

Explaining Time of Vote Decision: The Socio-Structural, Attitudinal, and Contextual Determinants of Late Deciding

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Abstract

In the last decades, Western democracies have witnessed an increase in the proportion of voters who make their electoral choice late in the campaign. Consequently, scholars have paid considerable attention to this phenomenon and attempted to identify the factors which influence time of vote decision. This article reviews the literature on the determinants of decision timing. Several studies suggest that women and young citizens are more likely to be late deciders. Besides, party identification has been shown to hasten the electoral decision, whereas attitudinal ambivalence and network cross-pressures have been found to delay the crystallisation of vote intentions. Moreover, previous work reveals that strategic voters decide later than do their sincere counterparts. Special attention is also devoted to the debate on whether the phenomenon of late deciding can be seen as the consequence of a lack of political sophistication or as the product of a high level of political engagement.

Keywords

time of vote decision, ambivalence, political sophistication, political disaffection, strategic considerations

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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. In many 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 Western countries, 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; Cautrès and Jadot, 2007; Dalton et al., 2000; Irwin and

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Van Holsteyn, 2008; Lachat, 2007; McAllister, 2002; Plischke, 2014). Indeed, less and less citizens know before the start of the campaign which party they will 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. Over the past few decades, a large number of studies have been conducted in order to explain why some voters make their final choice even before the campaign starts, while others take their electoral decision during the campaign period. Scholars have sought to identify the socio-structural, attitudinal, and contextual factors that delay or precipitate voting choices. The present article reviews this rich literature on the determinants of time of vote decision. I show that electoral researchers have put forward six main types of individual-level predictors of decision timing: sociodemographic characteristics, partisanship, cross-pressures, political sophistication, political disaffection, and strategic considerations. Moreover, I point out that besides individual-level factors, some contextual factors have also been claimed to affect timing of the voting choice.

Sociodemographic Factors

In previous studies, two sociodemographic characteristics, namely age and gender, have been argued to influence time of vote decision. Age is often regarded as one of the main determinants of decision timing. Previous research demonstrates that young citizens are more likely than their elders to make their voting choice late in the campaign (Blumenstiel and Plischke, 2015; Cautrès and Jadot, 2007, 2009; Dupoirier and Frogner, 2009; Fournier et al., 2004; Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Hopmann, 2012; McGregor, 2012; Mutz, 2002; Nir and Druckman, 2008; Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller, 2012). As Cautrès and Jadot (2007) have pointed out, the impact of age on decision timing can be seen as a consequence of the political socialization process. Since old voters have already been given the opportunity to participate in many elections during their lifetime, they are quite familiar with the political system and the electoral process. Moreover, they often have stable ideological orientations and stable party preferences. Hence, old citizens usually know before the start of the campaign for whom they will 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 (Cautrès and Jadot, 2007).

Second, gender is sometimes claimed to be a potential predictor of late deciding. Yet, there are contradictory findings on whether gender affects 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 (Catelani and Alberici, 2012; Cautrès and Jadot, 2007, 2009; Dupoirier and Frogner, 2009; Kenski, 2007; McGregor, 2012). On the other hand, several authors have found that gender has no significant impact on time of decision (Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Hopmann, 2012; Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller, 2012).

Partisanship

Party identification is unanimously considered as one of the most reliable 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 and Plischke, 2015; Chaffee and Choe, 1980; Chaffee and Rimal, 1996; Dalton, 2007, 2013; Dupoirier and Frogner, 2009; Fournier et al., 2004; Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Kenski, 2007; Kogan and Gottfried, 2012; Kosmidis and Xezonakis, 2010; Lavine, 2001; McAllister, 2002; McGregor, 2012; Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2005; Whitney and Goldman, 1985).

Cross-Pressures and Ambivalence

Another type of potential explanation for late deciding puts forward the notion of cross-pressure (or ambivalence) and was first proposed by Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) in their groundbreaking work. Using data from a multiwave 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 these contradictory influences 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 individual predisposed him or her to support the Democrats, whereas other factors pushed him or her towards the Republicans. In other words, voters affected by cross-pressures were driven in opposite political directions.

