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Eisinga, Rob

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15 The electoral cycle of undecided voters in the Netherlands

Effect of mass media attention on elections?

Rob Eisinga*

We study the proportion of undecided Dutch voters using a time series ($t = 921$) of weekly survey data on vote intentions in the Netherlands for the period 1978-1995. The figures suggest that the group of undecided voters follows a cyclical pattern over the election calendar. The size of this group invariably decreases sharply in weeks leading up to an election and gradually increases afterwards. We examine this electoral cycle using an artificial neural network model with the purpose of estimating when the undecided voters start making up their minds. We find that they begin to decide which party to vote on about nine weeks before a first order national parliamentary election and one (Provincial Council) to four weeks (European Parliament and City-councils) before a second order election. Whereas first order national parliamentary elections drive up the proportion of deciders considerably—almost 20 percent—second order elections expand this group by a few percentage points only. The results suggest that the electoral cycle represents the time-related effect of time-related media attention to elections.

15.1 Introduction

Many people do not have to wait until election-day to know which political party they tend to favour. Next to these early-deciders, however, there often are many undecided voters, even late in some election campaigns, and last-minute deciders. Dutch opinion polls suggest that in the Netherlands the size of this group of undecided voters is quite substantial. During periods with no elections ahead up to 30 percent of the eligible adult electorate fails to mention a party when asked which party they would vote on if elections were held that day. This percentage declines to approximately 15 percent in weeks leading up to an election. Hence election outcomes are, at least in part, the result of relatively sudden shifts in the feelings of undecided voters about candidates and political parties in the final few weeks or days or even hours of an election campaign. This chapter uses a time series of survey based vote intentions in the Netherlands and attempts to pinpoint the timing of vote decisions. That is, it considers the issue of how long before an election undecided voters make up their minds which party to vote on.

* Rob Eisinga, Social Science Research Methods, Radboud University Nijmegen, +31-24-3615722, r.eisinga@maw.ru.nl.

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As we will see, the recurring changes in the percentage of undecided voters appear in a cyclical fashion mainly driven by national parliamentary elections. A variety of factors can be proposed to explain the process that drives the undecided voters through the electoral cycle. One is the suggestive co-variation between the phases of the cycle and mass media coverage of elections and political party campaigning. During election campaigns political parties attempt to mobilise voters by modern campaign technologies and extensive use of mass media. Campaign resources are poured into political advertising and media image making, and political candidates and their campaign staff temporarily shape the media agenda. This would be particularly true for Dutch national parliamentary elections, where extensive media coverage of elections is provided and where mass media organisations and broadcasting companies frequently report political polls. Hence it seems plausible to assume that exposure to media attention of the upcoming election, especially television coverage, stimulates the intention to go and vote although, as Morgan and Shanahan (1992) and Weaver (1996) have argued, heavy media emphasis on campaigns and campaign strategy can also make some voters more cynical and less likely to vote. Television, Morgan and Shanahan (1992) noted, may narcotise and de-politicise the viewing audience and thereby discourage electoral participation. Also, mass media exposure to political campaigns is often hypothesised as influencing beliefs about the closeness of the election race and some political observers tend to believe that more competitive election races increase vote intention and voter turnout (e.g., Zimmer 1981). The premise is that in a close race with no frontrunner the election outcome is less certain. This uncertainty generates more interest among the public over the outcome, which in turn becomes a stimulus leading more of the public to participate by voting than would be the case when the election is expected to result in a landslide victory or perceived to be one-sided. A close election also provides rational reasons for people to vote. In a close race more citizens may vote because they believe that each individual vote counts more and that their participation has a greater impact on the outcome. Another explanation of why closeness is related to turnout is that parties respond to closeness with greater effort at mobilisation and get-out-the-vote campaigns. A somewhat related explanation is that mass media coverage of political campaigns may intensify feelings of voters about politics, which drives up their vote intention. In weeks leading up to an election political competition and intraparty conflict tend to increase. When political controversies are deeply felt by large numbers of people vote intentions should rise above preceding levels. Hence pre-election periods are times in which party differences, as perceived by the electorate, appear to be the sharpest and thus the best guide to make a decision.

