THE VOLATILITY LOOP:

EXPLAINING

EXTRAORDINARY ELECTORAL INSTABILITY

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Author's Declaration

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Abstract

The thesis investigates extraordinary electoral volatility in Bulgaria from 2021 to 2024, concentrating on the electoral shifts between 2023 and 2024. Emphasizing rapid shifts in voter preferences and frequent emergence of new political actors, the thesis presents a novel theory: the dynamic "volatility loop" to explain persistent electoral instability. Accordingly, the thesis demonstrates how structural grievances such as governance inefficiency, widespread corruption, and economic instability trigger initial voter dissatisfaction. The openness of the political system, combined with relatively weak partisan attachments, then further amplifies volatility by enabling the emergence and rapid rise of new, populist and anti-establishment parties. Yet, these new political entities often fail to deliver effective governance, leading to more disillusionment and voter punishment that results in vote switching, hence perpetuating the voter volatility loop. Two mechanisms seem capable of temporarily stabilizing electoral volatility: voter's transient return to 'traditional', established parties, or increased voter abstention. However, both of these mechanisms have the potential to exacerbate political alienation and thus democratic erosion. Uncovering the cyclical and structural nature of electoral volatility in Bulgaria, this thesis highlights the necessity of addressing long-term institutional weaknesses and socio-economic grievances to foster lasting political instability and democratic resilience in the entire CEE region.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Understanding voting behavior and why electorates shift often between electoral cycles lies at the heart of democratic theory. Voter volatility was formalized by Pedersen (1979) as the aggregate net change in party vote shares between consecutive elections, through the "Pedersen Index", which to this day remains the benchmark for measuring electoral changes. In advanced democracies, as Dalton and Wattenberg (2000) demonstrate, dealignment and weakened party attachments have fueled this volatility. Consequentially, volatility, especially in high rates, can be a symptom either of a very responsive polity, which is quick to reward policy successes and to punish failures, or it could be the trigger for fragmentation, failed coalition-building, or erosion of accountability (Norris, 1999). Many scholars have analyzed volatility and have tried to measure it and find its implications, such as Casal Bertoa (2025), or Emanuele (2015/2024). However, there are not many countries where volatility happens not only at high rates but also very rapidly. Many countries exhibit high rates of volatility, especially those sharing a post-communist political system (Epperly, 2011), but one country takes the spotlight.

Bulgaria has become a striking and impeccable case study for not only measuring volatility but also seeing its very rapid implications. In 1989, the country started its transition to democracy. Following decades of a monopolized political arena by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP)[2](Party abbreviations and full names in Table 1.1.), citizens had a rather stable duopoly between the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), or rather citizens had hopes of such system. The early hopes of a stable dual-party system were moved aside by the challenges and difficulties of the market transition, which due to failed government policies, led to a massive economic and financial crisis. Rapid

[2] A detailed list of party abbreviations and translations can be found in Appendix 1 (p. 60-62)

privatization in the country, mostly by former BCP and current BSP members, led to widespread unemployment, corruption scandals, protests, and massive distrust towards the new democratic system. The Hyperinflation in 1996-97 essentially broke the economy, as prices doubled every few days, real incomes collapsed, and mass demonstrations against the Jan Videnov government discredited both SDS and BSP, essentially leaving the political arena in Bulgaria open again for new managers of the transition (Charles & Marie, 1999)

Table 1.1. Party Abbreviations and Full Names (in English)

Party Abbreviation	**Name in English**
APS	Alliance for Rights and Freedoms
BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party
BCP	Bulgarian Communist Party
Bulgarian Rise	Bulgarian Rise
DB	Democratic Bulgaria
DPS	Movement for Rights and Freedoms
DPS – NN	Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning
GERB-SDS	Citizens for European Integration of Bulgaria – Union of the Democratic Forces
Get Up! Mafia Out!	Get Up! Mafia Out!
ITN	There is Such People
MECH	Morality, Unity and Honor
NDSV	National Movement Simeon The Second
NFSB	National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria
PP	We Continue the Change
The Left	The Left
Vazrazhdane	Rebirth
Velichie	Greatness
VMRO	National Movement Bulgaria

This void was quickly filled by the perhaps first populist party and leader in Bulgaria – the former Bulgarian Tsar Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, whose National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) campaigned in 2001 on a platform of rapid reforms and a definitive break with old politics. As Nikolov et al. (2004) argue, NDSV gained electorate and took office very quickly, making populist pledges, which were de facto later dropped, and the government essentially followed center-right type policies. As the authors highlight, NDSV in fact followed changes and policy reforms initiated by its predecessors. Most importantly, while Simeon II's platform was rebuilding and fixing the broken system, by the time he took office, hyperinflation was already under control, and the initial shocks and fears were already addressed. Hence Simeon II took office on promises to fix something that was already not really an issue and succeeded in consolidating power based primarily on the lack of trust of citizens to the other parties- SDS and BSP.

Why is this important to explain? It could be argued that it was in 2001, after SDS and BSP failed to provide an adequate and safe transition to democracy in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union and the Soviet regime in Bulgaria, that massive distrust and disillusionment with those "traditional" parties started. Hence, from then on, voting in Bulgaria was not about policies, reforms or agendas, but rather about simply disliking or distrusting the previous ruling parties, as was the case with NDSV and Simeon II. The evidence of that is the emergence of many new populist parties, based on charismatic leaders, with easy-to-understand rhetoric. In 2009 GERB (Citizens for European Integration of Bulgaria) emerged as an anti-establishment party, promising European integration, and cutting the ties with the previous "traditional" parties of Bulgaria, which failed.

Following GERB, many nationalist and far-right or center-right parties such as ATAKA, National Front for Saving Bulgaria (NFSB), Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO), Volya,

Patriotic Front, Neutral Bulgaria, Bulgarian Patriots, etc., emerged over the years and while they were never able to form governments themselves, they were always in coalition with the ruling parties- either GERB, BSP or Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS). Later other, more centric parties, such as Democratic Bulgaria (DB), emerged on the same anti- "traditional parties" platform, but this time against GERB, BSP and DPS. Fundamentally, since Bulgarian voters' choices became more about someone to come and fix the previous guys' problems, Gurov & Zankina (2013) show how charismatic framing and charismatic leaders amplified success of newcomers, essentially overshadowing real policy and political platforms, which later leads to disillusionment when these newcomers due to corruption scandals, policy failures or simply failures to deliver on promises.

However, all these dynamics of vote-changing between different populist or not necessarily so populist parties were happening over a full mandate, meaning over three or four years. However, the period 2021-2024 saw a new development, which was characterized by a rapid and drastic shift of voter preferences between different anti-establishment parties repeatedly. The uniqueness of this period comes not so much about the volatility itself, but the speed at which it is happening. Between 2021 and 2024 Bulgaria saw seven general elections, in addition to two presidential and one local elections. Seven consecutive general elections, happening months apart from each other, led to six interim governments, appointed by the President, and only two Parliament elected governments, which fell apart in less than a year, since formed. The last and current government was formed in January 2025, and by May, two coalition partners already withdrew their support, signaling that this government might follow the faith of the previous two.

As mentioned, GERB-SDS was a new party in 2009, promising to cut ties with the corrupted "traditional" parties. By 2020, GERB-SDS was already a rather corrupted

"traditional" party and the disillusionment with them was visible from the mass anti-GERB protests in 2020, which continued for almost four months and even led to several citizen injuries from clashes with the police. Hence, similarly to 2001, when the society was fed-up with the "traditional" parties and trusted NDSV and Simeon II, or when in 2009 the society was fed-up with the failures of NDSV and BSP and trusted GERB-SDS, now the society was fed-up with the failures and corruption scandals around GERB-SDS and were looking for new alternatives. The disillusionment with GERB-SDS led to the rise of Democratic Bulgaria, which failed, which then led to the rise of There is Such People (ITN), which also failed, leading to the rise of We Continue the Change (PP), which shared the same fate, later came the rise of Velichie and Moral, Unity and Honor (MECH), which also didn't manage to form a government or do anything in general, leading to the end result, which was again win for GERB. Consequentially, this makes one ask, what is this cycle that keeps happening, where people are constantly seeking new alternatives, always disillusioned with the ruling parties, but sometimes returning to them when nothing else works. In 2024 voters returned to GERB, the same way they returned in 1998 to SDS, once BSP and Jan Videnov led the country to economic and financial failure, or the same way they briefly returned to BSP, when NDSV failed.

