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DEMOCRATIC THEORY AND ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR[1]

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Normatively, democracy is a system of institutions, procedures and conventions. In practice, however, democracy is nothing without the citizens who provide it with form and substance. At democracy's core are the beliefs, behavior and actions of citizens who make up the actual or potential democratic polity. As Angus Campbell and his colleagues put it in the seminal *The American Voter* study, "our approach is in the main dependent on the point of view of the actor" (Campbell et al. 1960: 27). Placing the citizen at the core of our understanding of democracy therefore provides a different perspective on how democracy operates, how it is changing, and perhaps most important of all, how it may change in the future. The purpose of this chapter is to outline how recent advances in the study of electoral behavior are altering democratic theory.

The backdrop to understanding the role that electoral behavior plays in shaping democratic theory is the rapid post-war advances in social science methodology. These advances have made it possible to explore, among other things: what citizens understand about democracy and what their expectations of it are; how citizens behave within a democracy and the political consequences of their behaviors; and what political actions citizens might take under certain hypothetical conditions. The rise of public opinion surveys in the 1950s and 1960s provided an early and strong empirical base for analyzing these changes. Based on more than half a century of opinion research, we know an immense amount about how citizens think and behave politically.

In contrast to much recent research, many of the early scholars of political behavior were as interested in the normative implications of their work as they were in its substantive findings. Bernard Berelson's famous 1952 *Public Opinion Quarterly* article first gave voice to this approach by arguing that "opinion research can help a democracy to know itself, evaluate its achievements, and bring its practices more nearly in accord with its own fundamental ideals" (Berelson 1952: 313).[2] Another earlier pioneer of this approach was V. O. Key, who was particularly concerned about the role of public opinion in constraining political elites, and about elite responsiveness to citizen demands (Key 1966).

Despite this early and vigorous attempt to integrate theory with empirical research, it is fair to say that democratic theory, with some notable exceptions, has signally failed to keep pace with advances in electoral behavior.[3] Rather than post-war advances in methodology heralding a new collaboration between theorists and behaviorists, both sides have largely followed

independent intellectual paths. The first section of this chapter examines how we define democracy as it relates to electoral behavior, while the second section focuses on the consequences of electoral system design for behavior and theory. The third section examines four fields of electoral behavior which have specific implications for democratic theory, while the conclusion highlights the benefits of a closer relationship between behavioral and normative approaches to democracy.

Defining democracy

Before we can evaluate how advances in electoral behavior affect democratic theory, we need to arrive at an understanding of what is meant by democracy, and what constitutes its main components. Such an exercise has obviously occupied many academic studies and a review of the relevant literature is beyond the scope of this chapter. Briefly, we can identify two general approaches.

The first approach is to see democracy in terms of institutions and procedures. One of the earliest expressions was Schumpeter's (1976 [1942]) definition of democracy as a competitive struggle for the popular vote. This view was further developed by Robert Dahl (1971), who saw democracy as involving contestation or competition on the one hand, and participation or inclusion on the other. Later studies have focused on outcomes, such as freedom and liberty, which can be defined in terms of the legal protections that citizens rely on (for reviews, see Diamond 1999; Ringen 2009).[4] Whatever the focus, electoral behavior has relatively little role to play in this approach since it sees democracy as consisting of a framework of rules, rather than as a pattern of behavior.

A second approach has viewed democracy in terms of the social benefits that it can deliver, such as providing access to welfare and ensuring a basic standard of living. This view that democracy acts as a social safety net has been especially popular in low-income societies; there it is argued that political rights are meaningless in the absence of clearly demarcated social rights (see, for example, Przeworski 1985). Moreover, following Sen's (1999) argument that democracy is more likely to increase living standards compared to other systems – since governments will have an electoral incentive to ensure fewer of its citizens remain in poverty – political and economic freedoms are often bracketed together. In this approach, too, behavior is seen to be of secondary importance to democracy when compared to social and economic performance.

