

Chapter 13

Late Deciders: Changing Patterns in Which Voters Make Up Their Mind during Campaigns?¹

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In election campaigns intensive media focus is often directed towards undecided voters, whom many – not least journalists, campaign activists, and the candidates themselves – believe will determine the election outcome. Of course, each of the many voters who have decided their vote well in advance of the election count as much as each of the voters making up their mind in the last moment before, or on, election day. In this sense, the election can be said to be determined at least as much by the many voters with stable party choice. Yet, if the election outcome is close, and many voters are ‘late deciders,’ last minute persuasion during the election campaign can indeed be pivotal for who wins the election. This is a point often emphasized by students of campaign dynamics: as many elections are decided at the margins, moving even few votes during the campaign can make all the difference (e.g. Hillygus and Shields, 2008: 8).

Recent Danish national elections provide examples of late deciders making election night thrilling. In 2011 the center-left bloc of opposition parties had a clear six percentage lead in the opinion polls at the beginning of the three-week campaign. However, as the campaign progressed their advantage diminished and the center-left parties won the election by only 50.2 over 49.8 percent. This marked shift could possibly be explained by a strong performance by prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, leader of the major center-right party (*Venstre*), in the last television debates, which apparently elevated support for his party by two percentage points almost on election day, whereas the Social Democrats lost about two percentage points of their voters (Thomsen, 2011). Likewise, in 1998 the opinion polls consistently predicted that the Social Democratic-led government coalition was going to lose. Nevertheless, on election night the center-left parties surprisingly gained a majority in parliament, secured by just one seat, apparently because many voters in the very last days of the campaign decided to vote for the Social Democrats (Nielsen, 1999: 27-28; see also discussion in Elklit, 1989). Thus, in both elections a large number of late deciders appeared to support the incumbent government disproportionately in the very last days of the campaign; in the latter case it secured the governing parties another period in office, in the former the opposition parties could only just keep their edge.

To further support the idea that the behavior of the late deciders can tilt the election outcome, late deciders are much more likely to switch party. For example, in the 2005 Danish national election, voters making up their minds in the last few days before the election were more than five times as likely to vote for another party than they did in the previous election as compared to voters deciding before the three-week election cam-

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paign began (Hansen et al., 2007: 82). This inclination explains why late deciders can be pivotal to the outcome of an election.

However, despite their importance to election results we know little about the behavior of late deciders and what determines being a late decider. For example, do the undecided voters, like the above examples tend to suggest, end up giving the incumbent government the benefit of the doubt? How do socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender and education influence the tendency to decide early or late and what role do factors such as political involvement play? Answering such questions will allow us to ascertain whether, as some pundits seem to assume, late deciders are confused citizens with low levels of political and other resources or rather carefully considered, resourceful citizens that weigh the alternatives on offer in the election before making an informed decision on Election Day. Moreover, in Denmark as in other countries the group of voters deciding during the campaign is growing over time (Bengtson et al., 2011) and, as we will show, this trend continued through the 2011 Danish national election. The analysis conducted is dynamic in the sense of asking: Has the growing number of late deciders changed the effect that important socio-demographic and political variables have on the likelihood of being a late decider?

To illuminate these questions, we draw on voter survey data as captured in the Danish National Election Study over the 40-year period from 1971 to 2011. We define ‘late deciders’ as voters who say they make their final voting decision during the period between an election is called and election day, in Danish national elections typically a three-week period. This measure potentially gauges many aspects of the vote decision – including the decision to turn out, party choice and candidate choice – and hence provides a broad measure of when the voter made his or her final decision (Fournier et al., 2001, 2004).

We focus our investigation on the effect on being a late decider of three socio-demographic variables: gender, age and education. Young voters can be expected to decide later than older voters because as people get older their political orientations, including party identification, typically crystallizes. Thus, older voters might be more certain and more habitual in their vote decision and less susceptible to persuasion. It is, however, an open question how this evolves over time (e.g., whether there is an increasing number of late deciders also among older voters over time). Likewise, it is an interesting question whether the political mobilization of women has narrowed – or increased – a possible gender gap. We include education in order to see how this central resource affects the time of decision and how this might have changed over time.