1.1. Research Question and Hypotheses

The central question that this thesis seeks to answer is what sustains the volatility loop in Bulgaria between 2021 and 2024? This thesis argues that the rapid and sustained voter volatility is actually due to a self-perpetuating volatility loop. Unmet policy promises, weak institutional performance, perception of corruption, all generate widespread dissatisfaction with incumbents. Consequentially, voters start seeking alternatives, creating space for the emergence of many anti-establishment parties. However, due to either internal divisions, lack of experience or lack of a political agenda in general, these new alternatives inevitably fail to

deliver any substantial change or policy reform (Gurov & Zankina, 2013) or even form a government despite winning elections. Thus, the failures of the alternatives generate new dissatisfaction among voters, reigniting the cycle of seeking other alternatives. By unpacking each stage of the loop, this thesis would seek to find the underlying causal drivers of the loop, which would reveal not only why Bulgarian voters are so quick to change allegiances, but also what are the deeper grievances or institutional weaknesses which continue to fuel this dissatisfaction.

The thesis is structured as follows: In Chapter 2, I will first discuss the theoretical foundation of the thesis, which aims to conceptualize the self-reinforcing loop within specific structural grievances such as economic grievances, leadership scandals, or perceived corruption, which fuel the thirst for new, charismatic, populist outsiders. Following that, Chapter 3 will offer a closer look into the proposed theoretical framework of this thesis – the volatility loop, and its different stages and triggers. Chapter 4 will map out the methodology for the research in this thesis and the different scopes and methods used to test the functioning of the proposed volatility loop. Finally, Chapter 5 will present the analysis of this thesis, and Chapter 6 will offer a more detailed discussion and interpretation of these findings.

1.2. Measuring Instability

In order to capture the scale of the Bulgarian electoral volatility between 2021 and 2024, this thesis will employ the Pedersen Index of Electoral Volatility (Pedersen, 1979). The Pedersen Index remains the most widely used, and the most theoretically transparent, measure of aggregate voter changes (Adcock & Collier, 2001). As mentioned, Pedersen (1979) formalized volatility as half the sum of absolute changes in each party's vote share between consecutive elections. The simplicity of the index facilitates cross-national comparison and its

focus on the net vote-share changes directly applies to the conceptualization of the self-reinforcing volatility loop, presented in this thesis.

I calculate the volatility for each pair of consecutive general elections[3] from April 2021 → June 2021 → November 2021 → October 2022 → April 2023→ June 2024 → October 2024, plus the 2017 → April 2021 interval, used as the last four-year cycle. These cycles incorporate all nationwide general election ballots held in Bulgaria. The inclusion of the 2017 – 2021 cycle is important, as it anchors the analysis in a "normal" electoral rhythm, allowing to contrast standard multi-year volatility against the hyper-compressed cycles between 2021-2024.

One potential objection to using the Pedersen Index for this thesis is that it is usually calculated over four- or five-years periods (a standard government cycle) and Bulgaria's case contests this, as Bulgarian elections in the period of interest happened only months apart. However, the short-interval volatility in the Bulgarian case can be even more insightful, as it does not only reveal the extend of the volatility in Bulgaria, but its pace of how quickly Bulgarian voters abandon old parties and embrace new ones. In the context of Bulgaria, where the institutional trust erodes very rapidly and new parties flourish, applying the Pedersen Index over shorter, 'compressed' electoral cycles can more effectively capture the situational drivers of volatility, than analysis on longer and more stable intervals.

The calculated Pedersen Index for Bulgaria between 2021-2024 and presented in Table 1.2. What the calculations show is an extraordinary volatility in both the long and short cycles. The 2017-2021 cycle already registers a Pedersen score of over 70%, a level seen in very few

[3] The results of the April 2023, June and October 2024 general elections, as reported by the Central Election Committee of Bulgaria, are presented in Appendix I (p.63-65)

democracies in recent years (Emanuele, 2021). This means that the period 2021-2024 already starts with a very high volatility, which as it could be seen from the scores, continues throughout each electoral cycle. These figures confirm the core argument that Bulgaria's electorate is not merely unhappy and dissatisfied over the long-term, but it is repeatedly "resetting" at a very high pace, going through new parties in successive elections.

Table 1.2. Pedersen Index Calculations for Bulgaria (2017-2024)

Election Pairs	Pedersen Index (%)
2017 → April 2021	74.47%
April 2021 → June 2021	16.95%
June 2021 → November 2021	36.67%
November 2021 → October 2022	17.49%
October 2022 → April 2023	33.98%
April 2023 → June 2024	29.74%
June 2024 → October 2024	18.62%
AVERAGE	**32.56%**

Compared to Western European Democracies, such as Germany, France and the UK, Bulgaria's average Pedersen index is relatively higher. The same is for post-communist and post-transitional European states such as Romania, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, which have an average Pedersen Index no more than 25-26%. Bulgaria in compassion has an average Pedersen Index of almost 33%. What this shows is that Bulgaria's extraordinary volatility at high pace cannot merely be explained with being underdeveloped, in comparison with the most developed in Europe, or with the post-transitional period. Bulgaria's high volatility raises questions not just about the democratic processes, but it is about the nature of political representation, and it signals a deeply rooted crisis of political legitimacy and governance.

Table 1.2. Average Pedersen Index in Europe

Country	Average Pedersen Index (%)
Germany (2009-2021)	16%
France (2007-2024)	21.93%
UK (2010-2024)	14.61%
Italy (2008-2020)	27.34%
Croatia (2007-2020)	15.92%
Hungary (2006-2018)	15.90%
Slovakia (2006-2020)	26.26%
Romania (2008-2020)	19%

Sources: Emanuele, 2025/2024; Casal Bertoa, 2025

One this should be noted here. Although the numbers in Bulgaria seem relatively close to those in other European countries, there is a fundamental difference. The average Pedersen index of those countries in Table 1.2. is calculated over one or two electoral cycles with approximately four to five years difference between them. So, when for example Italy experiences an average Pedersen Index of 27,34%, this is over the course of twelve years and two-three general elections. However, the case of Bulgaria is extraordinary in the sense that, the relatively high volatility is measured from seven general elections over the course of three years. And although the numbers shown in Table 1.1. seem to show a decrease of volatility, the mere fact that the average volatility of 23,70% over the course of three elections, all in the same year (2021), then there is something extraordinary happening in the Bulgarian electoral and political system that ought to be unraveled by this thesis.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundation – Understanding Vote Changes

Voter volatility is usually examined and understood around four key dimensions: institutional factors, socio-political & legacies, economic conditions, and party organization dynamics. Each one of these approaches provides a different, yet interconnected lens through which the voter volatility can be examined and understood. The institutional theories will focus on the role of electoral systems and party system closure in shaping electoral stability. The socio-political approaches will underline the impact of historical legacies, political trust and voter socialization on party allegiance. Economic theories will examine how both the real and the perceived economic grievances and conditions can influence voter behavior and drive electoral instability. And finally, organizational perspectives will explore how party structures, grassroots networks, and voter engagement can contribute to or mitigate volatility. Based on all these approaches and theories, the current thesis will build its own theory for understanding voter volatility in Bulgaria.

Before proceeding with the different approaches, it is crucial that the definition of electoral volatility, that this research will use is defined. Electoral volatility is defined as the magnitude of voter shifts between parties across electoral cycles (Sikk, 2005). Voter volatility is a pervasive feature of post-communist democracies, (Powell & Tucker, 2013), whereas in established, developed democracies, it tends to decline over time as party systems stabilize and voter-party linkages are solidified (Mainwaring & Zoco, 2007).

2.1. Institutional Approach

The institutional approach emphasizes that the structure of electoral systems, the degree of party institutionalization, and the nature of the political rules play a fundamental role in shaping voter preferences, and thus voter volatility. The way in which electoral systems are

designed can either stabilize political competition or it can exacerbate the fragmentation and political stability, influencing both the emergence of new parties and the fluidity of voter preferences. Scholars have extensively examined how different institutional configurations contribute to those dynamics.

To begin with, Birch (2003) underlines how electoral system designs can influence and shape voter behavior, arguing that proportional representation systems foster greater electoral volatility, due to low barriers for new parties, whereas majoritarian systems promote more party stability by reinforcing long-term partisan alignments and commitments. Epperly (2011) builds on Birch (2003) by analyzing how post-communist electoral systems interact with historical legacies. In his research, he underlines that the permissiveness of electoral rules, and the nature of the electoral thresholds play a crucial role in shaping volatility. Post-communist states, which inherited the Leninist political structure, tend to struggle with entrenched volatility, due to the absence of well-established partisan loyalties and continued institutional experimentation. Epperly's findings indicate that in environments with low electoral thresholds and permissive rules, new parties can easily enter the system, leading to repeated cycles of instability.