There are therefore compelling reasons for giving the association between mass media coverage of political campaigning and the electoral cycle a causal interpretation. The mobilisation efforts of parties during election campaigns do not necessarily result in long-term allegiances however. Many people vote, if at all, for the candidate, not the party, and having done so abdicate partisan preferences. Moreover, the recurring increases in the number of undecided voters during post-election periods may be a response to the perceived gap between campaign promises and incumbent government performance. Unrealistically high initial expectations about what parties or the government will accomplish give way to disappointment at some time after the election. Also, while the intention to vote for the parties who have won the election typically increases shortly after the election itself, presenting a 'post-electoral euphoria' that may even

drive their popularity above the value expressed at the election result, voters for losing parties may temporarily be depressed and demobilised. This may result in a loss of interest in politics, resignation and, in subsequent elections, non-voting. Obviously, this two-way switching of mobilisation of winners and withdrawal by losers may cancel at the aggregate level of vote intention.

Although these explanations for the cyclical dynamics of vote intention pertain to all general elections, they are particularly relevant to what Reif and Schmitt (1980) call first order elections, i.e., those which allocate the most powerful and important political offices in a country. In the Netherlands, as in all parliamentary systems, these are the elections for the National Parliament. They constitute the most competitive contest because there is much at stake. Elections which are held in between the national parliamentary elections are the less-competitive second order elections. In the Netherlands these are the elections for the European Parliament, Provincial States and City-councils. In these less-at-stake elections abstaining is generally perceived to have less serious consequences.

This chapter examines the influence of first and second order elections on the percentage of undecided voters. Below, we discuss the data and specify our research questions. Next, we present our empirical results for the weekly series of undecided voters. We finally provide additional interpretations of our findings in terms of media exposure.

15.2 Data and research questions

The data we use are taken from the NIPO Inc.'s Omnibus survey, a weekly survey based on personal interviews of a random cross-section sample of the Dutch population of age 18 and over. The number of respondents to each survey equals just over 1,000 on average. A detailed description of the NIPO surveys is given in Eisinga (2005). The data we use are the responses to the question asked in the same form in every survey, 'Which party would you vote for if elections were held today?' taken over weekly intervals from the first week of 1978 to the last week of 1995, giving $t = 936$ in total, with only 15 observations missing. The measure we use is the number of 'undecided voters', that is, the percentage not supporting any particular party as a proportion of the total number of responses to the vote intention question. The series is graphed in Figure 15.1. Circles, cubes, triangles, and diamonds indicate elections for National and European Parliament, Provincial States, and City-councils, respectively.

As indicated, the most striking feature of this time series is its cyclical pattern. This cycle is closely connected to the dates of the first order national parliamentary elections: few weeks after each such election, the percentage of undecided voters starts displaying an upward movement, which gradually levels off and changes into a downward movement in weeks leading up to the next election. We define these periods of upward and downward movement as post-election and pre-election regimes, respectively, and one post-election and one pre-election regime together constitute an election cycle. This election cycle is seen to be asymmetric as the post-election regime in general lasts longer than the pre-election regime, notable exceptions being the cycles following the regularly scheduled election held in May 1981 and the early election of September 1982 caused by the untimely fall of the coalition government. Second order elections (i.e., those for European Parliament, Provincial States, and City-councils) seem to hamper the general cyclical pattern as they cause a temporary decline, which is restored fairly

quickly after the particular election has been held (and is not followed immediately by another election). If we disregard the cyclical pattern, there seems to be a slight upward trend in the percentage of undecided voters at least until 1994. This trend towards less party voting parallels the well-known decline in electoral turnout rates in many Western industrial democracies in the past few decades. It is fairly well accepted, although not always rigorously documented, that this decline is generated in part by long-term factors such as a decline in the saliency of politics for many citizens and a decline in the attachment of voters to parties. These changes may, at least in part, be the result of the turnover of electoral generations. Moreover, as can be seen in Figure 15.1, the election calendar has frequently called Dutch voters to the polls. The increased number of elections may have gradually devalued the importance of any single election and may have

