The undecided voters and the economy: Campaign heterogeneity in the 2005 British general election

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ABSTRACT

Research and conventional wisdom suggest that undecided voters are especially prone to campaign persuasion. Little has been done, however, in the way of uncovering the decision pathways followed by these voters. In this paper we seek to assess the undecided voters' alleged campaign susceptibility and, most importantly, to explore which campaign considerations inform their final voting decisions. Our central finding is that their behaviour is driven to a larger extent by economic performance and less by leadership or other valence evaluations. This finding has important implications for parties' campaign strategies in an era where the ranks of undecided voters are steadily expanding from one election to the other.

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1. Introduction

After more than 60 years of research, the role which campaigns play in voting behaviour and election outcomes is still a contentious issue. The early part of this research would converge on the idea that campaigns have a limited impact on elections and thus behaviours could be securely predicted based on prior predispositions, attitudes and personal characteristics (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell et al., 1960). For a long time the evident minimal effects were dominant in the literature though the intuition as well as the resources invested in electoral campaigns would not imply "minimalism" of any sort. Recently, scholars consider the "do campaigns matter" question to be "settled" rejecting the minimal effects thesis (Finkel, 1993; Norris et al., 1999; Shaw, 1999; Wlezien and Erikson, 2002; Hillygus and Jackman, 2003; Ansolabehere 2006).

Election campaigns play a crucial role and may influence election outcomes in many different ways. For instance, during campaigns the fundamental voter preferences are being enlightened (Gelman and King, 1993), the levels of attention to politics tend to increase (Wlezien, 2010), while the campaign learning process informs voters party positions and issue stances (Peterson, 2009). As a result, campaigns reduce the level of uncertainty around choices through the information they provide (Alvarez, 1998). This campaign effect is not constant across voters. Numerous studies have looked at proportions of the electorate purportedly more susceptible to campaign effects. Some are considered to be susceptible to campaigns as they are influenced by cross-cutting information on wedge issues (see Hillygus and Shields, 2008), others because they have conflicting political attitudes and thus are ambivalent (Feldman and Zaller, 1992; Alvarez and Brehm, 1997; Lavine, 2001) or finally some are floating voters who tend to swing from one party to the other in successive elections (Zaller, 2004).

Only little has been done concerning the voters who decide during the electoral campaign (Chaffee and Choe, 1980; Chaffee and Rimal, 1996; Fournier et al., 2004). All things being equal, undecided voters can influence election outcomes as they appear to be an *a priori* persuadable proportion of voters which tends to be larger than the

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numerical difference between the two leading parties. British Election study data suggest that the undecided voters have increased from 11% in 1964 to an approximate 35% in the last 2005 General Election meaning that almost one third of the British electorate was unable to choose from the available alternatives.[1] The limited studies that have been done suggest that campaign susceptibility is evident. Specifically, Chaffee (1996) showed that last minute deciders in the American context are more open in attempts at persuasion. Fournier et al. (2004) confirmed that finding for Canadian elections while they demonstrated that late deciders are responsive to campaign events. Lavine (2001: 921) showed that this lateness in crystallizing vote intentions might be produced by attitudinal ambivalence while Mutz (2002: 844) has found that late decision in American elections is a product of cross-cutting exposure. Finally, experimental research frameworks have being designed to tap into the attitudinal constructs and behaviour of the undecideds (Arcuri et al., 2008).

In this paper we seek to contribute to the above cluster of voting research. Our study, nevertheless, deviates both in terms of design and research question. We employ pre and post election representative British election survey data which successfully captures the notion of an undecided voter.[2] In terms of research focus, we seek to discern which specific campaign considerations will have a stronger impact on the undecided voters' choices as compared to their decided counterparts. The foundation of our argument is that undecided voters will follow different pathways to cast their votes.[3] Objects of politics which tend to minimize uncertainty will be more salient for individuals deciding during the course of the campaign, compared to objects whose messages either cancel out or tend to be charged with partisan perceptions. Our empirical results confirm that expectation and suggest that the economy matters the most for the undecideds' choices while leadership evaluations and issue performance matters more for decided voters. The above results confirm findings on the American floating voters where Zaller (2004: 191) found that low information campaign deciders are more responsive to economic performance. It also provides a micro level confirmation of aggregate studies which suggest that when the levels of partisanship are in decline, then economic voting is on the rise (Kayser and Wlezien, forthcoming).

The empirical analysis draws on a 3-wave (pre-campaign, campaign and post election) Rolling Campaign Panel data gathered by the British Election Study in 2005 (see Sanders et al., 2007). The paper proceeds as follows. In the first part we set out the notion of the undecided voter as it will be used here. In the second section we specify the theoretical considerations informing our argument and the hypothesis that will be tested in this paper. Next we turn to the data and the statistical techniques used to test these hypotheses. The fourth section presents the results. We conclude by discussing the implications of this research for party campaign strategy and the subsequent research agenda to be explored.

2. A concept of the undecided voter

Our definition of the undecided voter is simple and it sidesteps numerous problems. An undecided voter is an individual who is unable to form a vote intention when interviewed at a time point prior to Election Day. This implies that all persuasive messages in the previous period had been evidently unsuccessful in producing a vote intention. Thus, their susceptibility to campaign considerations will be higher compared to voters who decided before the start of the campaign. This proposition is clearer if we consider what explains their inability to form vote intentions and the circumstances under which they make their final vote decision.

We identify three plausible reasons causing a respondent's indecision. The first reason is that (1) the undecided voters were inattentive to politics in the mid-term period and hence they ignored the persuasion messages. Nevertheless, attentive undecided voters exist. Subsequently, the second and third reason is the outcome of either (2) being exposed to equally weak unappealing messages or (3) equally strong messages that cancel out and which maintain their indecision status. This, to an extent, implies that we might expect different typologies of undecided voters with different cognitive, intentional or behavioural constructs underlying their undecidedness.[4] In many cases these typologies might be challenged. Many would maintain that there is some possible degree of additional heterogeneity within the undecided voters' group.

One obvious subgroup of undecided voters is the partisan undecideds. There are reasons to believe that partisans may express indecision in the beginning of a given campaign and reasons to expect that their behaviour will be responsive to campaign influences. This might contradict a very common understanding of the undecided voter presupposing that they do not identify with political parties. However, this is entirely plausible and the 2005 British example is appropriate to explain why. The Iraq war could have negatively influenced the propensity of a Labour partisan to actually vote for Labour. Voters with weakened identifications engage campaign information to 'return

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[1] The British Election Study offers two different measures of campaign indecision. From the 1964 to the 1997 Election post election survey questions were tapping the timing of decision. After 1997 the pre-election survey data was asking BES respondents: Have you decided how to vote.

