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4 CHANGING VOTING BEHAVIOUR

This dissertation studies the effect of media logic on the viability of electoral democracy from the normative perspective of elections' mandate function. As outlined in *chapter 3*, voters have to make a voting decision based on their interests and policy preferences to give elected representatives a mandate which reflects the will of the people. This dissertation focuses on two aspects of voting behaviour that could pose a threat to the viability of electoral democracy: campaign volatility and personalised voting behaviour. *Section 4.1* starts with a brief discussion of the question why campaign volatility and personalised voting behaviour can form a problem for democracy.

Section 4.2 will continue with an empirical assessment of volatility and vote motivations in recent Dutch history. It assesses the floating, shifting, and drifting voter. Do voters shift from one election to another? It also addresses the timing of the voting decision. Do voters make their voting decision before or during the election campaign? This is an important question since campaign effects can only be found if voters make up their mind during the campaign. If voters do not shift between parties, there is no need to study media effects. Furthermore, do voters shift between like-minded parties or do they rudderlessly drift from one party to another? Finally, voters' motivations to elect a certain party are examined in *section 4.3*. Thereby, I will especially focus on the importance of party leader evaluations. These questions will be answered based on longitudinal data.

4.1 Threats to electoral democracy?

Volatility refers to changes in parties' vote shares or seats from one time point to another (Taagepera and Grofman, 2003). Two types of volatility can be distinguished: *inter* election change and *intra* election change, called campaign volatility (Dassonneville, 2012; Granberg and Holmberg, 1991; Van der Meer et al., in press). This dissertation focuses on campaign volatility.

At the level of individual voters, volatility simply comes down to changing voting preferences. It is needless to say that changing voting

preferences are not a threat to democracy in itself. Surely, voters reassess and alter their voting preference. From a normative perspective, volatility thus does not threaten democracy.

Is there a reason to worry about campaign volatility then? While changing voting preference might not be a cause for concern at the individual level, high levels of changing voting preference do form a problem at the aggregate level. If substantial groups of voters continually move from one party to another during the campaign, the eventual outcome of the election might seem arbitrary. High campaign volatility might give the impression that the outcome could have been substantially different if the election was held one week earlier or one week later. If voters easily shift between parties, the election outcome might strongly depend on the timing of the election. This contingency of the election outcome could damage citizens' confidence in the representativeness of the election outcome. The composition of parliament and the coalition, which are based on the election outcome, might seem arbitrary.

Whether or not volatility threatens the viability of electoral democracy also depends on the reasons for voters' shifts in voting preferences. As previously noted, the mandate function of democracy urges voters to base their voting decision on their interests and policy preferences. Voters are expected to reassess their voting preference and to change their mind occasionally. Yet, shifting voters are often thought to be rudderless and to drift from one party to another. This raises the question whether voters *shift* based on a reassessment of parties' issue positions or whether they *drift* based on peripheral cues. If voters drift based on peripheral cues, changes in voting preferences do not represent changes in policy preferences. The outcome of the election thus does not generate a mandate that represents the policy preferences of the people. This could result in policies with limited popular support.

A personalised vote is an example of a vote that is not *primarily* motivated by voters' interests and issue preferences. Instead, it is motivated by a voter's preference for a certain politician, most often the party leader. The Netherlands is a parliamentary democracy. Parties rather than individual politicians play a central role in parliamentary democracies. As outlined in *chapter 3*, a vote based on a voter's preference for a certain politician is inefficient because the power of individual politicians is limited. Dutch voters do not elect a president and the room for

manoeuvre of individual politicians is limited due to strong party unity (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011).

4.2 Volatility

The remainder of this chapter contains an empirical assessment of (campaign) volatility and vote motivations including personalised voting behaviour in the Netherlands.

4.2.1 INTER ELECTORAL VOLATILITY

Figure 4.1 depicts inter electoral volatility in the Netherlands between 1952 and 2010. Inter electoral volatility is measured by the summed absolute difference in party vote shares from one election to another.⁷

⁷ Three parties merged in the period under study. In 1980, *ARP*, *CHU*, and *KVP* merged into the Christian democratic *CDA*, in 1990, *CPN*, *PPR*, *PSP*, and *EVP* formed the Green party *GroenLinks*, and in 2001, *RPF* and *GPV* merged into the Christian *ChristenUnie*. In the calculation of intra electoral volatility, these merged parties are regarded as one party in the first election year after the merger.

