

## Informed Switchers? How the Impact of Election News Exposure on Vote Change Depends on Political Information Efficacy

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The increase in electoral volatility in European democracies has raised the question of whether volatile voters are just randomly switching or actually making more informed vote choices. This study addresses this question by examining the underlying mechanisms through which election news exposure influences two types of voting behavior: crystallization and conversion. Specifically, it examines how political information efficacy and campaign cynicism mediate the impact of election news exposure on both types of voting behavior. We used a Dutch panel survey ( $N = 1,349$ ) collected during the 2014 European Parliament elections. A structural equation model analysis revealed that election news exposure positively affects voting behavior, both directly and indirectly via information efficacy. Both effects were especially pronounced among voters who were undecided at the onset of the campaign.

*Keywords: media effects, voting behavior, election campaign, panel data*

Scholars have observed an increase in electoral volatility in European democracies over past decades (Mair, 2008). Not only do voters switch from election to election, but they also change their party preference over the course of an election campaign (Dassonneville, 2011; Van der Meer, Van Elsas, Lubbe, & Van der Brug, 2013). Previously, the stability of voter preferences could be predicted by long-term factors, such as sociodemographic characteristics (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954). These days, short-term forces, such as exposure to the campaign in the media, have become more important for explaining voting behavior (Dalton, 2000).

The current study examines election news exposure as a short-term factor influencing vote change. Therefore, we focused only on changes in voting behavior during one election campaign. Moreover, we distinguish between two types of voting behavior, based on a typology proposed in one of the earliest studies of campaign effects on voter behavior (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). The first type of voting behavior is *conversion*, which refers to switching from one party to another in response to

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election news exposure. The second is *crystallization*, which is when a voter's latent support for a party changes into an actual vote in response to campaign information. Recent studies on voting behavior have not distinguished between the different types of campaign effects that Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) initially laid out (for an exception, see Geers, Bos, & De Vreese, 2014).

However, we argue that election news exposure has a different impact on crystallization than on conversion. Especially voters who are undecided at the start of the campaign might be influenced by election news exposure. They may use media as a source of new information to become more informed and to eventually crystallize their vote choice (e.g., Arceneaux, 2005). We thus expected the effect of election news exposure to be stronger on crystallization than on conversion. Voters who already have a party preference are probably less likely to convert to another party in response to election news exposure.

In this study, we aimed to clarify whether volatile voters are either well-informed or uninformed, irrational switchers. This question was addressed in two steps: First, we examined to what extent citizens change their vote because of exposure to campaign information. Second, we tested the psychological mechanisms underlying the impact of election news exposure on crystallization and conversion. In this way, we attempted to unravel whether voters who switch in response to election news exposure are indeed more informed. One of the underlying explanations we studied is political information efficacy, that is, perceived political knowledge (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). If voters feel better informed by being exposed to the campaign, and this increase in political information efficacy consequently induces vote switching, we might conclude that these voters are indeed informed switchers.

If the effect of election news exposure on vote change is not dependent on information efficacy, this might suggest that volatile voters are in fact uninformed and perhaps switch as a result of media-induced cynicism. Several studies have shown that media can induce cynicism (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Jackson, 2011). Other studies have shown that cynicism is an important predictor of vote switching (Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Dassonneville, 2011), as voters with lower levels of trust are more likely to switch parties to voice their frustration (Zelle, 1995). In this study, we combined the two strands of research and examined to what extent the effect of election news exposure on crystallization and conversion is mediated by cynicism.

During election campaigns, all sorts of campaign-related news coverage appear in the media. Therefore, we can assume that during a campaign voters are exposed to a mix of informative content, as well as to strategic news and less informative content in general. We argue that exposure effects on voters differ depending on the type of content voters are exposed to. Although we did not include any specific news content in the analysis, but rather tapped voters' election news exposure in general, we expected that exposure to informational (issue-driven) content (Nadeau, Neviite, Gidengil, & Blais, 2008) would drive information efficacy and increased information efficacy would spark informed vote switching. In contrast, we expected that exposure to strategic content (Patterson, 1993) would lead to cynicism, which in turn would lead to abstention (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) or frustrated vote switching (Zelle, 1995).

The current study used Dutch panel survey data ( $N = 1,349$ ), collected during the 2014 European Parliament elections, to investigate the mediating role of political information efficacy and cynicism as mediators in the effect of election news exposure on two types of voting behavior: crystallization and conversion. To our knowledge, this is the first study examining what role political information efficacy plays in explaining vote change. As such, we extend the research on political information efficacy (e.g., Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007), which has mainly focused on its impact on political participation, as well as contribute to the existing literature on individual-level predictors of vote change (e.g., Dassonneville, 2011).

### **Two Types of Voting Behavior: Conversion and Crystallization**

In this study, we distinguished between conversion and crystallization and studied effects of election news exposure on each of these voting behaviors. The idea of crystallization was introduced by Lazarsfeld et al. (1948), who stated that the election campaign activates voters' political preferences. Rather than changing voters' attitudes and party preferences, campaign information is more likely to bring voters' preferences in line with their ideological predispositions (Finkel, 1993). In a multiparty system such as the Netherlands, with small ideological differences between parties, multiple parties might match voters' activated ideological predispositions. Therefore, it is not immediately clear which party is to be preferred at the end of this crystallization process. Finally, the end result is that votes crystallize: "The latent has become manifest; the uncertainty disappears, the voter is ready to mark his ballot" (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p. 76).

In early research studying election campaigns, the general accepted view was that campaigns have only minimal effects (Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Campaign effects were defined very narrowly, and only when campaign messages persuaded voters to change their vote intention from one party to another was it regarded as an effect. Yet, results have shown (e.g., Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) that the power of the mass media to alter political attitudes and preferences was rather limited. More recent research has, however, broadened the definition of campaign effects beyond the focus on persuasive effects, arguing that campaigns do matter (Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Fournier, Nadeau, Blais, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 2004). Besides persuading voters to change their party preference, campaigns may have an informational role, helping undecided voters make up their minds and crystallize their vote choices (Arceneaux, 2005).