In *The People's 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 or 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 Republicans and their religious affiliation which operated in favour of 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 compared to those voters who were not subject to such contradictory influences (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968).

In their seminal book, *The American Voter*, Campbell et al. (1960) drew the same conclusion, and also claimed that attitude inconsistency delayed vote decisions. Drawing on data from the *1952 and 1956 American National Election Study*, they showed that voters with a high level of attitude conflict were 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 et al. gave the example of a 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 Eisenhower.

In the 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 et al. was too encompassing and did not differentiate internal and external sources of conflicting influences. They contend that 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 conceptualisation 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 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 parties/candidates. A voter is in an ambivalent choice situation when he or she perceives several parties/candidates as being similarly attractive (Lavine, 2001; Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2005).

External ambivalence, on the other hand, refers either to a situation in which the voter is exposed to unanimous disagreement with his or her political opinions in his or her social environment (cross-cutting social network) or to a situation in which the voter belongs to a social network completely split into two political factions, with some members sharing his or 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 or her own viewpoint. Membership in a cross-cutting network thus implies that the individual perceives all his or her discussants as being at odds with his or her own political position (Mutz, 2002). Network-level ambivalence captures another type of configuration in which the individual perceives his or her environment as being politically divided between supporters and opponents of his or 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 a heterogeneous network are subject to cross-pressures, since their discussants send them contradictory 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, to disentangle the effect of one source from another. They found that attitudinal ambivalence towards parties/candidates substantially delayed the crystallisation of vote intentions (Blumenstiel and Plischke, 2015; Kosmidis and Xezonakis, 2010; Lavine, 2001; Lavine and Steenbergen, 2005; McGregor, 2012; Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2005; Nir and Druckman, 2008; Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller, 2012). Since ambivalent voters held different parties/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. 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 deciding. Exposure to dissonant political messages within discussion networks led

voters to take their final decision later in the campaign (Hopmann, 2012; Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2005; Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller, 2012). Nevertheless, some studies suggest that external ambivalence does not affect time of decision uniformly for all citizens (Nir, 2005; Nir and Druckman, 2008). As Nir (2005) has pointed out, the effect of external ambivalence on timing of the voting choice is moderated by internal ambivalence. In other words, the impact of network cross-pressures on decision timing varies according to voters' level of attitudinal ambivalence. A high heterogeneity of interpersonal networks can delay the vote decision of the most attitudinally ambivalent voters, for these individuals are open to persuasion and tend to uncritically absorb conflicting messages from the different sides of the political scene. However, network heterogeneity has no significant effect on time of decision among the least ambivalent voters, because they are less susceptible to persuasion and can resist to counter-attitudinal messages by using counter-arguments. Similarly, Nir and Druckman (2008) have demonstrated that internal ambivalence moderates the influence of mixed media coverage of a campaign (i.e. a balanced news coverage which offers equally favourable information for all parties) on decision timing. Mixed campaign coverage delays the crystallisation of vote intentions, but only among those voters with high attitudinal ambivalence.

Political Sophistication

Another potential explanation of time of vote decision dating back to the pioneer work of the Columbia school focuses on the role of political sophistication. While the relationship between political sophistication and decision timing 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 voting choice. In this debate, one can distinguish two competing theoretical perspectives on late deciding: a pessimistic view and an optimistic view. According to the pessimistic approach proposed by Lazarsfeld et al. (1968), late deciding can be regarded as the product of a lack of political involvement, whereas according to the optimistic perspective developed by Dalton (1984), late voting decisions tend to be taken by highly sophisticated voters who seek to make thoughtful choices.

In *The People's Choice*, Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) observed that early and late deciders differed significantly with regard to their levels of political involvement. Those voters who had already taken their vote decision before the start of the campaign were found to be well-educated, interested in politics, attentive to the campaign and knowledgeable about the political system. They made their electoral choice on the basis of a substantial amount of 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 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 well-motivated choice. Since these voters lacked cognitive skills and political information, they faced difficulty in choosing a party/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 of voting preferences, thereby leading to a delay in time of 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 pessimistic floating voter hypothesis has been largely challenged and alternative theories have been proposed to explain time of decision (Chaffee and Choe, 1980; Chaffee and Rimal, 1996; Dalton, 2006, 2013; Dalton et al., 2000; Whitney and Goldman, 1985). Philip Dalton (2006) points to 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. In the same vein, Russell Dalton (1984, 2013) claims that late deciding voters nowadays are more likely to be found among highly sophisticated citizens than among their less sophisticated counterparts. According to this optimistic view, 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 campaign.

