

The micro-foundations of electoral dealignment¹

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First draft – comments are welcome

Introduction

The phenomenon of electoral dealignment has become a central theme in electoral research. The main contention of this literature is that voters' traditional attachments to political parties are weakening. This is a consequence, broadly speaking, of social modernisation, which leads to an increase in the political skills of citizens and which reduces the privileged role of parties as intermediaries between citizens and government. The weakening of voters' party identification and their increased level of cognitive mobilisation means that more and more voters have the necessary political skills to make political choices without relying on traditional loyalties. These changes in the characteristics of voters have been related to several evolutions in electoral behaviour. Most important among these are increases in the level of electoral volatility, of split-ticket voting, and of late decision-making in electoral campaigns. They are seen as direct consequences of the growing proportion of voters combining a weak attachment to political parties and a high degree of cognitive mobilisation (or political sophistication). These 'apartisans' are the voters who should be most likely to be volatile, to split their ticket, or to make their electoral choice late in an electoral campaign.

In this paper, we shall propose an alternative hypothesis on the relationship between cognitive mobilisation and the consequences of dealignment. The argument of the dealignment literature that voters who are cognitively mobilised are more likely to have unstable or uncertain electoral preferences is surprising. We know from research on attitude formation and change that voters with a high level of political sophistication have usually more coherent and more stable attitudes. In order to solve this apparent paradox, we argue that it is necessary to develop a more detailed model of the processes leading voters to split their electoral ticket or to change their voting choice from one election to the next. We suggest in this paper that

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the ‘sources’ of instability are not the same for political experts and for political novices. Furthermore, these two groups of voters should divide their vote or change their electoral choice in different ways: political experts are more likely to do so between parties belonging to the same group of parties (what we name *intra-block* volatility or ticket splitting), while voters with a low level of political sophistication are more likely to support parties from different groups of parties (*inter-block* volatility or ticket splitting). We shall test these hypotheses with survey data from recent elections in four European countries (France, Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands).

In the next section, we review the literature on electoral dealignment and its consequences, emphasising the role played by voters’ level of cognitive mobilisation in the explanation of electoral volatility and split-ticket voting. After this, we present in more detail the different processes that may lead voters to have unstable or uncertain electoral preferences. Then, we introduce our main hypotheses by discussing the impact of political sophistication on these different sources of instability. In the fourth section, we present the operationalisation of our variables and introduce the datasets used to test our models. Finally, the main results are presented and commented.

Electoral dealignment and its consequences

The concept of electoral or partisan dealignment refers to changes in the relationships between parties and citizens. ‘The dealignment thesis holds that party ties were generally eroding as a consequence of social and political modernization, and thus most advanced industrial societies should experience a dealignment trend’ (Dalton 2000: 22). Dealignment can be explained both by evolutions affecting the function or status of political parties and by changes in the characteristics of voters. Parties tend to lose their privileged position as intermediaries between citizens and government. They face the concurrence of new actors, like interest groups or the mass media, and are affected by the professionalisation and personalisation of electoral campaigns (Swanson and Mancini 1996; Wattenberg 1998; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). At the individual level, the most important characteristics of this evolution are an increase in the political skills of citizens (i.e., in their level of ‘cognitive mobilisation’) and a decrease in the strength of traditional loyalties. Two aspects of the latter evolution can furthermore be distinguished: a *decline of party identification*, on the one hand, and a *weakening of the strength of cleavages*, on the other. While changes regarding party identification are the ones most often discussed in the literature, it is important to emphasise that a weakening of cleavages’ strength may also contribute to this phenomenon. We will

come back to this distinction in a later section. In the meantime, we shall refer here more generally to these two aspects as a *decline in the strength of voters' predispositions*. The combined effect of cognitive mobilisation and of the weakening of voters' predispositions results in an increase in the level of 'uncertainty' surrounding voters' choices. These two evolutions mean that we face a growing number of voters who do not rely on traditional loyalties and who have the skills to make political choices independently of parties. Following the dealignment literature, these new independent voters or 'apartisans' (Dalton 1984) should display a higher level of variability in their partisan preferences. They 'are less consistent in their voting patterns because voting behavior is not dependent on long-standing party predispositions' (Dalton 2002: 191). Depending on the characteristics of the candidates, on the most salient issues, on the perceived competence of the parties, among others, 'apartisans' are expected to choose the party or candidate that corresponds most closely to their political preferences.

These evolutions directly affect the process of formation of voting choices. Three aspects have received much attention in the literature: split-ticket voting, electoral volatility, and late decision-making in electoral campaigns. All three reflect the higher level of uncertainty or of instability of electoral preferences among 'dealigned' voters (i.e., those who have weak social-structural predispositions). As a matter of fact, these three 'symptoms' of dealignment have become more frequent over the last decades in many different countries, as shown by Dalton, McAllister, and Wattenberg (2000). There is also much evidence at the individual-level on the relationship between party identification strength and these forms of instability. Several analyses have shown that party identification has a strong impact on electoral volatility (see for example Clarke and Stewart 1998; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Sinnott 1998; Lachat 2004a). As party identification was often seen as the most important factor explaining the stability of party alignments and of voters' choices, its decline is similarly viewed as one of the most important factors contributing to higher levels of electoral volatility (Campbell, Converse et al. 1960; Crewe and Denver 1985; Wattenberg 1991; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). Similarly, it has been shown in many different contexts that party identifiers have a lower propensity to split their electoral ticket than political independents (e.g., Beck, Baum et al. 1992; Karp, Vowles et al. 2002; Gschwend 2004; Lachat 2005). Timing of the voting decision has maybe received less attention in the literature. But here too, several scholars have emphasised that early or 'precampaign' deciders are more strongly partisan than late deciders (Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous 1994; Chaffee and Rimal 1996; McAllister 2002).

