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# At the last minute

## Late deciders and the Dutch parliamentary elections of 2017

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### 1 Introduction

Once upon a time... Yes, once upon a time, Dutch voters were predictable. With only three questions on social class, religious preference, and frequency of attendance at religious services, in the mid-1950s one could correctly predict the vote choice of over 70 per cent of voters at national elections (Lijphart, 1974). Because these characteristics generally did not change between elections and voters knew their position with respect to the political parties, most voters also knew far before an election for which party they would vote.

Once upon a time is not now. The system of *verzuiling* or pillarization broke down in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and no longer provides a guide to electoral behavior of Dutch citizens (e.g., Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 1989b). They no longer know far in advance for which party to vote and electoral volatility is high (e.g., Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2008a; Mair, 2008). In the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES) of 1971, 70 per cent of Dutch voters reported that they knew months in advance for which party they would vote and only 10 per cent said they waited until a few days before the election to determine their choice (Todosijevic *et al.*, 2010: 73). According to the DPES 2017, in the general elections of March 15, 2017 only about 30 per cent of voters knew well in advance for which party they would vote, while 40 per cent waited until the last days of the campaign or even voting day itself to make a final choice (Van Holsteyn & Irwin, 2018: 31). They decided at the last minute, as nowadays so many voters in various countries do (e.g., McAllister, 2002).

In studies of elections, these late deciders receive a substantial amount of attention and are often treated as 'special' voters. It is frequently suggested that their vote is crucial:

“late-deciding voters are regarded by political actors - especially parties and candidates - as the group that determines the outcome of the election” (He, 2016: 362; see also He, 2017: 119). Or: “Late deciders have (...) become quite numerous at recent elections. As a consequence their choices increasingly determine election results” (Schmitt-Beck & Partheymuller, 2012: 299). Strictly speaking this is a myth or misunderstanding; the votes of late deciders have no more impact on the outcome than those of early deciders. All votes count equally. The basis for the myth is arguably the reliance that politicians, the media, and the voters place on public opinion polls. Throughout the election campaign, results of such polls are presented. And though the media sometimes make a half-hearted attempt to explain that the polls present merely a snapshot of the current situation and not a prediction of the outcome, many observers are led to derive expectations of the outcome. So if the late deciders divide their votes differently than the early deciders, surprises can ensue and it appears that these late deciders have ‘determined’ the outcome.

Complicating this is that it is argued or simply stated that the behavior of late deciders is difficult to understand, let alone predict. “The brain of the floating voter is inscrutable”, according to a Dutch national newspaper (*de Volkskrant*, 6 March 2017). Political scientists have also taken a dim view and bemoaned their inability to explain the behavior of such late deciding voters. Sixty years ago *The American Voter* referred to “the near-random behavior of those deciding late in the campaign” (Campbell *et al.*, 1960: 79-80). Many days have gone by, but the electoral calculus of the late deciders still allows such a ‘pessimistic’ view: “a last-minute decision is often a ‘snap’ decision by a voter who cares little and knows less” (Chaffee & Rimal, 1996: 269).

The quote from Campbell and colleagues indicates that late deciders were identified and have received scholarly attention long before the numbers of such voters began to increase. Even earlier, in their classic study *Voting*, Berelson and associates suggested that delaying one’s decision should be attributed to what they coined as ‘cross-pressures’; “opinions or views simultaneously supporting different sides” made voters “unstable in their voting position during the campaign” (Berelson *et al.*, 1954: 19). Since these seminal studies, the study of late deciders has remained on the agenda, only increasing in attention as the numbers of such voters has risen in advanced Western democracies (see, for example, Catellani & Alberici, 2012; Dalton *et al.*, 2000; He, 2016; 2017; Kosmidis & Xezonakis, 2010; McAllister, 2002; Nir & Druckman, 2007; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymuller, 2012).

There are two distinct research questions in the literature concerning the timing of the vote decision. One follows the tradition of Berelson and asks what factors are important

in explaining or determining the timing of the vote choice (see, for example, Henderson & Hillygus, 2016; Kenski, 2007; Lavine, 2001; McGregor, 2012; Orriols & Martinez, 2014). On the other hand and from the earliest empirical studies of voting onwards, e.g., *The American Voter*, scholars have commented on the characteristics of late deciders - these comments were generally rather negative - and tried to sketch the late decider profile. This resulted in a considerable literature focusing on various 'typical' characteristics of late deciders (see, for example, Catellani & Alberici, 2012; Chaffee & Choe, 1980; Fournier *et al.*, 2004; Gopalan & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Kosmidis & Xezonakis, 2010). Each research question has its merits, but in particular because of the negative, pessimistic comments concerning late deciders, the decision has been made here to focus upon the characteristics of those who postpone their decision until the last moments before the election. Is the pessimistic view on these citizens empirically correct or is their rehabilitation warranted?

We ask the following questions. Do late deciders differ from early deciders in terms of their sociodemographic profile? Are they less informed? Do they have different attitudes and opinions; are they perhaps cross-pressured by conflicting opinions? How similar or dissimilar is their voting behavior and do they in any sense determine the election results? Or do they have to make their choice from a larger set of possibilities than those who know far in advance which party they favor? The answers to these questions will be based on the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2017 (weighted data); our findings show a profile of the Dutch late decider. This is a descriptive endeavor. But “[c]ontrary to what some political scientists believe, description is a worthy scientific goal in its own right” (Toshkov, 2018: 223) and “[p]rogress in the discipline of political science rests not simply on the development of new techniques of research design and analysis intended to solve recalcitrant problems of identification in causal inference. Equally important is the seemingly prosaic act of description. As it stands, we simply do not know with any degree of precision or confidence what is going on out there” (Gerring, 2012: 743).