[2] In the 2005 BES the available responses were 1. Yes, I have decided, 2. No, I haven't decided yet, 3. I will not vote, 4. Don't Know. Plausibly, the second and fourth categories correspond to the undecided voter.

[3] Voter heterogeneity has been a central assumption in the study of political behaviour. For the notion of voter heterogeneity see Rivers (1988) Bartle (2005) and Fournier (2006). Studies assuming voter heterogeneity have looked at attitude accessibility, leadership driven voting, cognitive heterogeneity on economic perceptions and political information or knowledge (Krosnick, 1988; Bartle, 2002; Gomez and Wilson, 2001, 2006; Bartels, 1996; Andersen et al., 2005).

[4] We recognize that some survey respondents might report indecision to express their dissatisfaction with politics or the government. Measurement error is a possibility but we take it that for most undecided voters the source of indecision is described.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of key variables.

	Decided		Undecided	
	Pre-Campaign (62.86%)	Campaign (71.27%)	Pre-Campaign (37.14%)	Campaign (28.73%)
Partisanship (0/1)	71.84%	78.49%	28.16%	21.51%
Political interest (1/4)	3.50	3.49	3.20	3.22
$\|Blair - Howard\|(0 - 10)$	4.89	5.14	2.92	3.20
$\|Blair - Kennedy\|(0 - 10)$	3.38	6.39	2.84	2.97
$\|Kennedy - Howard\|(0 - 10)$	3.84	4.61	2.82	3.16
$\|Labour - conservative\|(0 - 10)$	4.85	5.44	2.65	3.16
$\|Labour - LD\|(0 - 10)$	2.91	3.14	2.10	2.25
$\|LD - conservative\|(0 - 10)$	3.78	4.23	2.51	2.98
Labour economic management	2.53	2.63	2.35	2.48
Conservative economic management	1.83	1.76	1.75	1.71
N[a]	4635	2738	4084	1646

[a] Note that the N corresponds to the initial percentage of decided and undecided voters.

home'. For that reason partisan undecideds are also sensitive to campaign effects due to timing limitations. They will need additional campaign information to reactivate their partisanship and 'return home'. As we argue below, they will be easier to persuade yet again their votes will be coloured by campaign information. These typologies of undecided voters share a unifying characteristic. As they enter the campaign period, the augmented salience of the election enhances their responsiveness and from that point on campaign information shape or reason their Election Day choices.

Undecided voters choose from the same set of already known alternatives. They may vote for one of the main rival parties, or abstain from the election.[5] Though the alternatives are clear, the difference in their utility by choosing, say, *Party X* rather than *Party Z*, is not. The campaign informs this process and undecided respondents formulate choice intentions. Nevertheless, undecided and decided voters are not different because of the actual process of choosing between the alternatives, but rather due the circumstances under which they make these choices. Clearly, if a respondent is undecided, the choice has to be taken by the Election Day deadline and most importantly taken under time constraints. This implies that all utility calculations will be made with the assistance of considerations amplified during the campaign period.

In 2005 the British undecided voters were less attentive and weaker (and fewer) partisans compared to their decided counterparts. The summary statistics converge towards the view of a group of voters that do not have strong enough attitudes indicative of a prompt vote intention. Table 1 reports entries on party identification, political interest, economic competence and attitudes towards leaders and political parties. The entries are stratified by decision status (Decided vs. Undecided) and by

campaign wave. The pre-campaign wave corresponds to the period 60 days before the polling day and the campaign wave to the period starting 30 days before the election. The results as expected are in line with our basic speculation that the undecided voters are less interested while they do not consider themselves as party identifiers. What we also observe are changes from one wave to the other. Undecided voters become marginally more interested while the decided voters follow the opposite route. The percentage of identifiers increases for the decided group while it shrinks for the undecided. In Fig. 1 we see the strength of their identifications (including no identification) which seems to be in line with our expectation.

The interesting result however is related with the difference between the expressed feelings towards the party leaders and their parties. We can see that the decided voters have clearer attitudes (larger differences between feelings towards various leaders) while the undecided voters do not have favourites amongst the political actors. Again these scores change from one wave to the other suggesting that the campaign might have an effect on those attitudes. To summarize it and see the effects in a confirmatory fashion we employ two discrete choice models to estimate what explains indecision. The two estimated models account for both waves of the pre-election period.

The results reported in Table 2 suggest that the strongest predictor of indecision is strength of party identification. On average, the stronger you identify with a party the larger the likelihood to be decided on whom to vote. Interest in politics does not play a role in both models. As expected, the clearer the attitudes towards the political actors, the higher the likelihood of being decided.[6] Interestingly, emotional reactions to the economy seem to provide a blurry view in both waves.[7]

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[5] Turnout is not our primary interest. Nevertheless, it is important to comment that undecided voters will abstain if 1) they are still uninterested during the campaign 2) they still find the messages unappealing or 3) conflicting in strength, substance and meaning. Without doubt, all the above will be conditional upon the extent to which an undecided voter will consider voting as her civic duty.

[6] This variable is the sum of the relative differences reported in Table 1 divided by three to assess the overall simultaneous effect of all leaders and parties for every voter.