The impact of party identification on split-ticket voting, electoral volatility, and timing of the voting decision, is quite straightforward. Much research in political cognition shows that individuals do not process all available information in a systematic manner. Both their capacity and their motivation to consider a large amount of information and to process it in a systematic way are limited. Instead, people tend to use simple decision rules or ‘heuristics’, that allow them making a choice on the basis of a few, salient pieces of information (Tversky and Kahneman 1974; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991; Popkin 1994). Party identifiers are likely to rely on a ‘partisan heuristic’ when receiving and evaluating information about candidates and parties (Ottati and Wyer 1990; Rahn 1993). This increases the stability and the coherence of their electoral preferences.

By contrast, the processes leading political independents to be more unstable remain unspecified in the argument of the dealignment literature. Are their underlying political preferences (issue positions, ideological orientation, etc.) less stable? Or are they responding more strongly to specific incentives affecting all voters? There are different motives or processes that may increase the instability or uncertainty of voters’ electoral preferences. It is also unclear whether the main three consequences of partisan dealignment are explained by the same factors. While having a strong party identification may be a sufficient condition for explaining the stability of voters’ choices, it is certainly not a necessary one. Political independents, as well as party identifiers, may support the same party for different offices or in consecutive elections, and they may have a firm voting intention at the start of the electoral campaign. From this point of view, the role of cognitive mobilisation emphasised in the dealignment literature is all the more important. The voters most likely to display the ‘symptoms’ of dealignment are those who combine a weak attachment to parties and a high level of cognitive mobilisation. The latter concept, as defined by Dalton (1984), is close to the notion of political sophistication or political expertise. Voters with a high degree of cognitive mobilisation are able to make political choices independently of parties. They are politically interested and involved, and have a higher level of political knowledge. Actually, the usual measure of cognitive mobilisation, which is an index combining political interest and education level, represents a good proxy for one’s level of political expertise. But research on the role played by political sophistication in processes of opinion formation and change shows that political experts have more stable attitudes than political novices. Political experts have not only a higher level of political knowledge, they also organise this information in a more meaningful way and are better able to relate new information with what they already know (Fiske and Kinder 1981; Lau and Erber 1985; Fiske, Lau and Smith 1990; Ottati and Wyer

1990). One of the most important aspects of political sophistication is its positive impact on attitude stability (e.g. Lau and Erber 1985; Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). The higher level of instability among cognitively mobilised voters emphasised in the dealignment literature seems thus to conflict with these hypotheses about the impact of political sophistication.

Sources of instability

The key to solving this paradox, we suggest, is to develop a more detailed explanation of the sources of change among ‘dealigned’ voters and to make a distinction between different forms of instability in voter’s electoral preferences. To this end, we shall focus here mainly on electoral volatility and on split-ticket voting.² As we saw, they are usually considered to reflect the instability or uncertainty of citizens’ political preferences. However, they may result from very different processes or considerations. Voters who split their electoral ticket – that is who support different parties in parallel elections – may do so for example because they are not convinced adherents of a particular party and do not know which party would best represent their interests. But on the other hand, voters with clear-cut preferences may also choose to split their ticket if they behave strategically and if the electoral chances of their preferred party are too small in one of the elections. Similarly, electoral volatility can result from unstable preferences or from a change in the strategic context, for example.

In order to better understand the relationships between political sophistication, the strength of voters’ predispositions, and the consequences of electoral dealignment, it is thus first necessary to identify the possible sources of instability in voters’ preferences. To this end, we simply assume that citizens have some underlying political preferences (ideological orientations, values, evaluations of central political actors, etc.) and that they tend to support a party or candidate that best fits with these underlying preferences, which can be more or less clearly defined. Not all voters however have the capacity to relate parties’ positions with their own political preferences. Voters’ ability to make a good or informed electoral choice should depend on their degree of political sophistication. On this basis, we can distinguish between three sources of instability.

First, voters may change their voting choice (or voting intention) simply because their underlying preferences have changed. Second, voters may display an unstable voting intention

² Explaining the timing of voters’ electoral choice would require a different model than the one presented here. This aspect of the formation of voters’ choices is more difficult to assess, we think. It is usually measured by a direct question (i.e., respondents are typically asked in a postelectoral survey when they made their voting decision), and voters’ answers represent subjective evaluations. They are thus likely to be influenced by other types of cognitive processes than the one we try to explain here.

because they have conflicting preferences (like a left-wing ideological orientation but a high level of sympathy with a candidate from a right-wing party) or are otherwise unsure about which party best corresponds to their political preferences. Finally, even if voters have stable underlying preferences and if they know how well the different parties' programmes match their own political positions, they can still change their voting intention or decide to split their ticket in response to specific strategic incentives. If their preferred party has weak chances of winning the election (or of winning enough seats) they may avoid wasting their vote by supporting a second best option.