## **2 Profiling late deciders**

### *2.1 Demographics*

We are relieved from the task of providing our own literature review concerning the characteristics of late deciders, since this has recently been done by Orriols and Martinez (see also Willocq, 2018):

The literature gives a fairly consistent profile of the main socio-economic and political traits of the undecided voters. Existing research usually characterizes them as individuals with

lower levels of education, weaker political preferences and lesser interest in politics. Indecision is also associated with demographics: women and younger voters are more likely to reach the late stages of a campaign with a decision about whom to vote for (...). Among all the above factors, the standard conclusion is that weaker political preferences, and in particular party identification, are the most correlated with being undecided.” (Orriols & Martinez, 2014: 13)

Although gender and age as such tell us little about electoral behavior, these variables invariably turn up in the political science literature in general and are also included in research on late deciders. So for starters, Table 1a provides a profile of the late decider on these two characteristics (for voters in the 2017 Dutch parliamentary election).

In his review of the literature on the determinants of late deciding, Willocq also mentions gender and age as sociodemographic characteristics that “have been argued to influence time of vote decision”(Willocq, 2018: 2). Concerning gender he cites contradictory findings, however, with five studies finding that “women are more prone than men to delay their vote decision until the campaign is under way” and three studies in which no statistically significant impact was found (Willocq, 2018: 2). Our results support those who find a gender difference: women are underrepresented among those who decide in the last weeks or earlier before election day and overrepresented among those who decided in the last days or on election day. This finding concurs with a study specifically focusing on the impact of gender; Kenski (2007: 20) reported that “women were more likely to say that they did not know for whom they intended to vote when asked their voting intentions.”

Table 1a. Timing of the vote and gender and age for the 2017 Dutch parliamentary election					
Time of vote decision →	On Election day	In the last days before election	In the last weeks before the election	A couple of months before the election	More than a couple of months before the election
<b>Gender</b>					
Men	38	44	54	61	56
Women	62	56	46	39	44
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N=	335	651	525	219	700
<b>Age (groups)</b>					
18-39	41	48	43	34	19
40-65	44	40	40	46	47
66 plus	16	12	17	20	34
Total	101%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N=	325	651	526	219	700

With regard to age, Willocq concludes that *all* previous studies demonstrate “that young citizens are more likely than their elders to make their voting choice late in the

campaign” (2018: 2). Our results are no exception to this rule.<sup>1</sup> Among those who make up their minds long before the election, only 19 per cent were young voters, i.e. younger than 40 years of age. Among those who make up their minds in the last weeks, days or on election day, the percentages are twice as high.

The quote above also indicated that ‘lower levels of education’ are characteristic of late deciders. Our data show differently, or at least the relationship is weak (see Table 1b). Although because of the large sample size, Chi Square is statistically significant, but ordinal measures of association are very low (e.g., Gamma= -.042). In this respect Dutch voters differ from voters in other countries.

Time of vote decision →	On Election day	In the last days before election	In the last weeks before the election	A couple of months before the election	More than a couple of months before the election
Level of education					
Lower	11	7	7	9	15
Middle	46	50	45	46	44
Higher	43	43	48	46	41
Total	100%	100%	100%	101%	100%
N=	301	568	461	206	632

### 2.2 Party Attachment

Attachment to party or party identification generally emerges as the most important factor leading to late decisions. Those who are strongly attached to a party will know far in advance that at any election they will support this party, whereas those without such an attachment will be less certain of their choice and may wait until late to reach a decision. The concept of party identification is associated with the Michigan School (e.g., Campbell *et al.*, 1954; Campbell *et al.*, 1960) and implies a long-standing attachment to a party that remains stable throughout one’s lifetime, even though one might deviate from one’s attachment and occasionally cast a vote for another party. The attempt to import this concept into the Netherlands has been problematic, however: when one changed one’s voting behavior, the attachment was changed and in the Netherlands identification causally followed party choice and not vice versa (Thomassen, 1976; Thomassen & Rosema, 2009).

Nevertheless, several questions have remained in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies that are used to measure ‘party attachment’. These questions were used to differentiate Adherents, Leaners and Non-Adherents and Table 2 shows that, whatever the conceptual problems may be, the general conclusion in the literature empirically holds for

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<sup>1</sup> To make presentation manageable, age has been grouped into three categories: 18-39; 40-65; 66 and older.

the Dutch case. The results support the conclusion that “[p]arty identification is unanimously considered as one of the most reliable predictors of timing of the voting choice”(Willocq, 2018: 2). Among those who made their decision more than a couple of months before the election, 38 per cent indicated that they were Adherents of a party and only 14 per cent said they were Non-Adherents. The results for those who decided on election day were different, with 6 per cent claiming any party adherence, as opposed to about 50 per cent who were Non-Adherents.

