

Studying campaign effects on voter heuristics

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Abstract

In the study of voter decision making, heuristics have emerged as one of the key concepts to understand the psychological processes underlying the decision making process (Baldassarri & Schadee 2006; Lago 2008; Lau & Redlawsk; Popkin 1991; Sniderman et al 1991; Wang 2008). Heuristics are cognitive shortcuts, that enable people to deal with the overload of information they are faced with everyday. When we try to assess the influence of campaign communications upon the use of heuristics we are faced with several methodological problems. A key aspect of this is that behaviorist methods equate the use of heuristics with the information gathering strategies used by voters (Lau & Redlawsk 2007; Lau & Redlawsk 2001b). As such it becomes difficult to differentiate between the heuristics and the information gathering behavior. In this paper I develop an alternative method of assessing the influence of campaign information on the use of heuristics: by mapping the motives reported by voters on a typology of heuristics. Repeated measurements of such motives, combined with information exposure measurements, should help us gain new insights into the effect of electoral campaigns upon the use of heuristics. The current paper establishes the conceptual model that will be tested using a panel survey among Belgian voters in 2009.

Studies of campaign effects on voting behavior often have to conclude that the effects, if any, are minimal at best. Especially when we look at the most important dependent variable in electoral research, voting behavior, scholars often fail to find any effects at all (Ansolabehere 2006). Several explanations can be found; for one, the link between cause and effect is hard to establish. Voters are exposed to a plethora of information throughout a political campaign; while most of this information originates from the mass media, it often fails to have an impact as the processes of selective exposure and perception dampen the effects (Noelle-Neumann 1999). A second cause is that voting behavior doesn't change all that often. A lot of voters do follow the campaign, but in the end they stay loyal to the party they preferred at the start of the campaign. This doesn't necessary mean the campaign had no effect at all, but as we see no observable change in the behavior we cannot be reject this statement either. Scholars have therefore moved away from mere voting behavior, and have focused on the decision making process instead: do campaigns have an effect on the way people decide for whom to vote (Lau & Redlawsk 2007)? This approach focuses on the information that voters are exposed to, and uses this to map the heuristics that are being used in the decision making process. Perhaps the voter doesn't change his preference because of the campaign, but he might reach that same preference using a different decision strategy.

A typology of heuristics

The concept of heuristics is crucial to this approach; the application of the concept in political science was developed in the works of Popkin (1991) and Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock (1991), but it originates from psychology, where Tversky and Kahneman (1974) used heuristics to explain the

biases they found in simple decision making tasks. Heuristics are information shortcuts, that allow voters to deal with the overload of information they are faced with. By only taking certain bits of information into account, people can reach decisions and act upon them. In this regard, heuristics are beneficial and even necessary to basic human functioning (Kuklinski & Quirk 2000); if people had to stop and think about all the relevant information before they did anything, not much would be done. On the other hand, the selective use of information introduces biases in the decision making process; people can make mistakes. If they chose option A through heuristic reasoning, but they would have picked B if they had complete knowledge of all the relevant information, the heuristic introduced a bias in their decision making. Lau and Redlawsk call a voting preference that is reached through complete knowledge of all the relevant information a 'correct vote' (Lau & Redlawsk 2007: 15-16); as such it becomes a benchmark against which the real-life performance of voters is tested.

While it is true that heuristics can bias the result of a decision by ignoring certain information, another possibility is that the information that a voter is exposed to shapes the shortcuts that are being taken; empirical evidence on the interaction between new, external information and heuristics is often lacking. For example, Lau and Redlawsk use so-called information boards to measure the use of heuristics. This technique, in essence, equals information seeking behavior to heuristics use. Based on the information respondents select to inform themselves on the parties and candidates running in an election, inferences are made about the heuristics these respondents are using. This simplification limits its use for studying campaign effects on heuristics, since it cannot distinguish between the heuristic and the information that a voter is exposed to.

Measuring heuristics through voting motives

For this reason we must resort to a separate measurement of the heuristics that are at work; voting motives, or the answers to the question 'why did you vote for this party' can provide us with a measurement of such heuristics. Voting motives, and their application in political science have been under scrutiny for decades. There are several reasons for this: from purely pragmatic reasons – open ended survey questions are expensive; to critiques on their reliability and validity (Nisbett & Wilson 1977; Rahn et al 1994; Van Holsteyn 1994)¹.