[7] Other models do not confirm the direction or the statistical significance of the effects of emotional reactions to the economy. These models are available upon request.
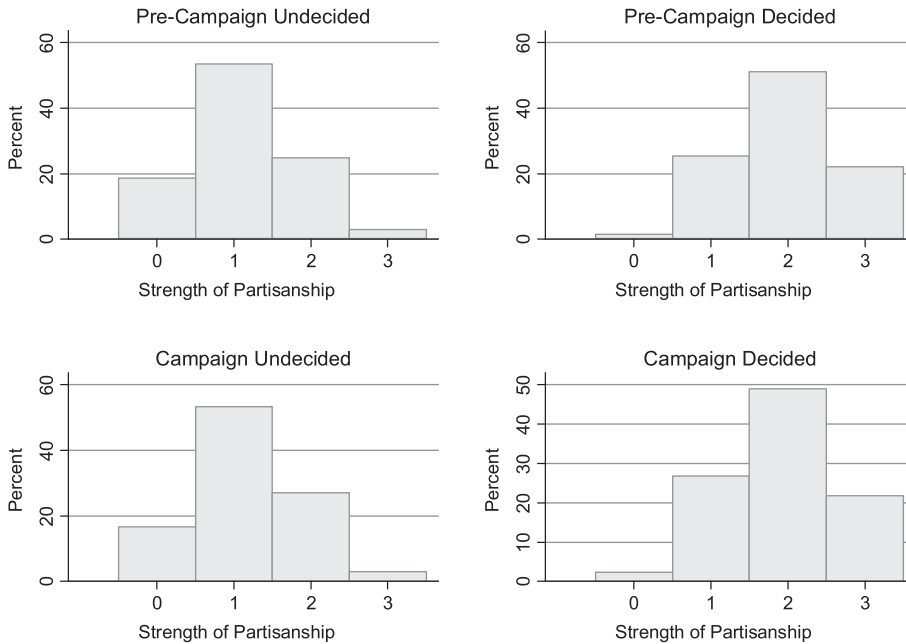
Fig. 1. Strength of identification and (In)decision to vote.

3. Theoretical expectations

Two are the dominant frameworks for analyzing vote choice.[8] The first incorporates the notion that voters undertake a utility calculation and tend to choose the party that maximizes that utility (Downs, 1957). The second proposes that voters have stable and enduring psychological party affiliations which tend to predict their vote choices (Campbell et al., 1960; Butler and Stokes, 1974). Revisionists of the latter model have encompassed rational choice components in the process of acquiring a party identification. On this – valenced partisanship – account, party identification is the sum of the running tally of retrospective evaluations and prospective promises that shape or update a party identification (Fiorina, 1981; see also Clarke et al., 2004, 2009). Valenced partisanship is related to considerations like leadership affection, economic competence, *ad hoc* issue stands and other related short-term valences. Hence it combines the rational choice account of decision-making alongside with psychological dispositions.

In order to assess the actual decision mechanism behind the undecided vote, we need to incorporate in the Fiorina model the idea of an *ad hoc* party preference (or vote intention) rather than a solid partisanship. This is a necessary adjustment as the concept and the descriptive statistics suggest that party identification is not a defining feature of the undecided voter. It is rather a source of additional heterogeneity within the undecided group. Reasonably, when partisanship is present, is a step ahead of party preferences. The probability of a partisan undecided is a theoretical advantage of the retrospective model to analyze undecided voter heterogeneity. In addition, the dynamic nature (i.e. running tally) of the decision process effectively captures the concept of the volatile and persuadable undecided voter while it retains the updating process for a decided voter.

Table 2
Probit regression of Indecision to vote.

(Un)Decided(1/0)	(1) Pre-campaign model b(SE)	(2) Campaign model b(SE)
Parties	−.155***(.017)	−.128***(.012)
Leaders	−.022(.014)	−.036**(.011)
Strength of PID	−.645***(.041)	−.526***(.034)
National prospective	.064(.044)	−.025(.036)
Personal prospective	−.042(.038)	−.086**(.032)
National retrospective	.007(.043)	.067**(.034)
Personal retrospective	−.076**(.034)	−.029**(.028)
Iraq approval	−.333***(.076)	−.145**(.049)
Political Interest	−.022(.049)	−.019(.042)
Constant	1.90***(.221)	1.63***(.193)
N	2819	4478
McFadden R^2	.23	.19
Correctly classified	75.7%	77.3%

Note that: 1. Standard errors in parentheses; 2. *** Significant at .01, ** significant at .05, * significant at .1 levels; 3. Models (1) and (2) include demographic Variables as Controls (age; education; ethnicity; gender).- Source: IRCP BES 2005.

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[8] The literature has identified three frameworks for analyzing vote choices. We treat the sociological and the social psychological as one given that both focus on predispositions that influence the vote. Clarke et al. (2004) have made a similar distinction (see Chapter 3).

Prior to the electoral campaign, the decided voters had already declared a winner in their running tally of various evaluations. Those evaluations might have updated their partisanship or produced an *ad hoc* party preference. Though both decided and undecided voters update their vote intentions in response to the same short-term evaluations, for decided voters, this running tally brings about an updated partisan affiliation that ultimately works as a perceptual screen for the forthcoming short-term evaluations in later time points. As long as these loops produce the same affiliations then the vote decision will be stable and predicted through the perceptual screen of partisanship which colours the perceptions of rival considerations. Therefore the decided voters' evaluations will be resistant to campaign influence or cross-cutting persuasive attempts. For undecided voters, on the other hand, this process is clearly a lot different.

At the time of the interview the undecided running tally is not indicative of a choice. That is the case either because the sum of the short-term forces produced a neutral stance, or because the update process of the Fiorina model is not consistent from one time point to the other. As they were entering the campaign, the sum of their evaluations did not break the tie between competing perceptions of rival parties and they reported indecision. This clearly implies two things about the campaign period. First, they will have to decide during the course of the campaign and secondly that they will put more weight on considerations highlighted during that same period. The linkages between considerations and choices are being clearer the closer we move towards the election (Gelman and King, 1993; Andersen et al., 2005). In other words, the timing of their decision will clue in which considerations are going to predict their choices.

In the case of a partisan undecided the story remains the same. The voter will be unable to link the psychological disposition to a stable vote preference as the running tally will not be indicative of an aligned choice, and hence the voter will report indecision again. The short-term predictors of voting will be informed during the campaign period. From survey data we can only infer that at the time of the interview, all these components of the Fiorina model (along with the evident partisanship) were not strong enough to build up a solid vote intention. We may only, therefore, evaluate which considerations played the strongest part in predicting the undecided's electoral choices. These short-term considerations are to a large extent central in political debates, popular in the everyday (campaign) discourse and subsequently on the top of the media agenda.

By short-term forces we mainly refer to an array of attitudes and evaluations that constitute the block of valence considerations. In the valence framework of analysis there is a broad line of consensus on the desirable policy goals and outcomes between voters and parties. What is important here is the debate on "which party, which party leader, and which policies are most likely to achieve the outcomes that virtually everyone wants" (Clarke et al., 2004: 23). Positive or negative qualities associated with parties and leaders, success and failure to achieve the commonly valued goals are the basis for reward or punishment on Election Day (Clarke et al., 2004: 29;

Stokes, 1993: 147). In valence issues, voters perceive politics as a simple contest from which they choose the best. In effect, performance oriented models mostly focus on party leaders, economic competence and other retrospective or prospective performance related evaluations (Fiorina, 1981; Clarke et al., 2004). However, which valence can be the most influential for the undecided voters?