In terms of the post-communist systems, Haughton (2005) adds another layer to the institutionalist discussion, by discussing how the development of political party systems in post-communist states is affected by institutional choices. The analysis in his research shows that the rapid institutional changes in the post-communist era have led to repeated cycles of party formation and dissolution, increasing the overall volatility. He highlights that in many post-communist countries, weak institutionalization of the party competition has allowed for high levels of voter volatility, as parties constantly fail to establish lasting ideological or organizational roots. In contribution to this, Powell and Tucker (2013) introduce two dimensions of volatility, separating it into Type A volatility, which has to do with party entry

and exit, while Type B volatility involves voter shifts between existing parties. They demonstrate that institutional openness can significantly drive Type A volatility, especially in systems where party institutionalization is weak. At the same time, they analyze both types of volatility as isolated from one another, which raises the question of whether Type A and Type B volatility, rather than being mutually exclusive, can be mutually reinforcing.

Expanding on these findings, Casal Bertoa & Enyedi (2016) examine the party system closure, concluding that in open political systems with low institutional barriers, new political actors often enter the system, preventing the stabilization of party competition. This never-ending instability in turn reinforces electoral volatility. Supporting this argument, Bielasiak (2002) finds that weakly institutionalized party systems experience greater voter fluctuations, as parties struggle to establish deep social and ideological linkages with the voters. Collectively these theories suggest that in states where party structures are fragile and institutional constraints on new party formation are minimal, electoral volatility tends to be higher.

Chepel (2024) extends the whole discussion on the institutional factors for high electoral volatility, by questioning whether formal institutions are enough to stabilize electoral patterns. His research shows that while institutional designs are intended to stabilize the party system and provide a structural framework for reducing volatility, they often struggle against deeply rooted societal factors, such as political distrust, weak ideological commitments, and voter alienation. Chepel (2024) argues that the mere existence of strong electoral rules does not necessarily lead to stability if broader political norms, historical grievances, and socio-political cleavages continue to fuel electoral unpredictability. He underlines that the relationship between institutional structures and social conditions is a crucial determinant of whether a post-communis state can achieve electoral stabilization or remain in flux.

2.2. Socio-Political & Legacy Theories

While Chepel (2024) discusses briefly the socio-political and legacy factors, other scholars focus more in depth on them, by unravelling their fundamental role in shaping voting behavior. Political transitions often lead to significant transformations in party systems, however in many cases, those systems remain unstable for decades, contributing to persistent electoral volatility.

Rose (1995) introduces the concept of political demobilization. His theory outlines how in transitioning democracies, citizens often lack strong partisan identities, leading to unstable voting patterns. He highlights that in many post-authoritarian societies there is a demobilized electorate due to a historical absence of participatory culture. Without any entrenched party loyalties, electoral volatility remains high, as voters tend to frequently experiment and switch party allegiances in search of electoral representation. Building on this argument further, Roberts (2008) argues that persistent disillusionment with governance and political institutions contributes to recurring voter shifts. He underlines that unstable democracies tend to have a rather unconvinced by established political actors electorate, which thus leads to frequent cycles of political experimentation, where voters continue to seek alternatives, but struggle to stick to one sustainable political option.

Comparatively, there is Mainwaring & Zoco's (2007) research, which contrasts electoral stabilization in developed democracies with persistent voter volatility in younger democracies. They highlight that institutional weaknesses and the lack of political socialization mechanisms can contribute to the enduring voter instability. In their comparative analysis, they explore how developed democracies have institutional safeguards, such as strong party identification, established voter blocs, and structured political competition, which are meant to

help reduce the volatility over time, whereas newer democracies, often struggle to establish these stabilizing mechanisms. In developing democracies, weak political engagement and a lack of long-term voter attachment lead to frequent electoral shifts, making it harder for the party system to consolidate. Furthermore, the absence of institutionalized ideological differences between parties means that voters are more likely to be swayed by short-term political events or candidate personalities, rather than enduring policy commitments. What the authors also highlight is that the reliance on clientelist networks and populist appeals in these environments further exacerbates volatility, as parties emerge and fade rapidly in response to shifting political demands.

Expanding on the emergence and disappearance of parties argument, Kitschelt et al. (1999) discuss how transitions to democracy, as those after the fall of the Soviet Union, led to many underdeveloped party systems, where new parties emerge and disappear frequently due to the absence of long-term organizational capacity. Their study explores how the party system volatility is much higher in environments where electoral institutions fail to encourage long-term partisan alignments. In such contexts, political parties function more as vehicles of electoral success, rather than as enduring institutions with ideological coherence. To further expand this argument, Enyedi & Casal Bertoa (2016), discuss party system closure and openness and they find that countries with open party systems- where political actors easily and frequently enter and exit without establishing durable governing coalitions, tend to experience higher levels of voter volatility. They argue that in systems with weak ideological commitment and fluid political structure, voters are far more likely to switch support between different parties, depending on short-term political developments and policy failures.

Finally, Pop-Eleches (2008) explores how corruption and weak institutional framework undermine party stability, thus leading to voter alienation and increased willingness to

experiment with new parties. His research shows that corruption scandals contribute significantly to electoral volatility by eroding trust in mainstream parties, pushing voters towards support for alternative political actors, which then often fail to deliver meaningful change, thereby perpetuating a cycle of instability.

2.3. Economic Conditions Approach

The economic theories explore how financial conditions, employment levels and economic crises can influence voter behavior and shape electoral volatility. Economic stability is often connected to government performance and dissatisfaction with economic conditions frequently leads to vote switching, or the rise of protest parties. In many cases just the perception of economic hardship, without the actual existence of such, can be just as influential as real economic indicators, leading to scholars exploring how both tangible and psychological factors can drive electoral instability.

Tavits (2005) explores how economic downturns can drive voter dissatisfaction, leading to increased levels of electoral volatility as citizens seek alternatives to incumbent parties, which have failed to address economic hardships. The author argues that voters are far more likely to shift allegiances when they are financially insecure and perceive governing parties as inefficient in addressing their needs. Her research also shows how short-term economic shocks tend to have a strong effect in politically instable environments, exacerbating volatility in systems which are already prone to high fragmentation. To expand this, Powell & Tucker (2013) examine how real economic declines versus perceived economic grievances interact with voter decision-making. Their findings indicate that voters often react more strongly to perceived economic distress, which can be exacerbated by media narratives and political rhetoric. They argue that in systems with weak party attachments, voters tend to perceive crises

far more dramatically, generating substantial electoral shifts even in the absence of objective economic downturns.

When discussing economic voting, Christensen et al. (2024) introduces a multidimensional economic voting framework, which distinguishes how different voter groups prioritize different economic factors. Their analysis shows that while middle-class voters might prioritize inflation control, working-class voters are more concerned with employment security. This segmentation then explains why economic volatility can manifest differently across different regions and social groups, adding an additional layer of complexity to electoral instability.

Chepel (2024) also discusses how voter volatility is particularly high in times when economic shocks first occur. This he argues is because economic uncertainty heightens political dissatisfaction, making voters more likely to abandon established parties and seek alternatives. This aligns with other theories of economic voting, further suggesting that voters punish incumbent governments for economic downturns. However, Chepel (2024) also suggests that economic conditions stabilize over time or citizens adapt their expectations and their perception of the market, which then weakens the direct link between economic shocks and voter behavior. So, according to Chepel's argument, the economic influence is most potent during periods of rapid change or in the immediate aftermath of a crises or some downfall, thus the volatility occurring as response is short-term, while the longer-term volatility is maintained by other factors.

2.4. Party Organization and Micro-Level Dynamics Approach

The role of party organization and the micro-level dynamics are fundamental in explaining and understanding voter volatility. The stability and the structure of political parties,

their internal organization, and their capacity to mobilize and retain their voter support is crucial, and it significantly influences electoral outcomes. Weak and poorly institutionalized parties contribute to instability by failing to maintain strong voter affiliations, while well-organized parties with deep-rooted structures and strong ideological foundation tend to reduce volatility by fostering long-term commitments.