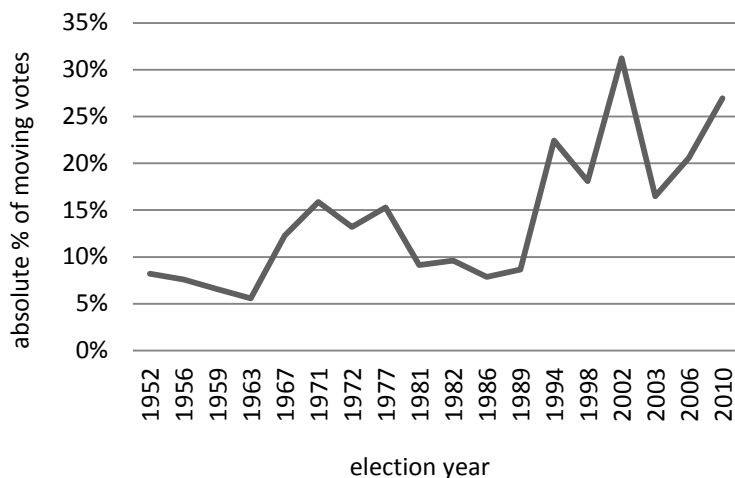


Figure 4.1 *Inter electoral volatility in the Netherlands (1952 - 2010)*

Figure 4.1 shows an increase in inter electoral volatility in the post war period. In the 1970s inter electoral volatility was relatively high in comparison to the previous and the following decades. A sharp increase in inter electoral volatility took place in 1994. In 1994, 22.4 percent of the seats moved to another party. The *CDA* alone lost 13.1 percent of its parliamentary seats. After the 1994 elections, the first cabinet after 1918 without *CDA* (or one of its predecessors) was formed. Electoral volatility has stayed high ever since. It reached its peak in 2002. In 2002, more than 30 percent of the seats moved to another party. The incumbent parties *PvdA* and *VVD* lost 13.9 percent and 9.2 percent respectively, while the first time contender *LPF* received no less than 24 percent of the votes.

This dissertation concentrates on campaign volatility rather than inter electoral volatility. The high level of inter electoral volatility shows that the Dutch voter has become more susceptible to change. This increase in volatility is in line with trends in many other countries (Dalton et al., 2005; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). Yet, Mair (2008) showed that the volatility in the Netherlands is among the highest in Western Europe.

4.2.2 THE TIMING OF THE VOTING DECISION

Campaign volatility in the Netherlands has not been consistently measured over time. This section will assess the timing of the voting decision because it can tell us something about the potential for campaign volatility. Surely only voters who decided on their voting decision during the campaign can have changed their mind during the campaign.

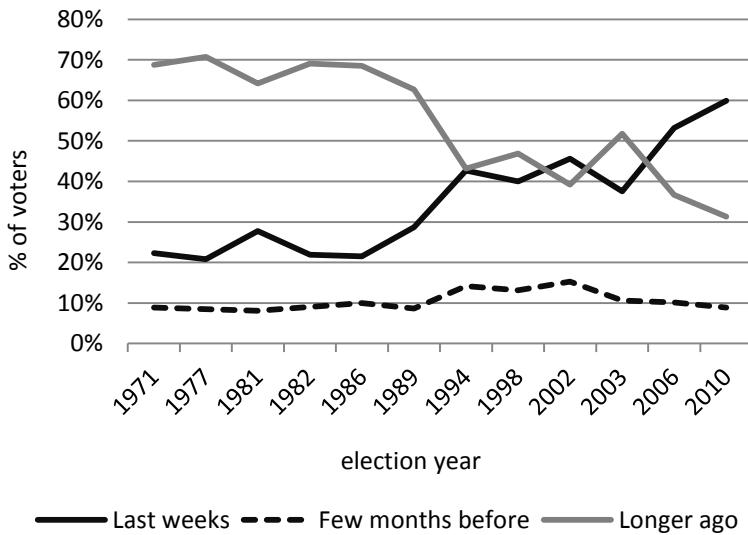


Figure 4.2 *Timing of voting decision in the Netherlands (1971 - 2010)*

Figure 4.2 shows the moment at which voters decided on their vote. The data are retrieved from the Dutch Parliamentary Electoral Studies of the Dutch Foundation for Electoral Research. The following question was posed to the respondents: 'When did you decide to vote for [party mentioned by respondent]? Was this on the day of the election, during the last days before the election, during the last weeks before the election, a few months before the election, or did you know even longer beforehand for which party you would vote?' (Todosijevic et al., 2010: 73). The answer categories 'the day of the election', 'the last days before the

election', and 'the last weeks before the election' were merged into the category 'the last weeks'.