Russell Dalton argues that the arrival of sophisticated late deciders can be seen as a consequence of the process of cognitive mobilisation. 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). According to Dalton, these two evolutions have reduced the functional value of party identification, since highly educated and well-informed voters do not have to use partisanship as a heuristic cue to guide their voting decisions. Hence, the rise in political sophistication would have largely contributed to partisan dealignment, that is, the gradual erosion of the bonds between parties and citizens, resulting in a decline in the proportion of party identifiers within the electorate. Following Dalton's thesis, apartisans (or independents) have not only become much more numerous, but their characteristics have also changed dramatically over time. While in the 1950s and 1960s, independents were disproportionately concentrated among the least sophisticated voters, apartisans would nowadays display high levels of education and high levels of political interest (Dalton, 2013). In sum, Dalton claims that the process of cognitive mobilisation has led to the emergence of a growing group of highly sophisticated apartisans 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, candidates and past performances, without relying on partisan cues. According to Dalton, these cognitively mobilized apartisans tend to take their vote decision shortly before Election Day, because they wait until the last minute 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 optimistic cognitive mobilisation hypothesis, several studies conducted in Canada and in the US have shown that 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 and Choe, 1980; Chaffee and Rimal, 1996; McGregor, 2012; Whitney and Goldman, 1985). Similarly, in his analysis of late deciding in Switzerland, 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 mobilisation hypothesis has received some empirical support in the above mentioned studies, its validity has been frequently called into question. Indeed, numerous 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 (Cattelani and Alberici, 2012; Cautrès and Jadot, 2007, 2009; Fournier et al., 2004; Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Henderson and Hillygus, 2016; Hopmann, 2012; Kenski, 2007; Kogan and Gottfried, 2012; Lavine, 2001; Lavine and Steenbergen, 2005; McAllister, 2002; Nir and Druckman, 2008; Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller, 2012). For instance, Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous (1994: 64) found 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 and Hadjiharalambous (1994: 64).

These findings are consonant with the pessimistic floating voter theory of the Columbia school (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968), which therefore still dominates the theoretical debate.

In fact, differences between the interpretation of the supporters of the pessimistic model and the conclusions drawn by the supporters of the optimistic model can be explained by the fact that the latter focus mainly on aggregate-level trends, while the former examine individual-level mechanisms. When analysing aggregate level trends, Dalton and the other proponents of the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis are undoubtedly right to state that the rise in political sophistication, the decline of partisanship and the increase in the share of late deciders have occurred simultaneously. Hence, it is tempting to assume that there is a causal relationship between these processes, and that political sophistication is negatively associated with party identification, and thus positively associated with late decision-making. However, most individual-level analyses show the contrary. Investigating the individual-level relationship between political sophistication and partisanship, some recent studies convincingly demonstrate that high levels of education and high levels of political interest increase the probability of identifying with a party (Albright, 2009; Marthaler, 2008). Partisanship, in turn, is almost invariably associated with early voting decisions. In most cases, therefore, being highly educated and being greatly interested in politics significantly reduce the likelihood of deciding late.

Political Dissatisfaction

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 decision timing and their results have not led to straightforward conclusions. In their analysis of late deciding in the 2012 French presidential elections, Cautrès and Jadot (2007) noticed that voters who were dissatisfied with the way democracy worked were somewhat more likely than other voters to delay their electoral decision. Besides, in his work on the 2006 and 2008 Canadian federal elections, McGregor (2012) investigated the time of voting decision patterns of protest voters to determine whether they made up their mind later than did sincere voters. He 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 decision in US presidential elections. Similarly, in his comparative study of late deciders in Australia, the UK, and the US, McAllister (2002) observed that the standard indicators of political satisfaction and trust had no significant impact on decision timing. Given that previous research on this topic is rather scant and inconclusive, there is a lot of uncertainty about whether political disaffection can contribute to the explanation of late deciding.