In the second section we outlined the undecided voters as time-constrained individuals who are to an extent less attentive to politics and with weakened party affiliations. In that respect, one advantage of performance politics is that valence considerations are closely related to gut feelings, emotional affect, simplified low-information rational calculations and cognitive heuristics that facilitate the decision process (see Clarke et al., 2009; Sniderman et al., 1991; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). Subsequently, voters do not need a great deal of information to cast their votes. They just need to make use of the most available information from the 'top of their heads' (Zaller, 1992; Popkin, 1991, 1993; Delli et al., 1996). Though the extensive media coverage of a particular consideration will enhance its accessibility in the undecided voters' minds, the update of the voter's utility will be conditioned by the impact of each of the rival valence considerations.

The most important thing to consider, therefore, is the extent to which the components of the running tally can have an influence on the undecided voter. Our argument is that for a valence consideration to have an effect on political choices, it should impinge upon the voter's utility. Put simply, the stronger the effect on a voter's well being, the higher the weight assigned by that voter on the valence. Accordingly, different valences have dissimilar impact on utilities. The party leaders, though omnipresent in the everyday news media, are not supposed to have a direct positive or negative impact on the utility of an undecided voter (King, 2002). Presumably, if leadership traits could determine anything for a voter's well being, then the likelihood of reporting decided rather than undecided would be higher in the first place (see Fournier et al., 2001). Different reasons, now, make the issue-party competence (or party performance) predictor equally problematic. The BES survey questions concentrate on the national level and might fail to notice the importance of a problem that voters themselves face. That could only be resolved if we would -wrongly- assume that the personal problems of a voter can be equated with the ones Britain is facing (see Wlezien, 2005). The other problem with party performance is that, as with party leaders, political issues are partisan-charged. Certain issues are 'owned' by certain political parties (see e.g. Petrocik, 1996; Green and Hobolt, 2008). This is not the case with economic performance. As we discuss below, economic performance can be tested against the objective reality, which in turn serves as a mechanism to minimize the uncertainty around a choice.

Equally important, however, is the cumulative media spinning and framing that might elevate the importance of a consideration (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). During electoral campaigns voters receive and consume a great deal of information regarding issues, parties and political actors. Party leaders are considered to be the protagonists of campaigns as they are followed by the media in all their

activities (King, 2002; also Clarke et al., 2004: 29). They are, nevertheless, the constants in the campaign race. Voters already know who they are, what they believe in and what they represent. Party leaders, during campaigns, mainly communicate policy proposals and set the agenda. Though the agenda changes dramatically from one day of the campaign to the other, the media coverage of the economy (and hence economic competence) is uniform and tends to be explicitly highlighted (Hetherington, 1996; Sanders and Gavin, 2004). In 2005 for instance, the overall proportion of media attention to the economy was the highest amongst all issues. The Loughborough research team coded all articles about the election in newspapers from the front page, the first two pages of the domestic news section, the first two pages of any specialist section assigned to the coverage of the campaign, and the pages containing and facing a newspaper's lead editorials for the duration of the campaign (30 days prior to the election). Table 3 reports the ten most prominent themes in the national media coverage according to the content analysis performed by the Loughborough Communication Research Centre.[9]

In response to arguments concerning the media attention and the importance of a valence we derive our theoretical expectation summarized in the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis: For undecided voters, positive evaluations of the governing party's handling of the economy will further increase the probability of voting for that party as compared to decided voters.

The above hypothesis maintains that amongst all valence influences, the economy is the consideration that will differentiate decided and undecided voters in the probability to vote for the government. When *Party X* argues its superiority in handling the economy, voters may 'test' that by looking at the economic record of *Party X* in the past. Reality, therefore, can mediate both salience and performance which in turn influence vote choice (Edwards et al., 1995).

Perceptions of economic performance should be considered as the most vital valence consideration. If national economic conditions are good, then personal economics are more likely to be good (for example, Abramowitz, 1988; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Sanders, 1996; Lebo and Norpoth, 2007). This cognitive mechanism is the foundation of the vast literature on electoral forecasting which is based on objective economic indicators. Even though the mode of the analysis differs from our pre-post individual level setting, the micro foundations of economic voting seem to maintain its applicability in the British electorate.

Economic competence will predict the decided voters' choices as well. Nonetheless, under a Fiorina account of electoral politics, these considerations should have been

Table 3
Table 10 most prominent themes during the 2005 campaign[c].

	Campaign issue	%
1	Electoral process[a]	52.22
2	Economy[b]	7.31
3	Iraq	7.29
4	Standards/corruption	5.67
5	Asylum/immigration	5.55
6	NHS	4.40
7	Crime	3.15
8	Education	2.72
9	Social security	1.85
10	Local government	1.47

[a] Mostly stories about campaign strategies, polls etc.
[b] Includes stories about: taxation, unemployment, businesses and the economy in general.
[c] Table 3 reports the percentage of media stories where the named theme was the first most prominent theme of the story. The authors would like to the thank David Deacon, Dominic Wring, Michael Billig, Peter Golding, and John Downey for sharing their data on media coverage of the 2005 general election.
Source: Loughborough Communication Research Centre Media Content Analysis 2005 Election Campaign.

already a part of the running tally resulting in either an updated partisanship or an *ad hoc* party preference. As they are decided they make use of their 'perceptual screens' to evaluate the rival valences and manifest their party preferences. The evaluations of economic management, in that respect, are more endogenous to party choice or partisanship. This view has been central in the economic voting literature. Voters who support the government will tend to think of the economy as robust therefore the perception of the economy will be endogenous to party choice (Conover et al., 1987; Wilcox and Wlezien, 1993; Wlezien et al., 1997; Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Ladner and Wlezien, 2007).

Endogeneity is also a consideration in the case of undecided voters. Even though, they are unable to decide how they are going to vote, some of them do have specific leanings. These are often expressed through a weakened party identification or *ad hoc* party leanings. However, we do not consider endogeneity to be as much of a problem for undecided voters. If partisanship was such a strong filter, it would have produced a stable and decided party preference in the first place. Without doubt, we do recognize the possibility that non-partisan undecideds will be more influenced by the economy compared to undecideds that identify themselves with a political party.

