 2013.*

III. Data and Methodology

The German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) campaign panels for the German federal elections in 2009 and 2013 (Rattinger et al. 2014; Rattinger; Roßteutscher; Schmitt-Beck; Weßels; Steinbrecher 2015; Rattinger; Roßteutscher; Schmitt-Beck; Weßels; Wolf; Plischke et al. 2015) provide an ideal database to examine the research question. In each year, the survey consists of seven waves – six waves before the election and one post-election wave – that were realized online. In 2009, 3771 respondents took part in the survey in wave 1 (w1), while 781 additional respondents joined the survey in wave 2 (w2). In total, 1792 respondents participated in all waves (seven waves for w1-starters and six waves for w2-starters). In 2013, the sample size is larger, with 5256 respondents partaking in the first wave and 3487 respondents participating in all seven waves. As a special feature, respondents that had participated in at least four waves in 2009 were invited to participate again in 2013 – therefore 1030 respondents participated in both years. With this inter- and intra-election panel we can analyze times of vote decisions in a yet unique manner. However, drawing on data from a group of online panelists who participated in 14 waves of an online survey ranging from 2009 to 2013 limits the generalizability of results. A particular problem is presented by the fact that the 2009 respondents who participated again in 2013 are somewhat more interested in politics and less likely to have made up their mind during the 2009 campaign than the respondents who participated in 2009 only (see Preißinger and Schoen 2016). We may thus underestimate the absolute level of late decision times and the prevalence of campaign effects with our sample in comparison to the electorate as a whole.

The time of the final vote decision is measured employing the panel method.[2] A respondent is considered to have arrived at a final voting decision at the time of her interview in a

[2] In the recent literature there has been some debate if the panel method is superior to the recall method or not (Fournier et al. 2001; Kogen and Gottfried 2012). This question, however, does not have to be discussed here because the recall method is not useful for the paper's purpose. Whereas one can estimate the effect of stable predisposition on time of vote decision measured by the recall method, one cannot examine the effect of change e.g. in the amount of processed campaign information on the probability to be decided at exactly one specific point in time. By employing the panel method we are able to do so.

specific wave if she does not report a different vote intention[3] in her interviews in subsequent waves. This measurement depends on the exact spacing of panel waves (Steinbrecher and Schoen 2013). In general, the longer the intervals between the panel waves are, the higher is the risk of missing real changes of vote intentions between the interviews. The GLES campaign panel waves, however, are very tightly scheduled. Less than 14 days lie between two interviews. This fact considerably reduces the risk for the occurrence of the error outlined above. The primary goal of this chapter is to explain differences in decision times between 2009 and 2013. Therefore it is essential to measure decision times in a comparable way in both years. As one can see in Figure 1, the sequencing of panel waves is largely comparable in 2009 and 2013. The only big difference is the timing of the first wave. In 2013, the first wave was fielded more than two weeks earlier than in 2009 and ended when the 2009 wave started. Therefore, we pool individuals that decided in wave 1 or wave 2 in this analysis and consider them to have arrived at a final decision until the end of wave 2. This procedure has the additional advantage that we can include the cases that entered the 2009 panel in wave 2.

--- Figure 1 about here ---

In order not to lose too many observations because of nonresponse, we treat missing values in vote intentions in the following way: If a single missing value is embedded within two valid observations of an individual, we assume that this missing vote intention equals the vote intention from the previous wave. Depending on the exact scenario we may over- or underestimate the true timespan until the final decision. [4] The good news is that the resulting

[3] Only the vote intention for the second vote (party vote) is considered here.

[4] Consider this example: Someone reported an intention to vote for CDU/CSU in the first three panel waves in one year, had a missing value in wave 4 and afterwards reported to vote for FDP. By assuming that his missing vote intention in wave 4 was for CDU we attain the time of final decision in wave 4. Another example: Someone intends to vote for the same party in all his interviews but has a missing value in wave 5. By assuming that in his missing wave, the respondent intended to vote for the same party, an early decision time is attained.

aggregate shares of final decisions made in each wave are almost identical whether missing values are replaced or not.

Concerning independent variables, campaign communication can originate from a variety of sources. The analysis is somewhat restricted since only the partisan direction of political talks, campaign contacts with parties and evaluations of the TV debate and of the coverage of the two most popular political newscasts in German TV are being measured.

A respondent is regarded to have achieved congruent information from his political discussant if the political discussant intends to vote for the same party as the respondent in his final vote decision. Note that this measure is somewhat post-hoc because we do not know which party the respondent will finally vote for at the beginning of our panel study. We will discuss this post-hoc reasoning later in this chapter. The resulting dummy variable takes on the value zero if someone did not talk about politics, if the respondent did not know which party his discussant would vote for, if the discussant intended to abstain from voting, or if the discussant intended to vote for a different party than the respondent. The variable returns the value 1 if the discussant intends to vote for the same party the respondent is going to vote for in the end.

With party campaign contact we proceed in a similar way. We create a dummy variable for each wave indicating whether someone had at least one contact with the party he is going to vote for (=1) or not (=0).