Table 2. Timing of the vote and party attachment for the 2017 Dutch parliamentary election

Time of vote decision →	On Election day	In the last days before election	In the last weeks before the election	A couple of months before the election	More than a couple of months before the election
Party attachment					
Adherents	6	10	20	27	38
Leaners	43	54	59	49	48
Non-Adherents	51	36	21	24	14
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N=	193	326	257	101	423

2.3 Interest in politics and the election campaign

The nature of the impact of political interest (or political sophistication, involvement in politics, or however it is called) on the timing of the vote decision has been contested. The earliest studies, e.g., *The People’s Choice* (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) and *The American Voter* offered the pessimistic view that late deciders were uninterested and uninformed. However, recent studies have taken a more optimistic view that late deciders were often politically sophisticated, with high levels of political involvement (see Willocq, 2018, for a summary of the argument; see also e.g., McAllister, 2002).

Overall, our results tend to support the optimistic view, although this is not exactly what our first indicator suggests (see Table 3a). Among those who made a decision on election day, 19 per cent reported to have little political interest, as opposed to between 9 and 13 per cent for all other groups. Those who made their decision during the last days or on election day had ‘very interested’ percentages of 11 and 13, as opposed to slightly over 20 per cent for earlier deciders. Some difference, but not really enough to claim that late deciders were *uninterested*.

Turning from a general expression of political interest to a more specific effort to obtain information, respondents were asked how frequently they read news in the newspapers. Again, a relationship with timing of the vote is found, but again it is weak. A majority of all groups report reading a newspaper at least once a week. However, this may

not be an accurate or valid indication of attention to news, since newspaper reading is more prevalent among older voters, as in particular younger voters turn to other sources of information (e.g., Wenekers *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, the question does not focus on information about the election, and, indeed, when asked how often they read about the election campaign in the newspapers, the difference between the groups becomes very small. Among the earliest deciders, 58 per cent report reading ‘almost always’ or ‘often’ about election news, as compared to 52 per cent of those who only decided on election day.

Table 3a. Timing of the vote and political/campaign interest for 2017 Dutch parliamentary election					
Time of vote decision →	Election day	Last days	Last weeks	Months before	More than months before
<b>Subjective political interest</b>					
- very interested	11	13	24	22	23
- somewhat interested	70	76	66	64	65
- not interested	19	11	9	13	12
<b>Read newspaper</b>					
- almost daily	38	40	44	54	57
- few times a week	18	21	22	21	15
- few times a month	12	13	9	8	6
- seldom or never	33	26	26	17	22
<b>Read in newspapers about election campaign</b>					
- almost always	15	20	21	16	24
- often	37	35	36	42	34
- now and then	36	40	37	38	34
- seldom or never	12	7	6	4	8
<b>Watch NOS Journal/RTL news</b>					
- (almost) daily	49/34	44/27	58/28	59/19	67/27
- 3 or 4 times a week	16/12	19/12	15/14	18/16	11/15
- 1 or 2 times a week	15/15	15/18	14/15	13/11	13/17
- less than once a week	20/39	22/44	14/44	11/54	9/42
<b>Watch debates with party leaders</b>					
- one or more fully	32	34	37	31	34
- fragments debates	45	48	48	52	46
- did not see debates	23	19	15	17	20
<b>Follow election campaign</b>					
- (very) intensively	38	47	54	48	48
- not so intensively	52	49	43	51	47
- did not follow at all	10	4	3	2	5
Note: The above numbers represent percentages (weighted data) that in most cases are based upon approximately 335 respondents who decided on election day, 650 respondents who decided in the last days before the election, 525 who decided in the last weeks, 220 who made their decision in the months before election day, and 700 who knew longer in advance for which party they would vote.					

Although the times - and news consumption - may be ‘a-changin’, television remains an important source of news for many voters (e.g., Van Praag, 2014; see also De Vreese, 2008). The 8 p.m. NOS news broadcast is still watched by large numbers of voters; on average about 2 million people or one third of all people watching television at that time, are

watching this news broadcast.<sup>2</sup> Among late deciders, no fewer than 67 per cent report watching daily, dropping to less than 50 per cent among those deciding in the last days and on election day. The percentages for the 7.30 p.m. news on the commercial station RTL are lower in all groups, but vary interestingly in a different fashion. Whereas 27 per cent of the early deciders report watching RTL-news daily, this percentage is actually higher (!) among those deciding on election day (34%). Yet, once again, when the question is not stated in general terms, but focusses on news related to the campaign, the results are modified. Respondents were asked if they had watched any of the election debates between the party leaders that were televised. Virtually no difference is found among the groups. Across the groups, approximately one-third of the respondents reporting having watched one or more of the four major debates, and about one-fifth reported not having viewed any of the debates.

Summing up, respondents were asked how intensively they had followed the 2017 election campaign. The results show considerable interest in and attention to the campaign. Although among those who decided on election day itself, 38 per cent reported that they had followed the campaign '(very) intensively', for other groups about half fell into these categories. Only very small percentages, varying from 10 per cent for the election day deciders to 5 or fewer per cent for other groups, indicated that they had not followed the campaign at all.