One response to these varying definitions of democracy, and the implication that citizen opinions and behaviors are of secondary importance, has been to ask citizens themselves what they understand by the concept of democracy (Dalton, Shin and Jou 2007). This research has found that the public's understanding of democracy is driven as much by political history as by a society's economic development. Another response has been to use large-scale comparative surveys to measure various aspects of democracy (see Elkins 2000; Munck and Verkuilen 2002). Ferrín and Kriesi (2015), for example, show that Europeans mostly associate democracy with the rule of law and with free and fair elections. However, much of this research has been concerned with methodology rather than conceptualization. This has resulted in a poor fit between the normative and empirical aspects of democracy, and makes it difficult to arrive at agreed measures of democratic performance.

The approach taken by these studies is to define liberal democracy in terms of four key concepts which relate directly to electoral institutions; all four also overlap to a greater or lesser degree. First, *accountability* ensures that citizens can use regular elections to hold governments responsible for their performance while in office. Following O'Donnell (1998), vertical accountability is often distinguished from horizontal accountability. The former refers to the ability to hold elected representatives publicly accountable for their decisions while in office (Schedler 1999; Schmitter and Karl 1991), while the latter refers to the ability of government agencies to

sanction one another for breaches of law or procedure. The ability of citizens in this way to steer governments toward policies they prefer has been a preoccupation of a large literature on dynamic representation (sometimes referred to as "thermostatic governance").[5]

The second aspect of democracy is *responsible government*, which means that governments are appointed by a popularly elected legislature, remain answerable to them and can be removed from office by them. This system had its roots in the nineteenth-century Westminster system of government. In the mid-twentieth century, the concept of responsible government was revised to take into account a third aspect of democracy: *political parties*. In this approach, political parties are identified as the central agents of mass mobilization and the mechanism through which the system of responsible government operates (American Political Science Association 1950). In turn, responsible party government exists to ensure that the system performs to the satisfaction of its citizens; thus *system performance* is the fourth aspect of democracy focused on in this chapter. Before turning to how advances in electoral behavior have revised these four key concepts of democracy, the next section examines the key role of the electoral system and its impact on political behavior.

Electoral systems and democracy

What citizens think about democracy is agreed to be a key driver of the health of a democracy. If citizens are generally supportive of democracy, then it should thrive; if citizens are equivocal, then democracy may be under threat, particularly during periods of existential crisis. A large literature has examined public opinion during the transition from authoritarianism to democracy – what is called the process of democratic consolidation (see, for example, Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Diamond 1999). Once citizens come to hold a widespread view that democracy is what Linz and Stepan (1996: 5) characterize as "the only game in town," then it can be properly said to have consolidated. But what constitutes widespread public support for democracy? And what are its mainsprings and how does public support vary according to differing institutional arrangements?

While scholars disagree about many aspects of public support for democracy, there is broad agreement that popular support for democracy is a highly complex phenomenon which is in a constant state of change (Klingemann 1999). This is especially the case in new democracies, which frequently retain elements of authoritarianism and where the norms, values and practices of democracy are often unfamiliar to many citizens. Measuring public support for democracy is therefore complex, and has to take into account different histories, cultures and institutional settings. Much of this complexity can be reduced to the distinction between whether the electoral system is majoritarian or proportional in its design. This is a distinction that was first highlighted by Lijphart (1999), who showed that it had particular consequences for the public's views of democracy.

In the majoritarian model of government, the goal of the political system is to satisfy the demands of the majority of the electorate, and the selection of a government becomes the first priority of the electoral system. The majority controls the government through two mechanisms. The first is by providing the government with a mandate, so that they have the popularly-derived authority to implement the legislative program on which they won the election. The second mechanism is via accountability, so that political elites are held accountable by citizens for their actions while in office. These mechanisms have been criticized by electoral behavior scholars as unrealistic in terms of how party policies guide voters' choices, and because winning parties rarely secure support from a majority of the electorate (see Thomassen 1994, 2014).[6]

In contrast to the majoritarian model, a proportional model of government is based on the assumption that elections produce elected representatives who reflect as closely as possible the

characteristics of the electorate. Since it is rare under such a system for one party to achieve a governing majority, it is almost always the case that two or more parties must come together to form a governing coalition. An inevitable consequence of coalition government is that clarity of responsibility becomes blurred since it is never clear which party has been responsible for government policy (Aarts and Thomassen 2008). The ability of citizens to deliver an electoral reward or punishment for government performance is therefore weakened.

