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The comparative advantages of panel studies to assess campaign and information effects. Lessons from past French experiences

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French electoral surveys, and in particular those carried out by Sciences Po's Centre for Political Research (Cevipof), have made a great deal of progress since the end of the 1970s. Surveys using large samples, in the election studies tradition, are now regularly produced. Although France has still to have a national research programme comparable to the British Election Studies (BES), or the American National Election Studies (ANES), significant progress has been made, and the data gathered has been used in many electoral studies and research papers.

The situation in France is not a unique situation. According to the current on-going European programme, the "True European Voter", not every EU country has a regular, large, public funded national electoral study programme. For France, the situation has shown several periods and changes in the organization of an academic national election study. If so-called "French election studies" started quite early (the 1958 panel study), it's only by the end of the seventies that a group of academics started to mobilise for the production and analysis of large samples post-election studies. Initially Cevipof researchers obtained the funding to conduct electoral surveys from the Ministry of Research (1978), the FNSP (1988) or the American National Science Foundation (1995). Sometimes programmes were jointly funded by two of these institutions. Latterly, from 2002 onwards, and in 2007 in particular, substantial funding was provided by the Ministry of the Interior. As the institutional body in charge of organising elections, this Ministry has made a commitment to backing research, and given itself the twin objectives of contributing to the production of election data, and making that data available to the scientific community and members of the general public. In 2006-2007, thanks to this initiative, Cevipof was able to conduct a series of surveys which yielded the most complete range of data ever gathered on the sociology of the French electorate.

In 2002 and 2007 electoral panel studies were set up, thanks to unprecedented levels of funding. It was the first time that French electoral researchers had been able to use this research methodology since the 1958 panel study - conducted by Georges Dupeux, Alain Girard and Jean Stoezel - which received the support of the Rockefeller Foundation. This revival of the study of voting behavior in a panel perspective has been one of the recent trends in French election studies¹.

In this paper, we would like to present, to show and to put into questions the recent (2002 and 2007, but mostly 2007). French experiences of electoral panel studies in the perspective of studying campaign and information effects. In order to support our point of view but also to confront it to alternative methods, the objectives of this paper are both substantive and methodological. We will propose four main topics : (a) a summary of the advantages of electoral panels as compared to a number of other methodological alternatives, that are available to incorporate the time-lag dimension in elections studies; (b) an overview of the recent literature on information learning and campaign effects through panel studies; (c) to present some examples coming from the 2007 elections studies of the relevance of panel studies to investigate the timing of electoral decision and the process of information through campaign effects; (d) finally to present a critical perspective on what was done in the 2007 French electoral panel in terms of the time span of the panel in particular and to propose some

¹ In 2007 the CEVIPOF also conducted a parallel four-wave panel study of Internet users, with a questionnaire similar to the Panel Electoral Français questionnaire used in the "Agora" project, conducted at Sciences Po under the direction of Jean Chiche (Cevipof).

improvements for the 2012 serie of election studies. Although panel studies seem to offer a suitable methodological framework for the analysis of the electoral decision-making process, we believe that their future development will depend on careful analysis of their methodological advantages and disadvantages, as well as the lessons we have learned from the experience of using them. An appendix recalls the major methodological and substantive aspects of the 2002 and 2007 French electoral panels².

The comparative advantages of the electoral panel study method

In their chapter in “The Future of Election Studies » (Franklin and Wlezien, 2002), a work which reviewed the state of election studies, Kathleen Knight and Michael Marsh rightly point out that although classic post-electoral surveys are particularly well-suited to the analysis of attitude and belief systems, they are “less successful at explaining the reasons why people have come to adopt those attitudes and beliefs” (Knight and Marsh 2002, p. 21). We may indeed trace a clear line between the conduct of panel studies and the question of opinion/attitudes formation; broadly speaking, panel studies are among the most suited research design, when the question of temporality in voting choices or opinion/attitudes formation is the key point of an electoral study.

The study of temporality in voting choices analysis may be defined as the central question of election studies, eventually susceptible to unify the kaleidoscope of contemporary research in the sociology of voting research. As voters become more mobile, both levels of uncertainty and the range of their possible votes increase. In many countries, the recent decades have shown tendencies to abstention become an “intermittent practice”, an erosion of the partisan link and a possible increase in voiting indecision and voting hesitation. In that context, the question of the dynamics of electoral choice moves to the very heart of research in the field. We would like to propose the hypothesis that the use of data collected from panel studies enables us to better address these recent issues in voting behavior research.

Temporality and its logics, which are frequently not linear, are not properly addressed by classical pre or post-electoral studies. In fact those studies capture the temporal sedimentation of the vote through the incomplete and imprecise recollections that survey participants have of their past behaviour and voting itineraries. An indeed, verbal recall regarding electoral behaviour is oftenly biased: selective and partial memorisation of actual behaviour by the respondent as well as social desirability can lead respondents to claim to have behaved in a way more in conformity with social norms, or more in line with the actual election results than was really the case. This is specially the case with electoral registration, abstention and voting for extreme parties. Other sources of inaccuracy of estimates coming from the classical pre or post-election studies are linked with observation and data collection methods : the formulation of questions, the way questions are sequenced and ordered in the interview, any delay between the election day and the interview, variations in data collection techniques (such as whether or not the voter is offered an urn to put his or her vote in, which is knone as

² This text reproduces and up-date the major parts of our chapters in : Bruno Cautrès, Anne Muxel (ed.). *The New Voter in Western Europe : France and Beyond*. New York, Palgrave, 2011 and in particular chapter 1 (The process of electoral decision making written by Bruno Cautres/Anne Muxel) and chapter 6 (Following the campaign, written by Thierry Vedel). We thanks Anne Muxel to let us using part of chapter 1.

having serious impact on reporting vote for the Front national in France), can all undermine the reliability of the statements of interview participants.

These preliminary methodological remarks do not seek to deny the real value and validity of data collected in the ways described above: several decades of electoral research have been largely based on the analysis of this kind of pre or post-election studies. Researchers have been well aware of the potential for bias : the survey design literature has grew up incredibly and become a very sophisticated filed of methodlogical research when the design of per or post-election studies has been modified accordingly; methodological solutions proposed have been proposed and implemented. Voting is a type of behaviour which is strongly socially structured, grounded in long-term socialisations which are mapped out in such a way that measurement errors, when they occur, are generally kept within tolerable confidence intervals. The sociological models of voting behavior as well as the socio-psychological models still predict voting behavior quite well, despite several decades of “de-freezing” process (to use a word in contrast with the Rokkan “freezing” hypothesis) and raise of non-partisan based choices and “candidate-centered politics”. Nevertheless how a vote will be cast is more unpredictable than three or four decades ago : indecision, the influence of emotions, and perceptions of candidates’ qualities, reactions and exposure to information and media, recent trends in partisan dealignment and in a weakening of the party-orientations/vote relationship, all contribute to the uncertain and occasionally fluctuating nature of voting.

We first agree with some of the criticisms levelled at traditional electoral surveys, such as those made from a political psychology perspective by authors like James Kuklinski (Kuklinski, 2001a and 2002 ; Kuklinski and Peyton, 2007). Kuklinski is critical of electoral analyses based on “one shot”-type surveys, which are not able to take account of the complex set of processes involved as voters make their choices (Kuklinski, 2001b). We are in agreement with the idea that traditional surveys “prevent researchers from examining in detail how voters handle a new piece of information, and in what way that information modifies their attitudes” (*op. cit.*, p. 127). Kuklinski adds that this methodological obstacle is particularly problematic because the updating of attitudes and preferences, in the light of information flow, is central to the democratic process of exchanges between citizens and the political world. He expresses a preference for experimental surveys over large sample electoral surveys. Nevertheless, we believe that panel study surveys constitute a pertinent way of situating the vote, as part of a process of political judgement formation and as the crystallization of a voter’s choice, observed within a broader time frame.

In order to support our point of view, we would like to summarise the advantages of electoral panels when compared to a number of other methodological approaches which we could have used. The main alternatives to panel studies are well known: cross-section surveys repeated over a given period of time, rolling cross-sections (repeated “bursts” of cross-sections, using relatively small samples which can be conducted every day), and lastly the experimental surveys favoured by Kuklinski, which rely on deliberative polling (Kenski, 2006b). Each of these methods has its advantages and disadvantages. Indeed they can be used together in a complementary fashion, as in the Canadian Election Studies or as in the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) which combine rolling cross-section design and panel studies, or like in the 2005 British Election Studies survey (Blais, Gidengil and Nadeau, 2000).