### **Effects of Election News Exposure**

Although theoretical perspectives on the link between media and voting behavior differ, there are numerous reasons to assume that exposure to the campaign in the media induces vote change. First, media generally focus primarily on short-term events and concerns and not necessarily on long-term developments, by which media undermine the stability of the political agenda and, consequently, cause instability in the electorate (Van der Meer et al., 2013). Second, undecided voters who have to make a vote decision as election day draws near have to rely on media coverage in their search for information (Walgrave, Lefevre, & Hooghe, 2010). Third, unlike voters in a two-party systems, voters in multiparty

systems need to learn much more to get their vote in line with their interests; thus, they are more reliant on campaign information (Jensen, Aalberg, & Aarts, 2012).

Studies examining the relationship between media exposure and vote switching are few, and results are scattered and inconclusive (e.g., Baker, Ames, & Renno, 2006; Dassonneville, 2011; Van der Meer et al., 2013). For instance, in a Dutch election study, scholars found that readers of certain newspapers are more likely to change vote preferences between elections (Van der Meer et al., 2013). In contrast, Dassonneville (2011) found no effects of media exposure on vote switching in the 2009 Belgium elections. In other studies, which focused on explaining campaign effects, positive effects of media use were found (e.g., Baker et al., 2006). So, even though these studies have contributed to our knowledge on the impact of election news exposure on vote change, prior results regarding this impact are still somewhat ambiguous. Yet, there seems to be a positive relationship between being exposed to more campaign information in the media and voting behavior. Therefore, we hypothesized the following (see Figure 1):

*H1: Exposure to election news facilitates vote change by both (a) crystallization and (b) conversion.*

Building on the work of Converse (1962) and Zaller (1992), we investigated whether the impact of election news exposure is more pronounced among voters who crystallize their vote during the election campaign or among voters who convert from one party to another. Converse proposed that those most influenced by the media are either highly stable or highly volatile voters. Highly stable voters, who decide what to vote well before the final weeks of an election campaign, are seen to pay close attention to the media's coverage of the campaign because of their interest in politics. For them, the election campaign has a reinforcing role. In contrast, highly volatile voters use the media as a source of new information to help them make their choice. For them, the campaign has a persuading or at least guiding role.

According to Zaller (1992), voters with strong existing political attitudes and strong party identification are often already well informed at the start of the election campaign. Although these voters are more apt and motivated to absorb information during the campaign than less-informed voters, they are not very likely to accept the new information and to consequently change their existing beliefs and preferences. Thus, voters with existing political preferences are less influenced by election news exposure and remain loyal to the same party than convert to another party. In contrast, less-informed voters with weak or no prior political preferences are more likely to accept new information and become more informed during the campaign. Therefore, we expected that especially voters who are undecided at the start of the campaign would be influenced by election news exposure; that is, undecided voters who are exposed to the campaign eventually crystallize their vote choice. Instead of deciding to abstain from voting, they decide to vote for a specific party on election day:

*H1c: The effect of election news exposure is stronger on crystallization than on conversion.*

### **Election News Exposure and Political Information Efficacy**

To gain a better understanding of whether voters who change party preference in response to election news exposure are well-informed switchers, we investigated the extent to which election news exposure affects the different types of voting behavior indirectly via political information efficacy. We argue that if paying attention to the campaign in the media leads to a higher level of information efficacy and an individual consequently changes his or her vote an informed vote switch has been made.

The concept of political information efficacy was put forward by Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco (2007) and is conceptually linked to general political efficacy, which can be distinguished in two dimensions: external efficacy and internal political efficacy. The concept of political information efficacy is closely related to internal efficacy and refers to "the voter's confidence in his or her own political knowledge and its sufficiency to engage in the political process" (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007, p. 1096).

In line with this argument, we argue that being exposed to campaign information is a crucial antecedent of political information efficacy. Studies have shown that exposure to political television debates (McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007) and television ads (Kaid, Postelnicu, et al., 2007) can increase political information efficacy. Other studies have shown that different types of news exposure are associated with the related concept of internal efficacy (Jung, Kim, & de Zúñiga, 2011; Möller, De Vreese, Esser, & Kunz, 2014). Based on these findings, we assumed that exposure to mediated information about the election campaign would lead to increased information efficacy.

As a predictor, political information efficacy is an important determinant for participation and engagement in politics (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). There is ample evidence that political efficacy is related to turnout, but the relationship between efficacy and vote choice has of yet been understudied. However, previous research has shown that an individual's perceived lack of knowledge is a key predictor for nonvoting (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000). Conversely, research has shown that voters who feel more efficacious are more likely to participate in politics (e.g., turn out on election day; Jung et al., 2011). Likewise, one could expect that voters with increased feelings of information efficacy might feel more capable of making a vote choice.

Especially for undecided voters, who feel that they need more information to decide and are uncertain of their party preference, exposure to campaign information might boost the self-assessment of their political knowledge. We know from the literature that voters with a greater sense of political information efficacy are more likely to turn out (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007; Möller et al., 2014). In a similar manner, an increase in information efficacy might indicate that undecided voters are ready to crystallize their vote choice; that is, instead of deciding to defect on election day, they feel that they have enough information to vote for a specific party. Hence, we expected that the effect of election news exposure on crystallization would be mediated by political information efficacy, such that a higher level of election news exposure would increase political information efficacy, which in turn would lead to crystallization. Alternatively, for conversion, it is less evident how information efficacy induces switching between parties. For voters with existing party preferences, higher levels of election news exposure and

information efficacy might rather reinforce than change their original voting decision. Therefore, we formulated the following hypothesis and research question (see Figure 1):

*H2: The effect of election news exposure on crystallization is mediated by political information efficacy, in that (a) election news exposure increases political information efficacy and (b) political information efficacy leads to crystallization.*