Figure 4.2 shows that approximately ten percent of the voters already made their voting decision a few months before the election. The relative size of this group of voters is more or less stable. More interesting movements are seen in the categories of voters who made their decision during the last weeks and the group of voters who made their decision long before. Up until 1989, a relatively stable majority of around 70 percent of the voters decided which party to vote for long before the campaign started. Only a small minority of around 20 percent made their decision during the last weeks before the election. Therefore, in this period only 20 percent of the voters can have shifted between parties - or have been undecided - during the election campaign. Starting from 1989, a decreasing number of voters decided which party to vote for long before the election. From 1994 to 2003, the two groups were about equal in size, with relatively small differences from one election to another. In 2006 and 2010, the size of the group of voters who made up their mind during the last weeks of the campaign increased again. After the 2010 election, no less than 60 percent of the voters indicated that they made their decision in the last week before the election. Therefore, the potential for change seems higher than ever. It also means that there is more room for short-term influences on the vote, like campaign coverage. Although it should be noted that even when deciding shortly before the election, voters do use earlier information in their vote decision (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006).

4.2.3 CAMPAIGN VOLATILITY: SHIFTING OR DRIFTING?

As noted in *section 4.1*, the implications of campaign volatility for the viability of electoral democracy depend on the kind of shifts voters make. A shift from a left-wing party to a right-wing party is less likely to be a well-informed decision based on a voter's interests and policy preferences than a shift from one left-wing party to another left-wing party. This section examines shifts in voting preferences during the 1998, 2002, 2006, and 2010 election campaigns.

The network graphs that will be presented in this section show the parties between which respondents' voting preferences have shifted.

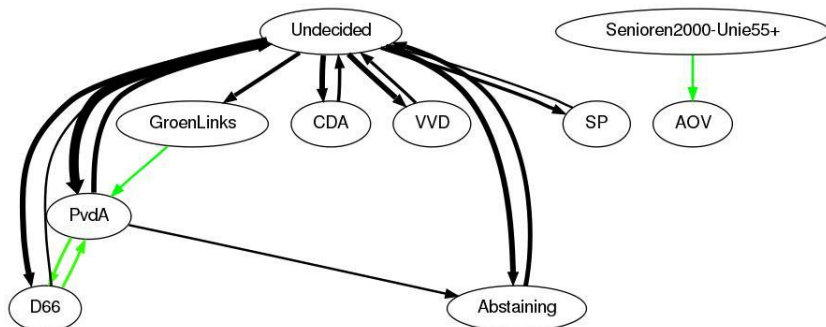
The graphs display shifts between parties, the undecided category, and the abstention category. The graphs include the shifts that occurred in at least 0.25 percent of the observations.⁸ The data were collected by four external research institutes, *NIPO* (1998), *Blauw Research* (2002), *Ruigrok Netpanel* (2006), and *Intomart GfK* (2010). For details on the number of waves and the number of respondents, see *Appendix A*.

The graphs also show the ideological distance between the parties between which voters shifted. The colour of the arrows between parties corresponds with the distance between parties on the left-right scale - as given by Laver and Budge (1992) - based on the parties' manifestos.⁹ The position of parties on the left-right scale was obtained from the Manifesto Project Database (Volkens et al., 2012).¹⁰ The absolute distances on the left-right scale were mean centred. Below average sized distances on the left-right scale were indicated with shades of green, while above average sized distances on the left-right scale were indicated with shades of red. The greener the arrow, the smaller the distance. The redder the arrow, the larger the distance. Distances that are more than one standard deviation smaller or larger than the mean distance were respectively coloured bright green and bright red.

⁸ For 1998, the threshold was lowered to 0.1 percent since change was rarer during this election campaign. This is in line with the results regarding inter-electoral volatility presented in *Figure 4.1*. Yet, it also is a consequence of the shorter period in between waves (see *Appendix A*).

⁹ The distance between parties on the right-left dimension is just one indicator of the difference between two parties.

¹⁰ Not all the depicted parties were included in the Manifesto data set. The distance between the two parties for the elderly was manually coded as very small. *D66* was not included in the 2010 analysis. The distance according to the 2006 data was used as a proxy.