To back up these arguments, Gherghina (2012) underlines the importance of party institutionalization in stabilizing electoral preferences. His research shows that parties with well-developed structures, clear leadership hierarchies, and active local networks are more likely to retain voter base across multiple electoral cycles, thus reducing volatility. According to him, party organization acts as a mediating force between voter discontent and electoral shifts, where parties with weak organizational frameworks are more vulnerable to sudden electoral losses and internal fragmentation. Essentially, a strong and well-organized party is more likely to retain its voters, as it shows signs of capability to form stable governments, whereas a disorganized and internally fragmented party is perceived as more likely to form unstable coalitions and governance.

Sikk (2005) explores the phenomenon of new party emergence and its impact on electoral stability. He distinguishes between genuinely new parties and parties which have emerged as rebranded versions of existing parties or appeared after a division in an already existing party. He argues that the former, genuinely new parties, contribute far more significantly to volatility, due to their lack of organizational entrenchment. The short lifespan of many new parties, according to the author is directly linked to their inability to establish enduring structures, resulting in cycles of voter defection and electoral unpredictability.

Further expanding on the arguments of party organizational and internal dynamics, Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018) explore how the erosion of traditional party structures and the rise of personalized political movements can weaken democratic stability. In their research they argue that when parties fail to institutionalize, electoral outcomes become more erratic, thus increasing both the volatility and the potential for democratic backsliding. Their analysis mainly suggests that parties with strong leadership continuity and robust organizational frameworks provide an anchor for voters, reducing the frequency of electoral realignment.

Finally, Linek and Gyárfášová (2020) explored how individual-level factors such as incumbency, ethnic background and the emergence of new parties can affect electoral volatility, focusing on Slovakia. Their analysis highlights that government parties are often losing votes to the "incumbent effect", a phenomenon which the authors argue occurs when voters punish and hold ruling parties accountable for unmet expectations or policy failures, thus leading to increased voter volatility. At the same time, according to them, new political parties play a crucial role in mobilizing previous non-voters or first-time voters, by providing a fresh perspective and an alternative platform which attracts individuals dissatisfied with traditional parties, thus contributing to the electoral volatility.

Chapter 3. The Volatility Loop

The theoretical framework of this thesis synthetizes all the insights of previous research into a multi-dimensional model of electoral volatility, which explains how the different variables interact in shaping electoral instability and how volatility evolves over time. Accordingly, volatility is a result of:

Institutional Design	Electoral system permissiveness (how easily new political parties can emerge)
	Weak institutionalization and frequent rule changes
	Openness of the political system (barriers to entry the system)
Socio-Political and Historical Legacies	Political distrust, low social capital and weak ideological commitments
	Post-authoritarian transitions and weak partisan identities
	Electoral clientelism and short-term political mobilization
Economic Conditions	Economic downturns and financial instability
	Perceived economic conditions
	Economic volatility and weak social safety nets
Party Organization and Internal Dynamics	Weak party institutionalization
	Emergence of new parties (populist and anti-establishment alternatives)
	Erosion of traditional party structures

Based on the multidimensional understanding of volatility, I suggest that there is a self-perpetuating electoral volatility loop, which characterizes the Bulgarian landscape. Rather than

viewing volatility as a linear process, the loop emphasized the recurrent and structurally embedded cycles of instability. The loop works as follows:

Phase 1: Structural Discontent and Electoral Punishment

- ➔ Widespread disillusionment with traditional parties is fueled by dissatisfaction with governance, corruption, and economic stagnation
- ➔ The institutional openness and weak party attachments allow and encourage electoral experimentation with new actors
- ➔ Voters start looking for alternatives

Phase 2: New Party Emergence and Populist Mobilization

- ➔ New anti-establishment and populist parties exploit voter grievances, by offering an alternative and anti-establishment narratives.
- ➔ The lack of strong ideological foundation and strong party commitments means that support for political parties is primarily reactionary, not programmatic.
- ➔ Voters put their trust into these new parties, hoping for a change

Phase 3: Governance and Institutional Failures

- ➔ If new parties fail to form a stable coalition or implement effective reforms quickly, then economic crises and perceived policy failures breed disillusionment with these parties
- ➔ Thus, voters, dissatisfied with the new parties, lose their trust in them, and start looking for alternatives

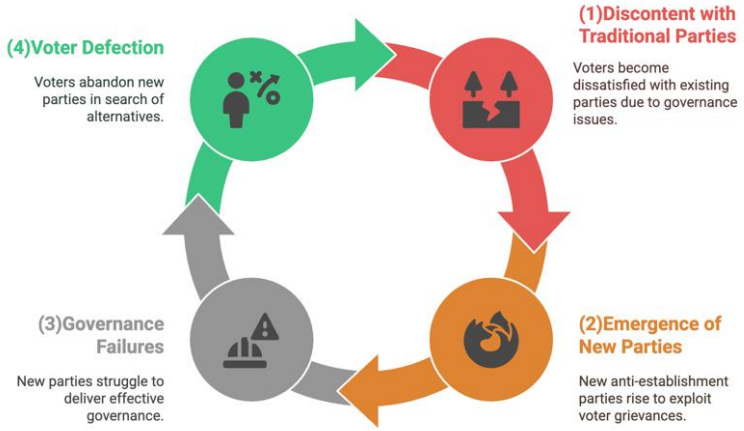
Phase 4: Voter Defection and Electoral Realignment

➔ Voters, dissatisfied with new parties, abandon them, either returning to traditional parties or seeking fresh alternatives

➔ Highly disillusioned voters can opt to abstain from voting

➔ Abandoning new parties reactivates Phase 1, restarting the cycle

Figure 2.1. The Voter Volatility Loop



Bulgaria's repeated electoral cycles of high volatility, fragmented governance and frequent new party emergence, aligns closely with this model. The institutional openness, lack of political socialization, economic instability, or the perception of such, as well the weak party structures, create this self-reinforcing feedback loop of electoral instability. There is no party consolidation, due to the rapid turnover of political actors, which prevents the emergence of stable governing parties. Due to the electoral shifts, coalitions are highly fragmented, leading to ineffective long-term policy planning and coherent governance. The failure of each successive ruling coalition further weakens trust in the political system, deepening volatility, and while voters continue to seek alternatives, no party can break the loop of instability.

Something important to the theory is that there are two additional dimensions, which might lead to short-term stabilization. The first one being, that after losing trust in new parties, voters return to supporting traditional parties again, believing that as those parties have more stable

organization and experience, they might be able to provide more stability. Thus, it can be assumed that this would lower the levels of voter volatility. However, over time, if those traditional parties again fail to address the underlying structural discontent, the discontent and frustration would return, as well as the thirst for alternatives, thus restarting the cycle.

The second additional dimension is that as voters are dissatisfied with both new and traditional parties, rather than switch their vote simply decide not to vote. In terms of volatility, this is a positive outcome, as those who have strong party alignments with certain traditional parties, continue voting, thus these parties gain more support (in terms of percentage on the elections), and the overall volatility would decrease. However, this has much deeper implications. This suggests that this loop is not just about volatility, but it shows that this loop can lead to decreasing democratic participation, and deeper political alienation thus democratic erosion. At the same time, some voters temporarily "exit" the loop, by either abstaining or by reverting to established parties. This withdrawal or return produces a brief stop in volatility, however, due to persisting grievances, these voters eventually re-enter the cycle of electoral experimentation, thus reigniting Phase 1.

Figure 2.2. The Voter Volatility Loop with Temporary Exit

Chapter 4. Data and Methodology

4.1. Survey Design and Data Collection

The research of this thesis draws on a national online survey among 267 Bulgarian voters (valid responses), conducted between March and May 2025. Respondents were asked to report on their actual voting patterns in the three most recent general elections (April 2023, June 2024, and October 2024), as well as their current party preference (six months after the last general election). The questionnaire had a skip logic, meaning that respondents were logically taken to the next question, based on their response and all empty data in the dataset has been recorded as genuine survey skips ("N/A" or "unapplicable"), and are not reported as refusals to answer. Although recalling past ballots could present memory challenges, the logic flow and small tests within the survey were put in place to flag possibly faulty responses[4]. Although the survey was aimed at gathering responses from a wide variety of demographics, women seemed to be more willing to participate in the survey, making men a bit underrepresented.

The survey data shows that among the survey sample, turnout is high (around 83%) (See Table 4.1). However, due to relatively small sample, the data is valid, but not fully representative, as we know that turnout in Bulgaria is much lower (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.1. Voter Turnout and Switching Rates (from Survey) (n=267)

Election	Turnout (%)	Switch Rate (%)
April 2023	86.14	-
June 2024	83.15	22.07
October 2024	86.27	24.06

[4] For example, in question coded A2, asking who did voters vote for in the April 2023 elections, there are parties included in the list, which did not participate in those elections (e.g. "Velichie"). The logic behind this is that if a respondent checked that in April, they voted for Velichie, then they are either filling in wrong answers, or are having trouble remembering their actual voting choices. Automatically those responses are marked as errors.