We also explore the effect of three political indicators: political interest, political discussion and extreme/non-extreme political views. The first two variables can illuminate whether level of political involvement differentiates between late and early deciders. The latter variable is an indication of ideological position where it can be expected that those with extreme political views will have an easier job deciding which party to vote for because their choice might be clearer as compared to moderates, who typically have more parties to choose from within short ideological distance as the party space is more crowded around the middle of the political spectrum. Again, it is interesting to assess whether differences on these political variables have changed over the 40 year period we are studying.

In the next section, we present and discuss the overall trend in the proportion of late deciders in Danish elections along with an investigation of the existence of any tendency

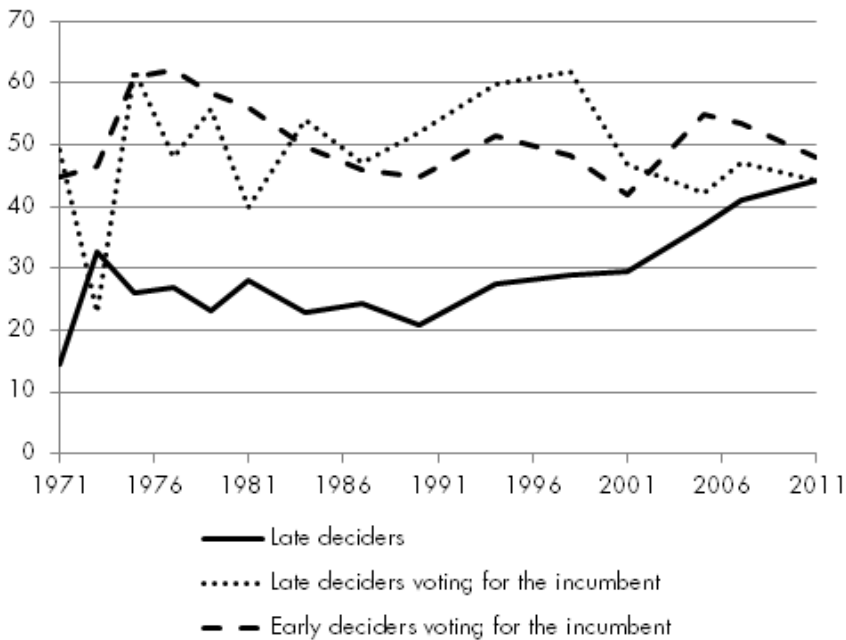
for late deciders to favor the incumbent government over the opposition. Subsequently, we investigate the effect of the socio-demographic and political variables on the likelihood of being a late decider.

An increasing trend, but unclear party political implications

Figure 1 presents the development over the years in the proportion of late deciders. The figure shows the increasing trend that has also been noted in the other Nordic countries (although still at a lower level, cf. Bengtsson et al., 2011). The increase has come in two steps: 1973 and the 2000s. Thus, from a rather low level of 15 percent in 1971 the proportion jumped at the landslide election of 1973 where 33 percent of the voters postponed their decision to the election campaign. Even though the figure dropped somewhat again at the 1975 election, it seems fair to say that 1973, also in this respect, was a bellwether of things to come in the following decades. During the following more than 30 years, however, the proportion of late deciders hovered between 20 and 30. Only in the 2000s did it begin to rise again and the 2005 election was the first since 1973 to register a proportion in excess of 30 percent. The rising tendency has continued through the 2011 election where it hit the highest level so far recorded with 44 percent.