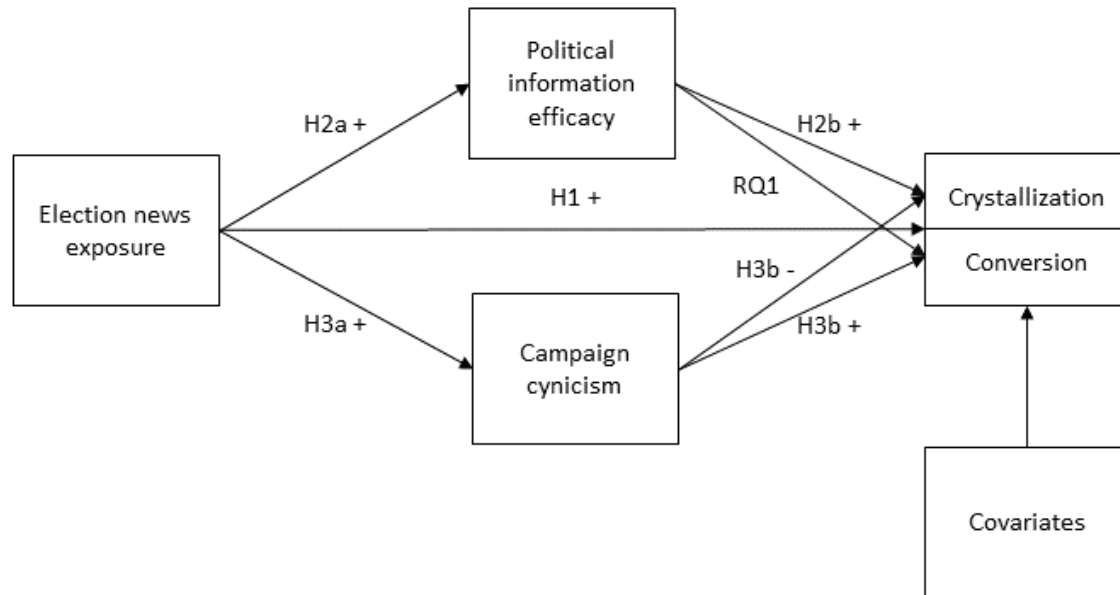
*RQ1: Is the effect of election news exposure on conversion mediated by political information efficacy?*

### **Cynicism as an Alternative Mechanism**

An alternative mechanism explaining the relationship between election news exposure and vote switching is cynicism. According to the "frustrated floating voter" hypothesis (Zelle, 1995), voters who are dissatisfied with democracy and have lower levels of trust are more likely to switch parties to voice their frustration. Various recent studies have supported this hypothesis and have shown that political cynicism is an important predictor of vote switching (Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Dassonneville, 2011). The rise in cynicism over the past decades is often blamed on the media, which have changed their coverage from more substantive news to more strategic and game news (e.g., Patterson, 1993). Several studies have shown that strategic news coverage induces political cynicism (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Jackson, 2011).

Although we did not specifically examine the effect of strategic news on cynicism and vote switching in the current study, content analyses have shown that strategic news has increased at the expense of substantive news (e.g., Patterson, 1993). Therefore, we can assume that voters who pay attention to the election campaign are exposed to at least a considerable amount of strategic news. Following the "spiral of cynicism" thesis (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) and the frustrated floating voter hypothesis (Zelle, 1995), we thus expected an indirect effect of election news exposure on crystallization and conversion through cynicism. Whereas some scholars focus on political cynicism in general, others specifically focus on cynicism induced by the campaign. This study examined both political cynicism and campaign cynicism. We expected that election news exposure via campaign cynicism would have a negative effect on crystallization, in that an increase in campaign cynicism would lead to abstention rather than crystallization. For conversion, we expected a positive effect, in that an increase in campaign cynicism would lead to a vote switch from one party to another to voice frustration. These expectations led to the following hypothesis (see Figure 1):

*H3: The effect of election news exposure on crystallization and conversion is mediated by campaign cynicism, in that (a) election news exposure increases campaign cynicism and (b) campaign cynicism decreases the chance of crystallization and increases the chance of conversion.*



**Figure 1. The theoretical model of the effect of election news exposure on crystallization and conversion.**

## Method

### Research Setting

In this study, we focused on the Netherlands, a democratic corporatist country with a multiparty system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This context is relevant for this study as the Netherlands has a high number of parties with small ideological differences between parties, making voters more likely to rely on the media and change their vote intention. Furthermore, the country has experienced some of the most volatile elections within Western Europe since the 1960s (Mair, 2008). However, this trend in increased volatility is not unique to the Netherlands, but has been observed in most Western European multiparty systems. Hence, in this study, we focused on the campaign of the 2014 European Parliament elections in the Netherlands. Although the salience of European Parliament elections in the media is typically rather low (De Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006), the majority of European citizens receive most of their information about the European Union and European Parliament elections from traditional news media, such as television news and newspapers. Moreover, European Union-related news was more prominent in newspaper and television news in the months preceding the European Parliament elections of May 2014 than it was in previous European elections (Kleinnijenhuis & Van Atteveldt, 2016). As such, these elections are a suitable setting for testing hypotheses of election news exposure and political information efficacy on vote switching.

### **Data**

To test our hypotheses, we relied on a four-wave panel survey in the Netherlands, which was part of the 2014 European Election Campaign Study (De Vreese, Azrout, & Möller, 2014).<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork was coordinated by TNS NIPO Netherlands, a research institute that complies with European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research guidelines for survey research. The sample was drawn from the TNS NIPO database. The database consists of 200,000 individuals who were recruited through multiple recruitment strategies, including telephone, face-to-face, and online recruitment. Quotas (on age, gender, and education) were enforced in sampling from the database. The survey was conducted using computer-assisted Web interviewing. Respondents were interviewed about six months prior, four months prior, and one month prior to the May 2014 elections for the European Parliament and immediately after the elections. Fieldwork dates were December 13–26, 2013, for the first wave; March 20–30, 2014, for the second wave; April 17–28, 2014, for the third wave; and May 26–June 2, 2014, for the fourth wave. A total of 2,189 respondents participated in Wave 1 (response rate = 78.1%); 1,819 respondents participated in Wave 2 (recontact rate = 83.1%); 1,537 participated in Wave 3 (recontact rate = 84.5%); and 1,379 participated in Wave 4 (recontact rate = 89.7%). The sample showed appropriate distributions in terms of gender, age, and education compared with census data.<sup>2</sup> We used the data of the last two waves only given that we were interested in the influence of election news exposure, which was tapped only in Wave 3 and Wave 4.