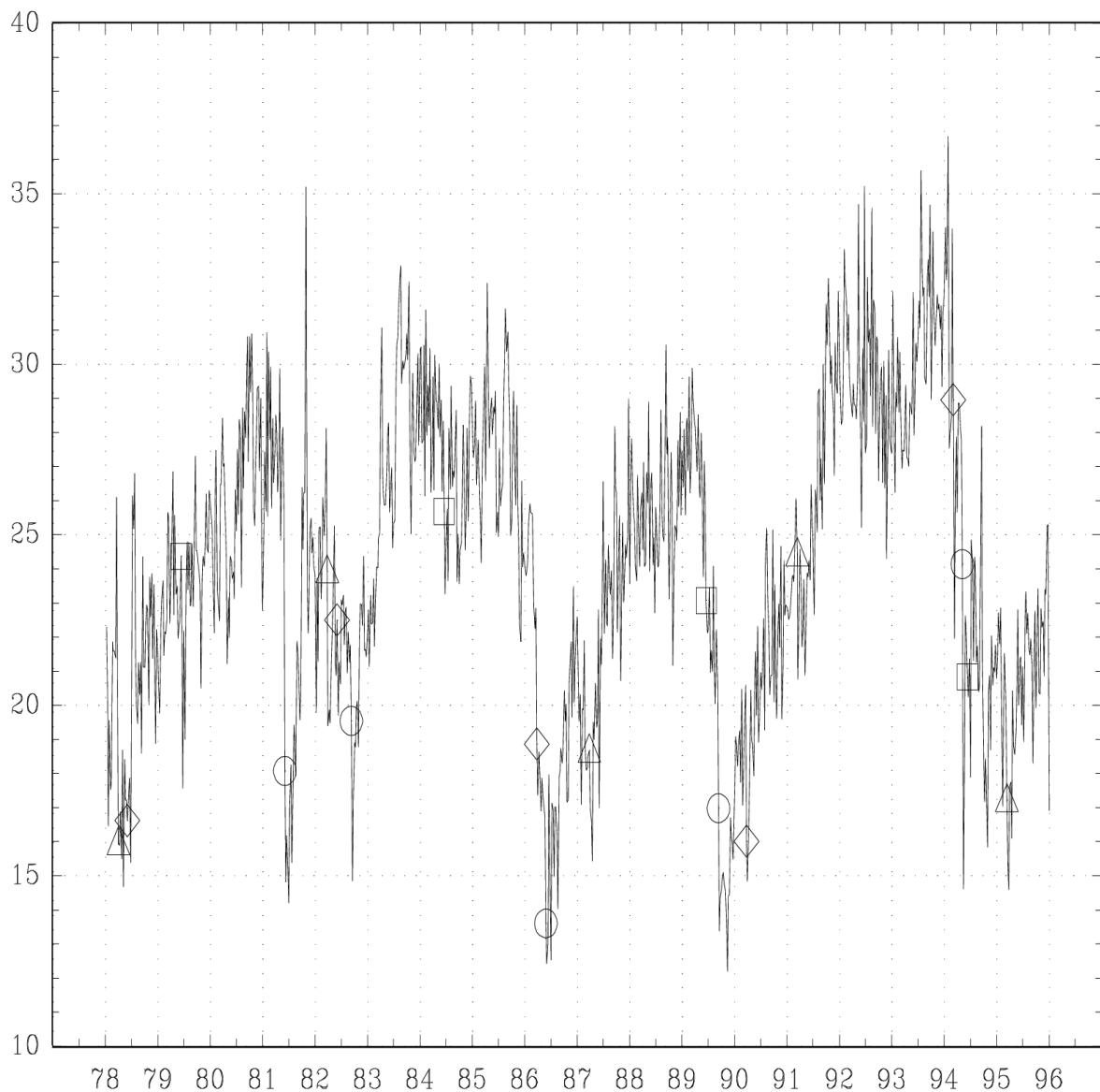


Figure 15.1 Undecided voters in the Netherlands, 1978 – 1995

Percentage of respondents who failed to mention a party when asked: ‘Which party would you vote for if elections were held today?’ Circles, cubes, triangles, and diamonds indicate elections for National and European Parliaments, Provincial States, and City-councils, respectively.