In itself, this trend is highly noteworthy as it may have important implications for the functioning of Danish democracy. One possible implication can, immediately, be investigated in Figure 1: the party political preferences of late vs. early deciders. Thus, as noted, recent Danish political history has seen two examples (1998 and 2011) of incumbent governments winning a large share of the late decided votes. Figure 1 reveals that

Figure 1. Percentage late deciders and voting for the incumbent among early and late deciders, 1971-2011



Source: Danish National Election Study, 1971-2011. See text for coding of variables.

this is no consistent trend, however. Thus, from the two curves depicting the percentage votes for the incumbent government (including its supporting parties, cf. Green-Pedersen and Thomsen, 2005) among late and early deciders we can see that, overall, there is no stable tendency for either group to consistently favor the incumbent. If we disregard the volatility associated with the anomalous 1973 election, the two curves do, however, show an interesting tendency for the Social Democratic-led governments in the 1990s to benefit from a rather large share of the late decided votes up until the 2001 election where the differences between the two groups reverted to the low level that characterizes most of the period. One interpretation is that the Social Democrats were more successful in mobilizing their electoral base during campaigns in these elections, but another would be that more of their voters were in doubt about their vote choice until the last minute.

The socio-demographic roots of late decisions

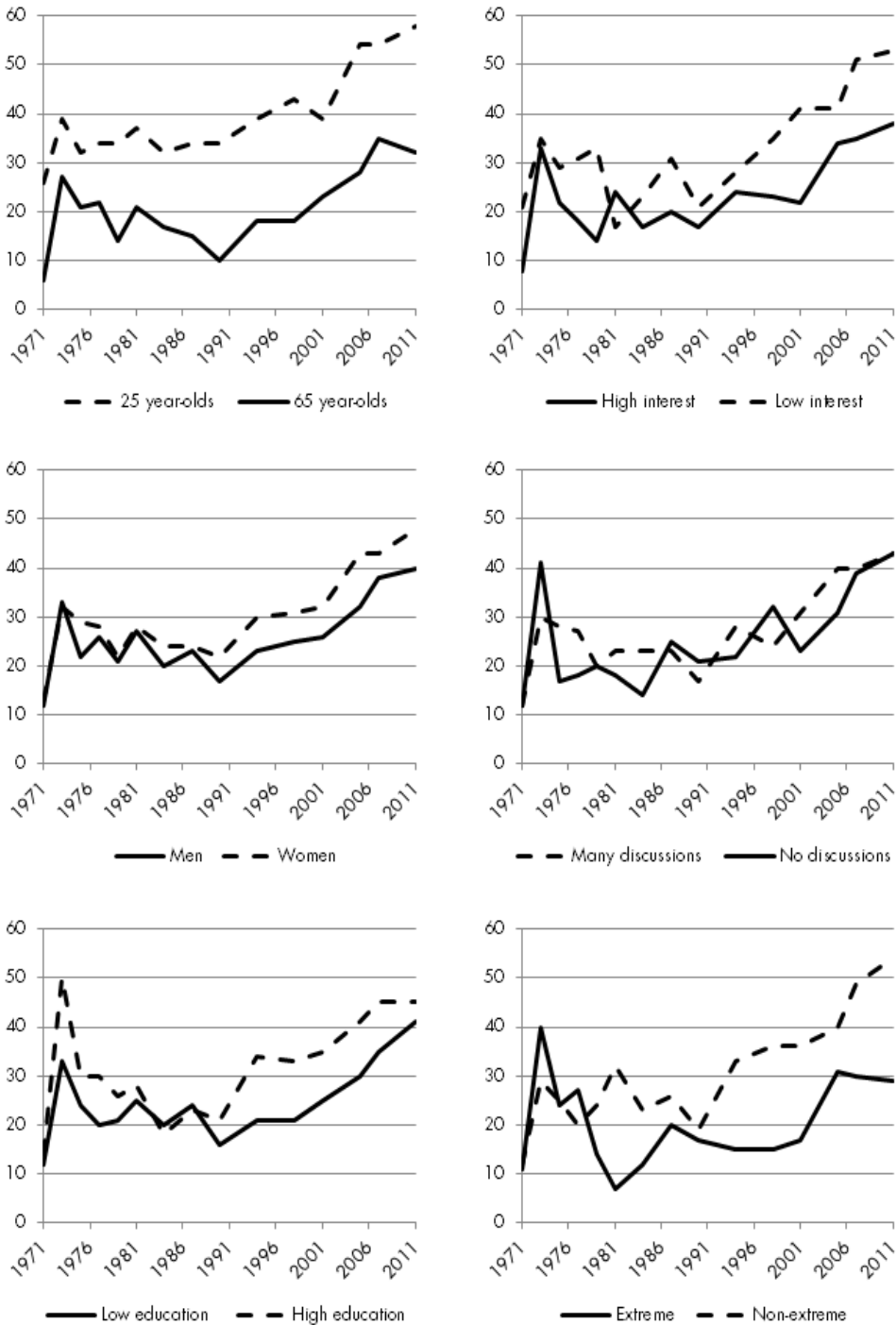
Useful as it is to examine the development of the share of late deciders and their voting behavior, a fuller understanding of the late decision phenomenon requires us to look into the causes of it, that is, to examine which factors induce or prohibit late decisions. To that end we have estimated a series of binary logistic regression models with late vs. early decider as the dependent variable. Following a standard ‘funnel of causality’ framework (Campbell et al., 1960), the models were estimated in three steps: Model I included only gender and age, Model II added education while Model III added political interest, extent of political discussions, and political extremity.² We estimate all three models for each election to keep track of possible changes in the effects of the independent variables. This, however, produces a very large number of difficult-to-interpret coefficients. Therefore, we rely on predicted probabilities to convey the results of the analyses. The predictions, presented in Figure 2 below, are based on the models in which each variable first appears and the values of all other variables have been kept at their mean.³