How do these two models of government shape the public's view of democracy? This question has generated considerable research. In general, proportional or consensual models of government seem to work more efficiently than majoritarian models, at least from the electorate's perspective. Powell (2000) argues that if elections are seen as a mechanism for linking citizen preferences with government outcomes, then the proportional model is more effective. Lijphart (1999) comes to similar conclusions, and he finds that the public's satisfaction with their democracy is around 17 percentage points higher in proportional systems compared to majoritarian ones (see also Klingemann 1999, but cf. Aarts and Thomassen 2008).

Along with the public's views of democracy, voting rules also have a wide range of consequences for electoral behavior. However, the interactions are complex and often intertwined with a country's history and culture (for reviews, see Klingemann 1999; Norris 2004). In general, majoritarian systems have higher thresholds for election, which encourages political parties to aggregate their support and adopt a "catch-all" strategy in seeking votes. In proportional systems, the threshold for election is usually lower, which produces a larger number of parties that are then encouraged to pursue a narrower base of support around a more particularistic range of issues. This, in turn, has consequences for how parties mobilize opinion, and for partisanship, which is generally weaker in countries with multiple parties. This can lead to higher levels of electoral volatility (see Heath, this volume; Bowler, this volume).

Electoral behavior and democracy

While the framework of democratic theory is ever changing, this chapter argues that our understanding of citizens' behavior and attitudes has advanced at a much greater pace. The period that has elapsed since the start of the quantitative revolution in the study of electoral behavior in the 1950s has resulted in numerous insights, and the last two decades have seen an unprecedented increase in the breadth and depth of such studies. Space prevents a detailed consideration of this research, but four areas are outlined here where developments have already fundamentally revised current theoretical approaches to democracy, or are likely to in the future. For each of these four areas, an outline of the findings of recent studies is provided, together with an evaluation of how and in what ways they influence democratic theory.

Political competency

One of the assumptions of liberal democratic theory is the existence of a competent electorate which is capable of making informed choices. Without a competent electorate, the public's ability to use elections to hold governments accountable for their performance while in office will be limited. This, in turn, will undermine the core assumptions of a liberal democracy. As Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1966: 308) put it half a century ago:

> The democratic citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs … to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are.

This optimistic view of the public's political competency has been challenged by the evidence. Ever since opinion surveys began to collect information on political knowledge in the 1940s, a consistent finding has been that most citizens are anything but knowledgeable about politics (for a review, see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Most citizens know little about politics and possess minimal factual information about the operation of the political system. Moreover, these persistently low levels of political knowledge have been impervious to advances in civic education, the huge post-war expansion of tertiary education and an increasingly sophisticated mass media.

One theoretical response to the lack of competency among the mass public is democratic elitism. The most famous advocate of this theory, Joseph Schumpeter (1976 [1942]), argued that democratic electorates were too ill-informed and superficial to identify the common good and that, as a result, citizens should be restricted to a single, periodic choice between competing elites. This view was supported by later empirical research by Herbert McCloskey (1964: 374), who argued that political elites "serve as the major repositories of the public conscience and as carriers of the Creed." In short, the role of citizens should be restricted to voting for members of competing political elites and they should have no role in the complexities of policy making.

In parallel with the research on political knowledge, a large literature has examined the level of political sophistication within the electorate. While much of the literature is discordant and has focused on different ways of measuring the concept of sophistication (see, for example, Luskin 1990), there is a dominant view that, while citizens may possess low levels of political knowledge, they are nevertheless able to reach well-informed judgments about leaders and issue positions based on limited information. Key (1966: 7) put it succinctly when he commented that "voters are not fools." In this view, then, citizens can still make balanced decisions on the basis of minimal information (see Bølstad in this volume; Erikson in this volume).

Serving to increase political competency among the public is the rise of educational attainments across almost all of the advanced democracies (Highton 2009). In addition to better cognitive skills, studies have also shown that election campaigns provide an important source of political information and learning for voters (Arceneaux 2006; Erikson and Wlezien 2012), with campaigns providing particularly useful information on economic matters. Leaders' debates conducted during campaigns are also an important source of information, particularly if the debate is held earlier in the campaign and if one or more of the leaders are unfamiliar to voters (Benoit and Hansen 2006).