### **Measures**

The dependent variables were based on one variable in the panel data set measured at two points in time. In Wave 3, respondents were asked which party they would vote for if European Parliament elections were held the next day. In Wave 4, the postelection wave, respondents were asked which party they voted for in the European Parliament elections. We constructed two dependent dummy variables: crystallization and conversion. Crystallization was constructed by assigning respondents a 0 if they responded “don’t know” or “abstain” in Wave 4, and a 1 if they changed from “don’t know” or “abstain” to a party preference between Wave 3 and Wave 4. For conversion, respondents were assigned a 0 if they reported voting for the same party in both waves, and a 1 if they changed from one party to another between Wave 3 and Wave 4.<sup>3</sup> Of the 1,379 respondents, 29% stayed with the same party in both waves,

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<sup>1</sup> On the basis of previous research, one can expect effects of specific media content characteristics on electoral volatility (Adriaansen, Van Praag, & De Vreese, 2012; Geers & Bos, 2016; Takens, 2013). The 2014 European Election Campaign Study (De Vreese et al., 2014) also included a media content analysis of the election campaign coverage, including content analysis measures of issue news and poll news. Unfortunately, in the current study, we were not able to weight the media exposure measures from the survey with the content analysis measures because of a lack of variance in the content analysis measures.

<sup>2</sup> Panel attrition did not lead to a significant difference in the composition of the panel with regard to age or gender. The average level of education has slightly decreased between Wave 1 and Wave 4.

<sup>3</sup> For crystallization, respondents who were stable or changed parties from Wave 3 to Wave 4 were treated as missing. For conversion, respondents who reported “abstain” or “don’t know” in either Wave 3 or Wave 4 were treated as missing.



10% crystallized their vote choice, 14% switched their party preference, and 47% eventually did not turn out on Election Day.

The independent variable was election news exposure. Election news exposure was measured with three items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*daily*; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ). The exact wording of the items is included in online Appendix A (see [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/787lsor8ldcf5p3/AAAv15\\_akC4ky37jKPNhwXgxa?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/787lsor8ldcf5p3/AAAv15_akC4ky37jKPNhwXgxa?dl=0)).

The mediating variable political information efficacy was measured at Wave 4 with three items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ). Campaign cynicism (cynicism induced by the campaign, as opposed to political cynicism) was also measured at Wave 4 on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) with five items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .68$ ,  $M = 4.86$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ). Scores were converted so that all high scores meant high cynicism and low scores meant low cynicism.

We also included several control variables, starting with the usual sociodemographic variables, measured at Wave 1: age ( $M = 49$  years,  $SD = 17$ ), sex (49.2% male, 50.8% female), and education (measured in seven categories ranging from no education/primary education to master's degree;  $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ). In addition, we controlled for various individual predispositions measured at Wave 4. First, political interest was measured with an item that asked respondents how interested they are in politics on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all interested* and 7 = *very interested*;  $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ). Second, political cynicism was the average score of four items measured on a 7-point scale ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ). Scores were converted so that all high scores meant high cynicism and low scores meant low cynicism. Third, political efficacy was the average score of six items measured on a 7-point scale ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ). Scores were converted so that all high scores meant high political efficacy and low scores meant low political efficacy. Fourth, ideological extremity was measured by recoding ideology 1 through 5 (ideology was measured with a variable tapping left-right placement on a 10-point scale), where 1 denoted being in the middle of the political spectrum, and 5 denoted being either at the left or right extreme end.<sup>4</sup> Fifth, we controlled for the likelihood of vote switching by including a dummy variable for which respondents were assigned a 1 if they changed vote preference at least once in earlier waves. Last, we included political information efficacy at Wave 3 as a control variable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ,  $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ), which was measured with the same items as political information efficacy at Wave 4.<sup>5</sup> In this way, we controlled for the initial status of political information efficacy, enabling us to assess the influence of the change in political information efficacy at Wave 4 on vote switching (Romer & Kenski, 2006).

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<sup>4</sup> Respondents could also report "don't know" on the ideology question. These responses were treated as missing, resulting in 209 missing values on the ideological extremity variable.

<sup>5</sup> We did not control for campaign cynicism in Wave 3 because there was hardly any campaign before Wave 3. We estimated a model in which we did include campaign cynicism in Wave 3 as a control variable: We found a positive effect on campaign cynicism in Wave 4 and no direct effect on voting behavior.

### **Data Analysis**

The hypotheses regarding how election news exposure directly affects crystallization and conversion were tested using logistic regression analysis. To test the indirect effects, we used structural equation modeling in Stata 13 using maximum likelihood estimation. A partially latent structural regression model was tested with crystallization and conversion as dependent variables (see Figure 2).

Before testing the overall model, first we specified a confirmatory factor analysis measurement model to test for discriminant and convergent validity. The obtained measurement model suggested moderate model fit (Kline, 2011):  $\chi^2(71) = 568.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ; comparative fit index (CFI) = .95; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .071, CI [.066, .077]. In general, the data showed no indications of poor discriminant validity, as all cross-factor correlations were below the threshold value of .80 (Kline, 2011). However, high correlations between political information efficacy in Wave 3 and Wave 4 were observed as they measured the same construct at two different time points; covariances between the error terms of all indicators of information efficacy at Waves 3 and 4 were specified. To obtain satisfactory convergent validity, we removed indicators with standardized factor loadings below .70 (Kline, 2011; see online Appendix B at [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/787lsor8ldcf5p3/AAAv15\\_akC4ky37jKPNhwXgxa?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/787lsor8ldcf5p3/AAAv15_akC4ky37jKPNhwXgxa?dl=0)). After respecifying the measurement model, we reached satisfactory model fit (Kline, 2011):  $\chi^2(35) = 83.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .032, CI [.023, .041].

### **Results**

Table 1 presents the estimates of the logistic regression models testing the direct effect of election news exposure on crystallization and conversion. H1a stated that election news exposure would increase crystallization and H1b stated that election news exposure would increase conversion. First, Table 1 shows that election news exposure had a positive and significant effect on crystallization ( $B = 0.209$ ,  $SE = 0.087$ ,  $p = .017$ ). These findings provide support for H1a. Voters who were undecided at the start of the campaign were influenced by election news exposure. Undecided voters who were exposed to the campaign eventually crystallized their vote choice. Second, no effect of election news exposure on conversion was found ( $B = 0.123$ ,  $SE = 0.086$ ,  $p = .152$ ).<sup>6</sup> Hence, H1b was not supported.