Looking first at the socio-demographic variables we can see that age (in the upper left corner of Figure 2) has the expected effect in the sense that older voters throughout the period have a considerably lower likelihood of being late deciders than younger voters (we show the predictions for 25 and 65 year-olds). The difference hovers around 20 percentage points through the years, thereby in all likelihood showing the effect of the habitual component of voting behavior as well as the increased experience with voting that comes with higher age.

2 The variables were coded as follows: gender: male/female; age: measured in years; level of education: elementary school up to nine years, elementary school ten years/*realeksamen*, high school; household income (recoded 0-1); occupation: self-employed, higher salariat, lower salariat, skilled workers, unskilled workers, students, outside the labor market; political interest: recoded 0 ‘not at all interested’ to 1 ‘very interested’; extent of political discussions: recoded 0 ‘no discussions’ to 1 ‘discussion with friends, family, and colleagues’; and political extremeness: distance from the mean placement of all voters on 0-1 left-right scale (prior to 1979 distances are ascertained on the economic values scale used by Stubager, 2003).

3 This also applies to the categorical variables, thus implying that the predictions are based on non-existent ‘persons’. This procedure has the advantage of providing an average picture of the effect of the variable in question.

Figure 2. Predicted probability of being late deciders for selected voter groups, 1971-2011. Percent



Source: Danish National Election Study, 1971-2011. See text for coding of variables. Predicted probabilities are based on the models mentioned in the text.

The effect of gender, for its part, is much weaker. In the second panel in the first column in Figure 2 we observe that men and women were about equally likely to be late deciders up until the 1990 election, and that from that time onwards, a small but consistent gender gap has evolved as women are some 5-10 percentage points more likely than men to be late deciders. While this difference between the genders does not in itself reveal its causes we may speculate that it has to do with the tendency, also found in studies of political knowledge, for men to be more self-assured in political matters (Hansen, 2007; Luskin and Bullock, 2011).

