

**From unstable preferences to unstable choices:  
Macro-micro interactions in the explanation of electoral volatility<sup>1</sup>**

Romain Lachat  
University of Zurich  
lachat@pwi.unizh.ch

First draft – comments are welcome

**Introduction**

The phenomenon of electoral volatility has received much attention in the literature, especially in the framework of electoral dealignment. Electoral or partisan dealignment refers to a general weakening of voters' attachments to parties. It is argued that party identifications, which played a central role in the traditional models of voting choice, are becoming less relevant. The consequence of these evolutions should be an increase in the level of uncertainty surrounding voters' political preferences and electoral choices. This should be reflected among others in higher levels of electoral volatility (as well as in other aspects of voting choices, like split-ticket voting or late decision-making in electoral campaigns).

This claim of the dealignment literature is the starting point for this research. We argue that an exclusive focus on party identification may be misleading. It is certainly true that voters with a strong party identification are on average less likely to be volatile than political independents or than citizens with a weak attachment to their preferred party. Yet, electoral volatility depends on other factors, both at the individual and contextual levels.

At the individual level, first, we expect electoral volatility to depend not only on party identification, but also on other types of social-structural variables. In particular, voters' position in the cleavage structure should also be linked to specific loyalties, which are not necessarily captured by party identification. Second, following literature on cognitive mechanisms in processes of opinion formation and change, we expect the stability of voters' electoral choices to be influenced by their level of political sophistication. Furthermore, as we shall argue below, the effects of these two types of individual-level variables – strength of social-structural predispositions and political sophistication – should be *conditional* on one another.

The most important point, however, regards contextual factors. One of the main characteristics of the literature on electoral dealignment is that it is expected to be a *general*

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*phenomenon*. These processes are not rooted in social and political evolutions that are specific to different countries or different contexts. On the contrary, it is argued that this phenomenon is a consequence of a general process of social modernization and value change that affects all democracies. The dominant empirical evidence presented in the literature shows that a large number of countries is characterized by a weakening of party identification and by increases in the frequency of different ‘symptoms’ of instability (electoral volatility, split-ticket voting, or late decision-making in electoral campaigns). We argue here however that the level of electoral volatility is conditioned by characteristics of the party system. The stability of voters’ political *preferences* should not be affected by contextual factors. But they should affect the likelihood that unstable preferences actually result in volatile *electoral choices*. Electoral volatility should be both higher and more strongly related to individual-level factors in constituencies with a fractionalised party system.

In the next section, we first present a brief overview of the main arguments linking partisan dealignment to electoral volatility. We then explain how this central argument can be extended, by using a more detailed definition of voters’ social-structural predispositions and by accounting for cognitive processes in the formation and change of attitudes. In the following section, we turn to the impact of contextual level factors. Then, we present the data used for our analyses and document the operationalisation of the individual-level variables. Finally, we present and discuss the results of our analyses, which offer strong support for our hypotheses about the conditional relationships between predisposition strength, political sophistication, and party system fractionalisation.

### **Individual-level determinants of electoral volatility**

The concept of electoral or partisan dealignment refers to changes in the relationships between parties and citizens. As Dalton writes it, ‘[t]he 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). 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 dealignment 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 the next section. In the meantime, we shall refer here more generally to these two aspects as a *decline in the strength of voters' predispositions*. These evolutions are important to understand the process of formation of voting choices. 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 should display a higher level of variability in their partisan preferences. Depending on the characteristics of the candidates, on the salient issues of the moment, on the perceived competence of the competing parties, among others, the new 'apartisans' (Dalton 1984) are expected to choose the party or candidate that corresponds most closely to their political preferences.

Electoral volatility is one of the expected consequences of dealignment which is most often emphasised in the literature. 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; Dalton, McAllister and Wattenberg 2000; Sinnott 1998). 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). However, focusing only on this variable is not sufficient. First of all, while party identification is certainly an important political predisposition, other types of social-structural predispositions also play a major role in structuring voters' choices. The traditional social cleavages – the most important of which being certainly the class and religious divides – have been central to the explanation of voters' party preferences. As they have also been affected by the evolutions presented above, they need to be accounted for if one wishes to determine which voters have become 'dealigned'. If weak social-structural predispositions lead to a higher level of electoral volatility, accounting for both of these two central types of predispositions will allow us to develop a better explanation of the increase in this form of uncertainty. Accordingly, as we explain in more detail below, we shall combine party identification and other social-structural variables in a single measure of the strength of voters' predispositions. The impact of this

Index of Predisposition Strength on electoral volatility should be similar to the one of party identification, but it should be more pronounced (Lachat 2004a, 2004b).