This distinction between three types of instability in voters' electoral choices is rather a schematic one. The three categories are not mutually exclusive, and the differences between them are maybe not always clear-cut. But the most important point here regards the likely relationships between political sophistication and these forms of instability. As political experts have more stable and more coherent attitudes than political novices, and as they are better able to choose the party/candidate that best matches their own preferences, the frequency of the first two sources of instability should decrease with voters' level of political sophistication. On the other hand, political experts have both the skills and the motivation to vote strategically. They will be more responsive to the strategic incentives of their electoral context and more likely than political novices to display a 'strategic form' of instability. In other words, political sophistication should not have a generally positive or negative impact on electoral volatility and on split-ticket voting. But it should be related to the frequency of specific types of changes or of instability.

In order to evaluate these hypotheses directly, it would be necessary to distinguish between the three categories of unstable voters – which is a difficult task. However, they can also be tested in an indirect way. As a matter of fact, the potential instability of electoral preferences among political experts and novices should not only result from different processes, but it should also translate into different types of changes. To show this, we need to introduce an additional distinction, between *intra-block* and *inter-block* electoral volatility (or ticket splitting). Voters are considered to be *intra-block* volatile if they change between parties who belong to the same group, that is who are ideologically close to one another. A German voter changing from the Greens to the Socialists, for example, would be *intra-block* volatile. *Inter-block* volatility, by contrast, refers to changes from one group of parties to another – like, in the French case, from the Socialist to the Gaullist party. By analogy, the same distinction can be used for split-ticket voting.

This distinction between intra-block and inter-block volatility or ticket splitting is central for testing our hypotheses about the role of political sophistication. As a matter of fact, the instability/uncertainty of electoral preferences among political novices should be more likely to result into *inter-block changes*, while political experts who change their voting intention or who split their electoral ticket are more likely to do so *within* a party group.

More precisely, if we start with the case of split-ticket voting, voters may divide their vote either because they are strategic or because they are unsure about which to party to support.³ Our hypothesis is that the level of strategic voting increases with voter's level of political sophistication. Now, in the case of Germany, which is the only country where we can measure split-ticket voting, strategic voters are likely to divide their vote between two coalition partners, but not between parties who belong to different blocks (Bawn 1999; Schoen 1999; Gschwend 2004). If our hypothesis is correct, political sophistication should thus have a positive impact on the level of intra-block ticket-splitting. The probability that voters divide their vote between parties of different blocks, on the other hand, should decrease with their level of political expertise.

We expect similar differences in the impact of political sophistication on the two forms of electoral volatility. Political novices should be more likely than political experts to be inter-block volatile, because their underlying political preferences are less stable and because they are less certain about which party best matches their own preferences. Political experts, on the other hand, may be more likely to be intra-block volatile. Their attitudes are not likely to change dramatically over time, but they will be more responsive to small, incremental changes than political novices are. This higher level of responsiveness actually corresponds to the central argument of the dealignment literature about the behaviour of 'apartisans'. But it should translate into intra-block volatility rather than into inter-block changes, as the political preferences of such voters are quite stable.

Data and operationalisation

To test these hypotheses on the impact of political sophistication and of predisposition strength, we consider elections of the 1990s and early 2000s in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Our aim is not to test the dynamic, long-term changes linked with electoral dealignment. Thus, we do not need to analyse the determinants of electoral volatility or split-ticket voting over a long period of time. However, we shall replicate our analyses for several elections and for different countries, in order to avoid any bias that may

³ Changes in voters' underlying preferences, by contrast, should not be relevant here, as split-ticket voting is not a case of an attitude change.

result from singular circumstances. More precisely, we consider the following elections:⁴ 1995 in France; 1990, 1994, 1998, and 2002 in Germany; 1994, 1998, and 2002 in the Netherlands; 1995, 1999, and 2003 in Switzerland. The French election is a presidential one, while all others are for the lower chamber of the national parliament.

The first dependent variable, split-ticket voting, can unfortunately be analysed only in the German context. In this case, voters can cast two ballots, one for a candidate from their constituency and one for a party list at the national level. Comparing these two votes is the ‘standard’ operationalisation of split-ticket voting in Germany (see for example Bawn 1999; Schoen 1999).⁵ Electoral volatility refers simply to the comparison between voters’ choice in the actual election and in the previous election, as indicated by a recall question.⁶ To distinguish between intra-block and inter-block volatile voters, we have formed groups of parties that are more or less ideologically close to one another. These groups have been defined separately for each of the four countries, and their composition can be found in table 1.⁷

Table 1. Composition of the party groups in Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland

Germany	Left	(SPD, Greens)
	Right	(CDU/CSU, FDP)
Netherlands	Left	(PvdA, D66, GroenLinks)
	Right	(CDA, VVD, Orthodox Christian Parties, LPF)
Switzerland	Left	(SP, GPS, Green and alternative movements)
	Centre	(CVP, LdU, EVP, CSP)
	Moderate Right	(FDP, LPS)
	Radical Right	(SVP, SD, FPS, Lega, EDU)

For both electoral volatility and split-ticket voting, two explanatory variables will be considered, as discussed before. The first is voters’ degree of political sophistication. We measure it, when possible, by questions of political knowledge. As a matter of fact, several

⁴ The references of the datasets used here are given in the appendix.