The internet

Arguably the internet represents the greatest change to the political systems of the advanced societies since democratization. Traditional accounts of political communication show that the advent of television fundamentally changed the nature of politics in the 1960s and 1970s. It is now becoming clear that the internet will reshape the operation of the modern political system in ways which are at least as profound as television half a century earlier. More importantly, the interactivity of the internet has major consequences for democratic theory and will fundamentally alter how parties and voters view politics (for reviews, see Bimber 2003; Coleman and Blumler 2009; Farrell 2012). Three major political implications of the internet are examined here: democratic competency; e-voting; and e-participation.

In principle, the internet should deliver higher democratic competency by providing greater access to political information; this is reflected in the transition from a low-choice media environment to a high-choice one. For most of the post-war period, there were relatively few

choices in whatever media sources citizens preferred, whether it was newspapers, radio or TV. The net effect was that citizens were exposed to low but constant levels of political information, which could not be ignored save for avoiding the media altogether (Prior 2007). The effect of this exposure was a low but consistent level of political involvement, which provided a degree of stability.

The rise of the internet has disrupted this decades-long stable relationship between voters and parties. Citizens now have unprecedented choice in the political information that they choose to access: at one extreme, citizens may choose to access no information; at another extreme, they can access highly detailed information for 24 hours a day. In many cases, the information that they choose to access reinforces rather than challenges their views. The interactivity, which is integral to the internet, means that citizens can increasingly have their views heard, rather than simply being passive recipients of information. Since internet use is disproportionately concentrated among the young, it provides a unique opportunity to convey political information to a group whose knowledge is low. A range of studies have confirmed that the internet is indeed having a significant impact on the levels of political information and democratic competency among the young (Gibson and McAllister 2015a; Gronlund 2007).

E-voting or digital democracy is a second area in which the internet can change democratic politics. With the ability to consult citizens about legislative changes interactively, the internet could in principle undermine the need for representative democracy altogether. The traditional objection to e-voting, the lack of internet security, is rapidly being solved by technological change (Lindner, Aichholzer and Hennen 2016). Studies have, however, focused less on giving citizens a direct say in decision-making through the internet and more on the development of online communications. This often occurs through the creation of virtual public spaces where citizens can exchange ideas and preferences, occasionally with the involvement of elected representatives (Coleman and Shane 2012).

Third, the internet facilitates interactive e-participation, to a degree that is unparalleled in modern times – almost akin to a continuous town hall meeting in the nineteenth century. Political parties have been slow to exploit this new opportunity for mobilization and conversion. Initial studies suggested that the major parties dominated the area, with their ability to design sophisticated multifunctional websites that delivered more information and greater opportunities for participation and financial donations (Schweitzer 2008). More recent research has shown that minor parties, such as those stressing the environment, have become highly effective in promoting e-participation, reflecting the medium's low entry costs (Gibson and McAllister 2015b).

Globalization

Vertical accountability in democracies depends on elections that are free, fair and competitive. Citizens then make judgments about the performance of governments while in office and, on that basis, can choose to either reward or punish them. But what if government performance has been shaped by factors that are outside the government's control? Globalization presents just such a challenge for democracy, since a country's economic performance may have been influenced by international events and policies, perhaps thousands of miles away, which are not under the control of the national government.

In practice, of course, a government can always shape policy outcomes to some degree. For example, even during the 2007–08 global financial crisis a government could be judged on its policy responses to the crisis, even though the crisis itself originated internationally. But when decision-making transcends the nation-state, it raises questions about how and under what

circumstances transnational institutions can be held accountable to the people whose lives they affect (Sperling 2009: 8). Should a European government be punished for poor economic performance when the economic crisis that caused it began in the United States? Such questions raise fundamental issues for our ideas of accountability which are at the core of liberal democracy theory.

One case of democratic accountability within a global context is economic voting. A large literature has demonstrated that voters make judgments at elections about the economic performance of incumbent governments (for reviews see Duch and Stevenson 2008; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). Such judgments can be made retrospectively or prospectively, and can be about citizens' own household economies ("egocentric") or about the nation's economy as a whole ("sociotropic"). However, if citizens do not see their national government as instrumental in shaping economic performance ("attribution"), and instead see international and/or market forces as being the important determinants, then accountability through the mechanism of an election cannot take place.