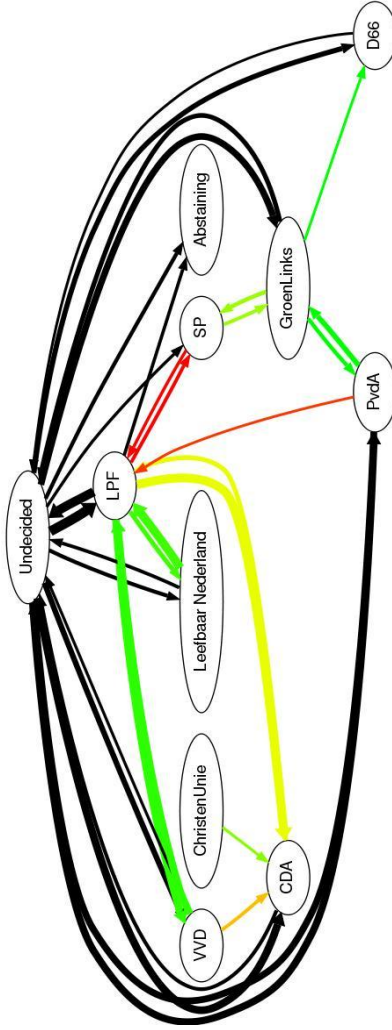


$N = 9,822$ observations

Figure 4.3 *Shifts in voting preferences during the 1998 campaign*

Figure 4.3 shows that in 1998 most voters shifted from one party to another party through the undecided category. So, voters commonly started to doubt before shifting to another party.¹¹ The direct shifts that were made are shifts between ideologically similar parties. Voters moved from a party for the elderly, *Senioren 2000*, to another party for the elderly, *AOV*. Voters also shifted from *GroenLinks* (greens) and *D66* (liberal progressive) to the *PvdA* (social democrats). The manifesto data show that these parties were not far apart on the left-right dimension in 1998. In conclusion, in 1998 voters seemed to have made changes between ideologically similar parties.

¹¹ It should be noted that the presented patterns depend on the time interval in between two waves. Because the time interval in between waves differed from one election to another these patterns cannot be directly compared to each other. See *Appendix A*.

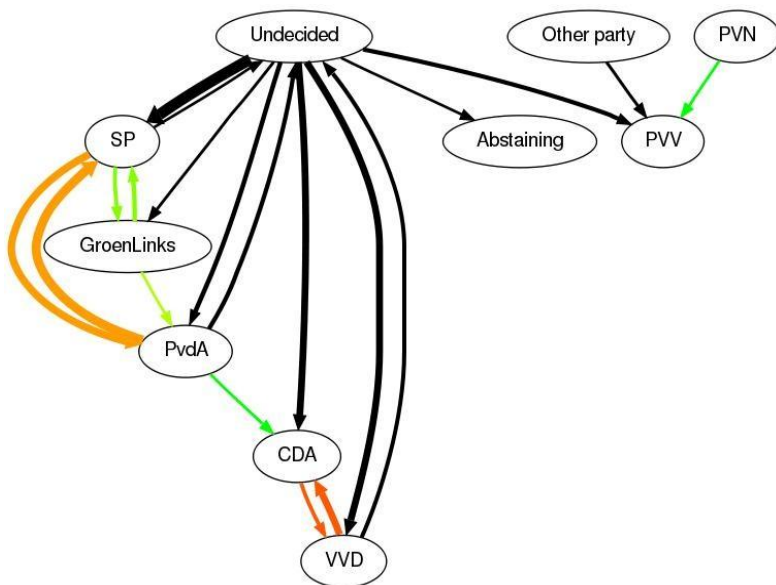


$N = 4,297$ observations

Figure 4.4 Shifts in voting preferences during the 2002 campaign

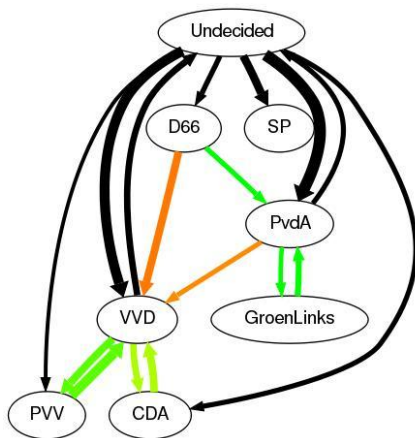
Figure 4.4 shows that the 2002 network looks quite different from the 1998 network. Voters more often changed between ideologically distant parties. The most central actor in the network is newcomer *LPF*. This populist anti-immigration party succeeded in attracting voters from a wide variety of parties. *LPF*-voters came from the populist *Leefbaar Nederland* and the right-wing *VVD* but also from the Christian Democratic *CDA*, and even from the *PvdA* (social democrats), and the *SP* (socialist). The ideological distance between the *LPF* on the one hand and the *SP* and the *PvdA* on the other hand is large. So, some voters moved from the (far) left side of the political landscape to the far right side. These changes in voting preferences consequently cannot be based on voters' preferences regarding left-right issues. This indicates that some of the shifts in 2002 were a result of vote motivations other than issue preferences on the left right dimension.