Second, we argue that the simple distinction between stable and volatile voters may not be sufficient. We distinguish here between two types of changes: intra-block and inter-block volatility. The latter corresponds to changes between parties which belong to different groups, defined in ideological terms. The former refers to changes *within* these groups of parties. A voter changing her preference from the Greens to the Socialists, for example, would be considered as intra-block volatile, while a change between the Socialist and the Liberals would correspond to a case of inter-block volatility. This distinction is important, at least for two reasons. First, it has been argued that the increase in volatility was first of all due to changes within party families (Zelle 1994, 1995). Then, the impact of predisposition strength on volatility is likely to be higher for inter-block volatility than for intra-block volatility, as the latter type of change involves a less radical departure from one's traditional loyalties.

While these first two arguments simply suggest more precise measures of social-structural predispositions and of electoral volatility, we also argue that the importance of these predispositions (and hence the level of electoral volatility) may be conditioned by other factors: at the individual level by voters' degree of political sophistication and at the contextual level by the fractionalisation of the party system. These arguments are more central: they imply that focusing only on party identification may be misleading, as the impact of party identification is likely to vary between both voters and contexts. To better understand the role of predisposition strength, it is necessary to consider the factors that moderate its impact on electoral volatility. We shall here first consider the role of political sophistication. There is a large amount of literature from political psychology showing the central role played by political sophistication in the formation of voting choices.<sup>2</sup> Expertise can be defined, at the most basic level, as 'accumulated knowledge in a domain' (Fiske, Lau and Smith 1990: 32). Variations in citizens' degree of political sophistication are linked with important differences in the stability of attitudes and in the way in which information is processed. Political experts will be more interested in politics than political novices, and they should be more strongly exposed to political information. Zaller (1992: 21) notes for example that 'political awareness denotes intellectual or cognitive engagement with public affairs as against emotional or affective engagement or no engagement at all'. Furthermore, political experts 'should have particularly well developed and efficient strategies for representing and using information'

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<sup>2</sup> We use here the terms 'political sophistication' and 'political expertise' in an interchangeable way.

(McGraw and Pinney 1990: 12). At a general level, we would expect an increase in a voter's level of political sophistication to result in more stable and more coherent political attitudes. The impact of political sophistication on electoral volatility, however, also depends on the strength of predispositions. To show this, we must first introduce a second central concept, namely heuristics.

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). In the case of voting choices, a salient piece of information on which heuristic decisions can be based is party affiliation. *If* political parties are central to the organisation of voters' political cognitions and *if* they are not particularly motivated – through contextual factors, for example – to invest more time comparing the alternative candidates and their political programmes, then the party affiliation of candidates may be sufficient to base their voting decision. This expectation is consistent with several dual-process models of opinion formation, that are central to understanding the process of attitude formation and change (Chaiken 1980; Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991; Petty and Cacioppo 1986a, 1986b; Fiske and Neuberg 1990). As far as the potential instability of party preferences is concerned, it implies that even voters with a low or moderate level of political expertise can display stable preferences if they base their decision on meaningful heuristics. Our argument here is that predisposition strength is a good indicator of the availability of heuristics to a given voter. Citizens with strong predispositions (i.e., those with a party identification and/or those belonging to a social group which is clearly 'aligned' in the cleavage structure) are likely to base their voting choice on party affiliation and they should display stable preferences, independently of their level of political expertise.

What about voters with weaker predispositions? In such a case, we would expect the stability of their party preferences to depend on their level of sophistication. But this relationship *may* be non-linear. Electoral volatility can be seen as a case of an attitude change. Following McGuire's 'information processing paradigm' (1968, 1969), the probability of an attitude change stands in a non-linear relationship with individuals' expertise. This expectation is centred on McGuire's distinction between *receiving* a persuasive argument and *yielding* to it. Experts in a domain will be more likely than novices to receive new messages, but they will at the same time be less likely than the latter to accept these new messages if they are conflicting

with their former preferences. As the probability of an attitude change is the product of the probability to receive an argument and of the probability to yield to it, the relationship between attitude change and expertise will be nonlinear. Such a paradigm has for example been widely applied by Zaller (1992) in his model of attitude formation and change. However, applying this model to electoral volatility is not that straightforward. The expectation of a non-linear relationship rests on the crucial assumption that voters' predispositions remain relatively stable. The 'baseline' against which new messages are evaluated must remain unchanged. If it is not the case, the relationship between political sophistication and electoral volatility may be linear. We can make a schematic distinction between two types of processes leading to a change in one's voting choice. It may be due to a more or less random variation around a stable tendency – in which case the impact of political sophistication should be non-linear, following McGuire's model. Or it may be driven by a 'real' change in voters' underlying preferences. In the latter case, political sophistication among 'dealigned' voters should have a linear and positive impact on electoral volatility. It is difficult to determine a priori which of these two patterns of change should be dominant among our two groups of volatile voters. We shall let this question open but specify our models in such a way that non-linear effects can be captured.