Table 4.2. Actual Voter Turnout

Election	Turnout (%)	Switch Rate (%)
April 2023	40.69%	-
June 2024	34.41%	Approx. 20%
October 2024	38.94	Approx. 21%

Sources: Turnout- Central Election Committee, Bulgaria, 2023/2024; Switch Rates estimates are calculated from Alpha Research Reports for June and October 2024

Survey respondents tend to overstate voting, and this is a well-documented bias in public opinion research. However, fundamentally, my survey shows switch rates around 22-24%, which remains stable across waves. This switch rates are almost identical to those reported by Alpha Research (2023;2024), which reports averages around 20-22% between the three elections. Hence, even if the absolute turnout figures are inflated, the data from the survey is still valid and reports similar trends as data from other national research agencies. The analytical sample from the data skews toward women (65.1%) with higher education (76.6%), primarily living in the urban areas. Despite these imbalances, the observed switching rates and turnout patterns closely align with national benchmarks, reinforcing confidence in the validity of our findings. I include age and gender controls to mitigate composition effects, however due to the fact that the demographic mix from the survey may not fully represent the broader electorate, any subgroup conclusions, while they may be informative, should be treated with caution.

4.2. Variable Operationalization

Based on the responses, I constructed the following variables, as presented in Appendix II. Each variable presented in the table mirrors the theoretical dimensions I highlight in Chapter 2. For instance, the country direction (*dir_wrong)* variable captures the general voter dissatisfaction, which, as I argue in the thesis, is the initial spark for electoral experimentation. Economic concerns (*econ_concern)* flags the respondents whose negative

economic outlook fuels volatility. Institutional trust is captured by the (*distrust_gov),* and party system weakness and sympathy towards new parties are captured by *party*_weak and new*_party_sym.* Finally, the temporary stabilization, presented at the end of Chapter 3, is captured by the return to traditional parties variable (*return_trad)*, which captures the short-term exits from the volatility loop.

4.3. Analytical Strategy

In order to test the theory of the self-reinforcing "volatility loop", the analysis is broken down into seven clear and logical steps. Each step is meant to build on the last, moving from simple descriptions of the data to more sophisticated tests of how discontent can lead to voters trying out new parties and then punishing those for bad governance outcomes or overall inadequate governance, which in turn can re-start the cycle.

I first begin by describing the data and highlighting the most interesting and important findings and patterns for the thesis. Then I proceed with developing vote switching models, using logistic regression. In this step I first test the Phase 1 indicators (e.g. *dir_wrong* and *distrust_gov*), which would serve as baseline models to assess the role of discontent and distrust on defection. Then I incorporate Phase 2 and Phase 3 indicators (e.g. *new_party_sym* and *gov_fail_sym*), to extend the model and explain additional variance. The next step is mediation analysis, where I establish different paths for regression. I verify the effect of discontent on institutional trust, establish the baseline effect or the total effect of discontent on switching and finally run the mediation test, to show the how distrust influences discontent's effect on voter experimentation. Following this, I break down discontent by different levels – high, moderate and low, testing whether having more grievances leads to disproportionally higher volatility than having only some or none. Robustness checks are incorporated into each phase of the steps

to check whether the findings of each step are valid. This happens via multiple imputations which I use to establish whether there is any change in results by rerunning the models with additional data. These checks are important to check whether the conclusions drawn from the analysis are not the outcome of how I handle the data or choose the models. This boosts confidence that the loop is actually working, and it is not just a statistical fluke. Finally, I build a Structural-Equation Model to test all the phases of the loop and the entire theory all at once.

4.4. Limitations

Each respondent was asked only once to recall their choices in three past elections and to indicate their hypothetical vote if elections were today. This design relies greatly on memory and future intention, rather than tracking the same individual over time – just not feasible for the purposes of this thesis because of time and financial constraints. What this means is that it is hard to track real within-person change or to fully rule out wrong recollection of the past. However, the design does try to control for such mistakes: the survey contains test answers, which can indicate whether a person is paying attention to what they answer, or whether they fill in wrong answers.

Another limitation is that all measures, including the open-ended reasons and future voting intentions, come from self-report. This can result in a possible issue that respondents may overestimate their likelihood of voting or understate protest motives, to present themselves in a more favorable light. In addition, in terms of coding, key attitudes such as structural discontent (dir_wrong) and economic concerns (econ_concern) each rely on one single question. Although these items perform as expected, they may not be fully sufficient to capture the full nuance of voters' economic perceptions or broader social grievances. Future research should include more multi-item strings for richer measurements.

Finally, I focus on attitude triggers within the volatility loop, however other factors such as local campaign effects are not fully captured by this analysis. However, the analysis within this research is multilayered and the multiple tests I employ are executed to ensure we do not make hasty conclusions. Despite these limitations, the multi-layered design, which is a combination of descriptive analysis, experimental prompts, and robustness checks, provides a reliable foundation for analyzing, diagnosing and validating the existence of Bulgaria's volatility loop.

Chapter 5. Findings

5.1. Data Overview

The survey data shows the general tendency of Bulgaria of decreasing over time turnout. At the same time, approximately one in five voters switches their party choice each time, which is not just a reactionary or one-time unique phenomenon, but it seems to be a stable pattern. This underlines the fragmented and highly volatile political environment in Bulgaria, which leads to multiple elections in short periods of time and frequent government collapses. While overall people tend to vote, they are still unwilling to stick to one single party, when it fails to meet expectations. In terms of future intentions, almost 20% of the voters intend to abstain if asked to vote today. This highlights abstention as a secondary "exit" from the loop. What can be seen, is that nearly one-fifth of the previous voters would choose to sit out, combined with the people who already didn't vote in the previous elections. This suggests that disillusionment can tip engaged citizens into abstention rather than merely party-switching. Among the 80.5% of the respondents who would vote if elections were today, nearly 19% of them would switch their last choice. While it should be noted that the volatility seems to be decreasing (from 22% to 19%), this could be attributed to the fact that more voters now, compared to the previous elections, would choose not to vote at all. At the same time, this alignment underscores that hypothetical future intentions reliably echo past behavior, confirming the overall stability of volatility attitudes.

Among the 19% of voters who would switch their vote if elections were today over 70% of them show either distrust (42.5%) or governance failures (27.5%), as core triggers of collective discontent, which essentially describes Phase 1 of the volatility loop, and institutional performance evaluation, which is Phase 3. (see Table 5.1)

Table 5.1. Reasons for switching if elections were today (Questions F4 & F5)

Reason	Percent (%)
Lost trust in party/coalition	42.50
Previous coalition couldn't govern and make a stable government	27.50
Give a chance to a new party with clear past	15.00
Other parties/coalitions cannot be trusted	7.50
Don't support anyone (disengagement)	2.50

Ultimately, this shows that there is a major trust deficit, as well as new-party appeal. 15% of the voters explicitly show that they are willing to try a new party, even after seven general elections in just three years. This shows that the October 2024 general elections have not been the end of the volatility loop, but if elections were today, it would continue, essentially indicating that Phase 2 would ignite again, continuing the cycle. Only 2.5% of the voters indicate that they don't support anyone, even if they vote, which suggests that most abstentions are not apathy, but grievances and protest vote against all parties and coalitions.

While the regression models use high-level attitudinal indicators, it is crucial to also ground these abstract measures into more specific problems that respondents actually experience (see Table 5.2)

Table 5.4. Drivers of Discontent

Issue	Mentions	Share of Mentions (%)
Persistent Corruption	62	31.5
Economic concerns (inflation, unemployment, economy)	48	24.78
Weak/Incompetent leadership	46	23.34
Weak Judiciary System	44	22.12

Persistent corruption is the most common reason for why Bulgaria is heading in the wrong direction. 31% of respondents perceive corruption, which indicates not just episodic outrage, but a chronic structural grievance. At the same time, those who think that corruption is among the biggest issue that Bulgaria is facing in general (regardless of whether the country is in the wrong or right direction) are 76%. The issues concerned with economic conditions fit

directly into the *dir_wrong,* as voters equate national mismanagement with personal hardship. The same is confirmed about the October 2024 elections, as well as future intentions.