On the other hand, we could state that simply ignoring these answers of respondents would severely cripple our ability to understand (and ultimately explain) electoral behavior. If we don't know how the voters themselves experience their behavior, we lose perspective of the voters' side of things. Furthermore, these measurements provide a width of information that cannot be obtained through a (series of) closed-ended question(s). Voting motives are in essence a quick introspection: the respondent tries to explain the causes of his own behavior. These causes can be many, and by not imposing a predefined framework we allow respondents to use their own wordings. These causes contain indications of the way in which a respondent makes sense of the decision at hand; in other words, they contain indications of the heuristics that are being used. Our approach will try to extract

¹ The fundamental debate is that on 'introspection', which still causes a schism in psychology; we don't cover it in more detail here, but should the reader wish more information on this debate, the paper by Danziger is well-worth reading: Danziger K. 1980. The History of Introspection Reconsidered. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 16:241-62

these indicators of heuristics from these voting motives; repeated panel measurements throughout an electoral campaign² allow us to track change and stability in these indicators. This enables us to separate heuristic indicators from information exposure.

Heuristics literature provides a variety of different ‘cognitive shortcuts’ that voters can use; we build upon the typology presented by Rosema (2004), though we make a few adaptations. Rosema distinguishes six heuristics that voters use in their decision making process: election outcome preference, incumbent approval, party preference, candidate preference, voting habit, and endorsements. Policy preference (according to Rosema, a subtype of the election outcome preference heuristic) is treated as a separate heuristic. Each of these heuristics limits the cognitive information that is considered in a different way.

Election outcome and incumbent approval

Voters using the election outcome heuristic are basically voting prospectively; the incumbent approval heuristic also has a temporal aspect to it, in that voters employing this heuristic are voting retrospectively. Retrospective voters are looking at their incumbent government, and asking the question ‘what have you done for me?’. If they’re satisfied with the performance of the incumbent, they vote for the government; if not they vote for the opposition. This is the basic outline of the theoretical argument (Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981). The key variable that is used is the state of the economy, but more specific performance on issue domains is also used (Fournier et al 2003); for our purposes the key aspect of the heuristic is the temporal dimension. The voter is looking backwards. Due to the coalition governments that are predominant in Belgian politics, the ability of voters to assess each parties contribution to the failure / success of the incumbent government is severely hampered. This obstacle may be circumvented somewhat by the personification of the different departments: the party that supplies the prime minister is often seen as the leading party of the coalition and is therefore often more likely to be assessed retrospectively (Fisher & Hobolt 2008).

On the other side of the temporal spectrum we find the prospective voter that is using the election outcome heuristic. These voters are voting based on their expectations of what will happen after the elections. Prospective voting theory has developed several considerations that voters use: voters can base their vote on their preferred government (coalition), their expectations on parties’ size, the preferred government leader, and their preferred policy (Rosema 2004). Government leader and policy preference are intertwined with candidate preference and issue voting, respectively. The key distinction is that a prospective voter is thinking about expected future outcomes.

The government preference consideration is perhaps better coined coalition preference, as the Belgian governments usually consist of several parties. Therefore, having a preference for the next government usually means having a preference for a certain coalition. While this makes the use of such a heuristic somewhat harder (since the actual coalition possibilities are only clear after the elections), voters are still able to vote for a party knowing that this may increase the chances of a certain coalition (Rosema 2006: 475). Furthermore, another possibility is that the voter simply wants a change in government – he wishes to ‘throw the rascals out’, so to speak. He may then choose from

² The 2009 electoral campaign for the Belgian regional elections in Flanders and Wallonia.

among any of the opposing parties, which would weaken support for the incumbent coalition. Note that some voters may actually cast a strategic vote: we define this as not voting for the most preferred party (Rosema 2004). One reason for this is that the most preferred party may not be large enough to be a true 'threat' to the current coalition, while a lesser preferred party could become large enough to break the coalition. Research has shown that voters can make predictions pertaining to this heuristic based on poll information (Meffert & Gschwend 2007). This strategic voting behavior will be captured under the party size preference heuristic.

Two possible prospects may be of importance to the voter using this heuristic: either the voter fears the existence of the party is in jeopardy, or the voter wants to vote for a large / small party. Due to the voting threshold effective in Belgium (a party must get a minimum of 5 per cent in the electoral district to be able to obtain a seat), small parties are often struggling to stay afloat. Commentators often mention this threshold when discussing the polls, so voters receive plenty of information to make use of this heuristic. Voters may cast an insincere vote for a party struggling with the threshold if they believe the party has a chance of survival (Meffert & Gschwend 2007; Rosema 2004). The effect could work the other way around though: if voters believe the party doesn't stand a chance, they may switch towards a party which actually 'stands a chance'.