Repeated cross-section - the first of these alternative methods - is, as well as being the most intuitive, the most straightforward to apply: the survey questionnaire is given to independent samples of participants over a given period of time. Variables, not individuals, are tracked

and this research methodology lends itself to macro, but not micro, longitudinal analyses: repeatedly using the same questionnaire with different samples of voters is not a suitable method for understanding the processes whereby political judgements and choices are formed. This method lends itself to the analysis of the evolution of the distribution of variables but not, for example, to the analysis of individual opinions and individual judgements under the influence of information available over the course of the election campaign³. Rolling cross-sections, the second alternative to the panel study, are much better suited to the analysis of choice formation since their daily, or almost daily, cycle of interviews facilitates an experimental monitoring of the effects of context and time. As Richard Johnston and Henry Brady note (2002), the high number of rolling cross-sections conducted over a limited time period (the election campaign), and the short time periods between the survey waves, enables analyses to approximate “an actual causal inference”: “It enables links to debates, news coverage, and campaign advertising, as well as the identification of the social and psychological mechanisms that mediate the potential impact of external forces”(p. 123). The rolling cross-sections design is therefore particularly suited to analysis of the effects of the campaign (Johnston and Brady, 2006). The staggered repeated use of the same questionnaire, given to a different micro-sample every day, follows a campaign in such a way that modifications of attitudes and behaviours in different segments of the electorate can be monitored. The fact that these micro-samples are so small, however, means that this method has a number of limitations. The analysis of the changes observed over time identifies overall trends rather than individual trajectories: we cannot therefore rule out the possibility that the independence of the micro-samples, observed in this way, will prevent the individual dynamics of voters’ choices from being identified.

Nevertheless we agree with the claim of partisans of rolling cross-sections that the controlled consideration of the effect of time, and therefore of the information flow, is a necessary methodological condition for establishing a causal analysis of the vote, treated as the result of a process of choice formation. Controlling this time factor is central to experimental surveys (see for example Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse and Stevens, 2005; Redlawsk, 2006c⁴).

³ The repeated use of surveys over an extended period, using independent samples, is not suited to analysis of the formation of voter choice or processes. This methodology is best used for long term comparisons, similar to macro-social longitudinal analysis. Good examples of these kinds of analysis in political sociology are to be found in research on the evolution of values, such as the European Values Studies or the European Social Survey, or in work which analyses cohorts, such as Inglehart’s analysis of the rise of post-materialism. In election sociology this type of approach, which we developed over the four waves of Cevipof’s Baromètre Politique Français (BPF), is only pertinent for a “barometer” approach conducted over a minimum period of several months (the four waves of the BPF were spread out over a year), which aims to measure the evolution of major trends or variables in the electorate, and to observe the emergence or decline of these same major trends. It is difficult to infer anything about the dynamics of the formation of political judgements and choices from these evolutions because it is not possible, using this method, to establish relationships between individual itineraries, the evolution of political attitudes compared to such attitudes before the elections, the events which define the context and, in the final analysis, the electoral choice.

⁴ Experimentation often consists of exposing voters to both true and false information, as well as to images and iconographic documents related to the candidates; estimating the capacity of voters to update their preferences; also (although less frequently) testing the stability over time of judgements and opinions expressed, or testing the scope of the hypotheses of explanatory models such as Zaller’s (1992b, 1996), or those of the Stony Brook School (Lodge and McGraw, 1995; Lodge and Traber, 2000). There is an impressive body of English-language literature investigating these questions from a political psychology perspective. This area has been until now somewhat neglected by French researchers; the reasons for this neglect have been trenchantly analysed by Yves Schemeil and Jean-Louis Marie (2008). A wide range of applications were developed over the course of these experimental surveys, regarding voting, the formation of political judgements and choices, and attitudinal or behavioural modifications. The work of Redlawsk and Lau is particularly representative of this branch of research (Redlawsk and Lau, 2006). One of the few experimental surveys available in France is the one

These kinds of survey permit the analysis of the part played by cognitive and emotional mechanisms in the acquisition, activation or updating of political attitudes, information and knowledge. Research in this field has made major contributions to the analysis of several breakthrough areas in election sociology: the role of affects and emotions, for example (Marcus, 2000, 2002 and 2008), as well as the role of cognitions and heuristics (Redlawsk and Lau, 2001 and 2006). Nevertheless many of these experimental surveys come up against the limitations of experimentation: they often use small groups and are carried out under artificial laboratory conditions, ideally during an election campaign, and are a kind of *in vivo* experiment. Although experimental control is a powerful scientific methodology for taking the effects of the changes in experimental conditions into account, the limitations of its practical applicability greatly reduce its value. The value of this methodology is more “exploratory” than “confirmatory”, it does not lend itself to inference and to the production of generalities.

If we had chosen to use one of these alternatives to a panel survey, a great deal of information relevant to analysis of the 2007 electoral cycle would undoubtedly have been obtained. Establishing a barometer of the broad changes in attitudes in the French electorate (relating to such questions as the number of French voters who gave responses which indicated their adherence to universal values, or the values of economic liberalism, and to what extent these proportions had risen or fallen since 2002) remains a fundamental objective of electoral research. This is why, parallel to the panel study, we conducted a post-electoral survey of a wide, representative sample of the French electorate, as well as a political barometer between spring 2006 and the beginning of 2007⁵.

At one point carrying out a rolling cross-section survey, designed to complement the panel study, was given serious consideration. We thought about combining the two methods by conducting the first wave of the panel study - in the month before the first round of the Presidential election - using either four micro-samples of 1,000 individuals in each of the four weeks before April 22nd, or two samples of 2,000 individuals over the course of the last two fortnights before that date. Whereas the first option was found to be operationally impracticable, the second was used, albeit in an incomplete fashion, as the fieldwork for the first wave of the panel only began a little less than four weeks before April 22nd 2007. Moreover, a certain number of experimentations were carried out as part of the *Baromètre Politique Français (BPF)* surveys and the post-electoral survey, but only in terms of formulation of questions and items (split sampling technique).

The virtues of the data obtained from panel studies

The value of the 2007 *Panel Electoral Français*, as of any electoral panel study, is that it permits the development of certain analyses which would not be possible if other types of survey had been used. In this connection, we are in complete agreement with Larry Bartels’ summary of the three virtues of panel studies, both for the analysis of election campaigns and, more broadly, the dynamics of electoral choice. The first virtue of panel data is that they facilitate adjustments for measurement error in survey responses, particularly regarding

conducted in 2002 by Gérard Grunberg, Nonna Mayer and Paul Sniderman (see Grunberg, Mayer and Sniderman, 2002).

⁵ The post-electoral survey was a post-Presidential survey of a nationally representative sample of 4,006 voters registered on the electoral lists. This survey, whose results are also in the process of being analysed, benefitted from the support of the Ministry of the Interior and was conducted by IFOP between May 9th and 23rd, 2007. See Cevipof’s website: www.cevipof.msh-paris.fr.

reliability bias⁶. The use of methods from the econometrics of panel data or from psychometrics (the method of the difference-in-difference, structural equation modelling for example), enables panel data to be exploited, in order to correct measurement errors and to stabilise the unknown quantities which measurements obtained from one shot surveys can generate. In future, our analysis will make more use of these methodologies.

Furthermore, panel data permits the direct analysis of changes in opinion and behaviour, for which the same opinions and behaviour measured at t-1 (and before) can be envisaged as independent variables. This is the second virtue of panel studies. Given the stability of political attitudes (at any rate when the measurement errors of their indicators have been corrected) and the relatively modest correlations with many explanatory variables⁷, a direct measurement of prior opinions increases the efficiency of statistical estimations. Panel data provide an interesting analytical perspective on factors which contribute to the stability of political attitudes when voters are exposed to new messages, information or knowledge, as is frequently the case during election campaigns.

The third and last virtue which Bartels attributes to panel data is by no means the least important. Such data enables us to analyse political attitudes and behaviours which have not been “contaminated” by the effects of the immediate context. This advantage is significant insofar as the indicators measured in electoral surveys are susceptible to “ex-post facto rationalisations” (regarding, in particular, remembering how one has voted).

As with all virtues, the three advantages of panel data come at a price, which can sometimes be a high one. So along with the capacity of panel data to explain political behaviours and their dynamics come two corresponding drawbacks. The first problem, known as “panel attrition” affects the structure of the panel design in a non-random way: the voters who are best integrated socially and politically, as well as those who are most interested in politics, are significantly more likely to participate and to continue participating in the panel study. In the case of France, Jadot and Cautrès (2004) as well as Lehay (2009) demonstrates that the 2002 and 2007 *Panel Electoral Français* suffers from this types of bias : the first reinterrogation is the most important filter, and accounts for most of the attrition of the panel. The second problem is known as “panel conditioning” in the literature : the experience of being interviewed, and the possible desire to “do well” and to consequently anticipate the next round of questions, can modify survey respondents’ relationship with what is being studied (by making them pay more attention to politics than they would otherwise have done, for example). The conditioning caused by the experience of being a panel member can thus distort the measurements, adding a “social desirability” bias to the bias of selection, as individuals answer in ways that they think they are supposed to. Finally these two kinds of bias can combine and result in the structure of the panel being very different from that of the sample observed in the first wave of the survey

Understanding and Disentangling of the Temporalities of the Voting

Despite the methodological weaknesses of panel studies, mentioned above and that are

⁶ When it is not simply, and much more embarrassingly, a problem of validity. These kinds of problem can arise during every kind of survey, panel surveys included.