The partisan bias of news stories aired by the German public broadcasters ARD and ZDF is measured by the GLES campaign content analyses for TV newscasts in 2009 and 2013 (Rattinger; Roßteutscher; Schmitt-Beck; Weßels; Wolf; Schäfer et al. 2015; Rattinger; Roßteutscher; Schmitt-Beck; Weßels; Krewel et al. 2015). The content analysis records for each news story in each daily newscast whether a positive, a neutral/ambivalent or a negative evaluation of a specific political actor is present. The most frequent evaluation in newscasts is no evaluation at all or an ambivalent evaluation. For example, in both 2009 and 2013 during

the whole timespan covered by the content analysis about 70% of all stories in the newscasts by ARD that mention the CDU/CSU are coded as providing neutral or ambivalent evaluations of the CDU/CSU. These evaluations on news story-level were averaged for each major broadcaster on a daily basis. Because our GLES campaign panel respondents were asked to report their media consumption behavior in the last seven days prior to their interview, each respondent was matched with the average tone of coverage in the last seven days before his interview in each wave. The final variables used in the analysis are dummy variables indicating whether a respondent received on average positive messages for the party he is going to vote for in ARD or ZDF respectively (=1). The variables take on the value 0 if coverage was either neutral/ambivalent or negative towards the party or if the respondent did not consume ARD or ZDF newscasts, respectively. For this as well as the aforementioned measures we have to bear in mind that we can only measure if communication is congruent with final vote choices for CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, the Greens or The Left. This means that we have to exclude respondents with final vote choices for other parties as well as non-voters from the analysis.

Furthermore, we include whether someone received messages congruent to his final vote choice in the TV debate. If a respondent reported to have watched the TV debate, she was subsequently asked how she rated the performance of incumbent Angela Merkel and her SPD-challenger. The debate was coded as a provider of congruent messages if a CDU/CSU-supporter evaluated the performance of Merkel as superior or if a SPD-supporter evaluated the SPD-candidate's performance as superior. The resulting variable is a dummy which returns 0 if the TV debate was not received, if someone made a final vote choice for a party other than SPD or CDU/CSU, if the opposing candidate was considered as the better performer or if both candidates were considered as equally performant.

Additionally, we measure how often a certain channel of communication is consumed. Therefore, the frequency of party contacts (ranging from 0 contacts up to 5 contacts), the

reception of the TV debate (which is a dummy), the frequency of political talk, daily paper consumption and public TV newscasts in the last 7 days before the interview (each ranging from 0 days to 7 days of consumption) are included.

The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we examine if the dynamic of campaign communication influences decision times in a specific year. In a second move we analyze if the difference of communication streams at the same time before Election Day explains why an individual decides at different points of time in both campaigns. The statistical method, the data structure as well as the transformation of independent variables into first differences will be explained in the following section.

In the *first step*, we statistically model how likely an individual is to make her final decision in each wave of the panel for each year in turn. Consequently, the dependent variable of the analysis is binary and indicates for each individual and for every wave if the final vote decision has already been made. By our definition one can make a final decision only once. Hence, the probabilities of interest are conditional probabilities: The probability to make the final decision in any random wave is conditional upon not having made up one's mind before. Thus, a survival analysis with a logistic regression function is used to model this conditional probability. This analysis requires the following data structure: Each individual makes up as many rows in the data set as it takes her waves to arrive at her final decision. All observations after the final decision are dropped from the analysis because the individual is no longer at risk of making the final decision (see table 5). By our definition every respondent has arrived at a final decision in wave 7 at the latest. Statistically speaking the probability of deciding exactly in wave 7 under the condition that one has not decided before is 1 for everyone. Hence, there is no variation that needs explanation. Everyone – no matter which values he has on the independent variables – has to decide. Therefore, the survival analysis stops at wave

6.[5]

--- Table 1 about here -----

We want to examine how the *change* in individuals' reception of campaign communication over the course of the campaign influences the *change* from having not yet arrived at a final decision to having arrived there over time (intra-individual change). In order to achieve this endeavor, we computed for each independent variable the change from each wave to its predecessor (first differences). The dependent variable does not need any transformation because it can already be interpreted as intra-individual change. Because it can only vary from 0 to 1[6] and can equal 1 at only one point in time, 0 means "no change" which is synonymous with "not having arrived at a final decision" and 1 means "change" which is synonymous with "having arrived at a final decision". Positive values of the reception frequencies can be interpreted as an increase in reception from one wave to the next, whereas negative values signify a decline. For example, if a respondent talked about politics three days in wave 2 but five days in wave 3, the first difference between wave 2 and wave 3 equals two days. The value "1" on the first difference of the congruent talk variable means that a respondent in the next wave had again contact with a congruent discussant, a "0" indicates the failure to have a congruent contact (again). The first differences for the reception of congruent messages in party contact, TV debate, or TV newscast coverage are calculated the same way. If k points of measurement for the variable exist and the difference between all consecutive waves is computed, the resulting number of differences is k-1. Therefore, in the single-year models 5 decision times are available for analysis (waves 3- waves 6). People who made up their mind at the earliest time point we can measure – wave 2 – have to be dropped from the analysis

[5] This does not mean that *individuals* deciding at wave 7 are dropped from the model. They remain in the model because at wave 6 they are still at risk of making their decision. Only *observations* of these individuals at wave 7 are not examined.