To sum up our arguments regarding the individual-level determinants of electoral volatility, we can formulate the following hypotheses. It should be reminded however that these will be refined in the next section by considering the role of contextual factors.

*Hypothesis 1.* The stronger the predispositions of voters, the less likely they are to be volatile.

*Hypothesis 2.* The higher the level of political sophistication, the higher will be the level of electoral volatility (both intra-block and inter-block). At high levels of political sophistication, however, the impact of expertise may reverse (i.e., the relationship may be non-linear).

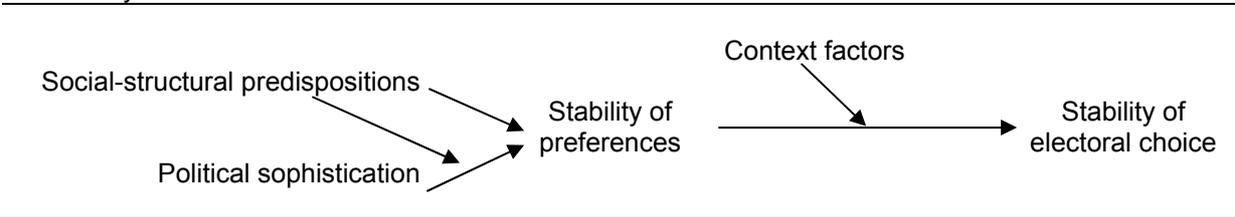
*Hypothesis 3.* The stronger the predispositions of voters, the smaller will be the impact of expertise on volatility (both intra-block and inter-block) specified in hypothesis 2.

### **The role of contextual factors**

The final part of our argument regards contextual-level factors. While predisposition strength and political sophistication impact on the stability of voters' political preferences, the likelihood that unstable preferences actually result in a volatile voting decision should further

be influenced by the characteristics of the decision context. From this point of view, an important factor is the ‘diversity’ of the electoral supply. In an electoral context where a large number of parties are competing, representing many different political stands, we expect a higher level of electoral volatility than, let us say, in a two-party system. We do not mean by this that the stability of voters’ preferences should be affected by the characteristics of their decision context. But these characteristics should affect the likelihood that unstable preferences actually translate into unstable choices. This distinction between these two types of effects is illustrated by figure 1.

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the impact of individual-level and of contextual-level factors on the stability of voters’ electoral choices.



The individual-level factors we have emphasised before should impact on the stability of voters’ preferences. The more unstable these preferences, the higher the level of volatility will be. However, the latter relationship should be influenced by contextual factors. In our case, as in most models of electoral volatility, we can only observe the stability of voters’ choices – not of their political preferences. This means that we cannot test the above model as such. But we can still consider the impact of contextual factors: if our model is correct, we should find that the strength of the relationship between individual-level factors and electoral volatility is influenced by contextual factors.

As we mentioned above, the ‘diversity’ of the electoral supply should be a central factor. The most straightforward way to measure it is to rely on a measure of party system fractionalisation. From this point of view, the ‘effective number of parties’ is a good starting point. This measure, proposed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979), is a weighted count of the number of parties in a given system. It is defined as follows:

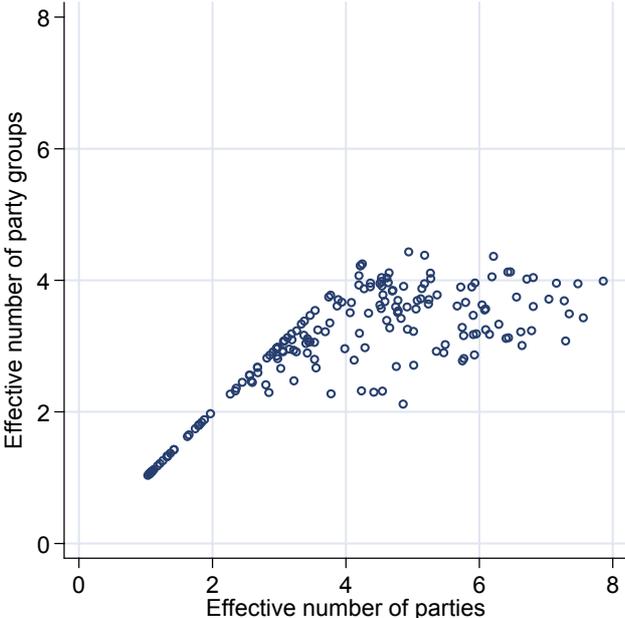
$$N_p = \frac{1}{\sum v_k^2},$$

where the  $v_k$  are the vote shares of the  $K$  parties. If all parties in a given election receive the same share of votes, the effective number of parties is equal to the actual number of parties. It

will however be smaller if the distribution of vote shares is unequal. This is a standard measure for this central characteristic of party systems and it has been widely used in comparative analyses of party systems.