5.2. Logistic Regression Analysis

Phase 1 of the volatility loop posits that structural discontent- voter's perception of the country going off-course, and eroded trust in parties and the government increase the likelihood of electoral experimentation. To test this, I first estimate a series of logistic regressions[5], predicting whether a respondent switched their vote in June 2024 (and, separately, in October 2024), using just the two Phase 1 indicators – *dir_wrong* and *distrust_gov*. These baseline models assess whether raw discontent and distrust raise the odds of defection. I then extended each regression, by adding two Phase 2 and Phase 3 factors- *new_party_sym* and *gov_fail_sym,* to test whether these later loop stages explain additional variance beyond the initial grievances.

All predictors are binary, and models use complete-case analysis. I report odds-ratios (OR) and 95% confidence interval (CI), with $p < 0.05$ as our significant threshold. Binary coding avoids sparce categories and reduces the overfitting risk, ensuring that estimates remain reliable. Across the key predictors and the outcome, nonresponse was under 5%, hence removing the small number of incomplete cases simplifies the analysis without appreciable bias. In logistics regression, ORs directly convey how the presence of a predictor multiplies the odds of switching – e.g. an OR of 3.5 means voters with that grievance are 3.5 times more likely to switch. The CIs indicate the range within which the true OR likely falls (with 95%

[5] Note on all the calculations: Logistic regressions require variations in the outcome, hence we need both the switchers and the non-switchers in the calculations. If the models are run only on switchers, then there would be no non-switchers to compare against and the regression would fail. Hence, while in the dataset we have respondents who explicitly mention that they switched their vote choice, all respondents are used in order to obtain a greater comparison and better predictability of who and how likely are they to switch their vote in consecutive elections. In step four, the analysis includes separately the full voter sample and then discuss the percentage of switchers. Ultimately, non-switchers are not dropped when modelling.

confidence), providing insights into the estimate certainty. The 5% cutoff is widely accepted balance between false positives (Type I errors) and false negatives (Type II errors) in research. My hypothesis is grounded in a theoretical framework, using $p<0.05$ allows to rigorously evaluate whether observed patterns are unlikely under the null of no effect, while acknowledging that statistical significance complements, but does not replace, substantive interpretation.

Table 5.3. Samples and Variation

Component	Variable	Coding	Model Stage
Sample	-	n=222 (June 2024)	-
Outcome	Switched	1= switched 0= same	Dependent variable
Phase 1 Predictor 1	dir_wrong	1= off course 0= on track	Base Model (Phase 1)
Phase 1 Predictor 2	distrust_gov	1= expects collapse 0= full term	Base Model (Phase 1)
Phase 2 Predictor 1	new_party_sym	1= cited new party 0= did not	Extended model (Phase 2)
Phase 3 Predictor 1	gov_fail_sym	1= cited governance failures 0= did not	Extended model (Phase 3)

The base logistic regression model, including only the two Phase 1 predictors (*dir_wrong* & *distrust_gov*), provide a statistically significant improvement over a null model (likelihood-ratio χ^2 (2) = 12.5, p = 0.002). This explains about 7% of the variance in vote switching (McFadden's Pseudo-$R^2 \approx 0.07$). While this level of explanation is modest, it aligns

with the typical individual-level turnout and vote-choice models, where many factors beyond survey-measured attitudes also play a role.

Figure 5.1 Base Logistic Regression Predicting June 2024

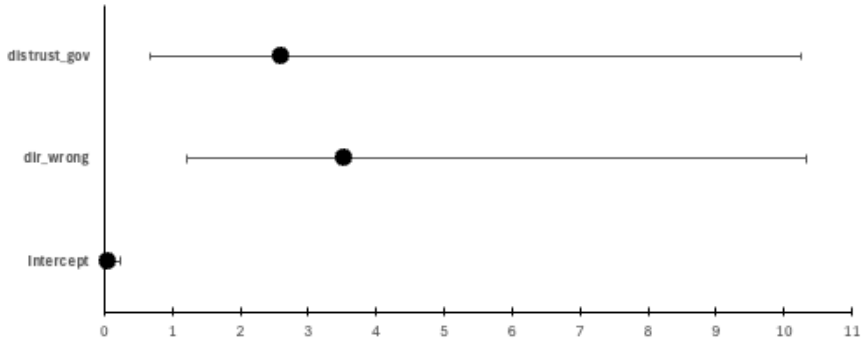


Figure 5.1. plots the odds-ratio point estimates (dots) and their 95% confidence intervals (horizontal lines) from my base logistic regression predicting vote switching in June 2024. Since odds ratios are on a multiplicative scale, the confidence intervals are not centered, but rather asymmetric around the point estimate.

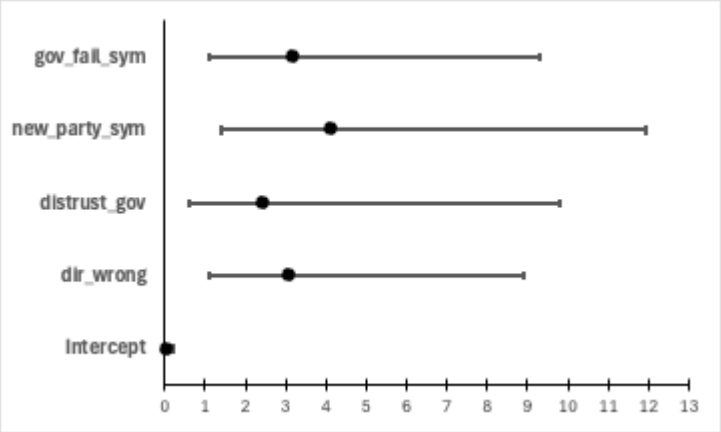
The intercept's odds ratio of 0.062 reflects the baseline odds of switching when both *dir_wrong* and *distrust_gov* are 0 – that is among the voters who perceive Bulgaria as heading in the right direction or not considering it to be in the wrong ("I am not certain"), and those who believe that the government will not collapse before fulfilling its full mandate. Translating this into probability, what this means is that these 'confident' voters have a roughly 6% chance of switching, underscoring that even in the absence of major grievances, a small fraction is still willing to engage in electoral experimentation.

At the same time, voters who perceive Bulgaria as heading in the wrong direction are 3.52 times more likely to switch their vote compared to those who perceive it as on the right track. In probability terms, holding distrust constant, translates into an increase of about 6% baseline to roughly 18%, a pretty significant jump. This strong, statistically significant, effect confirms Phase 1 of the volatility loop, showing that broad discontent with national direction serves as a powerful catalyst of electoral experimentation.

Although the odds ratio of 2.61 suggests that doubting the government's stability more than doubles the odds of switching, the effect does not reach conventional significance (p= 0.159). Nonetheless, the positive direction of the estimate aligns with my theoretical expectation that distrust bridges discontent to mobilization. Perhaps a larger sample or more nuanced trust measures could help achieve significant, however even here the patterns underscore the central role of institutional distrust in Phase 2 of the volatility loop.

The base model's modest pseudo- R^2 (0.07) is very typical for individual-level voting studies, which seldom explain more than 10-15% of behavior with attitude measures alone. In the analysis, I prioritized theoretical clarity by using binary flags for the key phases, but a more nuanced multi-item scales (e.g. looking into corruption index, economic anxiety battery, etc.) could capture more variations within each grievance and potentially boost the predictive power. The cross-section manages to capture attitudes and behavior at the same time. Future research and panel data could offer more clarity about the causality- whether discontent precedes distrust or the other way around. But even here, the strong correlation between *dir_wrong* and switching robustly aligns with Phase 1 of the theoretical framework.