These results so far indicate that it is not correct and almost insulting to call late deciders uninterested and inattentive. Dutch voters across the board are using the traditional media to obtain information on parties and party plans during the election campaign. Yet, this is not the only information voters may be seeking. Irwin and Van Holsteyn (2008b; see also Geers *et al.*, 2018) have shown that Dutch voters are also interested in the choices of their fellow voters. They try to vote strategically. For them, voting in proportional systems with coalition governments is a two-stage process and they look beyond the election results to attempt to influence the formation of the new government. In this respect, election polls taken during the campaign are an essential source of information concerning how other voters will vote and how the election outcome may be. In the DPES 2017, respondents were asked how often they encountered the results of opinion polls<sup>3</sup> and the ubiquity of polls in the Netherlands is revealed by their answers (see Table 3b). Only between 11 and 17 per cent of the groups indicated that they had never come across poll results. Equal percentages (12%) of the election day deciders and earliest

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://nos.nl/artikel/2078779-het-nos-journaal-is-jarig-hoe-werd-het-bekeken-in-2015.html>

<sup>3</sup> No indication was given of possible sources.

deciders reported that they frequently saw poll results; those who decided in the last weeks or months were slightly higher at 19 and 16 per cent. In general, there is only the very weakest of relationships between the time of the vote decision and attention to the polls. These results do nothing to negate the finding that probably many and at least some of those voters waiting until the last minute are interested in the relative success of parties so that they can consider and cast a strategic vote.

Time of vote decision →	On Election day	In the last days before election	In the last weeks before the election	A couple of months before the election	More than a couple of months before the election
Come across opinion poll results					
- almost never	17	14	11	11	15
- sometimes	34	34	24	33	31
- multiple times	37	39	46	41	42
- very often	12	13	19	16	12
Total	100%	100%	100%	101%	100%
N=	190	333	263	103	430

### 3 Cross Pressures and Ambivalence

An interesting concept to emerge from *The People’s Choice* was the idea of ‘cross pressures’, originally associated with the pressures from being part of various demographic groups. To this socio-demographic cross-pressuring, the authors of *The American Voter* added the idea of attitude inconsistency or cross-pressures. Those who had a high level of ‘attitude conflict’ were more likely to decide late in the campaign (Campbell *et al.*, 1960: 81-83).

Related to the idea of cross-pressures is the concept of ambivalence, i.e., “[t]he variability in the considerations associated with an attitude object” (Lavine, 2001: 916). Ambivalence can be determined by examining the “positive and negative evaluations of the candidates’ character and issue preferences” (Lavine, 2001: 918) and along with partisanship and political interest, ‘polarized character assessments’ were associated with early choices, whereas the opposites, lack of partisanship, lack of interest, and ‘moderate assessments of candidate character’ were associated with late decisions (Lavine, 2001: 921).

The studies mentioned are carried out in the American context and it is not always clear how these results should be applied in a multi-party proportional system as in the Netherlands. In her attempt to extend the study of issue cross-pressures and time of voting decision to systems other than the US, He concluded that issue cross-pressures had the largest impact in the Netherlands, followed by the United Kingdom, and was the weakest in Germany (He, 2016: 362; see also He, 2017: 133). However, her operationalization of issue-

cross pressures is complicated and, more importantly, she does not take the dimensionality of the Dutch party system into account.

As said, there once was a time that a majority of Dutch voters made their decision before any election campaign was started. They belonged to a specific socio-demographic section of society or 'pillar', that remained stable from election to election; five parties dominated the vote and voters stayed with their party. This has been referred to as the 'structured model' of voting (see e.g., Andeweg & Irwin, 2014: 117-119). However, as voting along these structured lines diminished, other explanatory models had to be developed and the concept of an ideological issue dimension model was introduced (e.g., Irwin *et al.*, 1987; Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 1989b). This model was based on two dimensions dividing the parties and the electorate: a socio-economic and a religious-secular dimension. To represent these dimensions, the question of reduction of income differences represented the socio-economic dimension and abortion and later euthanasia represented the religious-secular dimension. Using seven-point polar items from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies, a two-dimensional matrix of 49 cells was created. Within this matrix, three 'heartlands' for the three major parties were defined. Those who wished to reduce income differences and were in favor of allowing the patient to decide for euthanasia composed the heartland for the Labor (PvdA) party. Those who favored allowing euthanasia and favored increasing income differences, fell in the Liberal (VVD) heartland. Those who would forbid euthanasia were placed in the Christian Democratic (CDA) heartland; the Christian Democratic parties had always welcomed religious voters, whatever their position on social-economic questions.

Viewing the political landscape from this ideological perspective shows that it would have been difficult to identify cross-pressured voting. Whereas in the American context, a voter might hold positions that were not congruent with the two major parties, in the Netherlands there was much less cross-pressuring because there was always a party to represent the particular combination of positions. Strong cross-pressures or ambivalence was excluded: there was a party to fit *any* combination of positions.

What was left over, however, were combinations of positions for voters who did not have clear issue positions on one or both of the dimensions. This was labelled the Battlefield; it was among such voters that the most votes could be won for major parties. Following this line of reasoning, it is not cross-pressuring that should lead to late decisions in the Dutch multi-party proportional system, but the *lack* of any pressure in some direction. Analogous to the cross-pressured or ambivalent American voters, these inconclusive voters could be expected to delay their decisions later than those who fit into one of the heartlands.

Consequently we expect to find a higher proportion of battlefield voters among late deciders. And indeed this relationship does exist, but is weaker than might be expected (see Table 4). The percentage of battlefield voters increases only from 39 per cent to 50 per cent as the election day approaches.