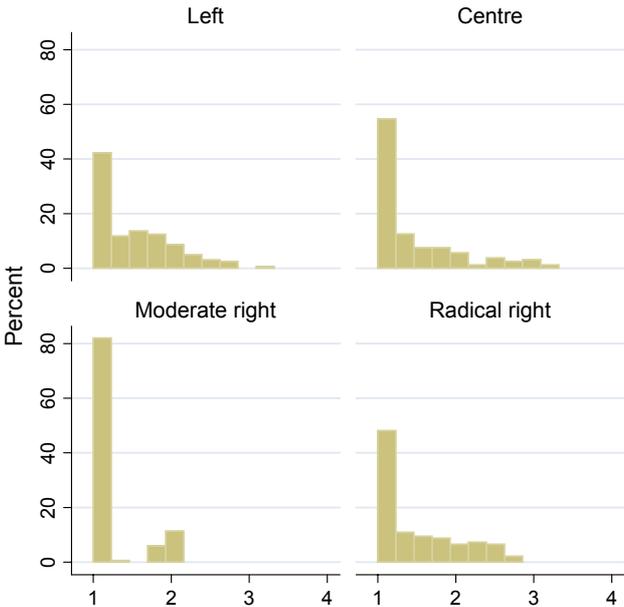
Yet, as we make a distinction between two types of changes (within and between party groups), an overall measure of the degree of fractionalisation is not sufficient. While the overall level of volatility may depend on the total number of parties, its impact on inter-block volatility and on intra-block volatility is not straightforward. Changes between groups of parties will depend on the number of these groups. We may thus define an analogous measure of the ‘effective number of party groups’,  $N_g$ , which is simply computed by replacing the vote shares of parties by those of party groups.  $N_g$  will always be smaller than (or equal to)  $N_p$ . The two measures will be identical if each of the party group is represented by no more than one party. Important differences between the two measures of fractionalisation will be found only in constituencies where several parties which are ideologically close to one another are in competition. We can see this in figure 2, where the two measures of fractionalisation are plotted against one another. When the number of parties is smaller than about 3, there is no difference between the two measures. But when it increases above this value, the effective number of party groups remains more or less constant.

Figure 2. Relationship between the degree of fractionalisation at the level of parties and at the level of party groups. Swiss cantons, 1971-2003



Modelling voters’ decision context with respect to the second type of electoral volatility, namely changes within party blocks, is more problematic. We do not deal here with a purely contextual-level characteristic: voters should only be affected by the effective number of parties within ‘their’ party group. Similarly to the two measures of the number of parties presented above, we can count the effective number of parties within each of the four major groups of parties. If a party group is represented at all in a given election/canton, this measure takes a value equal to or higher than 1. With the data we analyse, we find values that vary between 1 and about 3.3. The distribution of the number of parties is however quite similar among these groups (figure 3). The only exception is the moderate right, where the degree of fractionalisation is much lower, as it includes only the Radicals and the Liberals – the latter competing only in a minority of constituencies.

Figure 3. Distribution of the effective number of parties within party groups in Swiss cantons, 1971-2003



Having defined more precisely these two contextual-level characteristics, we can formulate our final hypotheses regarding the determinants of electoral volatility.

*Hypothesis 4.* The impact of the individual-level variables on inter-block volatility (as specified in hypotheses 1 to 3) should be larger, the higher the effective number of party groups is.

*Hypothesis 5.* The impact of the individual-level variables on intra-block volatility (as specified in hypotheses 1 to 3) should be stronger, the more fractionalised the party group supported in the previous election is.

### **Data and operationalisation**

For the present analyses, we use a pooled dataset from the 1971 to 2003 Swiss Election Studies. Unfortunately, the necessary information (regarding voting choice at the previous election and political expertise) are not available for all of these elections. Thus, we have to restrict our analyses to four elections during this period: 1971, 1995, 1999 and 2003.<sup>3</sup> The Swiss case is a very interesting one for an analysis of contextual factors, as there are important differences between the constituencies. In the election of the National Council (the lower chamber of the federal parliament), which we consider here, the constituencies are the twenty-six cantons. These vary strongly in size (the number of seats for each canton ranges from 1 to 35) and in the number of parties competing (in the four elections considered, the effective number of parties varies between 1.1 and 7.3). Similarly, the number of party groups, as defined above, ranges from 1.1 to 4.4.<sup>4</sup> This electoral setting is thus ideal to analyse the role of such contextual-level characteristics.