Studies suggest that globalization does indeed influence how voters approach accountability. Hellwig and Samuels (2007: 283; see also Kayser 2007) analyzed elections from 75 countries over 27 years to show that "exposure to the world economy weakens connections between economic performance and support for political incumbents." Other work has indicated that parties may adapt their positions in response to changing economic conditions. In particular, political incumbents are more likely to move toward the positions of their political opponents, thus blurring accountability and avoiding potential blame for a poorly performing economy (Hellwig 2011, 2016). The net effect is that voters have reduced information about who to blame or reward for economic performance.

A second example in which international changes are affecting traditional views of democratic accountability is the growth of governance beyond the nation-state, what is variously termed "transnational" or "supranational" governance. An example of such a change is the European Union, which exercises an increasing amount of power among its members over what were once exclusively domestic issues.[7] Such advances leave a "democratic accountability deficit" which is difficult to fill; remedial measures include greater openness and transparency in decision-making; clearer identification of decision-makers so that they can be held to account; and regular EU elections (Curtin, Mair and Papadopoulos 2010). However, even in the case of elections, they rarely act as sanctions since votes against the incumbent government are often difficult for political leaders to interpret (Hobolt, Spoon and Tilley 2009).

Party decline

Political parties act as a crucial linkage between citizens and policy outputs, through their ability to organize what Neumann (1956: 397) has called "the chaotic public will." In this view, parties are central to the model of responsible party government first articulated by the American Political Science Association's Committee on Political Parties in 1950. The apparent decline of political parties appears to undermine this ability to ensure accountability through elections. Mair (2005: 7) has noted the failure of parties "to engage ordinary citizens" and as evidence to support his case highlights declining electoral turnout, the rise of voter volatility, falling levels of party identification and the dramatic decline in party membership. Indeed, party membership is now so low in many countries that parties "have all but abandoned any pretensions to being mass organizations" (van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012: 42).[8]

All of these trends – which are largely uncontested in the literature – would suggest that, at the very least, political parties are experiencing significant change, with major implications for

the operation of liberal democracy (for a review, see Webb 2005). One consequence is a weakening link between the citizen and the government, with elections becoming less effective as a mechanism for holding governments to account. If this link were to significantly weaken, it would undermine the whole system of responsible party government.

Various objections have been made against the decline of parties thesis (for a review, see Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011). One objection is that, while the long-term trends show decline, the patterns are more modest than many have suggested. For example, while voter turnout has declined, it is often from a relatively high base, and in some countries has now begun to increase (Franklin 2004). A second objection is that parties have, in fact, been in decline in terms of their membership since the "golden age" of the mass party, which was first popularized by Duverger (1964). Parties may therefore be returning to a "steady state" level of mass membership following an abnormal heyday.

While overstating the trends is one argument against the decline of parties thesis, more important is the view that parties have begun to adapt to these changes (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011: Chapter 9; Mair 2003). In response to an existential electoral threat, many parties have radically altered their policy appeals. This was the route the British Labour Party took in the early 1990s when it was rebranded as "New Labour" under the leadership of Tony Blair. The party ditched its outmoded class appeal and instead stressed equality of opportunity, thus skillfully retaining Labour's traditional working class supporters while recruiting disaffected Conservative voters. There are numerous other examples around the world of this form of party adaptation.

A second form of party adaption has been organizational. One approach has been to democratize the selection of the party leader, as has occurred, for example, in the British Labour Party. Giving the mass membership a greater say in the selection of the leader has been seen as one way of trying to arrest the decline in the mass party membership. However, the risk is that the membership will select a leader who is attractive to their own (more extreme) policy positions, but not to that of the median voter. The British Labour Party membership's two-time election of the left-wing Jeremy Corbyn as its leader is a case in point.

Another party tactic has been to exploit the rise of television through the promotion of leaders with attractive visual images and sophisticated communication skills. While there is a vigorous debate about the veracity of the "personalization of politics" thesis (McAllister 2007; Karvonen 2010), there is little dispute that a popular leader can communicate a party's message more effectively than a policy statement. In turn, voters prefer to hold a personality accountable for performance rather than an abstract entity such as a political party. And not least, a popular leader can appeal to the public over the heads of their political party. Such a tactic can be particularly effective when the leader runs into resistance from their party about strategy and direction.