H1c stated that the effect of election news exposure on vote switching would be stronger on crystallization than on conversion. To test this hypothesis, we compared the coefficient for election news exposure in the logistic regression model for crystallization against the coefficient for election news exposure in the logistic regression model for conversion with seemingly unrelated estimation.<sup>7</sup> The results showed that the election news exposure coefficient for crystallization ( $B = 0.209$ ,  $SE = 0.084$ ,  $p = .013$ )

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<sup>6</sup> We also estimated models in which the election news exposure measure also included items for online media exposure. The results for these models were largely similar to the reported results in Table 1, except that we did find a significant positive effect of election news exposure on conversion if online media were included.

<sup>7</sup> In Stata, coefficients can be compared through the seemingly unrelated estimation command (`suest`).

was not significantly different,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.53$ ,  $p = .468$ , from the election news exposure coefficient for conversion ( $B = 0.123$ ,  $SE = 0.083$ ,  $p = .137$ ). Therefore, H1c was not supported.

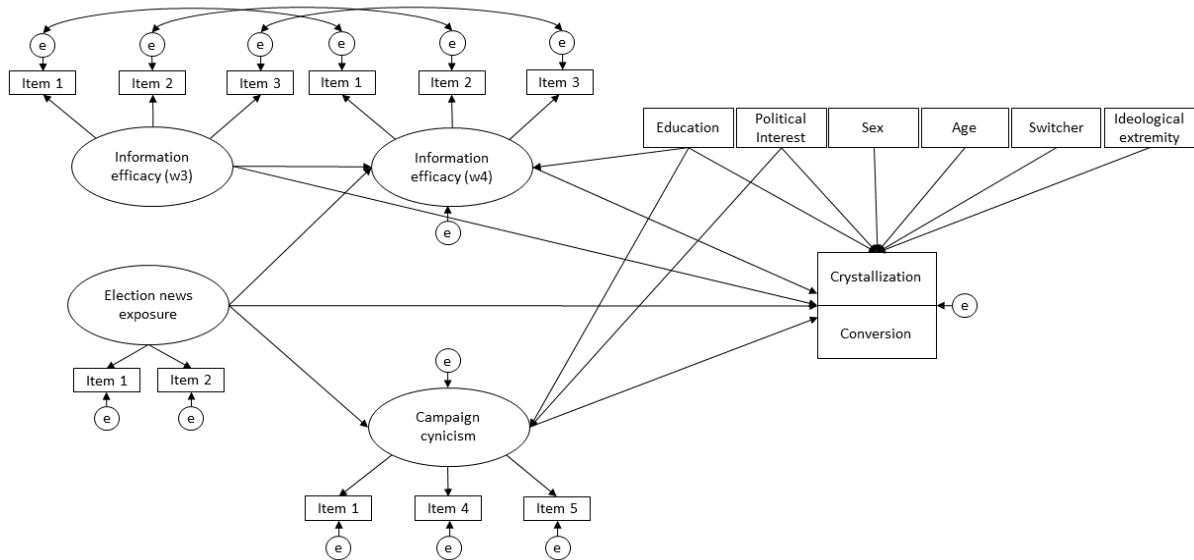
The overall structural model is visualized in Figure 2. This structural regression model estimated the indirect effect of election news exposure on crystallization and conversion via political information efficacy and campaign cynicism. Before testing the effects related to the hypotheses, we tested how well the model fit the data. We first tested a structural regression model that also included political cynicism and political efficacy as covariates.<sup>8</sup> However, this model only moderately fit the data,  $\chi^2(236) = 793.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .062. Furthermore, Table 1 shows that neither political cynicism nor political efficacy affected crystallization or conversion. Therefore, these predictors were removed from the model to retain a more parsimonious model.

**Table 1. Logistic Regression Models for the Impact of Election News Exposure on Crystallization and Conversion.**

Variable	Crystallization ( $n = 609$ )			Conversion ( $n = 561$ )		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
Election news exposure	0.209	0.087	.309*	0.123	0.086	.184
Information efficacy (Wave 4)	0.392	0.138	.485**	-0.048	0.122	-.064
Campaign cynicism	0.010	0.127	.013	0.006	0.109	.007
Age	0.005	0.008	.090	-0.002	0.007	-.036
Sex	0.489	0.240	.245*	0.190	0.204	.095
Education	0.219	0.079	.365**	-0.067	0.062	-.114
Political interest	0.283	0.101	.440**	-0.089	0.090	-.130
Political cynicism	-0.223	0.133	-.262	0.140	0.110	.181
Political efficacy	-0.162	0.109	-.236	0.163	0.086	.247
Ideological extremity	0.080	0.084	.111	-0.176	0.077	-.234*
Switcher	-1.327	0.308	-.615***	1.315	0.200	.648***
Information efficacy (Wave 3)	-0.531	0.143	-.655***	-0.128	0.121	-.168
Intercept	-3.290	1.234		-1.459	1.010	
Log likelihood		-243.201			-313.901	
Nagelkerke $R^2$		.229			.184	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

<sup>8</sup> We also estimated models with political cynicism as a mediator (as opposed to campaign cynicism). Findings revealed that the effect of campaign exposure on electoral volatility was not mediated by political cynicism.



**Figure 2. The partially latent structural equation model testing the effect of election news exposure on crystallization and conversion via campaign cynicism and political information efficacy.**

To examine whether there was a difference in impact between voters whose latent support for a party changed into an actual vote (crystallization) and voters who switched from one party to another (conversion), we specified two structural equation models with a similar path structure, but different outcome variables. The structural equation model predicting crystallization indicated good model fit:  $\chi^2(95) = 187.57, p < .001$ ; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .040, CI [.032, .048]. The structural equation model predicting conversion also fit the data well:  $\chi^2(95) = 170.30, p < .001$ ; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .038, CI [.028, .047]. The estimates for the effects of both models are presented in Table 2 and Table 3.