Electoral volatility is coded by comparing voters' choice in the actual election with their reported voting choice in the previous election, as indicated by a recall question.<sup>5</sup> We distinguish between three groups of voters: stable, intra-block volatile, and inter-block volatile voters. The party 'blocks' are defined on the basis of general ideological positions. We consider four groups: left, centre, moderate right, and radical right. For each of them, we indicate below the parties they include (using the standard classification of political parties designed by the Federal Statistical Office):

- Left: SPS, PdA, PSA, POCH, Solidarités, FGA, GPS;
- Centre: CVP, LdU, EVP, CSP;
- Moderate right: FDP, LPS;
- Radical right: SVP, Republikaner, SD, EDU, FPS, Lega.

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<sup>3</sup> All four datasets are available at the Swiss information and data archive service for the social sciences (<http://www.sidos.ch>).

<sup>4</sup> Although we identified four major groups of parties, we also formed a rest category including all parties that did not fit into these four groups. This explains why the effective number of party groups can take values higher than 4.

<sup>5</sup> The use of recall questions is not without problems, as it usually leads to an underestimation of the level of electoral volatility (see for example Schoen 2000a, 2000b). For a more detailed test of the arguments presented here, it will be necessary at a later stage to compare our results with those obtained using panel data.

At the individual level, we have two independent variables: political expertise and predisposition strength. Political sophistication is measured with an index of political knowledge. In 1971, we combine two measures. First, respondents were asked to name the parties represented in the Federal Council. It is thus a five-point scale, ranging from zero to four correct answers. The second item is very different: *interviewers* were asked to rate interviewees' knowledge of politics, using a five-point scale, ranging from 'very bad' to 'very good'. This variable is a little bit problematic as voters' scores do not depend directly on the knowledge of some factual piece of information. It may be influenced by interviewers' subjective appreciation. But we nevertheless chose to include it in our measure of political sophistication, as we have so little other information. Despite its subjective character, we can be confident in the validity of this measure. As a matter of fact, the correlation between the two variables is quite strong (0.51), which indicates that interviewers' ratings are validated by substantial information. To build our measure of political expertise, we summed these two variables and standardised the resulting scale. In 1995, 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.<sup>6</sup>

The second individual-level variable is the Index of Predisposition Strength (IPS). As we explained, this is a measure summarising the impact of voters' predispositions (party identification and variables related to the social cleavages) on their electoral choice. To compute this index, we start from a multivariate model, where electoral choice is regressed on the corresponding social-structural variables. Then, we use the estimated coefficients to compute 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 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

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<sup>6</sup> More detailed information on the construction and on the validation of these indices of political knowledge can be found in Lachat (2004b).

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. In our case, the models we have estimated distinguish between four possible votes – corresponding to the four major party groups. The highest predicted probability can thus range from 0.25 (i.e., equal chances to vote for any of the four party groups) to 1. To build our index of predisposition strength, we have recoded these highest probabilities into the 0-1 range. We have computed such a model and the corresponding index separately for each of the four elections. For reasons of space, we do not present here the estimated coefficients.<sup>7</sup> We simply indicate which variables were included: voting choices were regressed on party identification, social class, trade-union membership, religion, religiosity, age, gender, education, and employment status.

## Results

Our analyses shall be structured in two parts. As the contextual-level factors affecting the relationship between the stability of preferences and electoral volatility are not the same for the two types of changes, we analyse inter-block and intra-block volatility separately. In the first model, our dependent variable is a dummy distinguishing between inter-block volatile voters, on the one hand, and stable or intra-block volatile voters, on the other. At the contextual level, this form of instability should be influenced by the degree of fractionalisation *between party groups*. The second model we shall test focuses on intra-block volatility. For this, we exclude voters who switched between party families. Thus we have again a dummy dependent variable. This type of volatility should depend on the degree of fractionalisation *within party groups*.

For both of these models, we have actually only three independent variables (expertise, IPS, and fractionalisation), but also a large number of interaction terms. We include the index of predisposition strength, political sophistication (in its ‘normal’ and squared forms, in order to capture non-linear effects), as well as interactions between IPS and the two forms of sophistication. To this, we add the main effect of fractionalisation, as well as interactions between the measure of fractionalisation and all other variables. The two models to be estimated can thus be written as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> They can however be found in Lachat (2004b), along with more detailed information on the construction of this index.