[6] The variable can never vary in the reverse direction.

because no difference score from wave 1 to wave 2 can be computed.

In the *second step* we want to answer the question if an individual made up his mind at different times in 2009 and 2013 because he witnessed different communication streams in those years. We expect to see that a respondent has made up his mind until the fourth panel wave in 2013 but not in 2009 if in 2013 the respondent has already received congruent information before the wave four which was not the case in 2009. In order to model this expectation, the data structure and the variables need to be transformed. The dependent variable is a categorical variable indicating if an individual in a specific panel wave 1) has not yet arrived at a final decision in both years, 2) has already decided in 2009 but not so in 2013, 3) has already decided in 2013 but not so in 2009 4) has arrived at a final decision in both years (see Table 2 for an example). The dataset comprises the same number of rows for each voter as it takes this voter panel waves to arrive at a final voting decision in both years. For example, if an individual makes up her mind in 2013 in wave 4 but in 2009 in wave 6, all observations until wave 6 are part of the analysis (see Table 2). Again wave 7 is not part of the analysis because by definition everyone has to have made up their mind in both years at this point.

--- Table 2 about here ----

We model the probability to be in any combination of decision states in 2009 and 2013 via a survival analysis with a multinomial logistic regression function. In order to capture the difference in the timing of communication streams between both years, the independent variables indicate for each wave how many more instances of relevant communication an individual has experienced *up to this specific wave* in 2013 in comparison with 2009. Take the example presented in Table 3: At the end of each campaign, individual A had received three instances of congruent political talk in total, but the timing of this information stream is

different in 2009 and 2013. In 2013 the stream started earlier, but also stopped earlier. The final outcome variable mirrors this fact by giving the difference between the individual totals of congruent communication for each wave. Thus, positive values indicate more relevant communication in 2013 up to this point, negative values indicate more relevant communication in 2009. By computing the differences between the 2009 and 2013 values of independent variables, we free the measurement of any differences between individuals in communication reception that are constant between years, e.g. due to stable general political involvement, and are therefore in a position to study intra-individual change.

--- Table 3 about here ----

IV. Results

Looking at the aggregate distribution of final decision times in 2009 and 2013 one is hard-pressed to find differences between years (Figure 2). In both years, most of the voters make up their minds either very early or very late: Whereas about 50% of the respondents did not change their vote intention over the course of the campaign, about 25% made their final decision pretty much on Election Day itself. The remaining 25% of the samples scatters between decision times in wave 3 and wave 6 with a slight preponderance of later waves.

--- Figure 2 about here ---

This stability at the aggregate level, however, hides variation at the individual level (Table 5). Although at least 66% of early deciders in 2009 (wave 2) make their final decision in 2013 again in wave 2, the decision times between wave 2 and wave 7 are highly unstable within the same individuals across the two campaigns. One could argue that we confuse measurement

error with real change in individual's decision making processes. Variation, however, is not only constricted to adjacent waves but can be quite profound. For example, almost a third of wave 7 "late deciders" in 2009 are early wave 2 deciders in 2013. Therefore, it is clearly not the case that the same people are "always late" or "always early."

--- Table 4 about here ---

We hypothesized that the difference in decision times can be explained by different streams of communication. Figure 3 presents a simplified overview of these streams of communication by indicating the moment of the first encounter with congruent information. Obviously, not only the moment at which the first congruent communication stream reaches the individual should be essential but the following sequence of communication as well.[7] Concerning political talk, the main issue seems to be about someone never receiving congruent streams of communication during the campaign or starting to do so at wave 2. Turning to party campaign contact, we observe more variation over time; the point in time of the first congruent contact is scattered quite evenly between waves 2-6. The penetration of campaign communication seems to be lower in 2009, where about 40% did not receive a single congruent party contact during the whole campaign.[8] As noted before, in 2013 the TV debate took place earlier (relative to the election date) than in 2009. Respondents were asked about their reception and evaluation in the wave directly followed by the TV debate, which is wave 6 in 2009 and wave 5 in 2013. For 13% of the sample the TV debate provided congruent messages in 2009, in 2013 this share was slightly larger and comprised 21%. The remaining respondents either did not watch the TV debate or interpreted the messages delivered as incongruent. Turning to TV newscasts, their tone was congruent more often in 2009 than in 2013.

[7] With 5 waves and 2 manifestations per variable, we have $2^5=32$ possible sequences of communication streams over the course of the campaign.
[8] Overall, in 2013 the absolute frequency of party contacts (congruent or incongruent) was higher than in 2009, presumably mirroring the low intensity of campaigning in 2009.