**Table 2. Parameter Estimates for the Partially Latent Structural Regression Model Predicting Crystallization via Campaign Cynicism and Political Information Efficacy.**

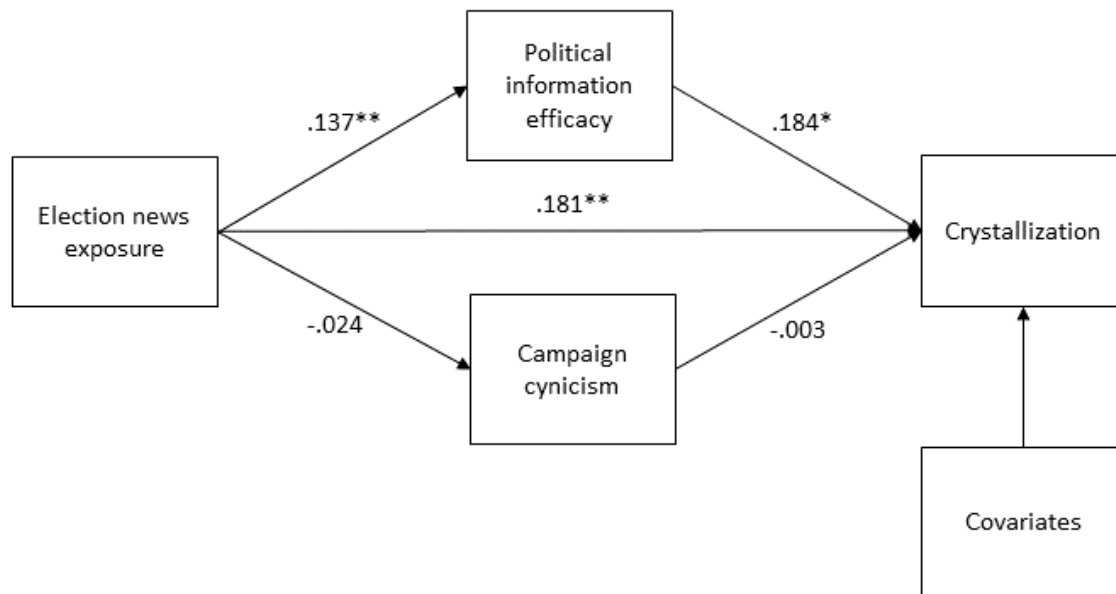
Hypothesis	Independent variable	Dependent variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
1a	Election news exposure	Crystallization	0.063	0.021	.181	.003
2b	Information efficacy (Wave 4)	Crystallization	0.061	0.024	.184	.011
3b	Campaign cynicism	Crystallization	-0.001	0.013	-.003	.944
	Age	Crystallization	0.000	0.001	.011	.799
	Sex	Crystallization	0.066	0.030	.086	.028
	Education	Crystallization	0.024	0.010	.104	.012
	Political interest	Crystallization	0.024	0.013	.097	.071
	Ideological extremity	Crystallization	0.012	0.011	.043	.266
	Switcher	Crystallization	-0.148	0.032	-.178	.000
	Information efficacy (Wave 3)	Crystallization	-0.076	0.020	-.246	.000
2a	Election news exposure	Information efficacy	0.144	0.046	.137	.002
	Education	Information efficacy	0.057	0.022	.081	.009
	Political interest	Information efficacy	0.204	0.030	.273	.000
	Information efficacy (Wave 3)	Information efficacy	0.475	0.040	.507	.000
3a	Election news exposure	Campaign cynicism	-0.025	0.052	-.024	.624
	Education	Campaign cynicism	-0.111	0.031	-.154	.001
2ab	Election news exposure → Information efficacy	Crystallization	0.009	0.004	.025	.042
3ab	Election news exposure → Campaign cynicism	Crystallization	0.000	0.000	.000	.944
Variance accounted for		Crystallization	$R^2 = .15$			
		Information efficacy	$R^2 = .62$			
		Campaign cynicism	$R^2 = .03$			
Fit indices			$\chi^2(95) = 187.57, p < .001$ ; comparative fit index = .98; root mean square error of approximation = .04, CI [.032, .048]			

**Table 3. Parameter Estimates for the Partially Latent Structural Regression Model Predicting Conversion via Campaign Cynicism and Political Information Efficacy.**

Hypothesis	Independent variable	Dependent variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
1b	Election news exposure	Conversion	0.049	0.034	.118	.152
2b	Information efficacy (Wave 4)	Conversion	0.007	0.039	.017	.865
3b	Campaign cynicism	Conversion	-0.003	0.019	-.006	.893
	Age	Conversion	-0.001	0.002	-.051	.355
	Sex	Conversion	0.031	0.039	.033	.425
	Education	Conversion	-0.015	0.012	-.056	.211
	Political interest	Conversion	-0.020	0.019	-.063	.293
	Ideological extremity	Conversion	-0.029	0.014	-.084	.038
	Switcher	Conversion	0.284	0.039	.298	.000
	Information efficacy (Wave 3)	Conversion	-0.044	0.038	-.112	.247
2a	Election news exposure	Information efficacy	0.111	0.046	.103	.016
	Education	Information efficacy	0.031	0.021	.044	.131
	Political interest	Information efficacy	0.142	0.034	.170	.000
	Information efficacy (Wave 3)	Information efficacy	0.697	0.048	.678	.000
3a	Election news exposure	Campaign cynicism	0.055	0.048	.059	.254
	Education	Campaign cynicism	-0.118	0.028	-.190	.000
2ab	Election news exposure → Information efficacy	Conversion	0.001	0.004	.002	.865
3ab	Election news exposure → Campaign cynicism	Conversion	-0.000	0.001	-.000	.894
Variance accounted for		Conversion	$R^2 = .13$			
		Information efficacy	$R^2 = .74$			
		Campaign cynicism	$R^2 = .04$			
Fit indices		$\chi^2(95) = 170.30$ $p < .001$ ; comparative fit index = .98; root mean square error of approximation = .038, CI [.028, .047]				