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot IPS + \beta_2 \cdot Soph. + \beta_3 \cdot Soph.^2 + \beta_4 \cdot IPS \cdot Soph. + \beta_5 \cdot IPS \cdot Soph.^2 + \beta_6 \cdot N \\ + \beta_7 \cdot N \cdot IPS + \beta_8 \cdot N \cdot Soph. + \beta_9 \cdot N \cdot Soph.^2 + \beta_{10} \cdot N \cdot IPS \cdot Soph. + \beta_{11} \cdot N \cdot IPS \cdot Soph.^2 + \varepsilon,$$

where  $N$  stands for the effective number of party blocks (that is  $N_g$ , in model 1) or for the effective number of parties in the group of parties supported by a voter in the previous election (in model 2, where this variable is labelled  $N_i$ ). As the dependent variable is a dummy in both cases, we have estimated the two models with logistic regressions. The corresponding coefficients and standard errors for the two models can be found in tables 1 and 2, respectively.

These estimated coefficients are quite difficult to interpret directly, as the effects of all variables are conditional on other factors. To make the interpretation of these results easier, we turn to predicted probabilities.<sup>8</sup> Starting with model 1, we see in figure 4 how the probability of an inter-block change is affected by political sophistication, predisposition strength, and the number of party groups. The three panels in figure 4 correspond each to different levels of party group fractionalisation. The middle panel is for constituencies with an average number of party groups (i.e., an effective number of party groups of 3.1). The left and right panels correspond to constituencies with a weak and a strong degree of fractionalisation,

Table 1 Impact of individual-level and contextual-level factors on inter-block volatility

	Coef.	Std. Err.
IPS	-1.67	1.71
Sophistication	-0.21	0.99
Sophistication <sup>2</sup>	0.78	0.94
IPS*Sophistication	-0.16	1.41
IPS*Sophistication <sup>2</sup>	-1.13	1.36
$N_g$	0.78*	0.32
$N_g$ *IPS	-0.89 <sup>†</sup>	0.48
$N_g$ *Sophistication	0.14	0.28
$N_g$ *Sophistication <sup>2</sup>	-0.20	0.26
$N_g$ *IPS*Sophistication	-0.08	0.40
$N_g$ *IPS*Sophistication <sup>2</sup>	0.29	0.38
Constant	-3.67***	1.13
N		2892
McFadden R <sup>2</sup>		0.05

<sup>†</sup> p<0.01 \* p<0.05 \*\*\* p<0.01 \*\*\*\* p<0.001

<sup>8</sup> All predicted probabilities reported here have been estimated using Clarify for Stata (Tomz, Wittenberg and King 2003; King, Tomz and Wittenberg 2000).

Table 2. Impact of individual-level and contextual-level factors on intra-block volatility

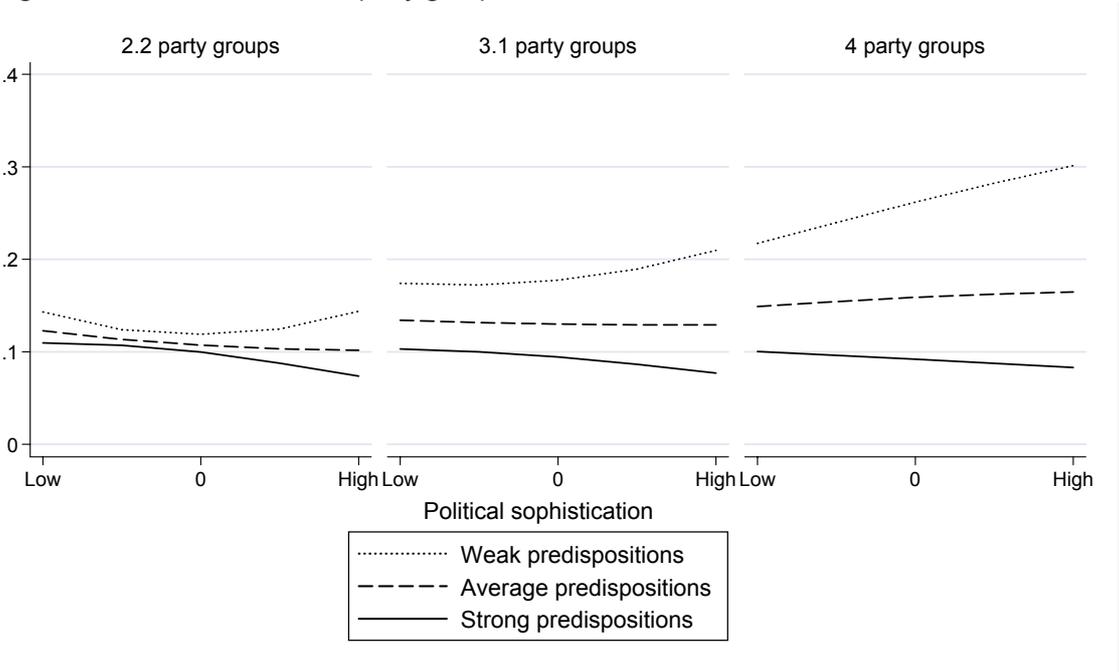
	Coef.	Std. Err.
IPS	-0.50	0.98
Sophistication	0.10	0.71
Sophistication <sup>2</sup>	-0.43	0.72
IPS*Sophistication	-0.12	0.92
IPS*Sophistication <sup>2</sup>	0.08	0.91
N <sub>i</sub>	0.71 <sup>†</sup>	0.39
N <sub>i</sub> *IPS	-0.09	0.55
N <sub>i</sub> *Sophistication	0.11	0.39
N <sub>i</sub> *Sophistication <sup>2</sup>	-0.06	0.40
N <sub>i</sub> *IPS*Sophistication	-0.21	0.50
N <sub>i</sub> *IPS*Sophistication <sup>2</sup>	0.25	0.50
Constant	-3.14***	0.70
N		2487
McFadden R <sup>2</sup>		0.03