Time of vote decision →	On Election day	In the last days before election	In the last weeks before the election	A couple of months before the election	More than a couple of months before the election
Heartlands					
Labor	34	30	31	36	28
Liberal	12	18	21	12	20
Christ. Dem.	4	5	6	9	13
Battlefield	50	47	43	44	39
Total	100%	100%	101%	101%	100%
N=	157	274	218	87	432

However, times are still ‘a-changin’ and the traditional heartland model no longer suffices to explain Dutch voting. The religious dimension has diminished in importance and a new dimension has emerged, i.e., an ‘authoritarian-libertarian’, ‘integration-demarcation’ or simply a ‘cultural’ dimension (see for an overview and discussion Andeweg & Irwin, 2014: 124). This dimension proved to be relevant in 2002 with the arrival of Pim Fortuyn on the political stage and his electorally successful List Pim Fortuyn (e.g., Pellikaan *et al.*, 2003; 2007). After his assassination, the torch was passed to Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party (PVV). This new ‘cultural’ dimension opens up the possibility that cross-pressuring may recently have become a part of the electoral calculus for Dutch voters.

To examine this, as in the original heartland model, a variable has been chosen that is key to the new dimension, related to questions regarding immigration, the integration of immigrants, and the multicultural society. To represent the ‘cultural’ dimension a seven-position scale running from allowing immigrants to retain their own culture to requiring them to adapt and assimilate has been used. By combining this question with that involving income differences, again a 7x7 matrix has been created; this matrix is presented in Table 5a and provides the percentages of the joint frequency distribution on these two variables.<sup>4</sup>

To determine whether voters might experience cross-pressuring it is relevant to know where the parties should be placed in the two-dimensional space. The DPES respondents were asked to place eight of the most important parties<sup>5</sup> on these two scales. The mean value of these placements is reported in Table 5a between the respective values

<sup>4</sup> All percentages of 0.5 or less have been rounded to zero.

<sup>5</sup> At the March 2017 general elections, these eight parties did get over 86 per cent of the total vote and gained 133 out of 150 seats in the Second Chamber of Parliament.

on the scale. The party placements reveal that *no* party provides the combination of favoring increased income differences and allowing immigrants to maintain their own identity. These voters would favor a conservative party on the question of income differences and a progressive party on allowing immigrants to maintain their own culture and are potentially subject to cross-pressuring.<sup>6</sup> The percentage of those subject to such cross-pressuring is small, however, certainly compared to those citizens who favor lowering income differences but feel that immigrants should assimilate. No party espouses this combination of positions (see also e.g., Andeweg, 2018; Van der Brug *et al.*, 2011). What stands out is the almost unanimous opinion that the PVV is the strongest in arguing that immigrants must assimilate (6.7 mean placement on a 7 point scale!). However, on the issue of income differences, the PVV is, on average, placed just to the left side of the scale with a handful of parties to its left. So at the lower left hand portion of the matrix are six cells which may be subject to cross-pressuring: voters can support the PVV for because of its stand on immigrants, or choose a party of the left on the issue of income differences.<sup>7</sup>

Table 5a. Frequency distribution of positions on income differences and cultural assimilation, 2017

		Income differences smaller			Income differences larger				
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
		SP 1.9	GL 2.3 PvdA 2.5	CU 3.3 D66 3.6 PVV 3.6 CDA 3.8		VVD 5.2			
Maintain own culture	1	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	
	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	0	
	3	GL 3.4 PvdA 3.5 D66 3.9 SP 3.9	1	2	3	3	1	0	0
	4	CU 4.5 CDA 4.6 VVD 4.8	4	3	4	6	3	0	0
Fully assimilate	5	3	2	4	6	3	1	0	
	6	PVV 6.7	3	2	2	4	3	2	0
	7	8	2	2	3	2	1	1	

A variable has been created that includes both groups of potentially cross-pressured voters, labeling those in the upper right hand portion of the table as ‘right cross-pressured’ (4%) and those in the lower left hand cells as ‘left cross-pressured’ (20%); 76 per cent are presumably not suffering from strong cross-pressuring from this perspective. The question is whether these cross-pressured groups are overrepresented among the late deciders. This is not the case; ideologically cross-pressured voters are not overrepresented among the late-

<sup>6</sup> Cells that likely contain cross-pressuring are shaded.  
<sup>7</sup> Cells that likely contain cross-pressuring are shaded.

deciders (see Table 5b). If anything, they are slightly overrepresented among those who knew the longest in advance for whom they would vote (25%, compared to about 20% for the left cross-pressured voters).

Time of vote decision →	On Election day	In the last days before election	In the last weeks before the election	A couple of months before the election	More than a couple of months before the election
Cross-pressured					
Left	21	14	16	18	25
Right	3	5	3	4	4
Not	76	81	82	78	70
Total	100%	100%	101%	100%	99%
N=	296	591	497	205	639

An explanation can be found by looking at the choices made by these left cross-pressured voters. More than one-fourth chose the PVV and almost one-fifth chose the Socialist Party (SP).<sup>8</sup> In general, PVV voters were among those who had determined their vote long in advance. To the extent that they ever felt cross-pressured, they resolved this dilemma well in advance by placing the emphasis on the cultural dimension. For those who placed their emphasis on the socio-economic dimension, they chose the party that was the strongest on this dimension. Apparently it took them no longer to make this determination than others who postponed their decision until the last minute.