induced voter fatigue. From August 1992 until approximately June 1993 there is a slight decrease which cannot be ascribed to an actual election. This anomaly might be attributed to the fact that during this period early elections were foreseen. At the time, the Dutch coalition cabinet faced great internal disagreement over several policy reviews and many people anticipated the demise of the coalition government and thus an early election. The major issue discussed in newspapers and on television was not whether there would be an early election, but when. The multiparty coalition ultimately experienced no early termination however. It averted the political crisis and remained in office for the complete term until the next regular scheduled election of May 1994.

In this chapter, we will investigate the influence of first and second order elections on the percentage of undecided voters. More specifically, we address the following questions: (1) How long before an election does the downward movement in the percentage of undecided voters begin? And (2) what is the size of the downward movement, i.e., how large is the decline in percentage points?

As explanatory variables in our models we use lagged values of the percentage of undecided voters, denoted y_t , as well as the number of weeks until and after the various elections are held in the Netherlands. We denote the latter as $t_{u,j}$ and $t_{a,j}$, respectively. The subscript j is used to identify the type of election, $j = NP, EP, PS$ or CC , corresponding to elections for National and European Parliaments, Provincial States, and City-councils, respectively. The variables $t_{u,j}$ and $t_{a,j}$ have been rescaled by dividing them by the maximum number of weeks between two elections of the same type (which equals 260, for elections for European Parliament are held once in every five years) and subtracting the result from 1. This transformation guarantees that the ‘until’ and ‘after’ variables are equal to one at the time of elections of the corresponding type, which facilitates interpretation of the estimation results.

15.3 Model and analysis

The time series of undecided voters was analysed using a single layer feed-forward neural network model. The basic model is given by

$$y_t = \phi_0 + \sum_{i=1}^p \phi_i y_{t-i} + \sum_{j=NP}^{CC} \beta_{u,j} F(\delta_{u,j}(t_{u,j} - \tau_{u,j})) + \beta_{a,NP} F(\delta_{a,NP}(t_{a,NP} - \tau_{a,NP})) + \varepsilon_t, \quad (15.1)$$

where y_t , $t = 1, \dots, T$, is the dependent variable. The so-called activation functions $F(\cdot)$ in the so-called hidden units, $\beta_{(\cdot)}F(\cdot)$, are taken to be logistic functions, i.e., $F(w) = 1 / (1 + \exp(-w))$ and ε_t is assumed to be a white noise process. The model has four hidden units to model the time ‘until’ elections, denoted as $\delta_{u,j}(t_{u,j} - \tau_{u,j})$, where $j = NP, EP, PS, CC$, and one hidden unit to allow the time after elections for National Parliament, $t_{a,NP}$, to enter the model.

To accommodate temporal dependence in our time series, the model includes $p = 4$ lagged values of the dependent variable. A dummy variable D_t , which equals 1 for week

43 of 1981 and zero otherwise is also included. The model parameters are estimated as follows,

$$\begin{aligned}
 y_t = & 4.366 + 8.903 D_t + 0.478 y_{t-1} + 0.198 y_{t-2} + 0.121 y_{t-3} + 0.118 y_{t-4} - \\
 & (1.266) (1.684) \quad (0.043) \quad (0.031) \quad (0.030) \quad (0.032) \\
 & 2.276 F_{u,NP} - 1.297 F_{u,EP} - 3.531 F_{u,PS} - 1.693 F_{u,CC} - 2.590 F_{a,NP} + \varepsilon_t \\
 & (0.383) \quad (0.421) \quad (1.184) \quad (0.451) \quad (10.85), \quad (15.2)
 \end{aligned}$$

where standard errors are given in parenthesis below the parameter estimates, and the shorthand notation $F_{u,j}$, $j = NP, EP, PS, CC$, is used to denote the activation functions.