⁵ Several forms of split-ticket voting could also be defined in the Swiss context, by comparing votes for the upper and lower chambers of parliament (Lachat 2005), by analysing voters’ use of panachage in the election to the lower chamber (Lachat 2004b), or by focusing on the distribution of voters’ two ballots in the election to the upper chamber (Kriesi 1998a, 2003; Lachat 2005). However, the strategic incentives faced by voters vary strongly between the constituencies and make it difficult to analyse the patterns of split-ticket voting at the national level.

⁶ Relying on recall questions to assess voters’ choice in the previous election is not unproblematic, as voters may rationalise their previous vote (see for example Schoen 2000). Unfortunately, there are only very few panel studies conducted over two or more elections and we cannot make here systematic comparisons between results obtained with a panel or a recall measure of volatility.

⁷ It is not necessary to form groups of parties in France: the measure of electoral volatility is based on the votes in the 2nd round of the presidential election, in which only two candidates compete. Both in 1995 and in 1988, there was one candidate from the Socialist party and one from the RPR. Thus, only inter-block changes are possible.

scholars have shown that indexes of political knowledge are one of the best measures of political expertise (e.g., Fiske, Lau and Smith 1990; Lau and Erber 1985; Zaller 1992; Price and Zaller 1993). The type and number of questions used differ from one survey to the next. In the Netherlands, 13-point scales of political knowledge are available for all three surveys, and are based on the same type of questions: respondents were presented with photographs of four politicians and were asked to indicate for each of them their name, party affiliation, and political function. The twelve resulting items were combined into a single scale using the Mokken model.⁸ In the 1995 Swiss election study, the index of political expertise is based on four questions on ‘civics’: respondents were asked to mention the number of parties represented in the Federal Council, the name of the President of this council, the number of signatures required to launch a popular initiative at the federal level, and the number of deputies of their cantons in the National Council. In 1999 and 2003, we use the same four questions as well a fifth one, inviting respondents to mention up to three names of candidates to the National Council in their canton. In all three cases, the questions were combined with principal-components factor analyses, which result in one-dimensional solutions. In Germany and in France, finally, we had to use a proxy as no questions on factual political knowledge were available. We have measured political sophistication by an additive index combining voters’ level of education and their level of political interest.

The second independent variable is the strength of voters’ predispositions. As we suggested above, the decrease in the strength of voters’ traditional loyalties is reflected both in the decline of party identification and in the weakening of the traditional cleavages. While analyses of electoral dealignment usually consider only party identification, voters’ position in the cleavage structure should have a similar impact on the stability of their electoral preferences. Thus, by combining voters’ party identification and other central social-structural predispositions (e.g., voters’ position in the class and religious structure, which are the two central cleavages in all countries analysed here), it is possible to determine with more precision which voters are ‘dealigned’.⁹ To compute this Index of Predisposition Strength (IPS), we start from a multivariate model, where electoral choice is regressed on the corresponding social-structural variables. Then, the estimated coefficients are transformed into predicted voting probabilities. These probabilities use all information in the model to express the likelihood that a voter chooses one alternative over the others. If a voter has a

⁸ More detailed information on the construction of these scales is available in the codebooks of the corresponding datasets.

⁹ We have shown in the case of Switzerland and Germany that the impact of this index of predisposition strength on the different ‘symptoms’ of electoral dealignment is similar to the one of party identification, but more pronounced (Lachat 2004a, 2004b).

probability of 1 to support one of the parties and probabilities of 0 to vote for any of its competitors, it means that she has strong predispositions: her vote can be predicted on the basis of her social-structural characteristics. At the other extreme, we may find that some voters have equal probabilities to support any of the parties. This means that social-structural variables do not give us any information about which party these voters are more likely to vote for. In other words, such voters have weak social-structural predispositions. The highest predicted probability for a given voter is thus an indication of the strength of their predispositions. For have estimated such a model and computed the corresponding index separately for each election. The highest predicted probabilities have been recoded so that the index can range in all elections from 0 to 1. For reasons of space, we do not present here the corresponding coefficients for all of these models. More detailed information on the operationalisation of the dependent and independent variables, as well as summary statistics on the index of predisposition strength, can however be found in the appendix.

Results

For both dependent variables, the models to be estimated have the following simple structure:

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot IPS + \beta_2 \cdot Soph. + \beta_3 \cdot IPS \cdot Soph. + \varepsilon,$$

where ‘IPS’ is the strength of a voter’s social-structural predispositions and ‘Soph.’ is her level of political sophistication. Both variables have been centred. Apart from the main effects of these two variables, the models also include an interaction term between them. In this way, it is possible to test for the possibility that the impact of expertise is conditioned by the strength of voters’ predispositions. As the dependent variables are categorical, we have estimated all models with multinomial logistic regressions.¹⁰ The corresponding results are presented in tables 2 and 3.