Similarly, voters may specifically choose to vote for a small or large party. This may be because of a coalition preference (see above), but also because of the mere appeal of a smaller party (who can have more pronounced issue stances, being less 'bound' by a large electorate). The reason voters may prefer a large party are varied: a large party may be more prone to break the incumbent coalition, or may be likely to become the leading party in the next coalition. Furthermore, some people simply prefer larger parties because they want to 'vote for the winner', as Lazarsfeld et al. already noted (1944). In both cases, the voter is explicitly voting based upon their expectation for that parties' performance in the upcoming election.

Party preference

Voting for the most preferred party is one of the most traditional approaches to voting; the electorate would 'simply' assess which party they prefer most, and vote accordingly. The Michigan model coined the term 'party identification' to signify a more stable and long lasting party preference, causing the voter to see himself as belonging to a certain party (Campbell et al 1960). Rational choice theories view identification from a purely utilitarian perspective; voters calculate their expected utility function for every party and vote for the one that offers the highest expected value (Iyengar & Ottati 1994); here the term preference seems more apt, as it doesn't imply a long-standing loyalty. We adopt a different perspective: the key concept in the cognitive shortcut is the party. Voters use the limited information they have on these parties to make sense of the decision they are faced with. This is similar to Zuckerman and Brynin's (2001) approach which links party identification to the heuristical framework. Not all voters go about their decision in the same way, and the same reasoning is valid for party preference: some voters reconsider their loyalty on each election, others always choose the same party. Though different mechanisms are at work, these voters are still voting for a party *because they like it best* (Rosema 2004: 81).

Voting against another party is, in our typology, also seen as an indication of party preference. Rosema (2004: 81) only treats voting for the most preferred party as such; as we use the party concept as the main distinctive concept for this type of heuristic, a voter voting against another party is still using information regarding parties to make up his mind. For example, if a voter expresses

discontent with party Y and therefore decides to choose party X, the voter is still making his choice based upon parties (instead of future expectations, candidates, or some other type of information).

Candidate preference

The fact that at least part of the electorate choose among candidates instead of parties is almost undisputed. The personalization of election campaigns in Western Europe has been increasing continually, and even parliamentary elections are becoming more and more presidential in nature (Mughan 2000). More and more, the person of the political leaders is becoming a crucial factor in winning (or losing) elections. This evolution might give the impression that elections in Europe are becoming more and more 'presidential' in nature, meaning that the real struggle occurs between candidates, rather than between parties (Kleinnijenhuis et al 2003: 82-84).

Swanson and Mancini (1996) suggest that the electoral behavior is determined in large part by the connection a voter has with a candidate. This augmented importance of candidates can also be explained by the loosened connection between voters and parties. Ideology as a voting determinant isn't as common as it used to be, and the number of 'floating' voters increases. We therefore include the candidate preference heuristic: voters using this heuristic are basically comparing the candidates (most often the party leaders) to make up their mind. As with the party preference heuristic, voters that vote *against* a candidate are also using the candidate preference heuristic. A voter that votes for X because he dislikes the party leader of party Y is using information about the candidate in his decision making process.

Several reasons may lead a voter to (dis)like a candidate: candidates are often evaluated by voters based on several attributes: competence, authenticity, integrity, morality, just to name a few. It is important to note that the notion of an 'ideal candidate' would imply that all voters look for the same characteristics in a candidate. Several studies have shown that people this isn't the case (Goeminne & Swyngedouw 2007; Miller et al 1986; Trent et al 2001). Whatever the underlying characteristics are, the shortcut remains identical: vote for the candidate you deem to be the 'best'.

Voting habit

Habit formation is one of the core psychological concepts that allow humans to cope with a cognitive overload (Ajzen 2002). In all aspects of life people are quick to use recurring patterns to deal with certain tasks, so it seems unlikely that voting would be an exception. Though this type of decision making may seem shallow at first, Downs acknowledges that it can be 'rational' use this type of heuristic:

"Finally, some rational men habitually vote for the same party in every election. In several preceding elections, they carefully informed themselves about all the competing parties, and all the issues of the moment; yet they always came to the same decision about how to vote. Therefore they have resolved to repeat the decision automatically without becoming well-informed, unless some catastrophe makes them realize it no longer expresses their best interests." (Downs 1957)

In their study of the emotional underpinnings of the vote, Marcus and MacKuen (1993) show that in absence of emotional arousal, habitual patterns dominate the voting decision. From a psychological point of view this is perfectly normal: as humans only have the ability to pay attention to a limited

amount of things at once, they are forced to rely on habits for many things. Given that for a lot of voters the interest and knowledge of politics is relatively low, the fact that they form a habitual voting pattern is only natural.