In conclusion, cross-pressuring or ambivalence does not seem to be strongly related to voting in general and the timing of the vote decision in particular in the Netherlands. During the time of the pillarization, there was no cross-pressuring because there was a party for each important social group. When voting on ideological issues replaced this voting structured by social groups, there still was no important cross-pressuring. Even the introduction of a new cultural dimension has not led to postponement of vote decisions. To the extent that there is cross-pressure along two issue or ideological dimensions, Dutch voters seem able to resolve their dilemma just as quickly as other voters.

#### 4 Consideration or choice sets

Yet, we still find that a large and increasing number of Dutch voters postpone their decision until the latest possible moment. Here, the ‘problem’ in the Netherlands may be an abundance of riches. There are a large number of parties from which to choose. In 2017,

<sup>8</sup> This observation may lead to the question: ‘How long will it take until the PVV and the SP will merge into SPVV?’ (*de Volkskrant*, August 4, 2018).

there were 28 parties listed on at least one district ballot, and 13 received representation in Parliament (see e.g., Van Holsteyn, 2018). With so many belles at the ball, many of whom are more or less equally attractive, how do you choose with which one to dance? What do you do when you like a number of parties but are only allowed to cast a single vote? Does this affect the moment of making that decision? Schmitt-Beck and Partheymuller examined what they called ambivalence in the 2005 and 2009 German federal elections, and their conclusion is arguably related to this aspect: “Voters who hold several parties in similar esteem are particularly prone to arrive rather late at clear-cut choices” (Schmitt-Beck & Partheymuller, 2012: 306) Although they did not employ the term, what they are concerned with has come to be referred to as the concept of a consideration set or choice set. This concept may be highly relevant for the Dutch case (see e.g., Van Holsteyn & den Ridder, 2008; Van der Meer *et al.*, 2012; 2015; Tillie, 1995).

In the DPES, respondents are asked for ‘vote probability’ scores on a 10-point scale, running from 1 (never) to 10 (certainly sometime), indicating what the likelihood is that they will ever vote for a party. In 2017 this question was asked for thirteen parties. The first step in calculating the choice set is to determine to which party or parties the respondent has given the highest score. These parties and all parties receiving a score no more than two points lower than this highest probability score are included in the individual choice set.<sup>9</sup> For those who were able to rate at least one party, the scores run from 1 to 13.<sup>10</sup>

Table 6 shows that those with larger numbers of parties in their consideration or choice set are more likely to delay the decision concerning which political party will finally get the vote - most likely one of the parties in their choice set (Van Holsteyn & den Ridder, 2008: 44). Of those who made their decision months before the election, 36 per cent have only a single party in their choice set and an additional 30 per cent have two parties. The percentages with only a single party decreases as the election approaches, with only 13 per cent and 14 per cent of those deciding in the last days or on election day having only a single party in their choice set (to which can be added 20 and 22 per cent with two parties). In these two groups of late deciders, 25 per cent of those deciding in the last days and no fewer than 32 per cent of the election day deciders have five or more parties in their choice set. These results complement the results found for party attachment. It is not simply that late

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<sup>9</sup> This is, of course, a rather arbitrary cut-off point, but we consider parties that are so similar to each other on the 10-point scale ‘more or less equally attractive’.

<sup>10</sup> Among the latter, most of the responses indicated they would never vote for any of the parties, or gave a score of 5 indicating they were basically indifferent to all of the parties. For purposes of presentation, those with five or more parties in their choice set have been combined.

deciders lack a bond with or preference for a political party, they evaluate a large number of parties relatively equally. No wonder they delay their decision to the last minute.

Time of vote decision →	On Election day	In the last days before election	In the last weeks before the election	A couple of months before the election	More than a couple of months before the election
Number of parties in choice set					
1 party	14	13	17	19	36
2 parties	22	20	23	30	30
3 parties	19	25	22	24	15
4 parties	13	17	16	11	8
5 or more	32	25	21	17	11
Total	100%	100%	99%	101%	100%
N=	193	328	263	101	431
Average number of parties in choice set	4.0	3.7	3.4	3.0	2.5

It is one thing to decrease the relevant supply of parties from almost thirty to less than five, but how to choose between this handful of alternatives that are basically equally preferable? One possible solution is to consult a Voting Advice Application (VAA), a device that was introduced in the Netherlands in 1994 and that has become very popular in many countries (see e.g., Garzia & Marshall, 2014). The confused, or simply curious, voter can go online and fill in a questionnaire concerning his or her positions on a number of political issues. It may even be possible to indicate the relevance of issues, but the important part is the ‘advice’ that the program provides concerning the party or parties to which one is the closest. In 2017, almost three-fourths of the DPES respondents indicated that they had consulted a Voter Advice Application prior to the March 2017 general elections.

Although whether or not one consults a VAA is not related to the size of the choice set, there is a clear relationship with the timing of the vote (Table 7). Among those who made up their minds months before the election, about 60 per cent consulted a VAA. Among those voters who decided in the last days or on election day, and even for those who decided in the last weeks, at least 80 per cent of voters reported having consulted a VAA.