--- Figure 3 ----

Does the dynamic of communication streams influence the time of final voting decisions? In a first step, we examine if the evolution of communication streams within the timespan of a single campaign – separately for 2009 and 2013 – explains when an individual arrives at a final decision in a specific campaign. The binary dependent variable measuring whether someone has finally made up their mind is analyzed via a survival analysis using a logistic regression function. As we have already learned from the descriptive distribution of decision times, these probabilities are quite unequally distributed across waves. In order not to overestimate the effect of our time-varying predictors, we have to control for the different levels of decision making in the different waves. We do this by specifying dummy variables for each wave (waves 3-6) and omit the estimation of a constant term. In order to detect if it is really the content of communication that influences decision making or whether it is the sheer frequency of communication received, we control for communication frequencies which are first differences as well. The regression coefficients are presented in Table 7. The quantity of information intake alone does not seem to influence the probability of making up one's mind. The respective coefficients are very small and fail to reach statistical significance (except for TV newscasts). In order to judge if the effects of the content of information are of reasonable size, average predicted probabilities are computed (Figure 4).

--- Figure 4 about here ----

The experience of an additional instance of congruent talk from one wave to the next increases the probability of arriving at the final vote decision by about eight percentage points in 2009 and about five percentage points in 2013 in comparison with failing to have such a

congruent contact (again). An additional congruent party contact results in a difference of about three to five percentage points in both years. Receiving congruent messages in newscasts does not seem to have an effect in 2013. In 2009, more congruent newscast exposure in ARD slightly reduces the probability of making up one's mind which is the other way round than expected. The probabilities reported so far were averaged across waves. In order to judge the effect size of the TV debate, probabilities for a single wave were computed because this event happens only once every election and therefore the value of the respective variable varies only once in the whole timespan. As can be seen in Figure 4, in 2009 the TV debate exerts a stronger effect than in 2013. In 2009 the difference amounts to 20 percentage points, in 2013 to eight.

--- Tables 8a and 8b -----

By and large, the effects of the content of communication are comparable across both campaigns and not particularly strong with the exception of the large effect of the TV debate in 2009. However, they do not tell us why the same individual makes up her mind at different points of time in 2009 and 2013. We now proceed to analyzing the question whether individuals decided at different points of time in 2009 and 2013 because of differences in the timing or the content of communication streams in those campaigns. The results of the multinomial logistic regression tackling this question are presented in Table 6. The categories "decided in both years" and "not yet decided in both years" of the dependent variable were collapsed together as a single reference category, because we assume that "decided in both years" and "not yet decided in both years" have the same probability if communication streams do not differ between 2009 and 2013.

--- Table 6 about here ---

Because coefficients of multinomial regressions are difficult to interpret, we directly turn to interpreting average probabilities. We calculate discrete changes in average probabilities if the covariates vary from 0 (signifying that a voter has received an equal amount of congruent messages in 2009 and 2013 at comparable time slots before election day) to 1 (indicating that a voter has received one instancemore of congruent communication in 2013 than in 2009). Specifically, in Figure 12.5 changes in the probability of arriving at a final vote decision in 2013 while not having arrived at one at a comparable time slot before election day in 2009 are depicted. Apart from the TV debate variable which is constricted to values 0 and 1, the other content variables theoretically vary from -5 to +5. The discrete probability changes depicted in Figure 12.5 therefore present a minimum take on the effects. As one can see, congruent messages on ARD and ZDF again do not substantially matter for the time of voters' final decisions. The ARD variable behaves the other way round than expected. The effect of congruent talk and congruent party contact, however, proves to be quite pronounced: one instance more of congruent political talk in 2013 than in 2009 increases the probability of a final decision in 2013 (while not yet having arrived at a final decision in 2009) by about six percentage points. The analogue difference in party contact even results in a difference of about nine percentage points.

--- Table 10 about here ----

These probability changes were averaged across panel waves. The respective probabilities for the effect of the TV debate are predicted for a single wave, namely wave 5.Rememberthat at that time the TV debate had already taken place in 2013 but not in 2009. Having received congruent information from the TV debate in 2013 increased the probability of arriving at a

final decision at wave 5 by about thirteen percentage points; the confidence interval, however, includes zero.

Therefore, effects of communication seem to be larger when we explain differences in individuals' times of final decision making between campaigns than within the timeline of a single campaign. A word of caution, however, is in order: When analyzing the difference in decision times 2009 and 2013 we are left with a very small number of individuals. A multinomial regression is a demanding statistical procedure that can lead to very thinly occupied cells when crossing the dependent variable and the host of the independent variables. Therefore, subsequent research should replicate these analyses with hopefully better data on later elections. Our results show, however, that much can be learned by studying the same individuals in different elections.