Endorsements

Rosema defines this type of heuristic as 'voting for the party or candidate other people say you should vote for' (Rosema 2004: 84). This heuristic therefore introduces the social environment of the voter into the heuristical framework. What differentiates this heuristic from the other cognitive shortcuts in the model is that the voter is, essentially, delegating his voting decision. The voter basically copies the voting decision taken by another individual, group or organization.

The impact of the social environment on decision making and attitude formation is well-documented in the literature (Glynn et al 2009). The crystallization theory states that young adults are still impressionable, and their attitudes are more easily influenced by external influences (Alwin & Krosnick 1991). Within the immediate social environment family and friends would be the most probable sources of endorsements (Beck & Jennings 1991), but larger organizations such as union groups have been found to have an impact as well. Note that this can work both ways: endorsements by groups you are positive towards increase the chance of voting, and vice versa. Brady and Sniderman (1985) describe the likeability heuristic, through which voters can infer policy stances from groups larger groups (black and white people) merely by their affective reaction to them. In a similar vein we can assume that voters can make similar inferences for unions, social movements and so on.

From a bounded rationality point of view, endorsements offer a quick and easy guide to the vote choice; by delegating the actual choosing to an external entity, the voter has only to invest a minimal amount of effort to the vote choice.

Policy preference

The policy preference heuristic focuses on a specific issue domain to decide which party to vote for. This shortcut is related to what is often known as 'issue voting'. Voters base their vote upon the policy stance of the parties on one (or several) issues. For example, a voter who finds tax cuts primordial would be inclined to pick the party that has an issue stance that stresses tax cuts (most likely a liberal party). As we already indicated when we discussed the election outcome heuristic, it is difficult to classify the policy preference heuristic as purely prospective in nature, since the issue voting literature focuses both on retrospective and prospective evaluations. The rational voter model assumes that voters look not only at the policy stances of parties (which indicate future performance), but also at the parties' performance on an issue.

Borre (2001) defines issue voting as comprising three elements: (1) issues about the goals of politics ('values') (2) issues as discussions about what should be on top of the agenda (issue saliency), and (3) issue performance in terms of the voters' perceptions of competence and credibility among parties and candidates. The third aspect Borre distinguishes clearly links issue voting to the retrospective approach: issue voting comprises an evaluation of competence and credibility of parties and candidates. Issue positions are linked to prospective evaluations as well. Tavits (2007) states that policy positions of new parties is a critical factor in electoral success (or failure). This indicates that

future expectations based on issue positions also matter in the vote decision. We therefore separate the time dimension from the issue voting as such.

While both retrospective and prospective considerations may play a role in the issue voting heuristic, the issues that are being considered by voters may be prone to external influence. Agenda setting by the media may cause certain issues to become more salient, and vice versa. We will touch upon this when we discuss the relation between electoral campaigns and heuristics.

Measuring heuristics through voting motives

Our research model distinguishes 7 cognitive shortcuts that voters can use to decide amongst the different parties running in an election. The first challenge of our approach is whether or not we can extract indicators for these heuristics from voting motives; as the focus is on the impact of campaigns on heuristics, we'll restrain our focus on this first challenge to a brief discussion in the methodology section of the paper. Assuming that we can indeed extract meaningful indicators of heuristics from voting motives, we develop a theoretical framework that tries to explain the interaction between electoral campaigns and the decision strategy that voters use.

Electoral campaigns and heuristics

We briefly touched upon Lau and Redlawks' approach to decision making heuristics; they equate the use of heuristics to the use of certain information searching strategies. By separating the two we can analyze the relation between external (campaign) influences and the cognitive shortcuts that voters employ. Our baseline assumption is that, void of external influences, the heuristics that a voter uses to make up his mind remain constant during the electoral campaign period. This is based upon basic decision making theory (Tversky & Kahneman 1974): except for external information reaching the individual, all other factors remain the same: the *individual* is unlikely to change substantially, since the campaign runs over only a three-month period (the electoral campaign); the *decision to be taken* remains the same: one preferred party is to be chosen; the *set of alternatives* remains identical; and there are no substantial changes in the *expected outcomes* of each of the alternatives. Therefore, we can assume that heuristic (time 1) = heuristic (time 2).