The merit of economic perceptions for the undecided vote is that it can be a heuristic that minimizes uncertainty unlike other short-term forces such as party leaders for whom the messages one receives from the campaign can be conflicting. At the same time, such considerations are associated with political parties and project a partisan bias (Bartels, 2002). The partisan discharge of economic perceptions by the undecided voters resolves plausible sources of indecision like attitudinal ambivalence or/and partisan polarization. Economic competence, in turn, can be a secure pathway for an undecided to cast a vote. In

Table 4
Variable description for equation (1).

Variable	Description	Panel wave
Vote Choice	Dichotomous variable scored 1 if respondent actually voted e.g. Labour, 0 otherwise	Post-Election Wave
PID	Dichotomous variable for Party Identification for the three major parties (0/1)	Campaign Wave
Leader	Attitudes towards the party leaders (0–10 thermometer scales)	Campaign Wave
MII	Dichotomous variable for the party able to handle the most important issue (0/1)	Campaign Wave
Issue Pr	Issue Proximities (Taxation; EU) (voter distance from each party in 11 point scales, 0–10)	Post-Election Wave
Econ	Evaluations on handling the economy (−2 Very Badly, −1 Badly, 0 Neither, 1 Fairly well, 2 Very Well)	Campaign Wave
Demo	Demographic Variables (Age, Gender, Education)	Post-Election Wave
Iraq	Iraq War approval or disapproval	Campaign Wave
Undecided	Constitutive term scoring is 0 if decided, 1 if undecided	Campaign Wave
Interaction terms	[$Xi*Undecided(0/1)$]	

other words, it is not constrained by any ideological or party-charged attitude and it is accessible through the parties' record on actual economic performance as well as the voters' financial situation. To further establish this argument we expect that non-partisan undecided voters will be even more persuaded by economic competence.[10]

One final reason should be set out in support of economic competence and the undecided group. First, the link between economic perceptions and the vote is more visible as we move closer to the Election Day. Following Erikson (2009:467), "… *before the formal campaign starts, potential voters are not thinking much about the connection between economic conditions and their future vote choices. As the campaign evolves, voters begin to take the economy into account*…". To put differently, the timing of the undecided's decision will clue in which variables will predict their vote choices. In effect the undecided voters, as they decided at some point just before the Election Day, will be heterogeneous in their campaign responsiveness and the economy will enhance the probability of voting for or against the government.

4. Data and results

To test our theoretical expectations we utilize the 2005 British Election Study Internet Rolling Campaign Panel (Sanders et al., 2007). The study comprises of numerous post election waves and two pre-election waves gathered 60 and 30 days before the election respectively.[11] We utilize the campaign wave to account for pre-election factors that predict post election choices.[12] We model undecided voter heterogeneity by creating an interaction term with the undecided dummy[$X_i^*Undecided(0/1)$]. We specify a set of models that seek to combine different sets of considerations. These models lead to a composite core model that simultaneously accounts for all predictors. The description of the variables is presented in Table 4. Equation (1) depicts the composite specification:

$$Vote\ choice = f\left(b_0 + \sum b_{1-3}PID + \sum b_{4-6}Leader \\ + \sum b_{7-9}MII + \sum b_{10-12}Issue\text{Pr} \\ + \sum b_{13-14}Econ + \sum b_{15-18}Demo \\ + \sum b_{19}Iraq + \sum b_{20}Undecided \\ + \sum b_{21-k}Interaction\ Terms\right) \quad (1)$$

If there is a statistically significant multiplicative term, that would indicate the presence of the hypothesized interaction. If this sign is the same as the conditional effect for the decided voters that means that this variable matters more in the voting decisions of the undecided voters. An interaction term with the opposite sign will signify that this indicator matters less in the behaviour of that group. Table 5 displays the results of two Labour probit models. In the first model (Model 1) we include variables describing psychological predispositions and spatial proximities while in the second model (Model 2) we present the results of a model which includes only short-term valence predictors. Both models are multiplicative models as described in equation (1). For presentation purposes we display the main and the interaction effect side by side. Columns 2 and 4 include the main effect of each variable for each model while columns 3 and 5 present the interaction effect for each variable.

For Model 1 the results in column 2 indicate that age, education, party identification and most of the issue proximities all have a significant impact on Labour voting. The coefficients in column 2 should be interpreted as conditional marginal effects (that is as the effect of each variable on the decided group of voters) and not as total marginal effects for each variable (Brambor et al., 2006; Kam and Franzese, 2007; also Jaccard et al., 1990). Proximities on the Euro-skepticism dimension for the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats do not appear to exert a statistically significant effect on Labour vote. The same is true for the effect of Gender. Turning to the interaction effects for each of these variables we get six significant interactions: The identification variables for each party, distance on the tax and spend scale for Labour and Conservatives and finally distance on the EU scale for Labour. As mentioned above the sign of the significant interactions indicates whether each variable exerts a stronger or weaker effect on the voting behaviour of the undecided voters. All six interactions have the opposite

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[10] We thank the two anonymous reviewers for bringing that into our attention.

[11] The data is gathered using a Rolling Cross-Section method. Everyday approximately 270 respondents are being interviewed for a 30-day period (pre-campaign). The same respondents are being interviewed in the campaign wave.

[12] For the 2005 BES technical Support visit: www.essex.ac.uk/bes.

Table 5
Probit regression on labour voting (interaction effects).

	Model (1) – long term forces		Model (2) – short-term forces	
	Main effect	Interaction	Main effect	Interaction
Age	−.008**(.002)			
Gender	−.12 (.07)			
Education	−.10*** (.02)			
Labour PID	1.56***(.10)	−.44**(.17)		
Conservative ID	−.80***(.16)	.54*(.28)		
Liberal ID	−.57***(.14)	.69***(.23)		
Labour distance (Taxes)	−.20***(.02)	.07*(.04)		
Conservative distance (Taxes)	.09***(.01)	−.07**(.03)		
Liberal distance (Taxes)	.07***(02)	−.01(.04)		
Labour distance (EU)	−.11***(.01)	.07**(.03)		
Conservative distance (EU)	.002(.01)	.03(.02)		
Liberal distance (EU)	−.02(.01)	−.05(.03)		
Labour economic competence			.15**(.061)	.29**(.13)
Conservative economic competence			−.14**(.05)	−.18*(.09)
Likeability Blair			.88***(.11)	−.78**(.21)
Likeability Howard			−.40**(.17)	.54**(.29)
Likeability Kennedy			−.55***(.16)	.69***(.26)
Labour party performance			.15***(.02)	−.08*(.03)
Conservative party performance			−.03(.02)	.02(.04)
Liberal party performance			−.08***(.02)	.05(.04)
Blair best PM			.49***(.14)	−.02(.25)
Howard best PM			−.60**(.24)	.44(.40)
Handling of Iraq war			.03(.03)	.04(.06)
Undecided	−.14(.72)		−.42(.48)	
Constant	.11(.22)		−1.07***(.27)	
N	2804		2766	
McFadden R^2	.47		.61	

Note that: 1. Standard errors in parentheses; 2. *** Significant at .01, ** significant at .05, * significant at .1 levels.
Source: IRCP BES 2005.

sign from the main effect indicating that for undecided voters these six variables have smaller effect.