Turning first to split-ticket voting (table 2), we find as expected that voters with strong social-structural predispositions have a lower probability to divide their vote. This effect is significant in all elections, for both types of ticket splitting. But the impact of predisposition strength is usually more pronounced for a division of votes between parties belonging to different blocks. It is more difficult to identify systematic patterns in the impact of political

¹⁰ For all models, the assumption of the Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives has been tested with a Hausman specification test (Long 1997: 183f.). This assumption cannot be rejected at the usual levels of significance. We can thus be confident that multinomial logit models are appropriate for the present analyses.

Table 2. Impact of predisposition strength and of political sophistication on split-ticket voting.
Coefficients and standard errors estimated with multinomial logistic regressions.

		IPS		Sophistication		IPS*Sophistication		Constant		McFadden's R ²	N
		Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.		
Germany											
1990	Intra-block	-2.50***	0.55	0.15*	0.07	0.03	0.27	-2.47***	0.15	0.04	828
	Inter-block	-1.07 [†]	0.58	-0.21***	0.07	0.05	0.30	-2.36***	0.13		
1994	Intra-block	-1.45*	0.63	0.26***	0.08	-0.06	0.29	-2.57***	0.16	0.11	728
	Inter-block	-3.71***	0.76	0.34**	0.12	0.03	0.33	-3.42***	0.26		
1998	Intra-block	-1.25 [†]	0.69	0.42***	0.07	-0.31	0.34	-2.49***	0.15	0.08	885
	Inter-block	-2.18**	0.66	0.22**	0.08	-0.69*	0.34	-2.70***	0.15		
2002	Intra-block	-1.31**	0.45	0.33***	0.07	-0.11	0.24	-2.19***	0.13	0.11	794
	Inter-block	-3.65***	0.57	-0.05	0.13	-0.67*	0.32	-3.21***	0.22		

[†] $p < 0.10$ * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Impact of predisposition strength and of political sophistication on inter-election volatility.
Coefficients and standard errors estimated with multinomial logistic regressions.

		IPS		Sophistication		IPS*Sophistication		Constant		McFadden's R ²	N
		Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.		
Germany											
1990	Intra-block	-1.91***	0.56	0.13*	0.07	0.14	0.28	-2.15***	0.14	0.04	762
	Inter-block	-1.79***	0.45	-0.18**	0.06	-0.27	0.24	-1.64***	0.11		
1994	Intra-block	-1.19	0.80	0.25**	0.08	0.21	0.34	-2.63***	0.18	0.06	641
	Inter-block	-2.73***	0.59	0.21**	0.08	0.38	0.26	-2.34***	0.16		
1998	Intra-block	-3.00***	0.75	0.17*	0.08	0.35	0.38	-2.65***	0.17	0.08	810
	Inter-block	-4.13***	0.49	-0.01	0.06	0.05	0.26	-1.77***	0.11		
2002	Intra-block	-2.05***	0.53	0.27***	0.08	-0.04	0.28	-2.47***	0.16	0.07	728
	Inter-block	-2.37***	0.42	-0.12	0.08	-0.27	0.25	-2.13***	0.13		
Netherlands											
1994	Intra-block	-2.12***	0.30	0.03	0.03	-0.05	0.09	-1.42***	0.09	0.07	1182
	Inter-block	-2.51***	0.34	-0.04	0.03	0.02	0.10	-1.61***	0.10		
1998	Intra-block	-2.03***	0.32	0.02	0.02	0.09	0.08	-1.55***	0.09	0.06	1358
	Inter-block	-2.62***	0.35	-0.03	0.02	0.14 [†]	0.08	-1.55***	0.09		
2002	Intra-block	-1.31***	0.22	0.00	0.02	-0.15*	0.07	-1.05***	0.07	0.04	1312
	Inter-block	-2.05***	0.24	-0.04	0.02	-0.11	0.07	-1.14***	0.08		
Switzerland											
1995	Intra-block	-0.45	0.47	0.20	0.15	0.44	0.48	-2.41***	0.15	0.03	791
	Inter-block	-1.55***	0.30	0.07	0.10	0.04	0.31	-1.45***	0.10		
1999	Intra-block	-0.36	0.45	0.03	0.16	-0.68	0.46	-2.54***	0.15	0.04	821
	Inter-block	-1.65***	0.31	0.09	0.11	-0.83**	0.32	-1.68***	0.11		
2003	Intra-block	-0.48	0.46	0.15	0.15	-0.61	0.48	-2.63***	0.15	0.03	946
	Inter-block	-1.68***	0.29	-0.01	0.10	-0.38	0.31	-1.68***	0.10		
France											
1995	Inter-block	-1.83***	0.18	-0.19***	0.05	-0.13	0.12	-2.12***	0.07	0.08	2538