In a campaign setting, the above assumption can hardly be described as realistic; voters are continually exposed to external information. Therefore, the next step is mapping this influx of external information; it is impossible to map everything a voter is exposed to, so we must limit our perspective somewhat. Our approach divides external information into three types or streams of information: information from the close social environment of the voter (friends and family, colleagues), information from the mass media (television, newspapers, radio and internet), and information that is coming directly from the parties (folders, websites, face to face meetings with candidates). As Popkin (1991) suggests, voters often don't search for information actively; the process of information acquisition is mostly passive, as voters pick up information in their daily activities. Our model focuses on measurable information streams, but this entails the omission of a part of the information that is acquired (for example, voters might have to endure daily traffic jams, causing the mobility issue to be highly salient for them). While we don't insert this type of information acquisition in our model, we do map its dissemination through the other streams: the mass media are especially key: to have an effect on the *voting* decision, voters must connect this day-

to-day information to the electoral decision – or as Popkin puts it, government. And to know what government is doing, people still have to consult the mass media. Therefore, the streams incorporated in the model should map the information acquisition quite well.

The impact of these streams is mediated by two processes: selective exposure, which mediates the types of information that a voter is exposed to, and selective perception. Using multiple measurements to map the (changes in) heuristics, we can make inferences about the information exposure and reception of the voters. Selective exposure mediates the influx of new information, and is therefore crucial to include in our model (Klapper 1960). Voters don't spend equal amounts of time consulting information on each of the parties, as they are more prone to consult information that is consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. Klapper describes the processes of selective exposure, perception and retention as important mediators of campaign influences. Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet made similar observations in their seminal study of the 1940 campaign (Lazarsfeld et al 1944).

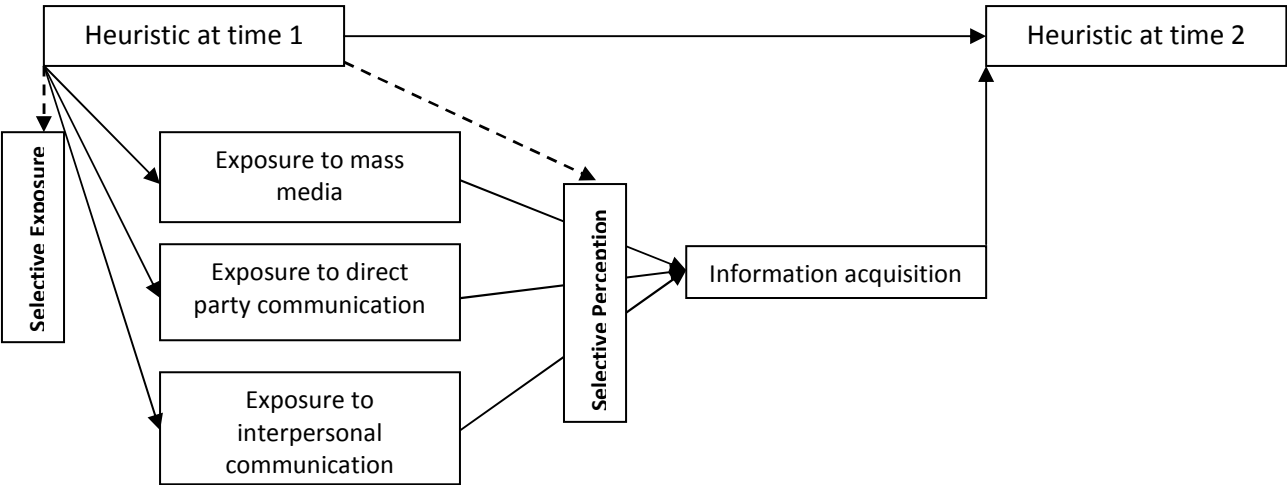
Selective exposure is also related to decision making itself. Social psychology experiments have indicated that individuals are prone to look for information that confirms, or is consistent with, earlier-made decisions (Fischer et al 2008). The theoretical root of this phenomenon is Festingers' (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, which states that individuals try to minimize cognitive dissonance at all times – avoiding information that is contrary to an earlier decision is but one of the ways in which this can be achieved. The selective exposure argument can be seen in a more positive way as well: people are faced with a trade-off of some sorts. Either they make a well informed (but cognitively taxing) decision, or they can make an easy, be it less informed one by only looking at selected bits of information. As the direct utility returns of voting are often minimal, we can assume that *easy usually trumps good* (Redlawsk 2005: 3). This is in line with heuristic reasoning: people make do with the information they have.

The key 'bias' introduced by selective exposure is related to the party preference of the voter: voters are more likely to be exposed to information on the preferred party (Noelle-Neumann 1999). However, voters that are not using party preference as the dominant heuristic would not be prone to such selective exposure. For example, a voter that is deciding purely based on the environmental issue would be interested in *all* parties viewpoints. More generally, we can assume that the impact of selective exposure will be relatively limited in our study. Iyengar and Bennet (2008) note that in the US, media have become more partisan in their coverage; this in turn gives voters more opportunity for selective exposure. However, in Belgium such polarization in the media hasn't appeared as of yet. During the electoral campaign period, television stations strive to give each party 'airtime'. This severely limits the ability for Belgian voters to avoid incongruent information. In a lot of cases voters are therefore being exposed to coverage on several parties at once, so the effect of selective exposure in the big picture would be lessened simply by the way in which mass media cover the elections. Still, theory would predict the impact of selective exposure to be larger among voters utilizing the party preference heuristic.