V. Conclusion

This chapter examined why the same individuals make up their minds regarding vote choice at different points of time in the German Bundestag elections of 2009 and 2013. Although the campaigns of the German Bundestag elections were both said to be very similar in their boringness, we found that different sequencing of communication flows explained why voters decide at different points of time in the analyzed campaigns. If such effects occur with similar election campaigns, the potential for very different campaigns to lead to very different decision times seems vast. We found that effects of campaign communication were larger when explaining the difference of individual decision times between campaigns than within the timeline of a single campaign. Thus proponents of the "minimal effects paradigm" may have found their effects not so minimal after all if they acknowledged more variation in campaign communication by looking at differences between campaigns. At the same time, however, one is well-advised not to exaggerate the campaign's influence on time of vote decisions. Apart from the few weeks before the campaign, a voter has several years after one

election until the next election to make up his mind. This research followed prior research by focusing on only a tiny section of this large timeline – the few weeks of campaigning before the next election. By doing so, we obviously are in a poor position to explain why some people made up their mind before the campaign started and we do not know if the effects of communication on decision times in the observation period that we confidently declared as "campaign effects" are causally unique in campaigns. Without studying the evolvement of communication and vote intentions in the long years between elections outside of campaigns, we have no way of knowing if these effects are really "campaign effects". Further research on voters' decision making, therefore, should not only acknowledge the variation between different campaigns but study non-campaigns as well (see Preißinger and Schoen 2016). A necessary step in this direction is to gather (panel) data not only in one campaign, but several campaigns, and within non-campaign periods.

Further research should deal with some other issues as well. First, we examined the time of vote decisions independent of the content of vote decisions. We found that differences in communication flows make individuals decide at different points in time but we did not examine if these communication flows actually pointed to the same party in 2009 and 2013. An individual might arrive at a final voting decision at a similar time relative to two different the election dates because she received information in line with this final choice at about the same time. However, this does not mean that she voted for the same party in both elections. By studying the content as well as the point in time of the final vote decision in tandem we could learn more about the substantive implications of decision times. Second, we argued theoretically that not all voters are equally likely to be persuaded by campaign information. Consequently, differences in communication between campaigns should not be equally important for all voters' decision making. Low number of cases in the relevant subgroups, however, prevented us from exploring this question further. Future research may thus tackle it. Third, we are in a poor state to actually *predict* when an individual will make up his mind.

We measured when an individual decided by tracking down the point of time after which the vote intention did not change any more. At any point of time we can only know if someone has come to a final decision due to our knowledge of future waves. This is necessarily not a prediction but a post-hoc statement. Similarly, the measures we used for the congruence of received information were quite ex post facto. We measured whether the information was congruent with the final vote decision the respondent made. Lastly, we demonstrated that changes in information streams lead to switching from not yet having finally decided to having finally decided. But we did not examine how these factors develop after the final decision had been made. For example, we would expect that the communication one receives after having arrived at a final decision is not overtly incongruent with the party decision made; otherwise one should not have been able to uphold this choice if the theory is correct. Overall, this research provided a first step into exploring the context-dependency of voter decision making processes but calls for additional research to pursue this question further.

Appendix: Question Wording

Variable	**2009**	**2013**
Frequency Talk	*Waves 2-6:* On how many days of the last week did you talk about politics and political parties with other people?	*Waves 2-6:* On how many days during the last week did you talk about politics and political parties with other people? (A) Friends (B) Partner/Spouse (C) Relatives (D) Colleagues/friends from college (E) Acquaintances, Neighbours
Frequency paper	*Waves 2-6:* On how many days during the last week did you read articles on politics in the following newspapers? (B) Frankfurter Rundschau (FR) (C) Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) (D) Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ) (E) Die tageszeitung (taz) (F) Die Welt	
Frequency public TV	*Waves 2-6:* On how many days during the last week did you watch one of the following newscasts? (A) Tagesschau/Tagesthemen (ARD) (B) Heute/Heute Journal (ZDF) (C) RTL Aktuell (D) Sat.1 Nachrichten (E) Newscasts of other channels (e.g. n-tv, Pro7)	
Reception TV debate	*Wave 6 (2009)/Wave 5,[6] (2013):* Did you watch the televised debate between Angela Merkel and [Frank Walter Steinmeier/Peer Steinbrück] on [Date]? - Yes, I watched it completely. - Yes, I watched it partly. - No, I didn't watch the debate.	
Vote intention of first discussant	*Waves 2-6:* Which party do you think this person will probably vote for in the federal election on 27 September, or do you think he/she will not vote at all?	
Party Contact	*Waves 2-6:* Did you get any information from the parties on the forthcoming federal election last week, or did you look for information on the federal election on your own? - Yes - No (A) I attended election meetings or	*Waves 2-6:* During the election campaign there are different ways of acquiring information about politics in Germany. From which parties did you receive information during this past week? Please checkmark all the parties to which the following statements

	rallies. (B) I received emails or text messages. (C) I received campaign flyers, handbills, leaflets or posted material. (D) I saw party or candidate broadcasts on television. (E) I listened to canvassing on the radio. (F) I saw campaign adverts in newspapers or magazines. (G) I saw campaign posters. (H) I visited the election campaign stand. (I) I received home visits from campaigners. (J) I got phone calls. (K) I visited a website.	apply. I ... (K) visited websites of a party or a candidate (G) saw election posters (A) visited hustings or rallies (D) saw commericals on TV (E) listened to commercials on the radio (Y) None of the above applies
Evaluation Performance Candidates TV debate	*Waves 5-6:* How well do you think did the candidates come out of the debate? (A) Angela Merkel (B) Peer Steinbrück [2009: Walter Steinmeier] - very well - well - neither well nor poorly - poorly - very poorly	