[†] $p < 0.10$ * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

sophistication. Following our hypotheses, political experts should be more likely than political novices to split their electoral ticket within a group of parties, but less likely to do so between party groups. Furthermore, the differences between political experts and novices should be strong only among voters who have weak social-structural predispositions. This hypothesis is partially confirmed in the 1990 election. We see here that political sophistication has a positive impact on the likelihood to divide one’s vote between two parties of the same group, but is negatively related with the probability of an ‘inter-block split’. However, the strength of this relationship is not affected by predisposition strength. As the two independent variables have different scales and as the coefficients were estimated with a logistic model, it is not straightforward to see how strong these effects are. To this end, we shall present some of these results in the form of predicted probabilities.¹¹ We do this for the 1990 election in figure 1. The probabilities of an intra-block split (left-hand panel) and of an inter-block split (right-hand panel) have been computed for different levels of political sophistication (on the x-axis) and for voters with weak, average, and strong predispositions (corresponding to the different lines). Political expertise and predisposition strength vary both from an average value by minus one standard deviation (i.e., corresponding to ‘weak predispositions’ or to a ‘low’ level of political sophistication) or plus one standard deviation (i.e., ‘strong predispositions’ or a ‘high’ degree of expertise).

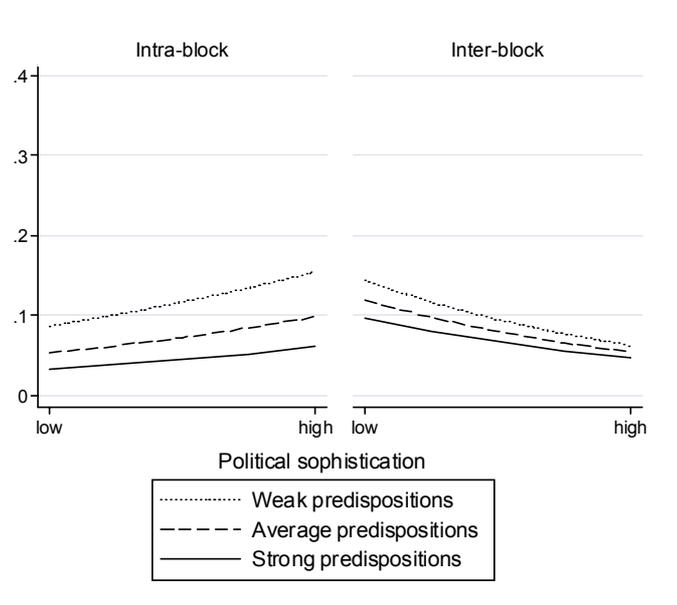


Figure 1
Impact of political sophistication and of predisposition strength on the probability of casting a split-ticket, 1990 German election

¹¹ All predicted probabilities reported here have been estimated using Clarify for Stata (Tomz, Wittenberg and King 2003; King, Tomz and Wittenberg 2000).

We see here very clearly how the impact of political sophistication differs between the two forms of ticket splitting. While ‘apartisans’, who combine weak predispositions and a high level of political sophistication, are the voters most likely to divide their vote between potential coalition partners, they have a low probability to split their ticket between party groups. The results for the other elections are very similar as far as intra-block ticket-splitting is concerned. Predisposition strength has always a negative impact and political sophistication a positive one on the probability of split-ticket. As regards the second form of ticket-splitting, by contrast, the results do not always fit with our hypothesis. While the probability of supporting parties from different blocks is always low among voters with strong social-structural predispositions (at all levels of political sophistication), it increases with one’s degree of political expertise among ‘dealigned’ voters in 1994 and 1998. For these elections, then, the hypothesis that the impact of political expertise differs between the two forms of ticket-splitting cannot be confirmed. In 2002 finally, the probability of an inter-block split remains virtually stable across levels of political sophistication, both for voters with weak and strong political predispositions.

The results pertaining to electoral volatility are presented in table 3. We could estimate such a model for all elections. First, we observe that respondents with strong predispositions are less volatile than ‘dealigned’ voters. This impact of predisposition strength is however more pronounced for inter-block changes than for intra-block instability (the 1990 German election is the only exception). This result is similar to what we found in the case of split-ticket voting. It not only shows that citizens’ social-structural characteristics are central to explaining the consequences of dealignment – which is not surprising – but also that the impact of party identification and of voters’ position in the cleavage structure is weaker for changes within groups of parties. This difference appears most clearly in the case of Switzerland, where the relationship between predisposition strength and *intra-block* volatility is not significant, in any of the four surveys analysed. The most interesting results, however, regard the impact of political expertise. In most cases, we find as expected that political experts have a higher level of intra-block volatility than political novices, but a lower level of inter-block volatility. There are many cases where the main effects of political sophistication are not statistically significant – but as political sophistication is included both in its ‘normal’ form and in the interaction with predisposition strength, the results are quite difficult to interpret on the basis of the coefficients only. We illustrate thus these results again in the form of predicted probabilities, starting with the example of the 1994 Dutch election (figure 2). Among voters

with weak social-structural predispositions, we see here that political sophistication has a positive impact on the probability of changing within a party group, but a negative one on the likelihood of an inter-block change.