Selective *perception* is more intricately related to the heuristics that are being employed; the definition of a cognitive shortcut implies that certain information is omitted (Kuklinski & Quirk 2000). We can therefore assume that the shortcuts that voters use influence their perception quite directly:

information fitting the shortcut would be more likely to be used in decision making, whereas information which cannot be used within the reported heuristics would be ignored. An example would be the aforementioned issue voter, mainly concerning with the issue of environmental safety. When watching the news, said voter would probably watch both the coverage on the latest electoral poll and the decision of the government to abolish a forest – but we would expect him to use only the latter in his decision making.

These two processes are the key mediators of external information that voters are acquiring. The next step is realizing that not all information streams contain information that connects to all the cognitive shortcuts. A voter that is voting based on endorsements is more likely to pick up relevant information from the interpersonal information stream; the mass media, on the other hand, form the main source for information on polls, future coalitions, endorsements from institutions (unions, for example), candidates and past government performance. The direct party information stream contains primarily information on candidates, party ideology and party stances on issues. Naturally, information from the mass media is further disseminated through interpersonal communication as people discuss the debates, polls and so on amongst one another. Overall, the heuristic that is being used at the start of an electoral campaign will sometimes dictate the exposure to the information streams, but should have a consistent impact on the perception of the information acquired from those information streams: information fitting the heuristic is more likely to be acquired. Figure 1 illustrates this assumption.



As the data and methods section will show, measuring exposure to information is relatively easy: people either watched the television news, or they didn't; acquisition cannot be directly observed, and is therefore more susceptible to bias. We will assess the possibility of examining information acquisition through voting motives as well. To this end we differentiate between two types of change that can occur in a voters' report: within- and cross- heuristic change. We will explain the difference between these two types of change using an example. The report of voter X at the start of the campaign shows clear indications of the policy preference heuristic (for example, mentioning the environmental issue as a voting motive); at the end of the campaign, the report of the same voter also contains indications of policy preference, but mentions a different issue – this is what we see as

within heuristic change. Though the decision strategy as such hasn't changed, the information that is contained in the report changes. Changes between cognitive shortcuts are defined as cross-heuristic changes. If the selective perception theory and heuristics theory are correct, we should observe mostly within-heuristic changes and only small amounts of cross-heuristic changes.

This results into two key hypotheses concerning the interaction of electoral campaign (information) and heuristics:

Hypothesis 1: Differences between information exposure cannot be explained using the typology of heuristics. Different heuristics do not lead to distinct patterns of information exposure.

Hypothesis 2: During an electoral campaign, exposure to external information leads to within-heuristic change, rather than cross-heuristic change.

The key weakness in the model at this point is the cross-heuristics changes we will undoubtedly encounter. How do we explain changes that indicate changes in the decision strategy itself? Two possible explanations are feasible: the first, most perilous one, is that we are observing measurement error – people are just giving us random answers each time. The second possibility is that we are observing the most salient motives – and thus the most salient heuristics at the time of measurement. The impact of external information can cause latent cognitive shortcuts to become salient again; therefore cross-heuristical changes aren't by necessity invalid. This is in line with research on priming and agenda-setting of the media. For example, media exposure can help candidates achieve electoral success (Van Aelst et al 2008), or make certain issues more salient (McCombs & Shaw 1972). Therefore, should the media coverage focus on one aspect of the electoral decision this might cause cross-heuristic changes in the answers we obtain through the open-ended question on voting motives.

Data and methods

Our methodological design builds on two separate research efforts; the first is a representative panel survey of the Belgian³ population that is eligible to vote in the 2009 regional and European elections (Partirep Voter Panel Survey – referred to as PVPS from here on out). This dataset is key to our design as it contains multiple panel measurements of voting motives throughout the electoral campaign, as well as measurements on information exposure, issue saliency, government evaluation and so on. The second is an experiment embedded in an on-line panel survey, the UAWEP (University of Antwerp Web-based Electoral Panel). This panel is by no means representative for the Flemish population. The chief aim of the experimental design is measuring the impact of heuristic-specific information on reported heuristics.

Partirep Voter Panel Survey

Preparations for wave 2 are currently in progress, wave 1 fieldwork is completed; table 1 gives an overview of the projected N and timing of each panel wave.