⁷ It is not rare, in the analysis of political attitudes, to obtain very low levels of explained variance, even when the statistical modelling is sophisticated and there are many independent variables.

more than anecdotal, the substantive contribution of panel studies to disentangle the temporal facets of voting is absolutely irreplaceable. When the classical election study (a post-election random cross section of the voters) measure the recall of voting, it “shrinks” as a unified measure what actually is the complex result of a temporal process, with different layers and different “sedimentations”: voting is nothing but an “immediate” reaction to a stimulus (the election, the electoral campaign, the context on the day of voting, the verbatim or format of the question in the questionnaire, whatsoever) . Voting is a “multiple-temporalities” phenomenon. This has been rarely remarked and seriously investigated, contrary to a superficial view on voting behavior literature. Panel studies are, among other methodologies, some of the more adapted studies to disentangle these different temporal facets of voting behavior. Since some years, we have contributed to a research agenda which express this problematic in terms of the three main temporalities of voting⁸. Let’s make it clear what we define as and to show how the recent literature on voting behavior goes or not in that direction. Finally, let’s see how panel studies can contribute, in our minds better than other frameworks, to this.

We can divide up the period of electoral decision making into three phases. First, the *long term* of electoral socialization, during which the voter develops systems of stable political attitudes. These attitudes are fixed and relatively permanent. Second, the *short term* of electoral socialization, which refers to election campaigns, when voter preferences emerge and the range of possible voting options becomes apparent. During this phase, the information and knowledge available to the voter is updated in the light of conjunctural developments and following various protocols. The third and last phase will be termed the *moment of electoral decision*, when voters, after considering the various options, come down to their final choices. Dividing up the process into these three different temporalities enables various approaches and explanatory paradigms to be clearly distinguished. Splitting up the temporalities in this way does not, however, indicate that the process should be treated as a causal, linear sequence in which the three voting phases simply follow one after another. Voters carry yesterday, today, and tomorrow around with them, and the construction of their social and political identities encompasses all three of these temporal stratifications. The principal social divisions both endure and evolve over time, both as objective realities and in the ways they are experienced subjectively by voters. The present triggers memories of the past, the past can in turn be reevaluated and reinterpreted in the light of the present, and the present can be interpreted by taking into account a future prediction, for example, when the voter is hesitating between a number of candidates. As Jacques Gerstlé observed, in an election campaign “everything is in a state of flux, not just the voters. The issues and values at the centre of the campaign are also influenced by the intense work of the political entrepreneurs, the media and the voters” (Gerstlé, 2005).

The “Long-term” Aspect of the Electoral Decision

This is the most developed and traditional voting analysis perspective used in the most well-established research traditions, which regard voting as the bringing up-to-date of existing predispositions, sociological roots, and ideological allegiances. This tradition has recently developed in interesting ways, in particular with regard to the study of

⁸ See for instance the round table animated in 2007 at the AFSP congress in Toulous by Bruno Cautrès and Pascal Perrineau

abstention in the light of the “participation routes.” New notions have been introduced, including the concept of *casual voting*, which may be contrasted with *habitual voting* (Fowler, 2006). A number of studies have even demonstrated that individual voters’ participation or nonparticipation in the previous election is the best variable for predicting whether they will subsequently cast their vote or abstain (Franklin, 2005).

Focusing on the electoral “long term” sheds light on the long-term relationship individuals form with both elections and the act of voting. Such an approach assumes the existence of relatively stable latent attitudes, even if, in specific electoral and political contexts over the course of an individual’s “voting career,” changes and realignments are liable to take place. These attitudes play a determining role in the formation of ideological orientations, the evaluation of the political system, and in the way elections and voting are perceived. This first approach to time is part of the continuing tradition of research into political socialization, family transmission, and political heritage (Percheron, 2003; Muxel, 2001a). It falls within the mainstream of analysis of sociopolitical divisions regarding political participation, interest in and knowledge of politics, and voting. As a result of socialization or membership of certain political and social categories, do voters gain knowledge and skills that influence them to vote in a certain way? What are the main factors that have a bearing on voting behavior and, more generally, on people’s attitudes toward politics? Researchers around the world continue to publish critiques of the model devised and updated by Lipset and Rokkan and their followers. Establishing to what extent voters are influenced by long-standing allegiances, which may be transmitted from one generation to the next, remains a central question, as does the recomposition of former social divisions, or the emergence of new divisions that have a bearing on voting behavior.

The “Short-term” Aspect of Election Campaigns

The second temporal dimension we propose to examine in our analysis of the voting is the short term of the election campaign. There is a body of research that stresses the impact of election campaigns and the flow of information on the political judgments and final decision of the voter.

This research question led to the questioning of the widely held belief that political communication relayed by the media only serves to reactivate or reinforce preexisting opinions. This paradigm shift was facilitated by a change of perspective that saw the focus of voting analysis move toward the temporal and cognitive stages preceding the act of voting itself, and away from sociopolitical determinants and their inscription in systems of divisions. This turn toward a more ‘cognitivist’ approach also took place in other related research areas, notably analysis of public policy. In the field of electoral sociology such research treated as processes the cognitions put to work by voters in their relationships with politics in general and voting in particular. How are representations formed? How are they articulated both between themselves and in relation to stored memorization? How are they transformed under the influence of political information and knowledge? The main focus of this body of literature—where political sociology and political psychology overlap and potentially converge—is the question of how voters process political information (Conover and Feldman, 1989; Lodge and Stroh, 1993; Popkin, 1991; Rahn, 1993; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991; Zaller, 1992a). As Romain Lachat (2000) has observed, what now lie at the heart of this predominantly cognitivist research are, first, the “cognitive strategies” adopted by voters in order to

process the flow of information and, second, “the motivations for making the effort to process them, as well as the factors which influence an individual’s ability to analyse this information in the light of their political preferences” (p. 51). The ability of voters to process/sort/order political information into a hierarchy/analyze according to preexisting preferences or as per the social contexts or settings in which they receive such information (networks of acquaintances and social capital, political conversations with family friends, exposure to the media, experimentation) is at the heart of the models and theories proposed by Zaller (1992a), Sniderman (Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock, and Brady, 1991), Kuklinski (Kuklinski et al., 2000), Gamson (1992), or Lupia (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin, 2000), to cite just a few authors and key works from this tradition. This body of research is diverse not only in terms of general perspectives but also as regards the data collected and the analytical methodologies used. Although conclusions reached have sometimes been contradictory, this work has enabled electoral sociologists to address the question of how political judgments and electoral choices are formed. How do voters manage to produce knowledge from the information they receive and the context that they perceive? There has been a wide variety of interpretations of the internal processes and the external influences voters draw on to convert political information into evaluation of political “objects,” relayed by attitudes and behaviors (Druckman and Lupia, 2000).

There is no room here to summarize the substantial body of literature produced in the US regarding these and other equally fundamental questions, such as voters’ ability to take shortcuts rather than construct complex and systematic schemas of knowledge, or even the question of the very nature of political knowledge. Individuals who receive information are, in fact, not simply passive recipients but rather active participants in information processing (Lang, 2000). Preexisting attitudes and preferences, as well as motivations for processing the information, have a bearing on the selection, perception, and acceptance of messages. The political reasoning that leads to a vote is an instance of “motivated reasoning” (Lodge and Traber, 2000). From this perspective, the emotions play an important role in the processing of information (Marcus, 2002), insofar as they accentuate the selective sensitivity to information, a process that is referred to as “hot cognition” in the literature (Kunda, 1990; Redlawsk, 2002). Researchers who have adopted this perspective generally distinguish between two models of the way voters process information. The voter-processor model puts an online process at the heart of its analyses: once the voters have created an initial image of a candidate, they incrementally revise their representation of that candidate in a process that updates the information stored in their memories. It appears that this process of information acquisition and its online processing can be facilitated or even hampered by predispositions, preferences, and knowledge that have already been memorized. The second model for voter-information processing is based on the use of voter memory as well as cognitive and heuristic shortcuts (Redlawsk, 2006c).