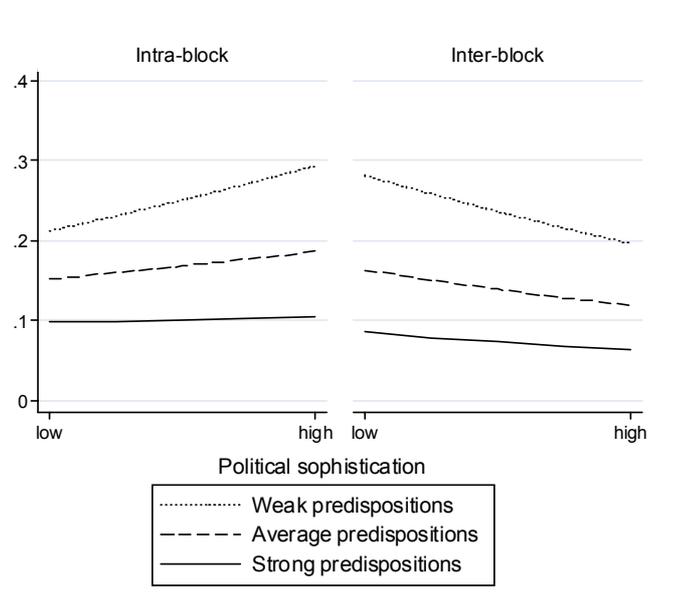


Figure 2
Impact of political sophistication and of predisposition strength on electoral volatility, 1994 Dutch election

The differences between political experts and political novices are maybe not very strong, but it is clear at least that political sophistication has not a positive impact on the level of inter-block volatility. The impact of voters' degree of political expertise differs between the two types of electoral volatility. In this case, thus, it cannot be argued that 'apartisans' are generally the most volatile voters. And as a matter of fact, most elections analysed here fit with this pattern. In all Dutch elections, in the French one, and in 1990 and 2002 in Germany, we observe that inter-block volatility is most frequent among voters combining weak predispositions and a low degree of political expertise. Furthermore, in three other cases (1998 in Germany, 1995 and 2003 in Switzerland), we find that the level of inter-block volatility is virtually not affected by one's political sophistication. We illustrate this in figure 3, with the example of the 1998 German election. Political expertise has a weak positive impact on changes within party groups, but the level of inter-block volatility is almost unaffected by voters' degree of political sophistication. While such a pattern of results supports our hypothesis less strongly than the previous one, it clearly shows that 'apartisans' are not the voters most likely to be volatile.

Among the eleven elections we have analysed, only the 1999 Swiss election and the 1994 German one offer strong support for the hypothesis of the dealignment literature, by showing that political expertise has a positive impact on both forms of electoral volatility.

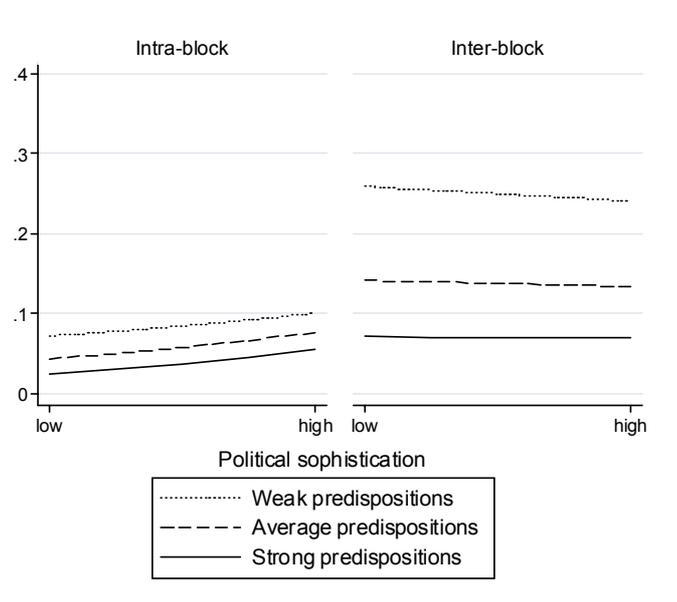


Figure 3
Impact of political sophistication and of predisposition strength on electoral volatility, 1998 German election

Conclusion

The starting point for this analysis was a central claim of the dealignment literature, that electoral volatility and other ‘symptoms’ of a growing instability in voters’ preferences should be most frequent among ‘apartisans’ – that is among voters who have no party identification and a high level of cognitive mobilisation or political sophistication. We have emphasised that this hypothesis was conflicting with results from the field of political psychology, showing that political expertise is associated with more stable and more coherent attitudes.

In order to try to solve this apparent paradox, we have focused in more detail the reasons or processes that may lead ‘dealigned’ voters to be volatile or to split their electoral ticket. We have formulated an alternative hypothesis, arguing that the major difference between political experts and political novices regards not their general level of volatility or of split ticket voting, but the processes leading them to be unstable, on the one hand, and the way in which they are likely to change their voting choice or to divide their votes. The potential instability in the voting preferences of political experts is a consequence of strategic decisions and of their higher level of responsiveness to small, incremental changes in their underlying preferences. If they are volatile or if they divide their vote, they should be most likely to do so

between members of the same block of party. They should not change from a left-wing to a right-wing party or divide their vote between parties that are not potential coalition partners. Voters with a low degree of political sophistication, by contrast, have less stable underlying preferences and are less certain about the party that corresponds most closely to these preferences. They are also less likely to vote strategically, as they do not have the necessary skills and motivation. As a consequence, we expect them to display a higher level of *inter-block* volatility and ticket splitting than political experts.