³ The survey only focuses on Flanders and Wallonia; due to methodological and budgetary reasons we couldn't include the Brussels region in the design.

Tabel 1: Overview of PVPS design

Wave 1 (February 23 rd – May 1 st)	Wave 2 (May 25 th – June 5 th)	Wave 3 (June 15 th – June 29 th)
2400 (F2F)	2200 (CATI)	1800 (CATI)
- 1200 Flanders	- 1100 Flanders	- 900 Flanders
- 1200 Wallonia	- 1100 Wallonia	- 900 Wallonia

The sample design is geographically clustered according to the electoral districts; within each cluster we drew a random sample of eligible voters, stratified by age. The resulting dataset should provide us with a sample that allows for inferences that can be generalized to the Flemish and Walloon electorate.

The measurements on voting motives (and hopefully, heuristics) are key to the design; each wave of the PVPS therefore includes an open-ended question on voting motives (with probes). These questions follow the question on vote intention and are situated near the beginning of the questionnaire to minimize the influence of other survey items. Wave 3 includes a closed-ended battery as well.

In all three waves, near the start of the survey an open-ended question on voting motives is included. First, the respondent is asked about his vote choice if the elections were held today (W1 & W2) or how he actually voted (W3). After this question the following, open-ended question is asked:

“People often have various reasons to vote for a certain party. In your own words, could you tell me why you decided to vote for this party?”

Two general probes (‘anything else you can think of?’) and two specific probes are asked as follow-up questions (in case the respondent states that ‘it is the best party’ the interviewer demands why it is considered the best party; a similar scenario is foreseen when the respondent talks about policy in general). Furthermore, a question on switching motives is asked. If a respondent switches parties between waves, an additional question is asked:

“Why did you decide to switch party?”

One follow up probe is added to the switch motives as well. The answers to both open-ended questions will be coded according to a codebook that reflects the seven heuristics we distinguished earlier. Up to three heuristics will be coded for each answer. This limit was imposed based on the coding of similar open-ended data from Belgium, where less than 5 per cent mentioned three motives or more (Beerten et al 1997). Coding will be done by the author and two students that will be trained on the codebook.

On a side note: the closed-ended question on voting motives included in wave 3 contains a listing of the most commonly mentioned motives based on previous research (Meerseman & Swyngedouw 2003; Swyngedouw et al 2001). This will provide us with a necessary check on the open-ended questions.

The above questions provide us with three measurements of heuristics throughout an electoral campaign. We can track changes and stability in these heuristics; to explain changes in these heuristics we included exposure to the three information streams discussed earlier as well.

In each wave, several items measuring exposure to information from three streams are included in the survey. The media information stream is measured quite extensively as it constitutes the main source of information available to the voters. Each PVPS wave includes a measurement of the frequency of television news exposure, newspaper reading, listening to news on the radio, and visiting news websites on the internet. For each medium we ask the most frequently consulted source (e.g. which specific newspaper is read the most, and so on). For television exposure we measure exposure to specific programmes in waves 2 and 3 as well, for example whether or not the respondent watched the big debate or 'do the vote test'. Finally we measure the party that was noticed most in the media (and whether or not this was in a positive, neutral or negative way).

The other two streams, interpersonal information and direct party communication are measured as well, albeit less detailed. In each wave we measure the frequency of talking about politics with friends, family and colleagues; in waves 2 and 3 we ask respondents to indicate the most discussed topics as well (issues, candidates, or polls). Direct party communication is measured through items on contact with party candidates or party members, reading of party flyers, or watching television ads of the parties. While these measurements are not exhaustive, they should allow us to at least control for exposure to these two other information streams when we analyze the impact of the mass media.

Experiment embedded in UAWEP on-line survey

The current sample of the UAWEP panel was drawn in the run-up to the 2006 elections. The current number of respondents is roughly 8000 for the first wave of 2009. The 2009 survey started about 3 months prior to election day, and includes 3 waves (2 pre-electoral, 1 post-electoral). Its questionnaire is clearly election- and campaign focused, and a large number of respondents is highly interested in politics.

The third post-electoral wave of the UAWEP will be used to conduct an experiment that tries to assess the impact of media coverage that is clearly relevant to one heuristic on the reported heuristics of respondents. A total of four conditions are planned: one issue-based condition, one election-outcome based condition, one candidate condition, and a control group. Except for the control group, all respondents are exposed to a video fragment that contains different items depending on the condition. The fragment is embedded at the start of the questionnaire, under the pretense that as the campaign is now over, we present our respondents with an overview of the campaign events. After exposure to the video fragment the questionnaire itself commences.

