Flawed Measures, Flawed Inferences?
A Panel Study on the Accuracy of Recalled Vote Choices in
Belgian Elections (2009-2014)

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Introduction

- Who switches parties is an old question in electoral research
- Increased instability in voting behavior
How to do research on volatility?

- Panel data are considered optimal

- But:
  - Attrition
  - Panel-conditioning
  - Costly

Recall questions in cross-sectional surveys are regularly relied on (part of CSES modules as well)
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How to do research on volatility?

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- Recall questions in cross-sectional surveys are regularly relied on (part of CSES modules as well)
Errors in recall questions

- Fierce criticism: "recall data should not be incorporated into models of voting behavior" (Weir, 1975: 53)
- Memory problems
  - Cognitive capacities
  - Political involvement
  - Time
- Cognitive dissonance
Overreported stability

- Easier to remember
- Tendency to appear consistent
Research on sources of errors in recalls

Previous research finds weak evidence

"We were surprised to find that only a relatively small number of factors appeared to be associated at all with recall behavior" (van der Eijk and Niemoller, 2008: 328).
Implications for research on electoral volatility

Political sophistication linked to vote switching...
Implications for research on electoral volatility

Political sophistication linked to vote switching... and to recall accuracy
Implications for research on electoral volatility

Political sophistication linked to vote switching... and to recall accuracy

Theoretical relation (real switching)

Observed relation (recalled switching)
Data and methods

- Belgian Election Panel (BEP) 2009-2014
- 792 respondents (48% RR)
- 'Real' behavior 2009 vs. recall in 2014
## Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Stable voters</th>
<th>Party-switchers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accurate recall</td>
<td>90.1%</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>66.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inaccurate recall</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>690</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Bias in measuring volatility when using recall question

Table 2. Binary logistic regression explaining accurate recall of the 2009 vote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model I</th>
<th>Model II</th>
<th>Model III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>se</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch (ref: French)</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>0.172</td>
<td>-0.144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (ref: male)</td>
<td>-0.277</td>
<td>0.172</td>
<td>-0.324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.012*</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.017*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low educated (ref: middle)</td>
<td>0.151</td>
<td>0.233</td>
<td>0.135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High educated (ref: middle)</td>
<td>0.184</td>
<td>0.198</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>0.070</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>0.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poll - 2009 result of 2009</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.049***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>party</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switched parties (observed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.415</td>
<td>0.384</td>
<td>-0.121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>668</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pseudo $R^2$</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>0.257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: BEP, 2009-2014. Unweighted data. Unstandardized coefficients and their standard errors are reported. Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. 
Figure 3. Marginal effect of political knowledge on the probability to switch parties

Marginal effects and 95%-confidence intervals of knowledge on the probability to switch parties. Based on estimates of Model I and Model III in Table 3. All other covariate set at their mean values.
Conclusion

- Reason for concern: flawed measures of recall
- Underestimation of real amount of vote switching (33% vs 44%)
- Predictors of vote switching are no strong predictors of accuracy
- No flawed inferences
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