† p<0.01 \* p<0.05 \*\*\* p<0.01 \*\*\* p<0.001

respectively (defined as the average number of party groups minus or plus one standard deviation). In each of these panels, the probability of an inter-block change is plotted against a voters' level of political sophistication (on the x-axis), for three different levels of predisposition strength. 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).

If we consider first the left-hand panel, corresponding to constituencies with a small effective number of party groups, we see that the effects of both political sophistication and predisposition strength are quite small. Voters with weak social-structural predispositions are slightly more likely than strongly predisposed voters to be volatile. The likelihood of an inter-block change varies also a little bit with the degree of political expertise. But altogether, we would rather conclude here that individual-level factors have no substantial impact on the level of electoral volatility. When the party system is more fractionalised, however, the differences linked with expertise and predisposition strength become more important, as illustrated by the middle and right-hand panels of figure 4. Voters with strong predispositions still display the same low level of volatility. But the impact of predisposition strength increases with the degree of fractionalisation. The higher the effective number of party groups, the higher is the level of volatility among voters with weak predispositions. As far as political expertise is concerned, we find that it has a positive impact on the likelihood to be

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities of an inter-block change, by political sophistication, predisposition strength, and effective number of party groups

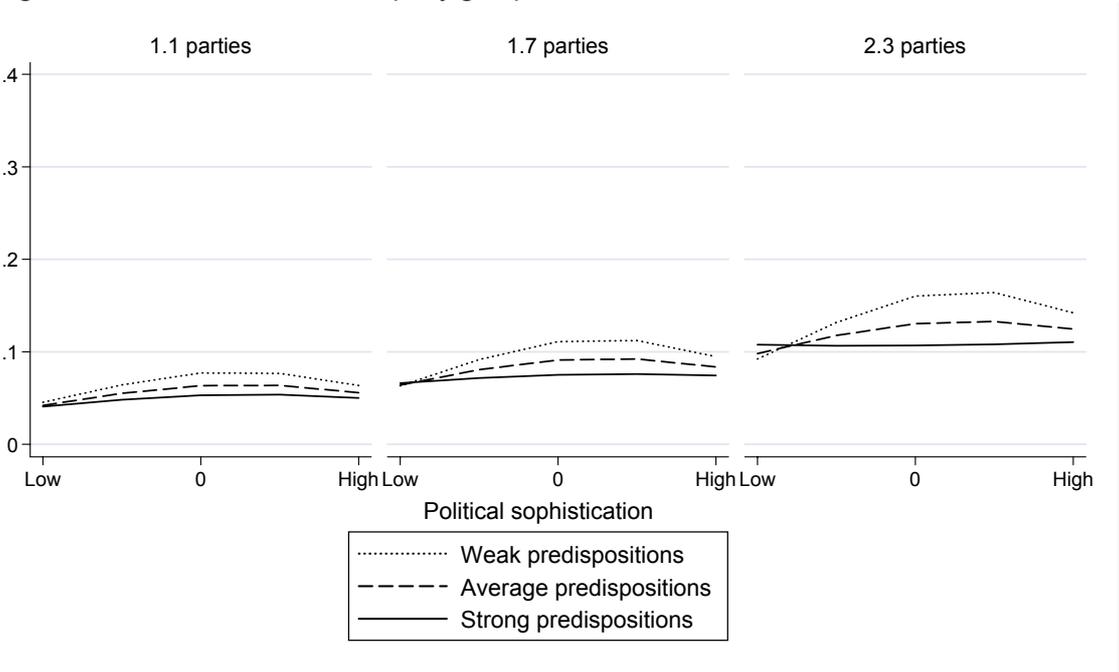


volatile, but only among voters with average or weak predispositions. To sum up, we find as expected that predisposition strength has a negative impact on electoral volatility, but that this impact is conditional on party system fractionalisation. Similarly, electoral volatility is influenced by voters’ level of political expertise, but this impact depends on both predisposition strength and party system fractionalisation (i.e., the impact of expertise is more pronounced among voters with weak predispositions and in fractionalised constituencies).