Each fragment is commented by an off screen voice of a journalist of the public broadcaster (Jan Gerits); the footage itself is tailored to fit one of the three heuristics we expect to be most common in the mass media – candidates, issues and election outcome information. In the issue condition the main campaign issues of each party are discussed, with only general images of the party congress and campaign material. Conversely, in the candidate condition the leading figures of each party are shown, along with a few short quotes and debate footage. Finally, the election outcome condition

focuses on the polls, predictions on government coalitions and the interpretations of the electoral result.

Naturally, in all three waves of the UAWEP we measure voting motives and most of the variables included in the PVPS. The key aim of this experiment is to analyze the interaction between external information and pre-existing heuristics. Following selective perception literature, as well as heuristic theory, we expect larger effects of external information if it ‘fits’ the heuristic that a voter is using.

Content analysis of the media

To map the content of the media coverage of the campaign, both newspapers and television broadcasts will be analyzed using a heuristic based coding scheme that allows us to match between heuristics and media content. As it was impossible to code *everything*, we are forced to make a selection in the number of newspapers and broadcasters as well as the sample of articles / broadcasts. The newspaper landscape in Belgium is separated into a French and Dutch subsystem. As such, we constructed a separate sample design for both language sectors. For the Dutch subsystem we selected three newspapers, for the French subsystem we selected two:

Table 2: Selection of newspapers (circulation estimates cited from (CIM 2008))

Newspaper	Description
De Morgen	Broadsheet newspaper, with extensive coverage of political news. It’s market share is about 10 per cent (CIM 2008).
De Standaard	Broadsheet newspaper, with extensive coverage of political news. It’s market share is about 14 per cent (CIM 2008).
Het Laatste Nieuws	The most popular newspaper, and also the most tabloid-like of the three. It has the highest circulation of the Flemish newspapers, resulting in a market share of about 30 per cent (CIM 2008).
La Libre Belgique	Considered to be the reference newspaper, with extensive coverage of political news. It’s market share is about 9 per cent (CIM 2008).
Le Soir	Also a ‘quality’ newspaper, but it has the highest circulation of the Walloon newspapers, resulting in a market share of about 22 per cent (CIM 2008).

These five newspapers were selected to include at least one ‘quality’ newspaper, and the most popular one for each region. The unit of analysis is 1 newspaper article.

We had to make a similar selection concerning television coverage of the campaign. We selected the public broadcasters of both the Walloon and Flemish region (RTBF and VRT respectively). Though this results in a selection without commercial broadcasters, the public broadcasters offer the most election-specific broadcasts. The unit of analysis is 1 newsitem.

We distinguish two time periods: the 'long' and 'short' campaign. The long campaign period starts 3 months prior to the election and ends 3 weeks prior to the election; the short campaign starts 3 weeks prior to the election and ends the week after the elections. The selection of broadcasts / articles for the long campaign is limited: we only code the evening television news, and only the political articles on the front page. The selection for the short campaign is broader: we code the evening news, as well as specific electoral programmes (for example Ter Zake 09). For the newspapers, we code all articles related to the elections.

The basic coding scheme focuses on issues and candidates: we code whether or not certain issues are mentioned (we use the codebook used by the Electronic Newsarchive for this, as this allows us to incorporate their coded news broadcasts into our sample), and whether or not political candidates are mentioned. We also code whether or not the candidates were mentioned in a positive, negative or neutral manner.

In the short campaign period we also code aspects of each newsitem that can be used as information for specific heuristics. This includes mentioning the incumbent government, polls or voting threshold, mentioning of a parties' campaign strategy, and so on.

This will allow us to get a measure on the relative strength of each type of heuristical information (candidate preference, policy preference, election outcome preference, incumbent approval and party preference) we expect to be present in the media information stream. Combined with the exposure measurements of voters obtained in the PVPS and UAWEP surveys we can integrate the content analysis in the overall model.

Conclusion

This paper set out to describe the theoretical framework and the empirical implementation of our approach to the interaction between the cognitive shortcuts voters use, and the external information that is generated in an electoral campaign. We try out a novel approach to the measurement of heuristics (through open-ended questions on voting motives), which allows us to separate the heuristic from the information search strategies that are measured 'as one' in the study by Lau and Redlawsk (Lau 2003; Lau & Redlawsk 2007; Lau & Redlawsk 2001b). By combining multiple measurements on voters' heuristics with measurements on information exposure and a content analysis of the media coverage of the campaign, we hope to shed some light on the way in which preceding heuristics shape exposure to, and acquisition of, new information. Furthermore, an experimental design allows us to test the effect of heuristic-specific information on reported heuristics.

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