It is apparent that one of the key challenges here is to establish whether voters’ opinions on the main election issues and the candidates are derived from latent traits and stable psychologies, or whether actual processes of political judgment formation operate, under the influence of information produced during the campaign. It is, therefore, a matter of knowing how during the (pre-)campaign voters react according to their more or less structured and intense preferences. Are some voters predisposed to voting systematically and always for the same party or candidate, while others are more apt to change their voting behavior, depending on the candidates and their stances, as well as on developments

during the election campaign? How can the process by which the opinions of floating voters are formed be broken down and analyzed? In order to answer the above questions, we need different data from the kind provided by traditional post-electoral surveys: only experimental devices or data from panel studies can provide an appropriate methodological framework.

The Moment of Electoral Decision Making

The third temporal dimension we propose to distinguish is the moment of electoral decision making itself. Here we need to establish how long-term predispositions are translated into an “electoral decision” under the influence of the election campaign. To answer this question we can draw on political psychology research as well as analysis of voting probabilities and party utilities. American political scientists have been carrying out research into these questions for some time. They have concluded that the final voting decision should be understood as the result of voter arbitration between different elements present in the processing of information. The moment of voting is indeed closely linked to the affects and emotions that are aroused inter alia by the behavior, statements, and policy proposals of the various candidates and come into play when the voter’s final choice is made. The importance of a candidate’s “image” and personality will vary depending on the type of election and the roles of the different candidates. Nevertheless, the voter’s final decision is also influenced by all the information made available throughout the electoral campaign, notably the candidates’ policy proposals, the main issues of the campaign, and the way in which they are publicly debated.

The question of whether last-minute developments at the end of the election campaign can lead to the reversal of well-established voting behavior has been hotly debated. The hypothesis that voters’ final decisions could be influenced or modified by last-minute information should be advanced cautiously: the vast majority of research carried out in this area indicates that the impact of information received by the voters at the very end of the campaign is limited. Experiments have been conducted (by, inter alia, David Redlawsk and Richard Lau, 2006) to show that voting is by and large “correct” or, in other words, linked to the predispositions and identifications stored by voters even before they become aware of the candidates. In any case, it is quite possible that information received during the election campaign or during final developments leading up to election day serves only to reinforce preexisting political judgments, or to confirm judgments formed during the election campaign. Such results should not, however, stand in the way of further research on the moment of voting, for which panel studies data is particularly useful, if not irreplaceable.

Following the Campaign and Politization Process through a Panel : Lessons from the French 2007 study

To capture the different temporalities of voting choices and also voting preferences formation process, a fairly good illustration can be given through the experience of the 2007 French electoral panel. A particular attention was given in that study on campaign effects.

What is the purpose of election campaigns? Do they have an impact on voting behavior and, more specifically, do they affect the processes of electoral decision making? For more than sixty years a whole branch of political science research has been attempting to answer these questions but has yet to come up with any definitive answers.¹ One school of thought, which represents a continuation of the Columbia School (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Lazarsfeld 1948) and Michigan School (Campbell et al., 1960) traditions, regards campaigns as having only a marginal impact on the outcome of elections. For them, voting behavior is primarily linked to party identification of voters, which operates as a kind of

filter of the information that candidates attempt to communicate. They believe that campaigns can do no more than reinforce voters' preexisting opinions. A second school of thought, which was established in the 1970s, focused on the often negative influence of the media on election campaigns (Schwartzberg, 1977; Bourdieu, 1996; Capella and Jamieson, 1997). According to this tradition, the media structure the definition of the key election issues (agenda setting), shape the perception of political debates (framing), or influence the criteria used by voters to evaluate candidates (priming effect) (Iyengar, 1994). For the last twenty years or so, research has increasingly sought to analyze the way voters process the information they receive during election campaigns, stressing, for example, the importance of the heuristics that enable political judgments to be made using a minimum amount of information (Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock, and Brady, 1991; Kuklinski, 2001a). The way voters articulate both information sources in the media and interpersonal communication has also been subjected to fresh analysis. Although the most recent work in this field has tended to stress the importance of the conjunctural, it does not dismiss the conclusions of earlier research. The literature on the functions and effects of election campaigns highlights their lack of uniformity: their influence varies significantly from one voter to the next (Zaller, 1992a). Voters do not all relate to election campaigns in the same way, and the manner and intensity of their exposure to election debates can also vary considerably. Moreover, the processes used by voters to come to their final decision are not all the same. As Richard Lau and David Redlawsk (2006) have noted, some voters actively gather information about the various candidates in order to make comparisons ("rational" vote), whereas others home in on candidates' positions on the issues that matter most to them (issue voting). Some voters follow election campaigns in a selective way and only retain information that provides confirmation of the views they already hold. Others make up their minds without taking much of an interest in the campaign, at best paying attention to incidents or stories that arise during the media campaign coverage.

We would like now, at the same time, to show the role of election campaigns in voting formation process and to contribute to the lively debates on campaigns effects by using data from the *Panel Electoral Français* of the 2007 French presidential and legislative elections (see the appendix detailing the different French experiences of panel studies, including the 2007 one). We will first examine itineraries throughout the campaigns of this whole electoral cycle we mean the four waves of the panel study) and points to the existence of four main voter groups, each with its distinct identity. Then we will analyze the voters' relationship with the campaign, namely the way in which they did or did not become interested in it, as well as their attitude to the campaign. The third and final part of the chapter examines how the fact of following the campaign impacted on voter behavior.

Following the Campaign: Intensity and Itineraries

One interesting question included in the *Panel Electoral Français 2007* was worded as follows: "Did you follow the presidential campaign [or the legislative election campaign] every day or almost every day, from time to time, or not at all?" This wording enables us to measure an overall relationship to the campaign without postulating an a priori interest in it. Neither are any assumptions made about the way in which the campaign was followed. Indeed it is possible to experience an election campaign and, therefore, be exposed to some of its effects without necessarily being interested either in political currents affairs or in how the campaign will unfold. One way of keeping abreast of what is happening in an election campaign is by being a high media consumer, another is by

discussing the election with family and friends while accessing media coverage in a more limited way (Zuckerman, 2005). Individuals who follow a campaign do not necessarily participate in it fully nor involve themselves in particular social interactions during the campaign period. They can be relatively passive spectators of the election race.

The panel study data reveal that the 2007 presidential election generated particularly high interest levels among the electorate. In the run-up to the first round of voting 59% of panel members followed the campaign every day or almost every day. This figure rose to 68% for the second round. These percentages (see table 1) are considerably higher than the corresponding figures for 2002, when only 37% of voters regularly followed the campaign leading up to the first round of voting, and 15% did not follow it at all. The second point to note is that the campaign for the legislative elections generated much less voter interest than the presidential campaign. More than a quarter of voters did not follow the second phase of this electoral sequence at all. This generalized indifference had not been present in 2002, undoubtedly due to the particular context surrounding the reelection of Jacques Chirac. As well as providing an indication of how closely the various stages of the campaign were being followed, the panel study also enabled us to track the dynamics of voter behavior over the period under examination, using two levels of voter engagement, (F = regularly following; N = not following or occasionally following), measured on three occasions during the campaign and yielding, in theory, eight itineraries. In fact, the voters followed three main itineraries (which were represented by 76% of panel members):

Table 1 Frequency of following the campaign (%)

	<i>Presidential first round (wave 1)</i>	<i>Presidential second round (wave 2)</i>	<i>Legislatives (wave 3)</i>
Every day or almost every day	59	68	28
From time to time	33	27	44
Not at all	8	5	28

Source: *Panel Electoral Français, 2007.*

- . just under a quarter of voters (24%) followed the presidential and legislative elections only sporadically or not at all (itinerary NNN);
- . an equivalent proportion of voters (24%), in direct contrast, followed both presidential and legislative campaigns on a regular basis (FFF);
- . a third group of voters (making up 28% of panel members) followed the whole of the presidential campaign and then followed the legislative campaign sporadically, if at all (FFN).

As well as these three main groups, two other secondary itineraries may be identified. Approximately 13% of voters followed the second round of the presidential election on a regular basis, but not the rest of the election cycle (NFN). Finally, a small group (6%) had a more original itinerary. After regularly following the campaign for the first round they failed to follow the rest of the election cycle (FNN).

Distant Voters and Attentive Voters

The “distant” voters, whom we define as those who consistently failed to follow any part of the election campaign (itinerary NNN), constituted a group that was demographically, on average, younger and much more female (68%) than the population as a whole. There was an overrepresentation of voters from the lower social classes in this group. Only 9% of its members were either senior managers or professional people. More than two-thirds of voters in this group claimed to live in a household that was having difficulty making ends meet, and only a fifth of them had continued their studies after taking the baccalaureate.

The second characteristic of this group was that, compared to the rest of the panel members, they did not regularly take the trouble to keep up with the news. These citizens watched the television news less than the others: 37% of them watched the news three times or less a week compared to 20% for the whole panel. They had relatively little access to non-media sources of information. Almost two-thirds of them said that they had only occasionally talked about the campaign with family and friends, and 15% said they had not discussed this topic at all.