We have tested these hypotheses with elections of the last fifteen years in France, Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. The results we have presented are mixed and do not always clearly support our hypothesis. While the intra-block form of electoral volatility and of split ticket voting is more frequent among political experts than among political novices in all elections, it was more difficult to identify systematic patterns of results with respect to inter-block changes. The expected negative impact of political expertise was confirmed in about half of the cases only. At the same time, however, these analyses have also shown that the positive impact of political sophistication on split-ticket voting and electoral volatility, emphasised in the literature on electoral dealignment, was not supported as far as inter-block changes are concerned.

Appendix

Index of predisposition strength

To compute the index of predisposition strength, we have estimated for each election a model where voting choice is regressed on voters' social class, religion, religiosity, age, and gender. The number of parties or of party groups that are distinguished depends on the country. We have five categories in Germany (Greens, SPD, FDP, CDU/CSU, others), eight in the Netherlands (PvdA, GroenLinks, D66, CDA, VVD, Orthodox Christian parties, LPF, others), five in Switzerland (Left, Centre, Moderate right, Radical right, others), and only two in France (PS, RPR), as only the second round of the presidential election is considered.

Social class is coded with a nine-class schema, which is a transformed version of the Goldthorpe schema, based on the work of Kriesi (1989; 1998b) and Müller (1998; 1999). The following classes have been formed: self-employed farmers; other self-employed in non-professional occupations; semiskilled and unskilled workers, including agricultural workers; skilled workers and foremen; routine non-manual workers in white-collar occupations; managers and other professionals in social-administrative occupations; professionals with technical expertise; social-cultural specialists; non labour-force participants.

For religion and religiosity, finally, we include a series of dummy variables for the most important religious affiliations of each country. Furthermore, for each of these groups, we distinguish between those who attend church frequently (i.e., at least once a month) and those who do not. In the case of Germany and Switzerland, for example, we consider two religious groups: Catholics and Protestants. We have thus a dummy for Protestants who go to church regularly, one for Catholics with a high level of church attendance, two dummies for other Protestants and other Catholics, respectively, and a fifth group including all other respondents (no or other religion). In France, we have only one religious group (Catholics), and three in the Netherlands (Catholics, Dutch reformed, and Calvinists).

Datasets

The datasets used here are available at the following institutions: France, Socio-Political Data Archive (www.cidsp.com/bdsp); Germany, Central Archive for Empirical Social Research (www.gesis.org/ZA); Netherlands, Steinmetz Archive (www.steinmetz-archieff.nl); Switzerland, Swiss information and data archive service for the social sciences (www.sidos.ch). Below, we indicate the title and reference number of the surveys we have analysed in this paper:

France: Enquête post-électorale française, 1995 (Reference: BDSP-CIDSP q0891).

Germany: Wahlstudie 1990 (ZA study number: 1919); Nachwahlstudie zur Bundestagswahl 1994 (ZA study number: 2601); Politische Einstellungen, politische Partizipation und Wählerverhalten im vereinigten Deutschland 1998 (ZA study number: 3066); Politische Einstellungen, politische Partizipation und Wählerverhalten im vereinigten Deutschland 2002 (ZA study number: 3861).

Netherlands: Dutch parliamentary election study, 1994 (P1208), Dutch parliamentary election study, 1998 (P1415); Dutch parliamentary election study, 2002-2003.

Switzerland: Swiss electoral study 1995 (Reference: 1815); Swiss electoral study 1999 (Reference: 6646); Swiss electoral study 2003 (Reference: 7918).

Descriptive statistics

Table A1: Descriptive statistics for the index of predisposition strength and for the measure of political sophistication

	Index of predisposition strength				Political sophistication			
	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Germany								
1990	0.22	-0.62	0.29	839	1.96	-3.88	4.12	902
1994	0.24	-0.68	0.23	739	1.89	-3.66	4.34	999
1998	0.19	-0.60	0.24	895	1.85	-3.78	4.21	1114
2002	0.27	-0.67	0.25	808	1.82	-3.94	4.06	1031
Netherlands								
1994	0.33	-0.36	0.53	1386	3.79	-6.57	5.43	1527
1998	0.31	-0.38	0.55	1611	3.97	-5.39	6.61	1814
2002	0.33	-0.39	0.54	1500	3.44	-7.22	4.78	1574
Switzerland								
1995	0.32	-0.54	0.40	1112	1.00	-1.71	1.57	1112
1999	0.34	-0.54	0.41	1182	1.00	-1.80	1.67	1182
2003	0.32	-0.57	0.35	1283	1.00	-1.98	1.74	1283
France								
1995	0.36	-0.64	0.35	3207	1.55	-2.58	3.42	4053

Note: We do not indicate the mean, as the variables are centred for all elections

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