

CHAPTER TWO

AMBIVALENCE AND ATTITUDE CHANGE IN VOTE CHOICE: DO CAMPAIGN SWITCHERS EXPERIENCE INTERNAL CONFLICT?

Patrick Fournier

Vote choice is arguably the most fundamental dependent variable in political science. First, the decision is quite momentous: in a representative democracy, voters are responsible for selecting the individuals who control government and drive the elaboration of public policy. Second, by the sheer volume, variety, and importance of work on the topic, vote choice is a dominant concern of political studies. From this large body of research, the discipline has achieved a rather impressive understanding of the determinants of vote choice. We essentially know why a person favors one party over another, and there is widespread agreement as to the list of key ingredients in the vote choice recipe (party identification, leader evaluations, values, issue positions, economic conditions, strategic preoccupations, and a handful of others). We may argue about the relative proportions of each main ingredient or the relevance of secondary seasonings, but the central dimensions of the recipe are evident.

It is a different story for movement in vote choice. Our comprehension of why people change their voting preferences, of why people switch sides, is relatively modest. In part, this flows from the nature of the available data. Panel or longitudinal studies are grossly outnumbered by cross-sectional studies, which hinder the examination of dynamics and change. A list of potential sources of campaign dynamics has emerged from prior research, including events (such as a candidates' debate), priming, advertising, learning, media effects, and so on. However, it is not yet clear under what conditions these factors do or do not lead to campaign movement, nor do we know which individuals are most likely to be influenced.

The present study seeks to fill some of this gap by identifying the types of citizens who tend to change their voting intentions during a campaign. Ambivalence, an important source of attitude change on political issue positions (Zaller and Feldman 1992), is perhaps the main contender for top determinant of attitude change on vote choice. This study's contributions are threefold. First, the impact of ambivalence on voting opinion change is ascertained in a variety of contexts. My analysis relies on panel surveys conducted by the last three American National Election Studies (ANES) (1992, 1996, 2000), the two latest British Election Studies (BES) (1997, 2001), the three most recent Canadian Election Studies (CES) (1993, 1997, 2000), and the 2003 Ontario Election Study (OES).¹ In all cases, attitude change is captured by comparing pre- and post-election vote choice. Second, ambivalence is tested against an extensive list of potential determinants of attitude change: indifference, opinion strength, issue importance, political sophistication, strength of party identification, education, gender, age, and income. Finally, a new measure of ambivalence is proposed and compared to the two most frequently used indicators of that concept.

CONTEXT

Social psychology has offered the most impressive and inspiring avenues to explain susceptibility to attitude change. The latter apparently can be a function of subject characteristics that include, for example, personality traits (Hovland and Janis 1959), ego-involvement (Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall 1965), salience (Fishbein 1967), cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), adherence to social norms or self-representation of norms (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975), and the amount of cognitive involvement with a given issue (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Persuasion may also be affected by source characteristics such as credibility (Hovland, Janis, and Kelly 1953) and attractiveness (Eagly and Chaiken 1975); by message characteristics such as structure and content (O'Keefe 1990); and by social context (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955).

Although research has considerably improved our understanding of attitude change in general, a case can be assembled about the particularities of *political* attitude change (Mutz, Sniderman, and Brody 1996). However, comprehension of this specific form of change is not very advanced. Despite increased attention within political science (Cobb and Kuklinski 1997; Koch 1998), our understanding of the phenomenon remains sketchy. According to Diana Mutz and her colleagues (1996: 8), "there is precious little evidence specifying who can be talked out of what beliefs, and under what conditions." What are the individual correlates of openness to voting attitude change? Who can be induced to change their intended vote choice