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All figures and tables

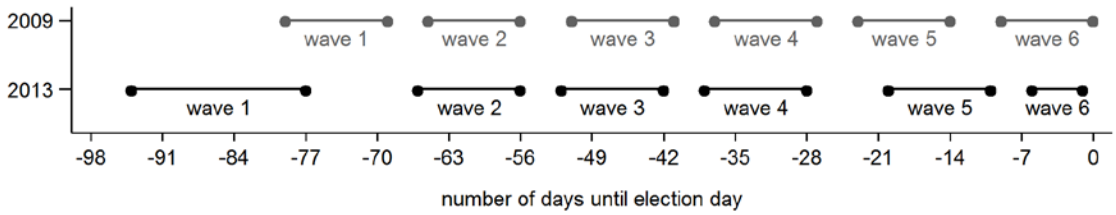

Figure 1: Waves of GLES campaign panels 2009 & 2013

Wave	Individual	Finally decided?
Wave 2	B	not yet
Wave 3	B	not yet
Wave 4	B	not yet
Wave 5	B	final decision
Wave 6	B	(*excluded form analysis*)
Wave 7	B	(*excluded from analysis*)

Table 1: Example of the data structure for survival analysis (single year models)

	2009	2013	Finally decided?
Wave 2	not yet	not yet	neither in 2009 nor in 2003
Wave 3	not yet	not yet	neither in 2009 nor in 2013
Wave 4	not yet	decided	already decided in 2013, not in 2009
Wave 5	not yet	decided	already decided in 2013, not in 2009
Wave 6	decided	decided	finally decided in 2009 & 2013
Wave 7	decided	decided	(*excluded from analysis*)

Table 2: Example of combination of decision states in 2009 and 2013

Individual	Wave	2009 congruent talk	2009 individual total of congruent talk	2013 congruent talk	2013 individual total of congruent talk	difference of individual totals between years (2013-2009)
A	2	0	0	1	1	1
A	3	0	0	1	2	2
A	4	1	1	1	3	2
A	5	1	2	0	3	1
A	6	1	3	0	3	0

Table 3: Example of transformation of communication variables

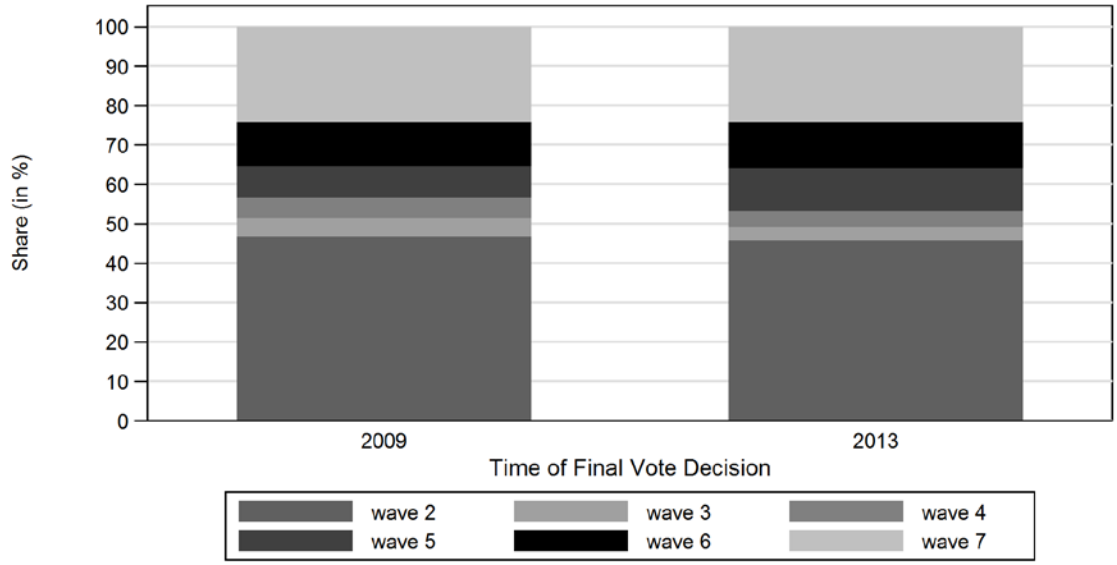

Figure 2: Time of Final Vote Decision in 2009 & 2013

				2013			
2009	2	3	4	5	6	7	N
2	**66%**	1%	6%	8%	8%	13%	330
3	53%	**3%**	0%	16%	6%	22%	32
4	41%	6%	**6%**	12%	15%	21%	34
5	41%	5%	0%	**19%**	5%	30%	37
6	33%	6%	4%	19%	**13%**	24%	67
7	26%	2%	4%	13%	15%	**40%**	141
N	321	14	30	72	64	140	641

Table 5: Intra-individual Variation in Time of Final Vote Decision 2009 & 2013
Row percentages are reported.