Time of vote decision →	On Election day	In the last days before election	In the last weeks before the election	A couple of months before the election	More than a couple of months before the election
Used a Voting Advice Application					
- Yes	86	83	80	72	59
- No	14	17	20	28	41
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N=	264	556	423	148	408

## 5 Late Deciders and the Election Result

The claim that late deciders determine the election outcome is false: these votes count for no more or less than the votes of earlier deciders. However, it is possible that the outcome of an election diverges from what had been expected before or during the election campaign, in particular based on public opinion polls as the main source of expectations (e.g., Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2002). To examine this, we first look at whether the supporters for various parties have made their determination at different points in time. Table 8a contains the timing of the vote decision for the thirteen parties included in the DPES and which received representation in the Second Chamber of Parliament.

Table 8a. Party voters and their timing of the vote, 2017						
Time of vote decision →	On Election day	In the last days before election	In the last weeks before the election	A couple of months before the election	More than a couple of months	Total/N
Party choice 15 March 2017						
- SP	19	32	16	4	27	98%/200
- GL	14	33	26	9	18	100%/251
- PvdA	20	26	13	7	35	101%/128
- D66	13	32	29	6	20	100%/325
- CDA	12	33	24	6	25	100%/250
- CU	14	15	19	14	38	100%/78
- SGP	5	12	12	12	59	100%/41
- VVD	12	23	22	10	32	99%/494
- PVV	12	8	15	12	53	100%/315
- PvdD	11	34	15	13	27	100%/88
- 50PLUS	19	32	24	8	16	99%/82
- DENK	8	45	20	20	8	101%/116
- FvD	12	36	48	4	0	100%/50
Note:						
- Among the voters for the SP, 19 per cent indicated that they had only reached a decision on election day, 32 per cent indicated that they had decided in the last days, 16 per cent in the last weeks of the campaign, 4 per cent a couple of months before the election, and 27 per cent even earlier.						

There are clear differences between the parties in the timing of vote decisions. Some parties have large percentages of voters who have determined their vote before the hot phase of the campaign. For instance, the State Reformed Party (SGP), which derives its electoral support from specific religious groups, has traditionally received a small but steady percentage of the vote (e.g., Van Holsteyn *et al.*, 2018). This stability can be seen in the 70 per cent of the SGP voters who knew how they would vote long before the campaign began. This is less the case for the other smaller religious party, the ChristianUnion (CU), but nevertheless a majority (52%) of CU voters knew in advance. The third party for which a majority of voters knew well in advance was the PVV; about two-thirds of those voters who

cast their vote for this party, said that they knew before the start of the campaign that they would support team-Wilders. No other party can count on such solid or at least early support of voters; all ten other parties were locked in a fierce competition for votes up until the election day itself.<sup>11</sup>

Although late deciders do not influence the outcome of an election more than early deciders, they certainly influence our *perception* of the outcome. In the months before the March 2017 parliamentary election and as early as October 2016, the polls consistently showed the PVV as the largest party, ahead of the VVD. The gap between the two grew in November and December 2016, with at the peak showing 36 seats for the PVV and 23 seats for the Liberals. This gap began to narrow at the beginning of 2017, with the parties running neck-and-neck in February and early March up until about a week before the election. The final results showed that the VVD had gained 21 per cent of the vote (33 seats), against 13 per cent (20 seats) for the PVV and a rather disappointed Geert Wilders.

It was shown that the PVV had the second largest percentage of early deciders. This knowledge helps explain the trends in the polls, and the 'surprising' election result. Table 8b (second column) examines what the results of the election would have been *if* the late deciders had not voted, combining all those voters who had determined their vote decision before the last days of the campaign. Although these results show the VVD with the larger percentage, the difference is only 5 per cent; if we look at the earliest deciders, the PVV scores 24 per cent, against 23 per cent for the VVD. However, the PVV did poorly among the late deciders, receiving 6 per cent of their vote. When combined, its total percentage drops to 13 per cent. The VVD 'lost' a smaller percentage of the vote, but ended up with 20 per cent, 7 per cent more than the PVV. Had one drawn conclusions on the basis of public opinion polls held several weeks or months before the March 15 election, one would have been surprised by the results - late deciders had determined the outcome!

Above it was shown that a larger percentage of votes in the Labour Heartland made their decision during the last phase of the campaign. Looking at the parties on the left (PvdA, SP, GreenLeft, and D66), one surprising result was the lack of support for the PvdA. Whereas this party once commanded a majority of the votes in its heartland, it now was competing for votes with these other parties - and came out on the losing end. There was no return to the party at the last moment, as it received only one per cent more of the vote on election day as it had among the group that had decided months ahead. Party leader Lodewijk Asscher only made a strong impression during the televised election debate on election

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<sup>11</sup> The low percentage for the Forum for Democracy (FvD) is at least partly due to the fact that this was a new party at this election, so voters could hardly have made a determination at an early date.

night, but this obviously was “too little, too late to help his party at the election the following day” (Van Holsteyn, 2018: 4). The other three parties made gains with the help of the late deciders, all ending up with slightly higher total percentages.

	Last days before election	Weeks or months before election	Total	Actual Election result
VVD	18	22	20	21
PVV	6	17	13	13
CDA	11	10	10	12
D66	15	12	13	12
GreenLeft	12	9	10	9
SP	11	7	8	9
PvdA	6	5	5	6
CU	2	4	3	3
PvdD	4	3	4	3
50PLUS	3	2	3	3
SGP	1	2	2	2
DENK	6	4	5	2
FvD	2	2	2	2
Other parties	2	1	1	2
Total	99%	100%	99%	99%
N	985	1442	2427	10,516,041

Note:  
- Partly due to weighing on the election outcome, the DPES election result is very similar to the actual election result.