Strategic Considerations

Tactical considerations are also argued to lead to late decision-making. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that citizens' evaluations of the relative competitive positions of the various parties (i.e. how much of a chance each party has of winning) may have an effect on the time at which they make up their mind. Kirkpatrick (1972) has shown that some American voters postpone their electoral decision for the presidential elections until the last weeks of the campaign, when they have a strong preference for one of the two main candidates, but expect the other to win.

In their study of the Dutch case, Irwin and Van Holsteyn (2008) have attempted to demonstrate that some late deciders delay their voting choice because they are waiting to gather information on how other voters intend to vote. These voters are not seeking new or additional substantive information concerning parties, candidates and policy proposals. Instead, they are waiting for strategic information on the expected election outcomes, the expected size of the parliamentary groups of parties and the likelihood of the emergence of various possible coalitions (Irwin and Van Holsteyn, 2008). Some voters make their voting choice not only on the basis of their own political preferences, but also on the basis of their competitive expectations. Since a large number of opinion polls are conducted during the campaign, strategic information on the relative competitive positions of parties is frequently updated in the weeks preceding the elections (McGregor, 2012). Consequently, voters who factor these strategic considerations into their vote decision will tend to make up their mind late in the campaign. In contrast, those individuals who do not base their electoral decision on their competitive expectations will be much less susceptible to opinion polls results or to any other source of strategic information and, as a result, they will be less inclined to postpone their voting choice. Consistent with these expectations, recent studies conducted in Germany and Canada have shown that strategic voters are more likely than sincere voters to delay their vote decision until the campaign is under way (Blumenstiel and Plischke, 2015; McGregor, 2012).

Contextual Factors

As shown in this review article, time of voting decision is typically regarded as a stable attribute of the voter, which reflects individual-level characteristics such as sociodemographics, partisanship or political sophistication. Several panel surveys covering two consecutive elections, however, reveal that a large proportion of those voters who decide early in one election postpone their voting choice until the last minute in the subsequent election, and *vice versa* (Cautrès and Jadot, 2009; Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous, 1994; O'Keefe et al., 1976). This observation leads some authors to argue that timing of the

voting choice should not be considered as a stable individual trait determined by one's position in the social structure or one's political attitudes (Chaffee and Rimal, 1996; Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Henderson and Hillygus, 2016). According to them, time of decision does not only depend on voters' individual attributes, but it may also be influenced by the political context and by the characteristics of the election such as the type of office at stake, the number of candidates/parties, or the competitiveness of the contest. Following this line of reasoning, the unit of analysis for decision timing should not be the voter, but the decision *per se* (Chaffee and Rimal, 1996: 276).

Although the effect of contextual factors on decision timing has so far never been thoroughly investigated, some studies have offered suggestive indications that the specific circumstances of an election may affect the time at which voters arrive at their final choice. First, the type of election is thought to have an effect on the formation of vote preferences, with the share of late deciders being somewhat smaller in 'first-order' elections (i.e. national parliamentary elections) than in 'second-order' elections (i.e. local, regional, and European elections). In their study of the Dutch electorate Eisinga et al. (1998) observed that vote intentions crystallised earlier in 'first-order' elections than was the case in 'second-order' elections.

Second, timing of the voting choice sometimes appears to be sensitive to some aspects of the political supply. Existing work on presidential elections in France and the US show that early deciders are particularly numerous in contests with an incumbent President, a candidate with whom voters are already familiar, and about whom they can already have a clear-cut opinion long in advance of the election (Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2015; Cautrès and Jadot, 2007; Dupoirier and Frogner, 2009). By contrast, the proportion of late deciders turns out to be very large in US presidential races with a strong third party's candidate, because the presence of this candidate induces many politically sophisticated voters, who would otherwise make up their mind several months before the election, to delay their decision until the end of the campaign, in order to gather information on the third man and his stances (Chaffee and Rimal, 1996; Whitney and Goldman, 1985). More generally, the level of party system fragmentation can be expected to affect time of decision. Plischke (2014) has shown that the increase in the proportion of late deciders observed in German Bundestag elections between 1969 and 2009 can be partially attributed to the rise in the effective number of parties. The larger the number of viable political alternatives offered to the electorate, the longer the voter will take to reach his/her decision.