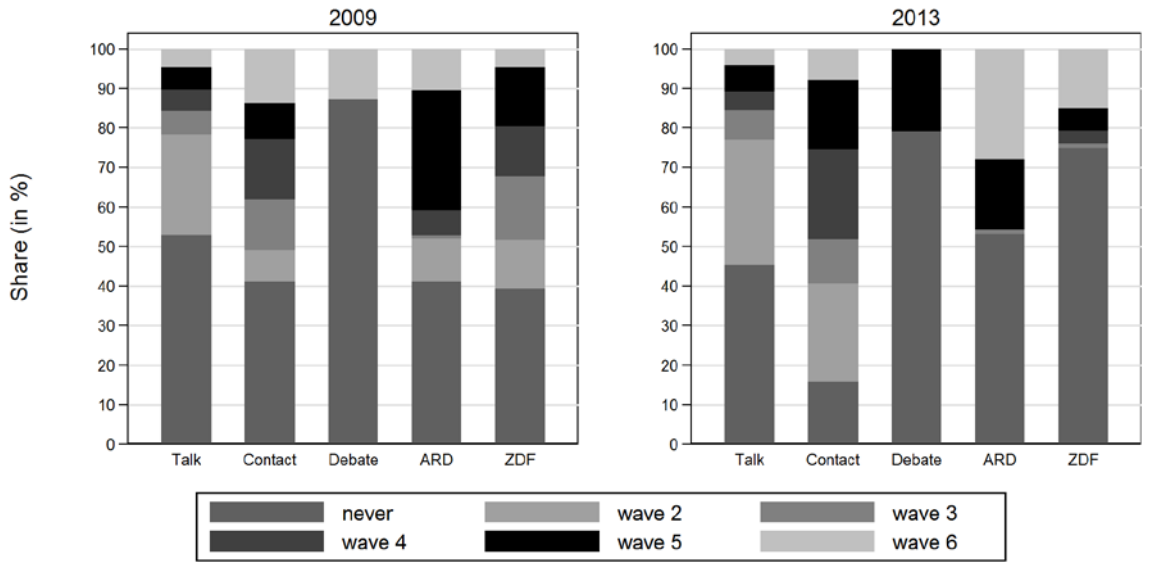

Figure 3: Time of first congruent message received in different channels
Reported are relative frequencies.

	2009	2013
Δ congruent talk	0.55***	0.39***
	(0.13)	(0.10)
Δ congruent party contact	0.36*	0.22*
	(0.14)	(0.10)
Δ congruent debate	0.85**	0.46**
	(0.27)	(0.17)
Δ congruent ARD	-0.32*	-0.09
	(0.15)	(0.13)
Δ congruent ZDF	0.40**	-0.12
	(0.13)	(0.16)
Δ talk	0.04	0.03
	(0.04)	(0.03)
Δ party contact	-0.01	0.00
	(0.03)	(0.02)
Δ debate	-0.26	0.13
	(0.21)	(0.17)
Δ newspaper	0.03	0.03
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Δ public TV	0.06*	-0.03
	(0.03)	(0.02)
wave 3	-2.51***	-2.77***
	(0.13)	(0.12)
wave 4	-2.21***	-2.41***
	(0.12)	(0.11)
wave 5	-1.54***	-1.53***
	(0.12)	(0.13)
wave 6	-0.67***	-0.67***
	(0.15)	(0.10)
# observations	2771	4528
# individuals	928	1409
McFadden's R^2	0.10	0.11

Table 7: Logistic regression of being finally decided in the campaigns of 2009 & 2013 (discrete survival analysis)