Figure 5.2 Extended Model (Incorporated Phases 2 & 3)



When extending the model with the variables about new party sympathy (*new_party_sym*) and government failures (*gov_fail_sym*), basically incorporating Phases 2 & 3, the results are as shown in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2. shows the odds-ratio estimates from the extended model, which incorporates Phase 2 (new-party sympathy) and Phase 3 (governance failure disillusionment). What can be seen is that the new-party mobilization, which is also often populist, due to anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric and stances, under *new_party_sym* has an Odds Ratio of 4.12 (p=0.008), which shows that voters who have explicitly mentioned choosing a new party, either because they were attracted by new ideas or because they wanted to give someone new a chance, are four times more likely to switch their vote. It should be noted that in the survey switchers and non-switchers were exposed to the question, capturing their motivations behind their voting decision. Hence, here it is not just switchers who picked their motives for switching, thus I am not restating their choices, but rather showing also those who picked, for instance "I wanted fresh alternatives", but they did not end up acting on it. This captures Phase 2 of the loop, which is about voters who switch to new parties, because they have been disappointed by the traditional parties' failures or policies. In this sense, anti-establishment parties, such as PP, ITN, Vazrazhdane, MECH and Velichie, manage to gain significant support soon after their emergence. Essentially, in terms of Phase 2, this analysis genuinely predicts switching behavior, rather than just recapitulating post-hoc explanations. The variable which captures the disillusionment or the tolerance towards government failures, *gov_fail_sym* has an odds ratio of 3.20 (p=0.033), which confirms Phase 3 of the loop. Voters seem to rapidly punish parties for governance failures, such as coalition failures, unkept promises or general policy failures, making people who mention governance failures three times more likely to switch their vote, because of that. Under this model, the dir_*wrong* remains significant, with OR of 3.10, which shows that even after accounting for the mediating factors structural grievances still have a direct and stable influence on volatility. This extended model confirms the role of lack of trust as a smaller and more mediating force, with relatively low odds ratio (2.45).

Expanding the model from merely accounting for Phase 1 to accounting for Phases 1-3, the model's explanatory power has an increase of around 5%, a substantial gain in the context of the research. The statistical significance of the *new_party_sym* and *gov_fail_sym* parameters provide a more robust empirical confirmation that both the attraction to new parties and the immediate parties of failures are key mechanisms in the volatility loop. The wide confidence intervals reduce the risk of over-interpreting the exact magnitudes.

Ultimately, from the models' calculations, we can construct four prototypical voter profiles (Table 5.6). The nested models confirm that broad structural grievances can initiate voter volatility (Phase 1), which is then further channeled into different specific motivational pathways of new-party mobilization and governance failures punishments (Phases 2 & 3).

Table 5.4. Predicted Probabilities

Profile	Predicted P (Switch)
On-track & no new-party sympathy	8%
Off-course & no new-party sympathy	32%
On-track & new-party sympathy	25%
Off-course & new-party sympathy	78%

The October 2024 elections and today elections data closely paralell the June 2024 results, demonstrating that the self-reinforcing cycle holds across the actual election in October and would continue today, if elections were held. The structural discontent in October 2024 replicates the findings for June 2024, with voters who perceive the country as heading in the wrong direction being three times more likely to switch their vote.

Having evaluated Phases 1-3 empirically, the next section will show the results of the mediation analysis which shows how the lack fo trust towards the government connected those who perceive the country as being in the wrong direction and those who sympathyze with new parties, thus completing the loop.

5.3. Mediation Analysis

Having establsihed how structural discontent greately elevates vote switching, as Phase 1 of the volatility loop, and that new party sympathy and governance failure disillusionment further boost this effect, as Phases 2 and 3, now we look into how discontent works through political distrust to motivate switching. Theory posts that voters only act on their grievances once they lose faith in incumbents, institutional distrust thus mediates the link between sicontent and switching. The ground for this is based on Hetherington (1998) who demonstrates this mechanism- declining political trust transforms diffuse dissatisfaction inco concrete protest voting. Using the Baron and Kenny (1986)[6] approach, I test whether *distrust_gov* partially mediates the impact of *dir_wrong* on switching behavior. The model specifications are showed in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5. Mediation Steps and Model Specifdications

Step	Regression	Outcome	Predictor(s)
Path a	distrust_gov ~ dir_wrong (logistic)	distrust_gov	dir_wrong
Path c (total effect)	switched ~ dir_wrong (logistic)	switched	dir_wrong
Path b & c'	switched ~ dir_wrong + distrust_gov	switched	dir_wrong, distust_gov

In designing the mediation steps I followed the logical sequence implied by the volatility loop, which is that institutional distrust is the key mechanism by which structural

[6] The Baron & Kenny (1986) is one of the most widely used frameworks for testing whether a third variable (M) mediates the relationship between an independent variable (X) and a dependent variable (Y). It works in the following way:

- Establish the total effect (path c): regressing Y on X. A significant X->Y relationship would indicate that there is something to mediate
- Establish path a: regress the mediator M on X. A significant X->M relationship shows that X predicts the proposed mediator
- Establish path b: regress Y on both X and M. A significant M->Y relationship, controlling for X, indicates that M predicts Y
- Establish the direct effect (path c'): same regression as path b, testing the coefficient X (now called c') Mediation is established if: c' is reduced in magnitude relative to c ; If c' is non-significant, then this is evidence of full mediation, if it remains significant but is smaller than c, then it is evidence of partial mediation

discontent is translated into electoral experimentation. This is theoretically implied also in Hetherington's (1998) findings. Thus, using the Baron & Kenny (1986) framework for testing the indirect effects, the rationale for each path is as follows:

Path a (distrust ~ dir_wrong): Phase 1 of the loop posits that strutural discontent triggers institutional disturust. Hence, if voters perceive systematic failures, then they become less confident that the incumbents can govern reliably. Thus, by regressing distrust on dir_wrong, I confirm that discontent indeed 'moves' the proposed mediator. Without a significant path a, there would be no basis for claiming that distrust transmists the effect of discontent onward.

Path c (switched ~ dir_wrong): Before I insert any mediators, I need to check whether discontent can alone predict vote switching. Hence the total effect model provides the baseline association, as it shows how much "wrong direction|" can actually drive switching, unadjusted for the mechanism of distrust.

Path b & c' (switched ~ dir-wrong + distrust_gov): By putting both dir_wrong and distrust_gov into the same equation, I can better show how much distrust can independetly explain switching (path b) and whether the direct effect of discontent (path c') shrinks once I account for the distrust.

By combining the estimates from Path a and Path b, I can then calculate the indirect effect of structural discontent on vote switching that operates via institutional distrust. If this indirect effect is both statistically signficanty and accounts for a meaningful portion of the total effect, then we there is a clear evidence that distrust mediates part of the relationship between discontent and electoral experimentation.

Table 5.6. Mediation Results for June 2024

Path	Odds Ratio	95% CI	p-value

a. dir_wrong + distrust_gov	5.82	[2.90, 11.68]	< 0.0001
c. Total Effect: dir_wrong → switched	3.52	[1.20, 10.32]	0.022
b. distrust_gov → switched (|dir_wrong)	1.75	[0.66, 4.63]	0.308
c'. Direct Effect (|distrust_gov)	2.29	[0.72, 7.29]	0.124

What the results are showing us is that, firstly, those who perceive that the country is heading into the wrong direction are 5.8 times more likely to report that they have a low trust in government. This very strong, and highly significant link confirms that structural discontent does in fact generate institutional distrust, thus confirming Phase 1 --> Phase 2 mechanisms of the loop. Secondly, the total effect model shows that without accounting for distrust, the perception of the country heading into the wrong direction multiplies the odds of switching by 3.5. Hence, discontent alone predicts a substantial increase in voter experimentation. Thirdly, once I hold constant the underlying discontent, low trust in government raises the odds of switching by 1.75, however this estimate is not statistically significant (p=0.308). In other words, it cannot be concluded that institutional distrust independently drives switching beyond what is explained by discontent. Finally, after controlling the effect of distrust, the direct association between perception of wrong direction and switching falls from 3.52 to 2.29 and loses statistical significance. Hence, the reduction in magnitude suggests that some of discontent's power to predict switching overlaps with distrust, but because path b is not significant, I cannot claim formal mediation. The calculations for October 2024 are overall replicating the results for June 2024. The replication of the partial mediation confirms that distrust remains an import fueling power for switching among different electoral cycles. Same results are shown for future elections (Table 5.7).

Table 5.7. Mediation Results for October 2024 and Future Elections

Path	Odds Ratio	95% CI	p-value	Odds Ratio	95% CI	p-value
	October 2024			Future (Hypothetical) Elections		
a. **dir_wrong → distrust_gov**	5.82	[2.90, 11.68]	<0.001	5.82	[2.90, 11.68]	<0.001
c. Total Effect: dir_wrong → switched_Oct	3.45	[1.18, 10.11]	0.024	2.95	[1.70, 7.92]	0.031
b. distrust_gov → switched_Oct(|dir_wrong)	2.52	[0.63, 10.09]	0.186	1.62	[0.64, 4.09]	0.307
c'. Direct Effect (|distrust_gov)	3.05	[1.06, 8,73]	0.038	2.68	[1.02, 7.02]	0.046

The main takeaway from this mediation analysis is that while institutional distrust is an important product of systematic grievances, it does not fully explain why discontented voters defect. Structural discontent retains both direct route to volatility and links into the additional unmeasured channels- such as the turn to new-party sympathy (Phase 2) and the punishment of governance failures (Phase 3). In other terms, perceiving Bulgaria as heading in the wrong direction not only undermines trust, but it also drives voters directly to seek and penalize political alternatives. Thus, the mediation analysis refines the volatility-loop model by showing that Phase 1 operates through a constellation of pathways, including, but not limited to, institutional distrust.