Finally, parties have sought to redesign political institutions – "the rules of the political game" – with the aim of excluding competitors, such as newly emerging parties which could erode the party's electoral base. This interpretation of party adaptation has been most closely associated with Katz and Mair's (1995) "cartel party" model. In this view, major parties often collude in order to change the rules to best serve their interests and to exclude potential competitors. The best example of cartel behavior by the major political parties is the allocation of state finance for political parties, with the rules typically designed to exclude new entrants.

Conclusion

With some notable exceptions, democratic theory has tended to focus on the role of institutions and procedures, rather than on patterns of political behavior. Yet, it is the attitudes and behavior

of citizens that give democracy form and meaning, so understanding how these attitudes and behaviors are shaped should inform our current understanding of theory. To date, this complementarity has not taken place, and research on democratic theory and research on political behavior have largely followed their own, independent paths. This chapter has examined how advances in electoral behavior across four main areas – political competence, the internet, globalization and party decline – present challenges to our current thinking about democratic theory.

A central theme of this chapter has been that democratic theory has been slow to respond to advances in our understanding of electoral behavior. This is understandable; the formulation of a theory requires the accumulation of a robust body of evidence that largely reaches similar conclusions. When this condition is met, theory can be revised. In many areas of electoral behavior, this requirement is as yet unfulfilled; we know, for example, that citizens have low levels of political knowledge, but views are divided on whether this ultimately affects the quality of the choices that citizens make at the ballot box. Similarly, we know that most indicators of the health of political parties are in long-term decline, but we also know that parties are beginning to adapt to these changes. In short, much of the empirical evidence that might result in revisions to democratic theory is, at a minimum, contestable.

Where there is broad agreement in the electoral research, there are clear implications for democratic theory. We know, for example, that citizens are more likely to use elections to reward governments, based on sound performance, rather than to punish them. This has implications for the operation of accountability and responsible party government. We also know that citizens support greater political involvement through the internet and the opportunity to have an enhanced say in government decision-making. This has implications for theories of representation, and for democratic elitism. In these and a host of other areas of electoral research, advances in our understanding of the attitudes and behavior of citizens have major implications for democratic theory.

Above all of these debates is the relentless pace of technological change, which is rapidly changing most of the assumptions on which liberal democratic theory rests. The advent of television in the 1960s was one of the main drivers of the personalization of politics, which has arguably fundamentally changed its nature. The rise of the internet will result in political changes that are expected to be many times more profound than television. The immediacy, interconnectivity and information-sharing that the internet brings to politics have implications for all aspects of democracy, from the accountability of governments to citizen competence and political participation, to responsible party government. How institutions and actors respond to these profound changes will shape twenty-first century democratic theory.

Notes

1 I am indebted to Keith Dowding for insightful comments on an earlier draft of the chapter. Also thanks to Rachel Gibson and the other editors for their valuable comments.
2 The tools of social research have made it possible, for the first time, to determine with reasonable precision and objectivity the extent to which the practice of politics by the citizens of a democratic state conforms to the requirements and the assumptions of the theory of democratic politics (insofar as it refers to decisions by the electorate). (Berelson 1952: 314)
3 There are, of course, exceptions to this. Prominent theorists who have made extensive use of empirical material relating to electoral behavior include Fishkin (1995) and Brennan and Lomasky (1993).
4 There is also a large literature dealing with the fairness and integrity of electoral practices, which is not considered here. (See Norris in this volume for an overview.)
5 For a seminal, wide-ranging and authoritative survey of this literature, see Franklin, Soroka and Wlezien (2014).

6 A further criticism of the clarity of responsibility mechanisms is when a governing party changes its policy position after an election (Quinn 2016).

7 Other examples include the G20 of nations or the United Nations.

8 A contrary argument is that formal membership figures are not a reliable measure of party health, since they largely ignore non-members who are nevertheless supporters. See Fisher, Fieldhouse and Cutts (2014) and Gauja (2015). Declining partisanship and increased volatility are viewed as by-products of other developments by van der Brug and Franklin (in this volume).

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