Entries are log odds and standard errors. * *p < 0.05,* ** *p < 0.01*

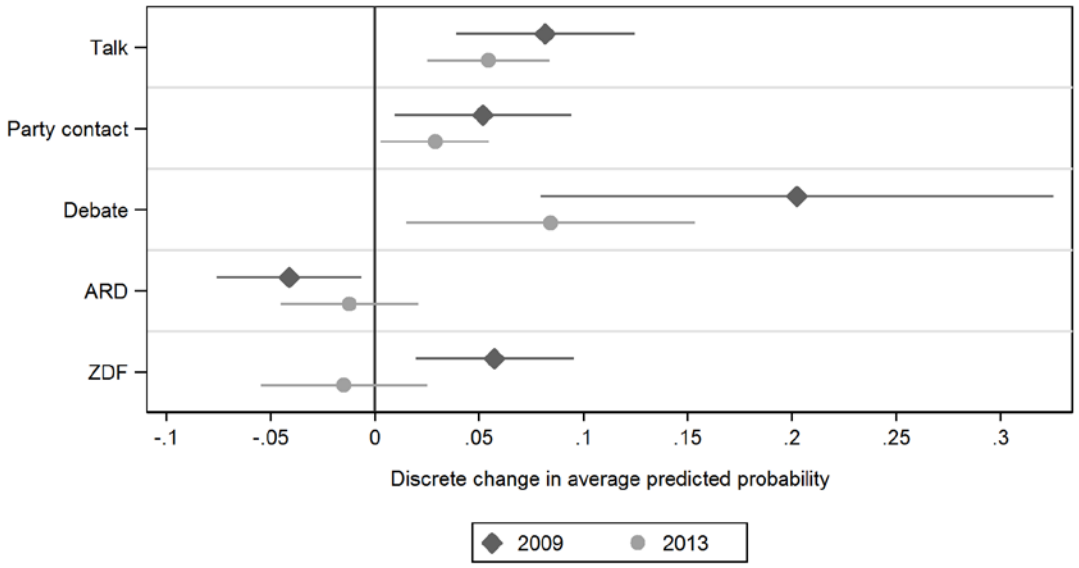

Figure 4: Discrete change in average predicted probability of having arrived at a final decision by congruent messages (with 95 percent confidence interval)
Notes: Discrete change if covariates vary from 0 to 1. Probabilities averaged across waves, except for TV debate (fixed at wave 6 in 2009, wave 5 in 2013).

	2009 final decision 2013 not yet$_t$	2013 final decision 2009 not yet$_t$
Δ congruent talk	-0.34***	0.26***
	(0.07)	(0.07)
Δ congruent party contact	-0.01	0.48***
	(0.14)	(0.14)
Δ congruent debate	-0.81*	0.44
	(0.34)	(0.32)
Δ congruent ARD	-0.08	-0.28
	(0.14)	(0.14)
Δ congruent ZDF	-0.02	0.15
	(0.10)	(0.11)
Δ talk	0.01	-0.03
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Δ party contact	0.02	-0.04
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Δ newspaper	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Δ debate	0.51*	-0.18
	(0.26)	(0.28)
Δ public TV	0.02	-0.02
	(0.01)	(0.02)
wave 2	-1.41***	-1.66***
	(0.13)	(0.14)
wave 3	-0.32*	-0.70***
	(0.15)	(0.17)
wave 4	-0.38*	-0.87***
	(0.16)	(0.18)
wave 5	-0.71**	-0.90***
	(0.24)	(0.25)
wave 6	-0.68**	-1.43***
	(0.22)	(0.26)
# of observations	1301	
# of individuals	457	
McFadden's R^2	0.07	

Table 9: Multinomial logistic regression of decision states 2009 & 2013 (discrete survival analysis)

*Entries are log odds and standard errors. The omitted reference category of the dependent variable is "same decision states 2009 & 2013". * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$*

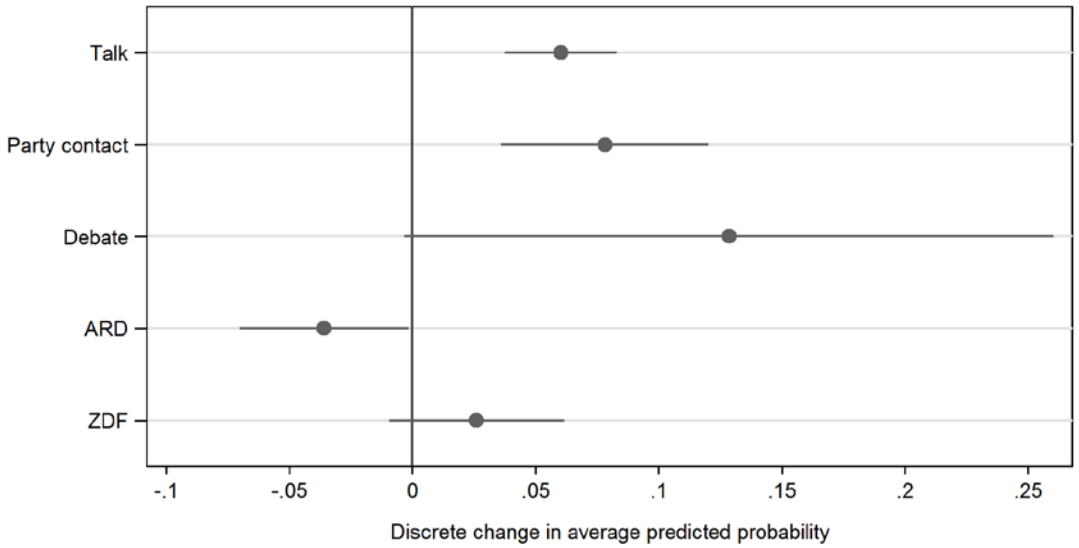

Figure 5: Discrete change in average predicted probability of having arrived at a final decision in 2013 but not in 2009 by congruent messages (with 95 confidence interval)
Notes: Discrete change if covariates vary from 0 to 1. Probabilities averaged across waves, except for TV debate (fixed at wave 5).