Figure 4.5 shows a network with a distinct pattern for the 2006 election. At the left side of the network, we see movements from the most left-wing parties to more right-wing parties, while the right side shows movements among the far right parties. At the left, voters move from the *SP* (socialist) to *GroenLinks* (greens) and the *PvdA* (social democrats) and from there to the *CDA* (Christian democratic) and the *VVD* (liberal). This order reflects the right-left dimension in the Dutch electoral landscape. It is interesting to see that voters move more often from the left to the right than the other way around. There is strong competition at the left side of the political spectrum. A considerable amount of voters has been moving between the *SP* and the *PvdA*. At the right side of the graph, voters move between the far right parties *PVV*, the *LPF* successor *PVN*, and other - mainly far right - parties. The colours of the arrows indicate that voters moved between parties who were far apart from each other on the left right dimension.



$N = 4,505$ observations

Figure 4.5 Shifts in voting preferences during the 2006 campaign



$N = 9,524$ observations

Figure 4.6 Shifts in voting preferences during the 2010 campaign

Figure 4.6 shows that the *VVD* – which won the election - was the most central actor in the network during the 2010 campaign. This party was successful in attracting voters from a wide variety of competitors. It drew voters from the *CDA* and the *PVV*, which are relatively similar parties. It attracted voters from *D66*, which is – although also liberal - more left-wing. Finally, it also attracted voters from the *PvdA*, which is the most erratic shift because of the relatively large ideological distance between these parties.

In conclusion, the 1998 and the 2006 data show patterns which indicate that voters predominantly shift between like-minded parties. Yet, the 2002 and the 2010 patterns show shifts between more distant parties. Both in 2002 and 2010 one party succeeded in attracting voters from various directions. This suggests that these voters did not shift based on their preferences regarding socio-economic issues, unless voters radically changed their minds on these issues.

4.3 Vote motivations

The analyses in *section 4.2* show that voters shift between parties from one election to another as well as during election campaigns. The loosening ties between parties and voters pave the way for short-term influences on the vote. This observation is in line with the finding that large and growing groups of voters only decide on their vote during the campaign. This section examines which short-term and long-term vote motivations voters mention as reasons to vote for the party of their choice.

Figure 4.7 shows changes in vote motivations over time. The graph indicates how many voters mentioned each of the five motivations as the main reason to vote for a certain party. The y-axis refers to the percentage of respondents who mentioned a certain vote motivation. The data are retrieved from the Dutch Parliamentary Electoral Studies of the Dutch Foundation for Electoral Research. The respondents were asked the following open question: ‘Why did you vote [party mentioned by respondent]?’ (Todosijevic et al., 2010: 69). The answer categories were coded by the Dutch Foundation for Electoral Research and grouped in five broader categories by the author: a politician related reason, a party related reason, a strategic reason, an issue related reason, and

religion/tradition. Politician related reasons refer to mentions of specific candidates or candidates in general, including party leaders. Party related reasons include expressions of party identification or membership or a positive qualification of the party. A strategic reason includes all references to (dis)satisfaction with a certain coalition or the performance and policies of that coalition. Issue related reasons include interest of specific groups like workers, personal interests, the general interest, a reference to a specific issue like economic problems, a specific set of political beliefs, like 'left ideological ideas', the party manifesto and the like. Finally, tradition/religion refer to respondents' mentions of their religious beliefs or a reference of voting for a party out of tradition (Todosijevic et al., 2010: 69-70).