For Model 2 the results in column four indicate that, for decided voters, all variables except for affect towards Howard and the Iraq war exerted a significant effect on Labour voting. Moving on to Column 5 we see that the undecided voters seem to place different weight in six out of the eleven variables that are included in the model. Evaluations of their ability to handle the economy, evaluations on who is capable of handling the most important issue and feelings towards Tony Blair are all associated with statistically significant interactions. However signs are reversed for the last 4 variables indicating that these valences matter less for undecided voters. The handling of the economy by the Labour exerts a larger influence for the undecided voters on the probability to vote Labour as compared to decideds. This supports our core hypothesis yet the model as it is specified does not take into account other possible influences on the vote that might absorb the impact of economic performance perceptions.

In Table 6 we combine the two models into one.[13] Columns 2 and 3 in Table 6 report the results for a model that combines prior predispositions and valence variables while columns 4 and 5 present the results for the same model controlling for prior inclination to vote for Labour (variable "Lagged Labour vote") as measured in the campaign panel. For the undecided group we have used

party leaning as an indication for their voting intention while for the decided voters we used the reported voting intentions.[14] The inclusion of the Lagged Dependent Variable serves two purposes. We primarily do that to test for endogeneity (see above for the theoretical discussion). Voting behaviour studies report that perceptions of the economy are endogenous to party preference (see e.g. Wilcox and Wlezien, 1993; Anderson et al., 2004; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Ladner and Wlezien, 2007). This is often the case with cross- sectional analyses. Even though we utilize a two-wave panel study, which tends to account for endogenous preferences, we further control for that possibility by adding a lagged version of the Dependent Variable on the right hand side. At the same time, this reveals whether there are some identifiable campaign effects for undecided voters or whether these effects will disappear as soon as pre-election intentions and attitudes are considered.[15]

Turning directly to column 3 where the estimates for the interaction effect are reported we see far fewer significant interactions. Three in total: Evaluations of Labour and

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[13] These models include controls for Age, Gender, and Education. These results are not presented but are available from the authors upon request.

[14] In 2005, BES respondents who had not decided who to vote yet, where asked the follow up question "Which party do you think you are most likely to vote for?".

[15] Even though this strategy allows us to somewhat deal with the problem, we recognize that the problem of endogeneity is not entirely resolved. This is the case for two reasons. First, some undecided voters do not have observed party leanings at $t − 1$ and secondly because the economic assessments at $t − 1$ are endogenous to vote intentions ($t − 1$) and, to an extent, endogenous to vote choice(t).

Table 6
Probit regression on labour voting (full model specifications).

	Model (3) – full model		Model (4) – full lagged model	
	Main effect	Interaction	Main effect	Interaction
Lagged labour vote (Campaign)	–		1.13***(.13)	
Labour PID	.95***(.15)	.02(.25)	.59***(.15)	.21(.28)
Conservative ID	−.18(.23)	.15(.42)	−.35(.23)	.43(.46)
Liberal ID	−.34(.22)	.53(.36)	−.17(.21)	.31(.37)
Labour distance (Taxes)	−.11***(.03)	.07(.06)	−.11***(.03)	.11(.07)
Conservative distance (Taxes)	.06**(.02)	−.04(.05)	.05**(.02)	−.06(.05)
Liberal distance (Taxes)	.04(.03)	-.05(.07)	.04(.03)	−.06(.07)
Labour distance (EU)	−.004(.03)	−.01(.05)	.01(.03)	−.01(.06)
Conservative distance (EU)	−.02(.02)	−.007(.04)	−.01(.02)	.006(.04)
Liberal democrats distance (EU)	−.003(.02)	−.03(.05)	−.006(.03)	−.07(.06)
Labour economic competence	.20***(.07)	.49**(.17)	.15**(.07)	.62***(.19)
Conservative economic competence	−.07(.06)	−.23*(.12)	−.06(.06)	−.26**(.13)
Likeability Blair	.14***(.02)	−.08(.05)	.11***(.02)	−.07(.05)
Likeability Howard	.01(.03)	.04(.06)	.01(.03)	.06(.07)
Likeability Kennedy	−.07**(.02)	.05(.05)	−.07**(.02)	.03(.05)
Labour party performance	.57***(.15)	−.96***(.28)	.40***(.15)	−.97***(.31)
Conservative party performance	−.31(.20)	−.01(.34)	−.16(.23)	−.23(.40)
Liberal democrats party performance	−.36*(.21)	.35(.34)	−.28(.21)	.42(.36)
Blair best PM	.44**(.18)	−.08(.32)	.26(.19)	−.13(.34)
Howard best PM	−.47*(.28)	.25(.51)	−.46(.28)	.22(.54)
Handling of Iraq war	−.002(.04)	.03(.07)	−.02(.04)	.02(.07)
Undecided	−.37(.89)		−.62(.99)	
Constant	.95(.44)		1.08**(.42)	
N		2130		2118
McFadden R^2	.67		.70	

Note that: 1. Standard errors in parentheses; 2. *** Significant at .01, ** significant at .05, * significant at .1 levels; 3. Models (3) and (4) include demographic Variables as Controls (age; education; gender).
Source: IRCP BES 2005.