The most distinctive feature of this group was its political profile. As one would expect, distant citizens had little interest in politics and were less well integrated into the political system. Furthermore, 53% considered that politics is a complicated affair (compared to 40% of the whole panel) and 57% believed that the democratic system did not work well. They voted far more intermittently than other panel members; 28% stated that they voted only occasionally or, in some cases, never (compared to 16% for the whole panel). Undoubtedly, another reason why these individuals did not follow the campaign is simply that none of the candidates appealed to them. Approximately 80% stated that they were close to no political party (compared to 63% of the whole panel), and more than two-thirds of them claimed they trusted neither the left nor the right to govern the country properly.

The group of attentive citizens, defined as those who followed the whole of the campaign (FFF), including the legislative elections, are in almost every respect in direct contrast with the group of distant citizens. In socio-demographic terms, members of this group tended to be male and older and had more educational qualifications. Upper and intermediate socio-professional categories were overrepresented. They were also better informed than average, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and were some of the most regular viewers of the television news: three quarters of them watched every day. They had relatively diverse information sources: 40% kept themselves informed primarily by listening to the radio, reading a national daily newspaper, or consulting the Internet (compared to 29% for the whole panel). Nevertheless, as with the previous group, the most distinctive feature of this group was their political profile. Voters who regularly followed the whole campaign tended to be very interested in politics. They were citizens who were ready to participate (94% stated that they vote in every or almost every election) and would not hesitate to go on a demonstration (67% stated that they would be ready to do so, compared to 49% of voters who did not follow the campaign). They are more polarized than other panel members: only 16% regard themselves as neither left- nor right-wing, and 59% stated that they felt close to a political party. Party orientation did not, however, have any significant impact on the extent to which the campaign was followed. Voters who stated that they felt close to a right-wing political party were about

as likely to have followed the whole electoral campaign as voters who were close to a left-wing party.

Citizens who closely followed the whole of the campaign tended to have a relatively positive view of politics. Nevertheless, we can also detect a degree of disillusionment with the political system among this group. Just 28% thought that politicians pay attention to what people think. Only half of them considered that the election of a new president was likely to improve things and, at the beginning of the campaign, 45% were of the opinion that the democratic system was not working very well

Between the two groups of attentive and distant citizens there were those voters whose relationship with the campaign changed over time. Before studying the panel members whose interest levels dropped toward the end of the electoral cycle (FFN), we will briefly consider voters whose interest in the campaign tailed off after the second round of voting (NFN).

At first glance this group does not seem very different from the distant citizens. One can well imagine these voters not following the second round campaign either. Although this group was slightly more positive, they had basically the same kind of relationship with politics as did the distant citizens: little trust in either the left or the right to govern the country properly, lack of connection with political parties, and relatively low levels of participation in elections. As regards economics, they shared many of the values and attitudes of the distant citizens but were less conservative on social issues. Socio-demographically, they again had a profile similar to that of distant citizens: men and members of high-level sociopolitical groups were underrepresented. What differentiated them from the distant citizens—and all the other groups—was their youth (see table 2): 44% were less than 35 years old. As a consequence, these panel members had studied more than the distant citizens—11% of them were students and 14% had higher educational

Table 2 Voters profiles according to how closely they followed the campaign

Followed regularly	<p>People in this group tend to be older, male, from upper socio-professional categories, and with high educational levels</p> <p>Very politicized and polarized voters</p> <p>Watch TV news a lot and keep themselves informed in a variety of ways</p>
Only followed the presidential campaign	<p>Sociologically, the profile of this group is close to that of the general population</p> <p>Take a moderate interest in politics, but this group is much less polarized than the previous one</p>
Followed just the first round of the presidential	<p>Predominantly mid-level employees, clerical workers, and skilled and unskilled workers</p>

election	Voters say they are neither left nor right wing, quite close to the extreme right in terms of values Obtain most of their information from television (mainly TF1)
Followed the second round of the presidential election	Very young group, not very politicized, may be differentiated from non-followers of campaign by a higher educational level and richer informational practices.
Did not follow campaign	Relatively female group, lower socio-professional categories and educational level Relatively unpoliticized voters without much trust in the political system Obtain most of their information from television but rarely watch the TV news

Source: Panel Electoral Français, 2007.

qualifications—making the likelihood of them taking an interest in politics greater. Second, they kept themselves better informed than distant citizens did. They watched the television news on a regular basis and, in particular, consulted the national daily newspapers and the Internet more often. They were also very critical of the media; 73% of them thought that the media did not do a good job of presenting the important issues (compared to 62% of distant citizens). Finally they tended to discuss politics more often: 26% spoke about the campaign with family and/or friends before the first round of the presidential election, and 53% before the second round (compared to 15% and 25% of distant citizens, respectively).

Two Phases of Demobilization : not possible to study it without a panel design

The group of voters who, over the course of the electoral cycle, went from following the campaign on a regular basis to not following it at all included just over a third of panel members. In fact, there were two moments in the campaign when panel members tended to stop following it.

The first wave of demobilization was relatively minor and occurred after the first round of the presidential election. A 10% of those who followed the campaign leading up to the first round failed to follow the rest of the campaign. Given that this was a small group of panel members (110 individuals out of a panel of 1,846), it is not easy to identify what motivated their loss of interest in the campaign. A majority of them were skilled and unskilled workers, mid-level employees, and clerical workers with few educational qualifications, only moderately interested in politics, and claiming to be estranged from all political parties. Their behavior was clearly motivated to some extent by feelings of disappointment, which must have been particularly widespread, given that half of them

were hopeful at the beginning of the presidential campaign that it could change things in a positive way. In fact, members of this group tended to vote for “minor” candidates in the first round of the presidential election: only half of them voted for François Bayrou, Ségolène Royal, or Nicolas Sarkozy (compared to 70% for the panel as a whole). This group contained the highest proportion of votes for Olivier Besancenot and José Bové (12% compared to 7% of panel members who stated that they had voted for one of these two candidates), as well as for the extreme right (13% compared to 8% overall). Furthermore, 18% of these voters claimed they had voted for Jean-Marie Le Pen in the first round of the 2002 presidential election (compared to 10% of the whole panel). These voters are, however, best characterized not by the way they stated that they had voted, but by their values.

The second and most spectacular wave of abandonment of the 2007 campaign occurred after the presidential election: 61% of voters who had followed the second round of the presidential election on a daily or almost daily basis followed the legislative campaign only from time to time, if at all.

Although this massive demobilization occurred across the board, it affected certain groups of voters more than others. Three out of every four voters under the age of 35 who followed the second round of the presidential campaign did not follow the legislative campaign (compared to half such voters over the age of 50). Students in particular failed to take an interest in the legislative campaign (82% did not follow it). A high proportion of these voters started to take an interest in the presidential election relatively late in the campaign and followed it only in the second-round phase. Disaffection with the legislative election campaign varied among socio-professional categories: such feelings were shared by 68% of skilled and unskilled workers, mid-level employees, and clerical workers, but by only 55% of senior managers and professional people.

Nevertheless, the key to understanding the reasons behind the demobilization of the electorate during the legislative campaign lies in the examination of voters’ attitudes to politics. Of those voters who followed the presidential campaign on a regular basis, the least likely to continue following the election cycle into its legislative phase had the following profile: they were the least interested in politics; they had the least faith in the left or the right to govern the country properly; and finally they did not feel close to any political party. However, voters who, having followed the presidential campaign, continued to follow the legislative campaign on a regular basis tended to be the most politicized voters. More than 90% of them stated that they were quite interested or very interested in politics; 70% would have put their trust in the left or the right to govern the country properly. Finally, a majority of these voters became personally involved in the presidential campaign, either by trying to canvas other individuals or by attending public meetings. A propensity to follow the campaign, though linked to the level of voter participation, is not related to the way an individual voted in the second round of the presidential election. The same proportion of the Sarkozy and Royal electorates failed to follow the campaign for the legislative elections.

All things considered, the drop in interest in the legislative campaign highlighted the particular status of the presidential election campaign. Unlike the legislative elections, the presidential campaign managed, if only for a fleeting moment, to capture the attention of some of the least politicized sections of the electorate. This ability to engage voters had three main causes. First of all, the intense media coverage of the campaign meant

that even those voters who were least interested in politics were inevitably exposed to the unfolding campaign. This—in a sense—passive exposure resulted from television viewing, and a close relation between the frequency with which an individual watched the TV news and the likelihood that they would have followed the campaign. Second, the fact that high percentages of voters followed the presidential campaign may also be partly explained by the central place it occupies in the political cycle. Many voters, realizing that the outcome of these elections have a determining effect on the political life of the country, pay close attention to them. Legislative elections, however, are regarded as being of secondary importance, especially when they come shortly after a presidential election and are followed closely only by highly politicized voters and political activists. Finally, it is reasonable to assume that for citizens who are not particularly interested in politics the campaign for the presidency is easier to understand than the legislative election campaign. The presidential run-off is experienced as a nationwide head-to-head contest between two individuals, whereas the legislative campaign culminates in a more complex kind of election, where both candidates and parties are pitted against each other in a variety of political arenas. In 2007 the usual interest generated by presidential elections was no doubt further heightened by the fact that the incumbent president was not able to stand again. Memories of the 2002 presidential election also helped to generate interest. Indeed it is not unlikely that some voters, despite having a low opinion of politics, took an interest in the 2007 presidential race in the hope of seeing Jean-Marie Le Pen repeat his strong 2002 performance.