Lastly, the perceived competitiveness of the election can also be viewed as a potential determinant of decision timing. Examining time of decision in US presidential elections from 1948 to 2008, Box-Steffensmeier et al. (2015) pointed at the existence of a significant and positive correlation between closeness of the election and the proportion of late deciders. In landslide elections, a vast majority of the voters appear to decide before the start of the campaign, while in more competitive elections, many voters postpone their choice until the last minute. Furthermore, election competitiveness may interact with individual-level determinants of decision timing. For example, in their study of the 2008 US presidential election, Henderson and Hillygus (2016) found that the effect of political interest on decision timing was moderated by the degree of campaign competitiveness. Less politically interested voters residing in 'battleground states' tended to make their voting choice earlier than their counterparts living in 'safe states', whereas highly interested voters living in 'battleground states' decided later than their counterparts residing in 'safe states' (Henderson and Hillygus, 2016).

To sum up, the specific circumstances of the election have repeatedly been argued to play a role in explaining the phenomenon of late deciding. Yet, the empirical evidence demonstrating the influence of situational factors on decision timing remains rather scant, and no solid theory of contextual effects has been proposed so far.

Conclusion

This article sought to offer a comprehensive review of the literature on the determinants of time of vote decision. I showed that the numerous studies, which have been conducted over the last decades, have brought many insights into why some voters make up their mind even before the campaign begins, while others decide during the campaign period. With regard to sociodemographic characteristics, it appears that women and young citizens are more likely to be late deciders than are men and the elderly. Unsurprisingly, party identification has often been found to hasten the crystallisation of vote intentions, with strong partisans arriving at their final choice long in advance of the election. I also pointed out that despite the large number of studies dedicated to the relationship between political sophistication and decision timing, it remains unclear whether high levels of political interest and political knowledge delay or precipitate voting choices. By contrast, previous findings unambiguously support the proposition that attitudinal ambivalence towards parties/candidates leads voters to postpone their electoral decision. Similarly, external ambivalence – stemming from political disagreement within one's social network – can cause a delay in time of decision, but this effect is moderated by voters' level of internal ambivalence. Moreover, political disaffection is sometimes claimed to hinder the formation of vote decisions, although it must be noted that the empirical evidence demonstrating the delaying effect of political dissatisfaction is rather weak. Finally, compared to sincere voters, strategic voters tend to take longer to make their final determination, because they wait until the last weeks of the campaign to gather tactical information on how other voters plan to behave and on how much of a chance each party has of winning.

To summarise the debate on the explanations of decision timing, it can be argued that there are two main competing views on late deciders. On the one hand, some researchers propose a pessimistic model of an apathetic and indifferent late decider who displays a low level of political sophistication and who is dissatisfied with the political system (e.g. Cautrès and Jadot, 2007; Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller, 2012). On the other hand, several scholars offer an optimistic model of a critical and rational late decider who exhibits a high level of political sophistication, who is ambivalent towards the various political alternatives and who factors strategic considerations into his/her vote decision (e.g. Dalton et al., 2000; Lachat, 2007; McGregor, 2012). As shown in this review article, existing work lends more support to the pessimistic model than is the case for the optimistic one, thereby suggesting that contemporary late deciding voters display many similarities with their apathetic and unsophisticated counterparts of the 1940s. Nevertheless, further research is needed to investigate whether the effects of individual-level determinants of decision timing may change over time, and especially whether the negative relationship between political sophistication and late deciding is likely to disappear or even to reverse in coming decades. Most fundamentally, the present article has pointed out that besides individual-level factors, the political context and the various characteristics of the election have also been argued to influence timing of the voting choice. However, there has been very few empirical work done on

the impact of situational factors, and as a result, little is known about which specific circumstances of an election may accelerate or slow down the voting decision process. Future research should therefore attempt to shed light on the role of contextual factors, by undertaking longitudinal and comparative cross-national studies of late deciding.

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