Conservative handling of the economy, and beliefs in Labour's competence in handling the most important issue.[16] As in Table 5 (columns 4 and 5) we observe similar interactions. Evaluations of economic competence matter more while party competence evaluations on the most important issue matter less for undecided voters. The same is true for model 4. The inclusion of the pre-election intention to vote does not alter the results of our core model (model 3) suggesting that the campaign period primed the economy on the voters' voting calculations.[17]
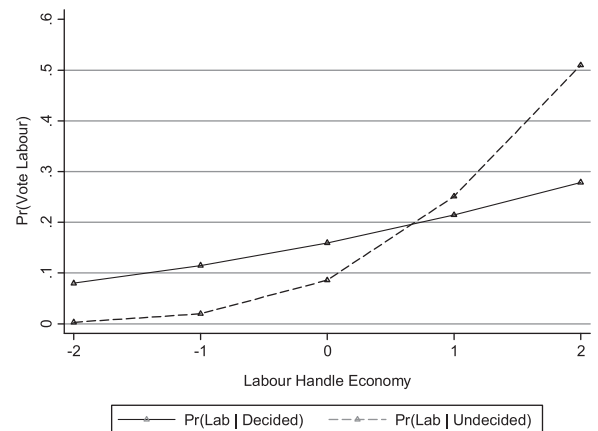
However, probit coefficients and interaction terms in regressions do not make sense intuitively. In Figs. 2 and 3 we provide a visual representation for the effect of evaluations of economic competence for Labour and beliefs concerning Labour's competence in handling the most important issue for the Decided and Undecided groups (based on Model 3). These two figures plot the probabilities of voting Labour for the two groups in different values of the aforementioned two variables.[18]

As depicted in Fig. 2 when the evaluation of Labour's handling of the economy is low there do not appear any substantial differences between the two groups in their probability of voting Labour. However as that evaluation becomes higher, the effect for the undecided increases more sharply and in the case of very positive evaluations undecided voters are about 20% more likely to vote for the governing party than decided voters. As depicted in Fig. 3 Labour's suitability to handle the most important issue has a markedly larger effect on decided voters. For

[16] We should mention here that feelings towards Tony Blair are marginally significant at $p = .116$.
[17] We have tested for the pre-campaign inclination to vote Labour and the results stay the same.
[18] For the calculation of the probabilities, all other variables in the model have been set to their mean value. Setting the variables to their median does not change the interpretation of the graphs. Probabilities have been calculated in Stata 10.0 using the "praccum" command (see Long and Freese, 2006).

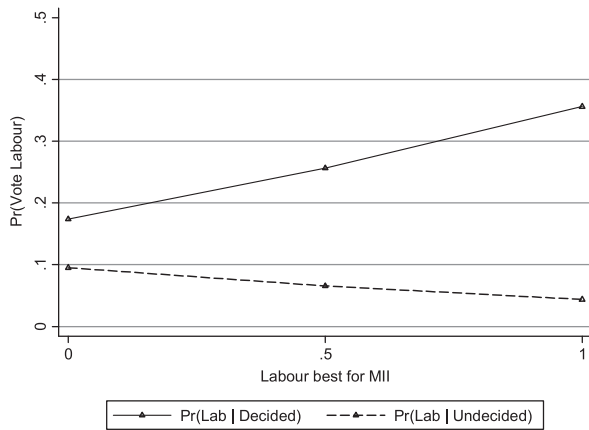**Fig. 2.** Probability of a Labour vote and evaluations of economic competence.

Fig. 3. Probability of a Labour vote and party best in most important issue (MII).

undecided voters the same effect seems to stand much lower in the case of undecided voters. The interplay between indecision and performance indicators seem to vary across the four models of Labour voting presented here. Leadership evaluations have the same effect on voting for both groups, while the parties' performance on the most important issue has a negligible effect on undecided voters. However, the hypothesized conditional effect of the incumbent's prospective economic performance remains quite robust even after controlling for prior inclinations to Labour voting.

5. Heterogeneity within heterogeneity?

One could argue that not all those who report indecision are equally undecided.[19] As we have already noted in section 2, a large number of undecided voters do report a party identification. As we also noted in that section, these voters might be expressing "hesitation" during the campaign but are likely to "return home" eventually. This begs the question: Are *all* undecided voters, irrespective of their predispositions, as susceptible to evaluations of the economy as our hypothesis suggests? Or could it be that, what we term here, as "undecided partisans" would be less swayed by economic evaluations as compared to undecided voters with no party affiliation. In line with our arguments so far, we expect the non-partisan undecided voters to be mostly influenced by economic competence.

We report here an additional analysis specified to provide answers to the above questions. First, we have constructed a four-point scale that measures the decision status of the respondent together with his or her status as an identifier. This produces the following groups (1) partisan decideds, (2) non-partisan decideds, (3) partisan undecideds and (4) non-partisan undecideds. We then replaced this variable as constitutive term of the interactions in Model 3. As you can see in Table 7 the interaction

Table 7
Probit regression on Labour voting with refined Indecision measure (identification/decision status).

	Model (5) – core model	
	Main effect	Interaction
Labour PID	1.097***(.26)	−.07(.11)
Conservative ID	−.23(.40)	.04(.20)
Liberal ID	−.43(.36)	.18(.17)
Labour distance (Taxes)	−.13**(.05)	.02(.03)
Conservative distance (Taxes)	.07*(.04)	−.01(.02)
Liberal distance (Taxes)	.06(.05)	−.02(.03)
Labour distance (EU)	−.01(.05)	.002(.02)
Conservative distance (EU)	−.02(.03)	.0003(.01)
Liberal democrats distance (EU)	.03(.05)	−.02(.02)
Labour economic competence	−.08(.13)	.25**(.07)
Conservative economic competence	.01(.10)	−.09*(.05)
Likeability Blair	.19***(.04)	−.04*(.02)
Likeability Howard	.002(.05)	.01(.02)
Likeability Kennedy	−.09*(.04)	.01(.02)
Labour party performance	1.03***(.24)	−.44***(.13)
Conservative party performance	−.23(.33)	−.02(.15)
Liberal democrats party performance	−.68**(.32)	.25*(.14)
Blair best PM	.32(.29)	−.03(.14)
Howard best PM	−.66(.47)	.008(.04)
Handling of Iraq war	−.002(.08)	.03(.07)
Identification/decision status	−.02(.41)	
Constant	−1.00(.74)	
N	2145	
McFadden R^2	.66	

Note that: 1. Standard Errors in Parentheses; 2. *** Significant at .01, ** significant at .05, * significant at .1 levels; 3. Models (3) and (4) include demographic Variables as Controls (age; education; gender). Interactions are between the variables identified in first column and the variable Identification/Decision Status measured as a 4 point scale. This is scored as: 1 partisan decideds, 2 non-partisan decideds, 3 partisan undecideds and 4 non-partisan undecideds.
Source: IRCP BES 2005.

between the new "refined" variable and evaluations of Labour's handling of the economy remains significant.