The Relationship to the Campaign

As well as simply following election news, voters can participate more fully in campaigns by involving themselves in various social interactions or by engaging in activities that have a connection with the election.

Table 3 Activities undertaken during the campaign (%)

	<i>Wave 1</i>	<i>Wave 2</i>	<i>Wave 3</i>
Talk about the campaign with family, friends, and acquaintances often or from time to time	85	92	86
Try to convince someone to vote like you often or sometimes	25	35	31
Attend a public meeting often or sometimes	15	14	17
<i>Reminder: followed campaign on a regular basis</i>	59	68	26

Note: Read horizontally. For example, 85% of voters spoke often or from time to time about

the campaign with family, friends, or acquaintances during wave 1 of the panel study, and 92% during wave 2.

Source: Panel Electoral Français, 2007.

So, at one point or another of the electoral cycle, practically all the panel members spoke about the campaign with family, friends, or colleagues; 46% of them tried to convince someone to vote for the same candidate or party as them, and 27% stated that they had attended a public meeting or a meeting with a candidate. Such activities were not, however, undertaken with the same intensity over the whole course of the election campaign. Discussions with family, friends, and acquaintances took place throughout the period in question and, not unexpectedly, were more frequent between the two rounds of the presidential election (see table 3). Similarly, the period between the two presidential ballots was the time when voters were most likely to try to persuade other individuals to vote for the same candidate as them: 35% of them did so during this part of the campaign. Such proselytism did, however, also occur during the campaign for the legislative elections and involved 31% of voters. Finally, although attendance at public meetings was relatively low, it remained fairly stable throughout the electoral cycle and even rose slightly during the campaign for the legislative elections, very likely due to the great number of informal meetings organized during this period.

This wave-by-wave examination of data could suggest that there is no connection between following the campaign and personal involvement in the campaign. The drop in interest in the campaign following the presidential election, in particular, did not seem to affect campaign-related activity during the legislative elections. Although considerably fewer voters followed the legislative elections, the frequency of conversations and the amount of proselytism declined only a little, and attendance at public meetings actually went up slightly.

Involvement in the Campaign: Effects of Politicization and Age

In order to understand the dynamics of campaign involvement we devised an indicator using the number of activities and the moment in the campaign when they were engaged in.⁹ It would appear that over the whole of the electoral cycle approximately half of the electorate involved themselves a little or not at all in the campaign, that is, they engaged in only one activity at the most (generally conversations with family, friends, and acquaintances). At the other end of the spectrum, 18% of voters got involved in both the presidential and legislative election campaigns, that is, they engaged in two or more activities in each wave of the panel study. Between the voters who were consistently very involved and the voters who were not involved, or only slightly involved, we can identify a group whose involvement was confined to the presidential campaign (13% of panel members), as well as two other groups with rather more original profiles: first, those who were involved in the second round of the presidential race and the legislative elections (8% of panel members), and, second, individuals who got involved only in the legislative election campaign (6% of panel members).

What factors determined the level of an individual's involvement in a campaign? Once more we find—to an even greater extent than for how closely a given individual followed the campaign—that their degree of politicization was a key factor. Those who throughout the campaign regularly discussed the elections with their family, friends, and acquaintances, tried to convince others, or attended public meetings were highly

politicized citizens. Some were even political activists. Almost all of them (9 out of 10) were very or relatively interested in politics or stated that they felt close to a political party; 73% thought that politics was not complicated. An extremely high proportion of them would participate in a demonstration (77%), and they vote very regularly (91% vote in all or almost all elections). However, individuals who did not get involved in the campaign at all tended to be much less interested in politics and less likely to think of themselves as right- or left-wing. More generally, regarding all variables to do with politics, their results were in complete contrast to the results of the active citizens.

Nevertheless, an individual's attitude to politics was not the only factor determining their level of involvement in the campaign. Availability and opportunity were also important. In the present case, the relative lack of interest in politics of some citizens could be compensated for by having more opportunities for social exchange, as well as by being in a better position, for practical and material reasons, to get involved in the campaign (e.g., attending public meetings). Analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of the various groups demonstrates that the level of personal involvement in the campaign was probably linked to the density of an individual's social networks. People who are socially isolated because of their age or professional situation are considerably less involved than others. So, 60% of those who were engaged in no campaign activity (over the period in question) were either unemployed, retired, or not working, whereas these categories of individual made up only about a third of the group of very involved citizens. It should also be noted that involvement in the campaign varies according to where one lives. Voters living in Paris and its suburbs and to a lesser extent people living in other very large cities were relatively active throughout the campaign, whereas those living in the country or small towns tended not to participate in any election-related activities.

It is interesting to examine in some detail how age and involvement in the campaign are related. As a general rule an individual's involvement in political campaigns increases as they get older and is in close correlation with interest in politics that, as we know, increases with age (Muxel, 2007b). Nevertheless, for those over 65 involvement in the campaign went down. Unlike in other age categories, older citizens' interest in politics is not translated into active participation in campaigns and is neutralized by their inability to engage in certain activities due, for example, to the fewer opportunities they have for exchanges with family members, or the difficulties they experience in getting to public meetings because of their reduced mobility.

However, the relationship between age and involvement in the election varied over the course of the campaign. The presidential campaign succeeded in mobilizing the youngest voters in great numbers. Only 8% of those under 35 took no interest in the first round of the campaign. This figure dropped to 3% for the second round. Young voters' involvement in the electoral cycle did, however, tail off significantly during the campaign for the legislative elections: 12% of those under 35 engaged in no activity at all during the latter campaign, and the drop in involvement was most pronounced for voters in this age group.

A Disenchanted Attitude toward the Campaign

Although more voters followed the 2007 election campaign than had followed the 2002 campaign, that does not mean they thought the campaign was interesting. The panel study produced some unexpected results, thanks to an open-ended question asking voters what had made the biggest impact on them during the campaign.

First of all 19% of panel members did not mention any statement or incident that had made an impression on them. This group contained a relatively high proportion of voters who did not follow the campaign at all (12% compared to 8% for the whole panel) or followed it only from time to time (37% compared to 33%). Nevertheless, there were also many voters in this group who did follow the campaign on a regular basis and discussed it with family, friends, and acquaintances. It almost seems as if, for them, the campaign had dissolved into background noise from which it was impossible to extract a particular defining moment, even for an attentive observer.

The most striking statistic to emerge from our analysis of the answers to this open-ended question was the high proportion of voters (approximately 30%) who had a negative impression of the way the campaign had been conducted. Voters repeatedly used the same harsh terms to criticize the candidates' campaigning style. More than 11% of voters criticized the candidates for making disparaging remarks about one another, for being too aggressive, or for spending their time attacking one another. For just under 10% of them the campaign was punctuated by a series of promises that were either unrealistic or destined to be broken. About 7% felt that the election contest had more to do with image than with substance, and that communication campaigns were too much to the fore. Finally, 3% thought that it was difficult to differentiate any one candidate from the others, and that they all said the same things. Besides communication campaign the candidates' personalities too were criticized. When voters mentioned the personality or behavior of candidates (which was the case for 16% of panel members), two-thirds of them did so in a negative way.

Close reading of the replies to this open-ended question reveals two broad categories of criticism. The first type of criticism reflects a suspicion of politics and expresses the view that the candidates are "all the same," quick to make fine-sounding promises that they will be unable to keep and far removed from the concerns of ordinary people. This kind of view tends to be expressed by voters who are not particularly educated or interested in politics, and who do not believe that their interests are well represented by politicians. These voters are also characterized by their relatively infrequent use of a narrow range of information sources: they engage in discussion of the campaign significantly less than other panel members and are bigger consumers of the free press.

The second type of criticism reflects a different relationship to the political world, one not characterized by suspicion, but by frustration at the candidates' inability to run a "serious campaign," a "serious campaign" being one in which discussions would properly engage with the fundamental issues of the campaign and not be merely superficial and polemical. Voters who expressed these views tended to be highly educated and very interested in politics. They talked about politics with family, friends, and acquaintances twice as often as mistrustful voters, and their media consumption was characterized by a relatively high use of daily national newspapers and the Internet.