The impact of elections can be decomposed into ‘timing’ and ‘magnitude’. The estimates of the constants $\tau_{u,j}$ indicate the timing aspect of the influence of the different types of elections. The estimates (standard errors in parentheses) are obtained as $\tau_{u,NP} = 0.963$ (0.029), $\tau_{u,EP} = 0.980$ (0.020), $\tau_{u,PS} = 0.993$ (0.002), and $\tau_{u,CC} = 0.989$ (0.055). Translated back into number of weeks prior to election, these estimates become 9, 4, 1, and 2 weeks. Hence, 9 weeks before elections for National Parliament are held the number of undecided voters starts decreasing, and 1 (Provincial States), 2 (City-councils), and 4 weeks (European Parliament) before a second order election. The impact in terms of magnitude of decrease can be estimated by computing the difference in expected value of y_t and the expected value of y_t if the activation function would not become active. Using the model estimates, the impact of elections for National and European Parliaments, Provincial States, and City-councils in the week the elections are being held, is estimated to be 19, 8, 3, 5 percentage points in (rounded) absolute value.

15.4 Conclusions and discussion

The results reported here demonstrate that first and second order Dutch elections have an unequal impact on the timing of vote decisions of undecided voters and on the change of the size of this group in the final few weeks before election. The estimates show that undecided Dutch voters begin to make up their minds nine weeks before a first order national parliamentary election and one (Provincial States) to four weeks (European Parliament and City-councils) before a second order election. While first order national parliamentary elections decrease the proportion of undecided voters considerably, almost 20 percent, second order elections decrease this group by only a few percentage points.

At the outset of this chapter we discussed several possible explanations for this cyclical pattern in vote intention. They all lead to the conjecture that the electoral cycle reflects the impact of media coverage of elections and political party campaigns. There seems to be little room for additional explanation. Why else should vote intention behave in this fashion and with such regularity? Although the analysis presented here does not directly speak to this question, the results suggest that the electoral cycle represents the time-related effect of time-related media attention.

Media exposure to election campaigns has for a long time been thought to have limited effects on voters because partisan pre-commitment of early deciders would be sufficient to preclude media campaign effects and because the remainder of the voters, who

are presumed to lack interest in political news, would lack exposure to the campaign. Indeed, Chaffee and Choe (1980) and Whitney and Goldman (1985) show that pre-committed voters or already-decided partisans are also those least likely to be swayed by media campaign messages. These people have already decided on a candidate or party before the campaign gets underway and they attend media reports only to reinforce existing preferences. However, the authors also find that in the absence of a pre-campaign decision, those exposed to the heavy flow of information during the campaign decide primarily on the basis of this information (see also Bowen 1994, and Finkel and Schrott 1995). It is the undecided, those who make their decision during the conduct of the campaign, who are most affected by the campaign message. Obviously, if parties are to win they must both mobilise their existing support and reach out to those who have not yet decided. As the undecided voters are often the key to a winning election they are a major target for electoral media campaigns.

Finally, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1992) show that active campaigns are more effective at getting the votes out than moribund campaigns. This explains why in first order national parliamentary elections undecided voters make up their minds earlier than in second order elections and why there are many first-order-election-only voters. The strategic efforts of political parties and their leaders and the features of a particular campaign environment affect the timing of participation and thus the aggregate rise and fall of participation within and across electoral cycles. In more-at-stake first order elections the amount and quality of campaigning and partisan efforts, television time given to parties, and mass media coverage are typically greater than in less-at-stake second order elections. The latter, particularly the European elections, generally have little appeal for party activists. One could therefore also argue that campaign efforts are more important at second order elections than at first order elections. In the latter there is generally much more attention given by the media as well as by the public, because the entire political life of the country is focused on the event.

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