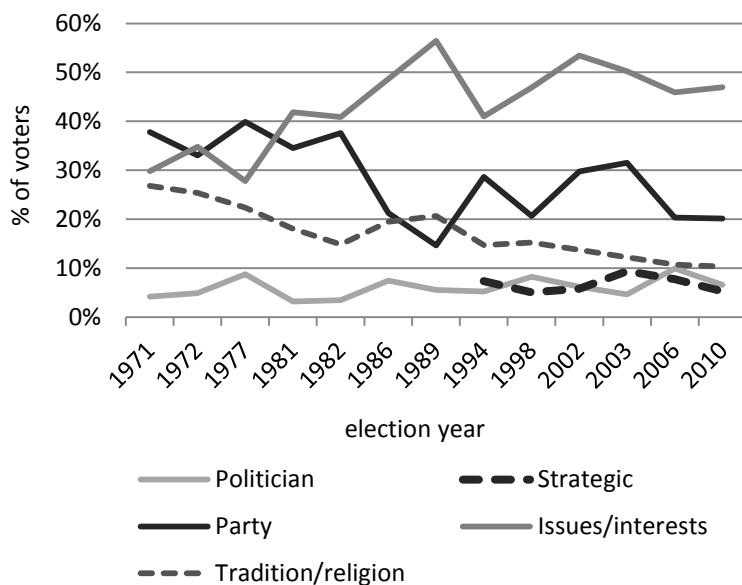


Figure 4.7 *Vote motivations in the Netherlands (1971 - 2010)*

Figure 4.7 shows a decrease in long-term vote motivations. That is, voters decreasingly vote for a party based on religious or traditional reasons. Voters also decreasingly vote for a party simply because they

appreciate the party. Voters increasingly report to vote for a party because they agree with its issue preference, because they defend certain interests, or because of its manifesto. This is in line with the contention that voters have emancipated. Well-educated, interested voters judge parties according to their issue positions. This is good news from the perspective of the mandate variety of electoral democracy. At the same time, voters also increasingly vote for a party because they appreciate the politicians representing the party.

4.3.1 PERSONALISED VOTING BEHAVIOUR

Figure 4.8 zooms in on personalised voting behaviour. It displays the percentage of voters who mentioned individual politicians, including party leaders, as respectively the first or either the first or the second reason to vote for a certain party. The data are part of the above-mentioned dataset.

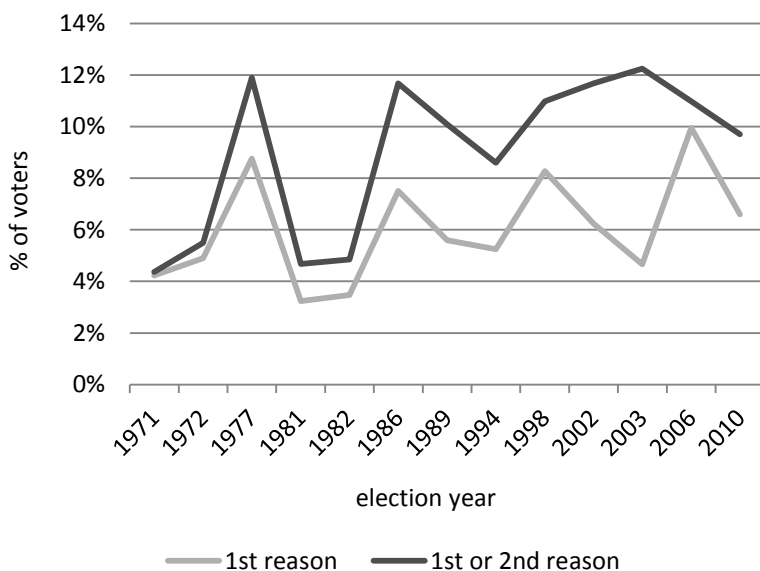


Figure 4.8 *Percentage of voters mentioning a politician as a vote motivation*

Figure 4.8 shows that up to 9.9 percent of the voters mention a politician as the main reason to vote for a certain party. Up to 11.9 percent of the voters mention it as either the first or the second reason to vote for a certain party. This number is on the rise. Personalisation of voting behaviour thus occurs in the Netherlands. Voters' appreciation of party leaders plays an increasingly important role in their vote decision. Moreover, it is not to say that voters who do not mention politicians as a main reason to vote for a certain party do not take evaluations of politicians into account at all. A voter can simultaneously base its voting decision on evaluations of politicians representing a party and that parties' issue positions.

* * *

These analyses showed that voters change from election to election and from poll to poll. A considerable and growing proportion of the voters make up their mind during the election campaign. This finding makes it worthwhile to study the effects of election campaign coverage. Although most voters shift between like-minded parties, some voters make shifts that seem more erratic. Voters base their vote increasingly on their interests and policy preferences. Yet, voters' preferences for a certain party also play an increasingly important role. The results presented in this chapter showed that there is reason for concern about campaign volatility and that personalised voting behaviour is increasing.