Campaign and Electoral Decision Making

Does following or not following an election campaign have any impact on voting behavior? Did levels of attention paid to the campaign as it unfolded influence voter participation or the way people voted? These questions are part of the wider debates over what determines voting behavior, as well as the effect of conjunctural factors on voters.

More fundamentally, they lead us to ask what processes are involved when individuals make their decision about who to vote for. To what extent does voters' decision depend on how well-informed they are? How did voters who did not take an interest in the campaign and, therefore, had access to relatively little information about the candidates and their positions on various issues manage to decide who to vote for?

Effects on Participation

A positive relation between following the campaign and voting on polling day can be observed. The more regularly individuals follow the campaign, the less likely they are to abstain. This holds true not only for the electoral cycle as a whole, but also for each individual ballot.

Panel members who followed the presidential and legislative campaigns on a regular basis voted relatively often. A little over two-thirds of them participated in all four rounds of voting, compared to around half of those who followed only the presidential campaign, and 42% of those who did not follow any of the campaigns cycle. More frequent voting by those who followed the campaign was also observed among individuals having equivalent levels of politicization, suggesting that following the campaign does have a particular effect on voting levels.

Furthermore, the rate of abstention for each ballot was higher for voters who did not follow the campaign on a regular basis than for those who did. In the second round of the presidential election, 19% of the former group and 10% of the latter did not vote. The gap was even wider for the first round of the legislative elections: abstention rates were 36% and 11% respectively. Furthermore, we can observe that following the campaign can have a certain kind of delayed effect on electoral participation. Voters who did not follow the campaign for the legislative elections but who had previously followed the presidential campaign were more likely to have voted in the legislative elections than voters who had followed neither campaign. In other words, it seems that the presidential campaign heightened some citizens' awareness of the importance of voting, and that the effects of their heightened awareness continued even after the campaign had come to an end, compensating to some extent for the drop in their attention levels during the legislative campaign.

Although there does seem to be a relation between following the campaign and participation levels, the importance of this relation needs to be qualified. Although this relation is particularly clear for legislative ballots, it is of marginal importance in presidential elections. Many distant citizens, despite not having followed the campaign, participated in the presidential election. Only 12% of distant citizens stated that they had abstained in the first round of the presidential election. Even taking into account the exceptional mobilizing power of the 2007 presidential election, the low level of abstention among distant voters demonstrates that an individual can decide how to vote even when they have very little information. Thus, approximately 20% of voters who had not followed the campaign managed to select one candidate from the twelve standing (and, as we shall see below, they often voted for a "minor" candidate), despite the fact that following the campaign was really the only way for them to get to know the personalities and programs of the candidates.

Effect on the Votes of the Various Ballots

Did the intensity with which voters followed the campaign affect the way they voted in the various election ballots? Our analysis of the panel data yielded results that suggest that the campaign had little influence on the orientation of the voting, although that does not mean that the campaign had no impact on the electoral decision-making process. In fact, following the campaign on a regular basis had at least two main effects: a confirmation effect and a polarization effect.

The Confirmation of Preexisting Preferences

Following the campaign on a regular basis led to very few modifications of the voting intentions expressed before the first round of the presidential election. As table 4 shows, the vast majority of voters who followed the campaign every day or almost every day voted in the

Table 4 Voting intentions and actual voting in relation to how the campaign was followed (%)

<i>Voting intention before the presidential election</i>	<i>Followed the campaign regularly</i>	<i>First-round presidential election</i>	<i>Second-round presidential election</i>	<i>First-round legislative elections</i>	<i>Second-round legislative elections</i>
Ségolène Royal	Yes	87	95	67 PS*	91 PS*
	No	69	81	55 PS*	85 PS*
Nicolas Sarkozy	Yes	89	96	81 UMP	88 UMP
	No	74	85	70 UMP	74 UMP
François Bayrou	Yes	81	59 S. Royal	42 UDF	55 PS*
	No	66	34 N. Sarkozy	22 UMP	27 UMP
			37 S. Royal	21 PS*	48 PS*
			34	16 UDF	46 UMP
			N. Sarkozy	38 UMP	
				32 PS*	

Note: Example of how to read the table: among voters who expressed the intention of voting for Ségolène Royal before the first round of the presidential election, 87% of those who followed the campaign regularly actually voted for her, compared to 69% of those who did not follow the campaign.

*The votes marked PS include votes for the *Mouvement des radicaux de gauche*.

Source: Panel Electoral Français, 2007

two rounds of the presidential election as they had stated they would at the beginning of the campaign: 87% of those who intended to vote for Ségolène Royal, 89% of those who intended to vote for Nicolas Sarkozy, and 81% of those who, before the first round, expressed an intention to vote for François Bayrou actually did so. Furthermore, in the legislative elections a high proportion of individuals voted for the party that had previously supported their preferred candidate in the presidential election. In contrast, voters who followed the election campaign a little or not at all were less likely to choose the candidate who they had said they would vote for at the beginning of the campaign. Moreover, in the legislative elections these individuals had a lower propensity to vote for the party that had supported their preferred candidate.

Furthermore we can note that a large portion of voters who followed the campaign on a regular basis stated that they had already made up their minds about who to vote for well before polling day. So, in the first wave of the panel study, more than 67% of voters who followed the campaign on a regular basis stated that they had already known for a long time who they would vote for in the first round of the presidential election. Moreover, in the third wave of the panel study, 70% of them stated that they had also made up their minds about whom to vote for in the first round of the legislative elections a long time before. However, a high proportion of voters who followed the campaign a little or not at all either took their decision during the campaign or were still undecided; 42% were in this situation before the first round of the presidential election, as were 48% before the first round of the legislative elections.

These two results may appear, at first glance, to be paradoxical. Why did some voters who had already decided who they would vote for before the campaign started and who indeed on polling day voted in line with their voting intentions as expressed at the very start of the campaign still take such a close interest in the campaign? This behavior could be interpreted as an indication of the very limited influence of election campaigns, since here they seem to have little or no impact on vote formation. It is, however, more likely that these results actually demonstrate two other, rather different, trends: first, that there is not necessarily any instrumental logic underlying the following of election campaigns and, second, that people do not primarily take an interest in such campaigns in order to collect the information they require to decide who to vote for. Voters' motivations lie elsewhere.

For many citizens, particularly the most politicized, following a campaign is a matter of continuing to keep abreast of politics and current affairs: when one is in the habit of taking an interest in political life, one naturally continues to do so, particularly during eventful periods. Following a campaign also serves to help confirm long-established political preferences: we keep track of developments not to help us decide who to vote for, but to give us arguments to support the choice we have already made. Finally, for other voters, particularly those who are least interested in politics, a third reason for following a campaign could be the enjoyment of a dramatic narrative, complete with scheming and unexpected twists in the plot. In this last case the campaign is followed not out of concern for the eventual outcome of the election, but because the spectacle on offer is of a kind that can intrigue and excite even individuals who normally take no interest in politics.

The Polarization of the Vote toward the Main Candidates

On examination of the relation between overall orientation of votes and how closely the campaign was followed, few differences in their distribution appear. Voters who followed the campaign on a regular basis and those who paid it little attention voted for left- and right-wing candidates in roughly equal proportions. This held true for both rounds of the presidential election, as well as for the legislative elections. In the legislative elections, for example, the overall orientations of the votes of those who followed the campaign and of those who did not were similar. So, in the first round of the legislative elections, roughly 33% voted for a candidate from the socialist left and 32% for a candidate from the UMP or the presidential majority. In the second round these percentages went up to 39% and 38%, respectively.

Although, overall, following the campaign made only a slight impression on voting orientation, closer data analysis that focused on individual candidates or parties rather than broad political groupings revealed a number of differences. Some were relatively minor. Voters who only followed the presidential campaign were more inclined to vote for François Bayrou. As for individuals who only followed the campaign leading up to the first round, their voting behavior was distinctive in that they were relatively likely to support far-left or far-right candidates, who obtained 37% of their votes (compared to 22% of the votes of the panel as a whole).

This analysis reveals another, more important result, namely, that following the presidential campaign on a regular basis correlates with voting for the leading candidates (Bayrou, Royal, and Sarkozy), irrespective of which political camp the voter is closest to. This result is somewhat counterintuitive. One could assume that when following a campaign a voter would become better informed about certain candidates and their ideas—which they had previously been relatively ignorant about—thus leading to an increase in the number of candidates for whom they could potentially vote (and, inversely, that not following a campaign would result in the less well-known candidates—who only come to the fore during this period—being overlooked). The polarization phenomenon is particularly present among voters who stated that they felt close to the right, as well as among those who stated that they were close to neither the left nor the right. In the latter group, 72% of those who followed the campaign on a regular basis voted for one of the top three finishers in the first round of the presidential election, compared to 51% of those who did not follow the campaign. Among voters defining themselves as close to the right, the differential between votes for the three leading candidates and the other candidates, depending on whether or not the campaign was followed on a regular basis, is 20%. This phenomenon was also present among voters stating that they were close to a far-left or far-right party (differential of 16%) and, to a lesser degree, among voters close to a party of the (non-far) left (differential of 10%).