The last panel in the first column of Figure 2 contains the plot for education (we show the predictions for people with no more than nine years of school and for those with a high school exam). The panel contains a very interesting picture that speaks directly to the debate about the democratic consequences of the increasing number of late deciders. Thus, contrary to many speculations the figure shows that high school graduates have, bar a short period in the 1980s, consistently been more likely to be late deciders than voters with up to nine years of school (the two groups differ by some 5-10 percentage points). This finding is remarkable as the effect shown does take into account the fact that there are relatively more young voters with higher levels of education. Taking into consideration the higher level of cognitive resources that comes with higher education, this result indicates that late decisions may, to some extent, be seen as reflecting more careful consideration than confusion on behalf of the voters.

The political and motivational roots of late decisions

Turning now to exploring political factors that might explain late vote decisions we can further illuminate whether late decisions are driven by resourceful or haphazard considerations. As seen in the upper-right panel in Figure 2, voters with low political interest tend to decide later than those with high political interest, when we control for the other variables in the model. This difference exists across most of the years and even increases over time. The result follows the general expectation from campaign studies that highly interested voters know well in advance of the campaign what to vote and thus rely less on campaign information. Rather, the campaign activates and mobilizes latent partisan predispositions among the highly politically interested voters, which reinforce their pre-campaign vote choice (Holbrook, 1996: 18). Campaign effects are, consequently, more likely to play a role among the less interested voters.

In contrast to political interest, political discussion with friends, colleagues and family does not affect whether voters decide late or early (see the middle-right panel in Figure 2). The reason might be that early and late deciders engage equally in political discussion, though for different reasons. Late deciders might search for information that can help them decide or, for some citizens encountering opposing views in discussions with others might further delay their vote decision. Early deciders might just be reassured by discussions about the vote choice they have already made and might engage in discussions to convince others to vote as they do. Regardless of the specific mechanisms underlying the lack of influence of political discussion on time of vote decision, these findings cannot be taken as a sign that late deciders generally are less engaged in the campaign.

Finally, as the lower panel in the second column of Figure 2 shows, the most extreme on the left-right scale persistently, and increasingly over the years, tend to make up their

minds before the campaign. That is, voters placing themselves to the extremes, be it far left or far right, make their vote decision earlier than voters who place themselves as ideological centrists. This finding makes sense as the middle of the political spectrum is crowded by more parties and hence centrist voters can have good reasons to consider more party alternatives and for this reason make up their minds closer to the election. Moreover, centrist voters often have less strong attitudes and therefore it might be less important to them which party they vote for. These reasons, too, suggest that late deciders should not *a priori* be considered less thoughtful voters.

Conclusion

The analyses above have shed some light on the growing group of late deciders. Thus, we have found that low age, female gender and higher levels of education seem to induce voters to postpone their vote decisions to the campaign period. Further, low levels of political interest and centrist ideological position also tend to increase the likelihood of a late vote decision, whereas the amount of political discussion does not appear to have any influence on the timing of this decision. The effects of these variables conditioning time of vote decision have consistently become stronger over time, at least since the 1990 election. Then again, the analyses also showed that there is no consistent trend of late deciders voting for the incumbent government. However, an additional analysis (not shown) did show a tendency in the period from the 1994 election to the 2011 election of more late deciders among supporters of the left. This might be caused by a stronger and later mobilization on the left during campaigns, but also suggests that voters on the left decide later than voters on the right, indicating that the campaign was more important for parties on the left during this period.

The growing number of late deciders also suggests that the importance of election campaigns has increased. As there are more votes to compete for, political parties have greater incentives to engage in intensive campaigning. The increased importance of election campaigns does not imply, however, that parties face less intensive competition for votes between elections. Rather, the larger proportion of volatile voters has intensified partisan competition in general. In a wider democratic perspective the results also provide important new information. That is, given that higher education and ideological centrism both promote late vote decisions, and that late deciders are no less prone to engage in political discussion during the campaign, it is difficult to find support for the perception that late deciders should be confused or even incompetent voters, as is sometimes implied in public debates. In this light, the increasing proportion of late deciders in the electorate gives less cause for worry than some pundits seem to assume.

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