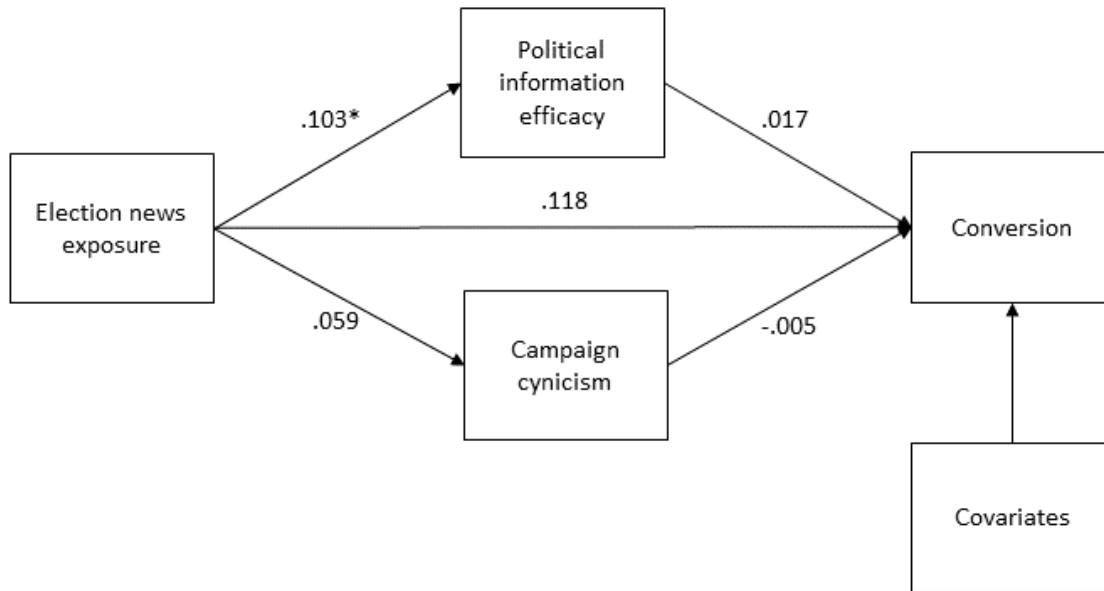
H2 stated that the effect of election news exposure on crystallization would be mediated by political information efficacy, such that election news exposure would lead to a higher sense of political information efficacy, which in turn would lead to crystallization. Table 2 shows that (H2a) election news exposure had a positive and significant effect on information efficacy ( $B = 0.144$ ,  $SE = 0.046$ ,  $p = .002$ ) and (H2b) information efficacy had a significant positive effect on crystallization ( $B = 0.061$ ,  $SE = 0.024$ ,  $p = .011$ ). The indirect effect of election news exposure on crystallization via information efficacy was also

found to be positive and significant ( $B = 0.009$ ,  $SE = 0.004$ ,  $p = .042$ ). Still, the direct effect of election news exposure on crystallization remained significant when the mediating variable was added, indicating partial mediation. These findings provide support for H2a and H2b (see Figure 3).<sup>9</sup> With regard to the effect on conversion, the question was posed whether the effect of election news exposure on conversion would be mediated by political information efficacy (RQ1). Table 3 shows that election news exposure positively affected information efficacy ( $B = 0.111$ ,  $SE = 0.046$ ,  $p = .016$ ). However, no effect of information efficacy on conversion was found ( $B = 0.007$ ,  $SE = 0.039$ ,  $p = .865$ ). The indirect effect of election news exposure on conversion via information efficacy was also insignificant ( $B = 0.001$ ,  $SE = 0.004$ ,  $p = .865$ ). These findings lead to the conclusion that the effect of election news exposure on conversion was not mediated by political information efficacy (see Figure 4).



**Figure 3. The effect of election news exposure on crystallization via campaign cynicism and political information efficacy. Paths show standardized regression weights from the structural regression model. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .**

<sup>9</sup> We also estimated the models predicting crystallization and conversion using generalized structural equation modeling (GSEM) in Stata. GSEM allows for generalized linear response functions, like the logit function for our binary outcome variables. However, GSEM does not allow tests for goodness of fit and indirect effects. The results produced by the GSEM procedure were similar to the reported results analyzed with structural equation modeling; see online Appendix C (see [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/787lsor8ldcf5p3/AAAv15\\_akC4ky37jKPNhwXqxa?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/787lsor8ldcf5p3/AAAv15_akC4ky37jKPNhwXqxa?dl=0)).



**Figure 4. The effect of election news exposure on conversion via campaign cynicism and political information efficacy. Paths show standardized regression weights from the structural regression model. \* $p < .05$ .**

Finally, H3 stated that the effect of election news exposure on crystallization and conversion would be mediated by campaign cynicism, in that (a) election news exposure would increase campaign cynicism and (b) campaign cynicism would decrease the chance of crystallization and increase the chance of conversion. As shown in Table 2, no significant direct effect of campaign cynicism on crystallization was found ( $B = -0.001, SE = 0.012, p = .944$ ). The effect of election news exposure on campaign cynicism was also insignificant ( $B = -0.025, SE = 0.052, p = .624$ ). The indirect of election news exposure on crystallization via campaign cynicism was also insignificant ( $B = -0.000, SE = 0.000, p = .944$ ; see Figure 3). Table 3 shows that, in the model with conversion as the outcome variable, the direct effect of campaign cynicism on conversion ( $B = -0.002, SE = 0.019, p = .893$ ) and the direct effect of election news exposure on campaign cynicism ( $B = 0.055, SE = 0.048, p = .254$ ) were both insignificant (see Figure 4). The indirect effect of election news exposure on conversion via campaign cynicism was also insignificant ( $B = -0.000, SE = 0.001, p = .894$ ). Hence, both Hypotheses 3a and 3b were not supported.

### Discussion

This study focused on the impact of election news exposure on two types of voting behavior—crystallization and conversion—arguing that the effect of election news exposure is stronger on crystallization than on conversion. We aimed to clarify whether voters are well-informed or uninformed switchers by examining to what extent vote change is driven by exposure to campaign information and



which psychological mechanisms underlie this relationship. Does election news exposure increase political information efficacy, sparking an informed vote switch? Or does election news exposure induce cynicism, leading to random or frustrated vote switching?