New political parties or party lists also made gains in the last days of the campaign. The ethnic party DENK, the party for the elderly 50PLUS, and the new Forum for Democracy (FvD) all picked up votes. The numbers are small, but this could have been just what was needed to gain an extra parliamentary seat in the extreme proportional Dutch system. Finally, the parties who did not get representation in Parliament, also picked up votes at the very last minute. It is probably not too farfetched to suggest that voters who had few positive feelings about parties, ended up casting a ‘wasted vote’ for one of the 15 parties on the ballot who did not exceed the electoral threshold.

## 6 Concluding remarks

The seminal election studies, and many thereafter, have left a predominantly negative impression of those citizens who wait until the last minute to determine their party choice at an election. Such voters are said to be of lower education, less interested, and less politically informed. They have been said to make their choices at random. At the obverse,

those who know their decision well in advance are better educated, more interested, and better informed.

These early studies were carried out in the United States and at an earlier time - the 1940s and 1950s. Since that time, much has changed. Across democratic systems, there has been a decline in levels of party identification and other structural factors impacting on electoral behavior. Electoral volatility has increased. Election campaigns and the media have changed. And as a result of such developments, there has been a substantial rise in the numbers of late deciders, which has been documented across a number of political systems. Such changes are reason to re-examine and profile late deciders again, in this case in the context of the 2017 Dutch parliamentary election.

In the Dutch case, women were found to be somewhat overrepresented among the late deciders. A stronger relationship is found for age, with younger voters more prevalent among the late deciders; this is likely an artefact of the fact that younger voters are less likely to have a strong identification with or attachment to a party. In contradiction to many other studies, only a very weak relationship was found with the level of education.

With basically no relationship with education, the question arises whether late deciders are less interested and less informed. The answer of course depends on what is defined as interest and information. Late deciders indeed show lower levels of a general interest in politics and attention to the media in order to obtain information. However, when interest and information is focused on the election campaign, the relationships are weak. Late deciders are only minimally less likely to read about the campaign in newspapers, follow the campaign on the television news, watch televised debates among party leaders, or indicate that they followed the campaign. Only small differences were found between late and early deciders in their attention to public opinion polls.

An early explanation of late deciding was that voters were cross-pressured, either because of conflicting social background characteristics or conflicting attitudes. This was examined by looking at late deciding along the ideological issue dimensions of the Dutch system. It was noted that cross-pressuring could hardly exist in the Netherlands where political parties existed for the combinations of the social-economic issue dimension and the religious-secular dimension. What did emerge was the late deciders were less likely to have strong opinions on these dimensions: they had not been cross-pressured, but had inconclusive attitudes. In recent decades a new cultural dimension has emerged in Dutch politics which might have led to cross-pressuring. Yet, here again, those who were potentially cross-pressured were not overrepresented among the late deciders.

No stronger relationship is found in the study of late deciders than that such voters lack a strong attachment to a political party. These results were again found among Dutch voters. However, in the multi-party system of the Netherlands, such a conclusion does not provide a complete picture; the concept of party identification has been called into question in the Netherlands. This can also be seen when one examines the concept of consideration or choice sets, i.e., the parties for which a voter might at some point cast a vote. Relatively few Dutch voters have only a single party in their consideration set. Yet only 38 per cent of those voters who are defined as identifiers using the standard operationalization have only a single party in their consideration set. Even these voters indicate that they might vote for another party in a future election. On the other hand, among those who are defined as non-identifiers, 14 per cent have only a single party and no fewer than 37 per cent have five or more parties in their consideration set.

Late deciders tend to have greater numbers in their consideration set than early deciders. This would seem to explain the lack of relationship found between indicators of interest in and attention to the campaign. Whereas early deciders may have only a single party in consideration, late deciders have to choose from a larger number. Making this choice involves paying attention to the campaign. Something has to be found to break the tie among parties for whom one has equal or almost equal attachment. There are many belles at the Dutch ball, but the voter is only allowed to dance with a single partner.

McAllister studied voters in Australia, Britain and the United States and classified late deciders in two distinct groups. On the one hand, there were the uninterested and uninformed late deciders (of the seminal studies...): the 'capricious' voters. On the other hand, he found late deciders who were 'calculating'. He found that the latter were more numerous in all three countries, and that their numbers were increasing (McAllister, 2002). No attempt has been made here to classify late deciders in such terms. However, it is plausible that our results would be similar. Undoubtedly there are late deciders who are uninterested and uninformed, but their numbers are very likely not such that they dominate the group of late deciders, which would result in overrepresentation in the late decider group. One should not forget that there are also those who are uninterested and uninformed among early deciders - if you know far in advance for which party you will vote, there is no need to follow the campaign in detail. On the other hand, there are calculating late deciders who must follow the campaign in order to make a final decision concerning to which party to give their vote.

In conclusion, the negative description of late deciders must be abandoned. Rehabilitation of the late deciding voter is in order. Late deciders are just what the term implies. They are voters of whom many need and use politically relevant and campaign information until the last minute before making their final determination. If anything, this is a positive, rather than negative, characteristic.

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