It remains to be established whether this polarization effect was actually linked to the extent to which the campaign was followed and was not an indirect effect of the level of voter politicization (which, as we saw earlier, largely determines the degree of attention given to the campaign). Indeed, as the most politicized voters identify more than other voters with the main political parties, we could imagine that they would naturally tend to vote for candidates who have ties with such parties. By the same token, we could also suspect that voters who feel relatively cut off from political life might be more inclined to vote for candidates who were not establishment figures. If we repeat the analysis, controlling the level of voter politicization, we can observe that the relation between following the campaign and polarization of the vote persists among voters who are very or fairly interested in politics. Of these voters, those who followed the campaign on a regular basis were relatively more likely to have voted for a candidate who did not finish in the “top three” (differential of 14%). This phenomenon was, however, not as consistently present where levels of politicization were lower. Regarding voters who were not very interested in politics, the fact of following the campaign on a regular basis variously had no effect (the Royal vote), increased the likelihood of voting Bayrou (although we should not rely too heavily on this data that is of questionable significance), and lowered the probability of voting for Sarkozy.

How should the polarization effect be interpreted? There are several possible

explanations. We could imagine that, in the course of following the campaign, some voters gleaned information—regarding, for example, the relative standings of the various candidates—that led them to decide not to waste their votes on marginal candidates and to vote tactically. We can also see in the polarization linked to the following of the campaign an indirect consequence of the media’s tendency to focus on the leading candidates. Finally, it is possible that individuals who followed the campaign on a regular basis would come to attach increasing importance to the major social issues of the campaign and the various programs put forward, leading them to exclude the possibility of voting for those candidates who seemed least capable of actually governing. In a certain sense, the campaign served as a reminder that politics is a complex and serious business that requires those who govern not just to hold a set of opinions but to be actually capable of making difficult choices. This last interpretation, in ascribing to the campaign the role of reestablishing the importance of politics, though no doubt optimistic, is backed up by another result that the panel study highlighted.

Conclusions

Election campaigns can be described as periods of information overload (Gerstlé, 2004) that induce citizens to take more interest in political life. Although the 2007 election panel study confirmed this and indicated that the interest generated was greater than in 2002, this statement requires qualification in a number of respects.

In the 2007 campaign, the public's attention was mainly focused on the presidential election. After a brief period during which the public paid a great deal of attention to politics, the legislative elections marked a return to normal interest levels. The intensification of political conversations in the run-up to the second round of the presidential election died away and public discussion returned to the levels that prevailed at the beginning of the electoral cycle. Presidential elections are examples of "high stimulus elections" (Campbell, 1960), when even voters who have little interest in politics are mobilized. This mobilization is due to a number of factors: the intense media coverage presidential elections are given; the way these elections structure political life; and the personal and bipolar nature of presidential runoffs, which make them easier for voters to understand than other types of election. In 2007 this capacity to engage voters was undoubtedly enhanced by the candidates' personalities as well as memories of 2002.

Despite the exceptional nature of the 2007 campaign, the usual split between the averagely politicized citizens and citizens who took little or no interest in politics showed no signs of narrowing. Although, as a result of the campaign, members of this latter group did pay more attention than usual to political life, this was also the case for politicized citizens, who intensified their relationship with politics and continued to involve themselves in the campaign more actively, over a longer period, and in greater numbers than other categories of voter.

Finally, taking an interest in a campaign is not the same as finding it interesting. Almost a third of voters were critical of the 2007 campaign, and this group included not only mistrustful citizens, who have a negative view of politics, but also more demanding citizens, who would like political debate to be of a higher order and of a less polemical nature.

Voters were motivated to take an interest in the 2007 campaign for a variety of reasons. For some it was a continuation of their habitual interest in political current affairs. Others followed the campaign as they would a dramatic narrative, drawn in by the twists and turns of the plot, rather than concerned by the repercussions of the election result for the future of the nation. The panel study also suggested that the campaign had a minimal impact on the formation of voter choice. Individuals who followed the 2007 campaign most closely did not do so in order to be able to make an informed voting decision, but rather to obtain confirmation that the choice they had already made was the right one. The vast majority of people who did not follow the campaign were perfectly capable of deciding how to vote, at least in the presidential ballots. Their propensity to either abstain or return a blank vote was only slightly greater than for other voters.

Nevertheless, the fact that the campaign did not generate any information indispensable to the electoral decision-making process does not mean that it served no purpose and had no impact. Individuals who followed the 2007 campaign on a regular basis tended to vote for the leading candidates. More generally, we can suggest that election campaigns help

voters to modify their electoral choices, in order to make their vote count as much as possible in the prevailing electoral context. Furthermore, the 2007 campaign led to an increase in trust in the democratic system, even among the most skeptical citizens. These positive effects on political cohesion, which have often been observed in other countries as well (Hart, 2000; Farrell and Schmitt-Beck, 2002), remind us that campaigns should not be dismissed as much ado about nothing.

The contribution of panel studies to this set of results is irreplaceable. It permits to monitor and to figure out the mobilities, fluidities as well as the resilience of voting and political preferences. It is certainly time in France to think about the way that we did practiced the panel studies, in particular the 2002 and the 2007. The time span of our panel studies is definitively too short, too narrowly conducted to the election. We would strongly recommend the following scenario in the future : to establish a long-time panel study, as did the BES between 1997 and 2001. Without ignoring the difficulties, a genuine time series of surveys data would resource the main paradigms of French voting behavior research. To make it, the only way would be to drive the French election studies in the same direction as the BES or the GLES in Germany : a combination of different data sources, taking voting behaviors under different methodological, substantive and may be more important time dimensions : combing panel studies, repeated cross-sections and rolling cross-sections would be of a huge intrest and would drive French electoral sociology on god tracks : less dependency of the results on the empirical tools, more intellectual confrontations, more tolerance between approaches, in other words an improvement in science.

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Appendix : The French experiences of electoral panel studies

The following tables come from : Viviane Lehay. The Panel electoral Français 2007 : methodological issues. In : Bruno Cautrès, Anne Muxel (ed.). *The New Voter in Western Europe : France and Beyond*. New York, Palgrave, 2011, page 243-244. Special thanks to Viviane Le Hay for permeting this reprint. The same chapter of Viviane Le Hay as well as the methodological appendixes of the edited volume gives numerous figures and data analysis on the sociology of panel participation, panel attrition and panel deformation through the four waves.

Bibliography of this text will be completed and uploaded in later version

1958 Panel		French National Election Panel Study, 1967-1969		PEF 2002	PEF 2007
Team and funding	Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, Conseil supérieur de la recherche scientifique, Fondation Rockefeller	Philip E. Converse (University of Michigan), Georges Dupoux (université de Bordeaux), Roy Pierce (University of Michigan), University of Michigan Council for International Programs	CEVIPOF, Ministère de l'Intérieur et de l'Aménagement du Territoire		
Population targeted	Metropolitan electorate.				
Wave 1 sample	Random method. Drawing by lot from electoral registers in 116 towns and 61 départements. Stratification by region and by residence.	Random method. W1: drawing by lot of 86 electoral constituencies from 467. W2/W3: drawing by lot of 43 constituencies from the preceding 86.	Stratification by region and category of agglomeration. Quotas (sex, age—including sex x age for 65 and over, occupation of the head of household)		Stratification by region and category of agglomeration and by legislative constituency. Quotas (sex x age, occupation or former occupation of head of household, level of education)
Number of waves	3	3	3	3	4
Dates	W1: September 10-27, 1958 (before the referendum) W2: November 3-22, 1958 (between the referendum and the election) W3: December 15-31, 1958 (after the election)	W1: end April-end June 1967 (after the 2nd round of the legislative election) W2: July-beg. October 1968 (after the events of May and the June legislative election) W3: end September 1969 to January 1970 (80% carried out in October) (after the April referendum and the June presidential election)	W1: April 8-20, 2002 (before the 1st round of the presidential election) W2: May 15-31, 2002 (after the 2nd round of the presidential election) W3: June 20-28, 2002 (after the legislative election)	W1: March 29 to April 21, 2007 (before the 1st round of the presidential election) W2: April 25 to May 5, 2007 (between the 2 rounds of the presidential election) W3: May 29 to June 9, 2007 (after the 2nd round of the presidential election) W4: June 19-30, 2007 (after the 2nd round of the legislative election)	

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