Let us now consider the results of the second model. Similarly to the model of inter-block volatility, we have computed predicted probabilities for different levels of political sophistication, predisposition strength and party system fractionalisation. The relevant contextual variable is now the effective number of parties in the group of parties supported by a respondent at the previous election. The corresponding results are presented in figure 5. The measure of ‘within-group-fractionalisation’ varies here between 1.1 parties (average value minus one standard deviation) and 2.3 parties (average plus one standard deviation). The other variables are set to the same values as in the previous model.

We start again with the left-hand panel. When the degree of fractionalisation is low, we find that political sophistication and predisposition strength have almost no impact on the degree of volatility. Voters with strong predispositions are the least likely to be volatile, but the differences with the other two groups are marginal. Like for inter-block volatility, however,

Figure 5. Predicted probabilities of an intra-block change, by political sophistication, predisposition strength, and fractionalisation within party groups



we notice that differences between individuals become larger as the degree of fractionalisation increases. The level of intra-block volatility increases among all groups of voters, but it does most strongly for respondents who have weak predispositions and a middle or high level of political expertise. Here, we can thus actually observe a non-linear relationship between political sophistication and the level of volatility. The voters most likely to switch between two parties of the same ideological group are those who combine weak predispositions and a middle level of political sophistication. Most important, however, is that our hypotheses about the role of contextual factors are again supported: electoral volatility is influenced by predisposition strength and by political sophistication, but these effects intensify with the degree of fractionalisation of the party system. The impact of these two individual-level variables is not a general one: it is conditioned by the characteristics of voters' decision context.

**Conclusion**

The starting point for this analysis was the central claim of the dealignment literature, that electoral volatility – like other ‘symptoms’ of a growing instability in voters’ preferences – is to be mainly explained by the decline in the level of party identification. We have suggested that this argument was not sufficient to explain electoral volatility and that focusing mainly on party identification may be misleading. Most important from this point of view is our

argument that the impact of party identification (or of other social-structural predispositions) should be conditional on other individual-level factors and on characteristics of the electoral context. The impact of social-structural predispositions should not be constant across groups of voters or across electoral contexts. It is likely to vary between individuals, as having strong social-structural predispositions is not the only 'route' leading to stable attitudes or voting choices. Attitude stability is also a function of voters' degree of political expertise.

Accordingly, the effects of predisposition strength and of political sophistication should be conditional on one another. Similarly, the relationship between individual-level variables and electoral volatility is conditioned by the characteristics of voters' decision context. The impact of predisposition strength and of political expertise, as well as the general level of volatility, will be higher in constituencies with a fractionalised party system.

We have tested these hypotheses in the case of Swiss national elections, where the characteristics of voters' decision context vary strongly from one constituency to the next. Our results show strong support for our hypotheses. We have shown that electoral volatility (both within and between groups of parties) is influenced by political expertise, predisposition strength, and by party system fractionalisation. But most importantly, we found that the effects of these three types of variables are conditional on one another. The strength of voters' social-structural predispositions is an important factor, as argued by the dealignment hypothesis, but its impact varies strongly between contexts and between groups of voters. When the degree of fractionalisation of the party system is weak, predisposition strength makes no difference. In such a situation, the level of electoral volatility is the same among all voters.

When discussing the impact of political sophistication on electoral volatility, we explained that it was difficult to determine a priori whether the shape of this relationship would be linear or not. This type of attitude change may be a result of two different processes: random variation around a stable preference (in which case the impact of sophistication should be non-linear) or a change in voters' underlying preferences (resulting in a linear relationship between expertise and the likelihood to be volatile). Our results show that the impact of sophistication is positive and linear as regards inter-block changes, but non-linear in the case of intra-block volatility. Unfortunately, we have not enough data here to test whether this difference can really be explained by the two processes leading to a change in voters' attitudes. To do this, it would be necessary to rely on panel data, where changes in voters' preferences can be measured. However, such an explanation seems at least plausible on the basis of our results. Changes in voters' underlying preferences should be more likely to result

in a change from one party group to another. Smaller, 'random' variations in voters' preferences, on the other hand, are less likely to lead voters to change radically their electoral choice. This would explain why the impact of political expertise is non-linear for *intra-block* volatility, but not for *inter-block* changes. Of course, this is only a tentative conclusion. To test more systematically for such differences between intra-block and inter-block volatility, it will be necessary to perform more detailed analyses, on the basis of panel data.

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