Plotting the marginal effect of economic evaluations on Labour voting across the 4 categories of this new variable (Fig. 4) provides further insights regarding the questions set above.
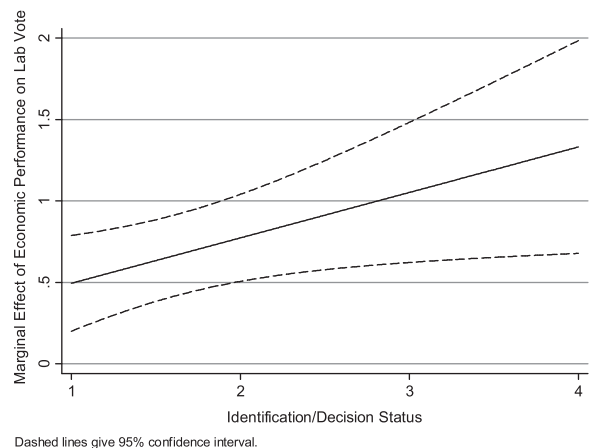

Dashed lines give 95% confidence interval.

Fig. 4. The effect of evaluation of labour's handling of the economy conditional upon identification/decision status. The variable identification/decision status is scored as: 1 partisan decideds, 2 non-partisan decideds, 3 partisan undecideds and 4 non-partisan undecideds. Source: IRCP BES 2005.

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[19] We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers who brought some of these issues to our attention.

First we can see that there is a clear upwards trend with the decision status of the respondent. The economy does seem to exert a larger pull to non-partisan undecideds yet "undecided partisans" are also weighting the economy heavily and certainly much more than the two other decided categories. As such we are confident that the conditional effect that we have identified still holds even after we refine our measure of the undecided voter.[20] Evidently, the more undecided a voter is, the stronger the influence of economic competence.

6. Conclusions

In this paper we have explored if and in which ways undecided voters differ as a group in their decision-making processes. We have put forward the idea that undecided voters' behaviour will be driven to a greater extent by influences that become salient during the campaign such as valence considerations. We have examined the role of three such valences namely leader-ship evaluations, party competence on the most important issue, economic competence evaluations while we added *ad hoc* issue conflicts like the Iraq case in 2005. We further argued that evaluations of economic competence will most likely weigh more heavily for the undecided voters' behaviour as compared to other valences. Since undecided voters need to make a heavily time-constrained decision they will base the latter on cognitively readily available rational considerations which are as less prone to uncer-tainty as possible. In this sense, economic evaluations provide an ideal shortcut provided that parties have an established record of economic competence and the "effects" of that record on a voter's financial situation are sufficiently unambiguous.

While it seems that valence considerations have indeed been a source of heterogeneity, this heterogeneity has the opposite direction as far as competence evaluations are concerned and it is almost nonexistent in the case of party leaders or the war in Iraq. Undecided voters attach less importance in their perceptions on who is more able to handle the issues of the day and they do not seem to differ from decided voters in the way they consider party leaders. However, our results have confirmed the expectation that economic evaluations will be an important source of heterogeneity. Undecided voters appear to be about 20% more likely to vote for Labour if they rate the incumbents highly in terms of economic competence. Those results are in line with previous findings on American elections sug-gesting that the economy can sway the floating voter (Zaller, 2004).

Throughout the manuscript we have highlighted some potential implications of the paper. For us, a basic concern is the operationalization of the undecided voters. Simply put, we cannot be sure whether indecision could be considered a 'Black and White' dichotomy. In the real world there are different levels of decidedness yet the data at hand constraints us to use a dichotomous variable.

Accounting for possible additional variation in response to partisanship does not perfectly address the problem of measurement. We still believe that a new variable that measures indecision in a continuous scale would be supe-rior to test similar hypotheses. A second implication might involve the possibility that some voters might swing from one vote intention to the other in the campaign period (for vote switching see, Denver, 2003; Carrubba and Timpone, 2005). In effect some respondents coded as decideds might change their intentions at some point during the campaign. However, what we seek to unfold is the effect of the time period between the two interviews (i.e. pre–post election). We are interested in their opinions the exact day they declared their decision status and how this set of opinions explain their choices as captured in the post election survey. The third implication relates to the potential problem of endogeneity. Undecided voters have some party leanings (i.e. they are not equally undecided towards all parties) and this might induce the effect of economic perceptions. Even though we address that statistically, we still recognize that it is not entirely resolved. Finally, the last implication relates to our focus on the 2005 election.

Every election has distinguishing characteristics that a pattern of campaign effects seems difficult to capture. As ever, extending this research to cover a larger number of elections would be the way forward in order to establish whether this is a recurring pattern or a one off event. It does appear, however, that undecided voters might be more rational than previously thought. Their utility is maximized through considerations that can be tested against objective performance and at the same time exert an impact on their well being. As Vavreck (2009) argues, incumbents under a robust economy must build their campaigns around economic competence to win the elec-tion (see also Green and Hobolt, 2008). In 2005 the Labour Party had to confront the unpopular engagement in the Iraq war. An easy way out of the issue was to highlight the good economic conditions at that time. The government's success became apparent in the undecided voters' weights on economic considerations. The voters who had not decide before the start of the campaign voted for Labour mostly relying on the handling of the economy.

This paper, however, seeks to open a new research agenda on campaign effects heterogeneity by looking at the undecideds in a broad range of issues. The most apparent goal should be the systematic exploration of turnout and the undecided voter. In our concept of the undecided voter, we set out a series of reasons explaining indecision to vote. An extension of those three reasons creates a series of expectations relating the campaign and the undecided voter.[5] The third aspect of indecision to vote (apart from vote choice and turnout) is a thorough explanation of who the undecided voters are and most preferably which events, policies or even personal characteristics might explain their inability to decide. A wider story on unde-cided voters through time will give as a clearer under-standing of who they are, why they are unable to form vote intentions and how they are likely to be persuaded. The latter question of campaign persuasion was partly answered in this paper.

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[20] The interpretation of the results remains the same even after we drop the party identification variables from the model.

Acknowledgements

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