First, we found that exposure to campaign information induces crystallization. Thus, the more voters are exposed to campaign information in the media during the last month of the election campaign, the more likely they are to crystallize their vote choice. Previous studies on the effect of media exposure on vote change have offered mixed and inconclusive findings (e.g., Baker et al., 2006; Dassonneville, 2011), but this study adds new evidence to the literature in favor of campaign effects (Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Fournier et al., 2004). Moreover, our results showed that the effect of election news exposure was pronounced only among voters who crystallized their vote during the election campaign, whereas no effect was found for conversion. This is in line with Converse (1962) and Zaller (1992), who argued that voters with strong political attitudes are often well informed and thus are not very likely to change their existing preferences when exposed to new information. Our study shows that especially undecided voters use campaign information to help make their vote choice.

Besides a direct effect of election news exposure on crystallization, we also found an indirect effect of election news exposure on crystallization via political information efficacy. For undecided voters, exposure to campaign information seemed to boost their feeling of political knowledge. This increase in information efficacy eventually encouraged them to crystallize their vote choice. This finding is in line with prior research on the effect of information efficacy on political participation, which found that voters with a greater sense of political information are more likely to turn out to vote (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007; Möller et al., 2014). Given that we found that crystallization was driven by exposure to campaign information and that this relationship was explained by higher levels of information, we can thus conclude that these voters were indeed informed switchers. This conclusion is further substantiated by our null findings for political cynicism and campaign cynicism. Whereas the spiral of cynicism proposes that cynicism is demobilizing (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), we did not find that cynicism affected vote switching. The idea that cynical voters switch parties to voice their frustration (Zelle, 1995) was not supported by the current data. As such, this study provides support for a more optimistic view of the role of the media in explaining voting behavior. Instead of inducing cynicism leading to random or frustrated vote switching, media fulfill an informational role, with campaign coverage boosting feelings of political knowledge, which consequently sparks informed vote choices.

Although we found an effect of election news exposure on crystallization via political information efficacy, we found no effects for conversion. Campaign information does not seem to persuade voters to convert from one party to another. This might suggest that voters who convert their party preference are making an uninformed switch. We did find that ideological extremity influences conversion: Voters who are in the middle of the political spectrum are more likely to switch between parties. This is in line with prior research that has shown that volatile voters mainly switch to ideologically similar parties, so-called intrablock volatility (e.g., Van der Meer, Lubbe, van Elsas, Elff, & van der Brug, 2012; Walgrave et al., 2010). These findings imply that voters who convert from one party to another are also quite emancipated, choosing between rather similar parties instead of randomly switching to ideologically dissimilar parties (Dassonneville & Dejaeghere, 2014; Van der Meer et al., 2013).

In the literature, the importance of political knowledge or political information for the functioning of democratic processes is undisputed (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Most models of democracy stress the importance of a citizenry that is informed on political matters and that participates in the political process (Strömbäck, 2005). The findings of this study suggest that a share of the volatile voters is rather informed voters, crystallizing their vote choice after exposure to the campaign because of increased confidence in their political knowledge. As such, this study supports the notion of an informed citizenry and shows that volatile voters are not necessarily harmful for democracy. The question remains whether citizens who feel politically informed actually possess the political knowledge to make an informed vote choice. To come to a correct voting decision, citizens should at least have some degree of political knowledge, besides having confidence in their own political knowledge. Although we did not include measures of factual political knowledge in our analysis, we did find that education, often used as a proxy for political knowledge, had a positive significant effect on both political information efficacy and crystallization. Based on this finding, we can expect a positive association between information efficacy and political knowledge (Jung et al., 2011). Future research could investigate to what extent the level of political information efficacy and the actual level of political knowledge are positively associated, and examine whether both are related to election news exposure and vote switching in a similar manner.

We know from previous studies that, besides media use in general, specific media content characteristics can induce vote change (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Geers & Bos, 2016; Takens, 2013). Unfortunately, our data did not allow us to examine the effect of specific campaign content, such as issue news and horse race and strategic news, on vote switching. Future research should further disentangle the relationship between campaign content characteristics and the mediators in an experimental setting. We can expect that differences in campaign content affect political information efficacy and cynicism differently, leading to different vote decisions. For instance, one could expect that nonsubstantive media content, such as horse race and strategic news, can decrease political information efficacy and accordingly lead to nonvoting. In contrast, exposure to informative content, such as information on policy issues, could lead to increased information efficacy, which subsequently could spark informed voter switching.

The current study was conducted in the context of the 2014 European Parliament elections. These elections were characterized by lower turnout rates (Franklin, 2014) and lower media coverage (De Vreese et al., 2006) than national elections. Therefore, one could wonder whether our findings would be different for national elections. For instance, it could be easier to find an effect of election news exposure on crystallization in second-order elections than in first-order (national) elections, as citizens may be more undecided at the beginning of the campaign and have less information about political parties. For conversion, one might be less likely to find an effect from election news exposure in second-order elections, given that factors such as strategic voting will play less of a role. In other words, in first-order elections, voters may change their vote after being exposed to the campaign because they decide to vote strategically after seeing the latest polls. This is less likely in second-order elections. However, a recent study on the effects of campaign activities on electoral participation showed that effects were rather similar in first- and second-order elections, although baseline levels of turnout were higher at general elections (Trumm & Sudulich, 2016). Future comparative studies could test whether this also holds for the effect of election news exposure on electoral volatility.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the existing literature on individual-level predictors of vote change (e.g., Dassonneville, 2011; Van der Meer et al., 2013), as well as extends research on political information efficacy (e.g., Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007), by showing that election news exposure positively affects crystallization, both directly and indirectly via information efficacy. Furthermore, the results of this study touch on the general debate about campaign effects: Exposure to the campaign does not persuade voters to alter their party preference (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). However, the campaign does seem to have an informational role helping undecided voters to crystallize their vote choice (Arceneaux, 2005).

The question of whether voters are randomly switching or making informed vote choices remains interesting for future research. This study shows that distinguishing between different types of voting behavior is helpful in this regard. Although we found no effects for conversion, we did find that undecided voters who eventually crystallized their vote choice actually felt more informed. Future studies should further explore which factors drive conversion, and whether these factors indicate random or rather informed vote switching. For now, this study provides a first insight into the mechanisms that underlie the impact of election news exposure on vote change, which is a fruitful avenue for future research.

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