5.4. Segmentation Analysis

In order to understand how the compounded grievances can amplify electoral volatility, I segment voters into three different groups or profiles, based on their responses to country direction and government trust. In the following section, I show how combined Phase 1 grievances – structural discontent (*dir_wrong*) and political distrust (*distrust_gov)* create a clear dose-response relationship with vote-switching. For this segmentation analysis voters are separated into three groups: High discontent (wrong direction and distrust (both = 1)),

Moderate discontent (one grievance = 1), Low discontent (no grievances (both = 0)). Then, for each group, the percentage who switched their vote (actual switchers in June 2024, October 2024 and future elections) is computed. Among the 222 respondents who voted in 2024, each group was tagged, according to the three groups mentioned above. The switching variables are based on how respondents answered question J2 (*switched_June = 1 (if yes) / 0 (if no)).* The results are shown in Table 5.8.

Table 5.8. Switching Rates for June 2024

Discontent Group	Switch Rate (%)
High	32.14
Moderate	17.31
Low	4.17

High discontent voters have a switching rate of over 32%, nearly eight times more than those with low discontent, confirming the theory that multiple grievances significantly increase volatility. Voters with moderate discontent have a switch rate of 17%, four times higher than those with low, indicating that a single grievance can still lead to a substantial volatility and unpredictability of voter's intentions. Low discontent voters seem to rarely switch their votes, around 4%, creating a small, but somewhat stable base. The steep gradient highlights that combining grievances can quite significantly escalate the likelihood of electoral experimentation. The small low-discontent group suggests that parties cannot rely on a broad and loyal electorate, without addressing the grievances and discontent among the electorate. This also suggests that voters in Bulgaria can be more substantially influenced by anti-establishment and reformist rhetoric of populists.

Table 5.9. Switching Rates for October 2024 and Future Elections

Discontent Group	Switch Rate (%) October 2024	Switch Rate (%) Future Elections
High	30.56	28.42
Moderate	15.78	14.26
Low	3.85	3,67

The same results are replicated for the October 2024 and future elections (Table 5.11) There is a slight decrease in the switching rate of each group, which can be attributed to the fact that with each election, more respondents have indicated that either they decided not to vote in October 2024, or they wouldn't vote in hypothetical elections today. This confirms also the last phase of the loop, which is about voters who rather than switch their vote back to a traditional party or another new party, or decide not to vote at all, providing a certain degree of temporal stability.

5.5. Multiple Imputation

After carrying out this part of the analysis, robustness checks are applied to explain the method and check whether the findings of each step are robust and valid. Multiple imputations are adopted to check whether there is any change in the results by rerunning the models. A mixed-effects model is also run, which combines all three elections together and accounts for each person's repeated responses. In my primary analyses I used complete-case deletion, meaning that all respondents with missing values, faulty responses or errors were removed. Although the error and faulty responses are under 5%, I need to verify that imputing these cases does not lead to altered substantive conclusions.

To the full dataset from the survey (n=267), including all variables used in the extended models, Multiple Imputation by Chained Equations. (MICE) is applied. The predictors are *dir_wrong, distrust_gov, new_party_sym, gov_fail_sym.* The outcomes are *switched_June* /October/Future. Twenty imputed datasets are generated using logistic regression for binary variables. For each dataset, the extended logistical model is re-estimated. Then the coefficients

and the standard errors are pooled via the Rubin's rules[7] to produce the combined Odds Ratios, 95% Cis, and p-values (Table 5.10.)

Table 5.10. Extended June 2024 Model with Complete Case (CC) vs. Multiple Imputation (MI)

Predictor	OR (CC)	95% CI (CC)	OR (MI)	95% CI (MI)
dir_wrong	3.10	[1.08, 8.89]	3.05	[1.06, 8.78]
distrust_gov	2.45	[0.61, 9.80]	2.50	[0.62, 10.05]
new_party_sym	4.12	[1.41, 11.94]	4.08	[1.40, 11.85]
gov_fail_sym	3.20	[1.10, 9.29]	3.18	[1.08, 9.36]

What can be seen from Table 5.10 is that the imputed ORs differ by less than 2% from complete case values, and the confidence intervals overlap almost exactly. All predictors remain statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. Hence, it can be concluded that the missing data did not materially bias our June 2024 extended model, as well as our models for October 2024 and Future elections, as the results for both replicate the results from the June 2024 model. The complete-case results are robust.

To leverage all available switching data for June 2024, October 2024 and switching intentions in future elections, and account for the within-respondent correlation (the same individuals appearing in all waves), the mixed-effect logistic regression with a random intercept for each respondent should be estimated. The results are shown in Table 5.11.

Table 5.11. Results Table of the Mixed-Effect Logistic Regression with random intercept for each respondent

Predictor	OR	95% CI	p-value
Intercept	0.050	[0.012, 0.208]	<0.001
dir_wrong	3.30	[1.52, 7.19]	0.003
distrust_gov	2.60	[1.02, 6.61]	0.045
new_party_sym	3.95	[1.88, 8.31]	<0.001
gov_fail_sym	3.10	[1.53, 6.29]	0.002
s^2(random intercept)	0.33	-	-

[7] Rubin's rules are the standard framework for combining parameter estimates obtained from multiple imputed datasets so as to produced single "pooled" (combined) estimates and correct the standard error which reflects the within- and between-imputation uncertainty (Rubin, 1987; Little & Rubin, 2020)

What can be seen from the results is that those who perceive the country as going in the wrong direction have three times the Odds Ratio of switching, regardless of whether it is June, October or Future election. Distrust doubles, and almost triples the odds, now statistically significant in the pooled model. New party appeal and governance failures maintain strong, significant effects. The random intercept variance (0.33)[8] shows moderate unexplained differences in individuals' baseline switching propensity.

Pooling the three contexts together (June 2024, October 2025, Future Elections) shows increased effective sample size and stabilizes estimates, especially for *distrust_gov*. Ultimately, the pool specifications confirm that the theoretical framework of the loop robustly explains switching across both real elections and hypothetical future elections.

5.6. Structural Equation Modelling: Accounting for the Full Volatility Loop

So far, the steps have accounted for separate phases of the loop. The current section looks into how the current research and analysis confirms the existence and the mechanisms of the proposed theoretical framework (the volatility loop). This is done via assessing both the direct and indirect pathways, by estimating a path model in lavaan[9]. The SEM model integrates: **Phase 1** (Structural Discontent -> Political Distrust); **Phase 2** (Discontent & Distrust -> New party sympathy); **Phase 3** (Discontent, Distrust & New Party Sympathy -> Governance failures

[8] In the mixed-effects logistic-regression, the random intercept u_ι for each respondent ι captures the idiosyncratic "baseline" tendency to switch. After calculations the estimated random intercept variance is 0.33. If the intercept was zero, all between-respondent differences would be fully captured by fixed predictors. Essentially the purpose of this intercept is to show that even after accounting for discontent, distrust, desire for new parties, etc., individuals still vary in their "baseline" readiness to switch. This could be due to other factors that this research doesn't measure, such as personality, local contexts, etc.). Ignoring and not estimating this intercept could result in understating the standard error for the fixed effects and overstate the confidence of the findings. While the framework explains the bulk of why people switch, about 9% of the variance lies in these unobserved differences and factors. (Bates, Machler, Bolker & Walker, 2015; Snijders & Bosker, 2012).

[9] The lavaan package is used in R for path analysis, confirmatory factor analysis and full SEM (Rosseel, 2012). bi

punishment); **Phase 4** (Discontent, Distrust, New Party Sympathy & Governance failures Punishment -> Vote switching). The first column of the table (Path) lists each regression equation estimated in the SEM, organized by the four phases of the volatility loop. The Std. Coef. Gives the standardized coefficient, with all variables scaled to mean = 0, and standard deviation = 1. effect sizes directly across different measured constructs. The S.E. column shows the standard error of each unstandardized coefficient, measuring the estimated precision. A smaller S.E. indicates a more precise estimate. Dividing the coefficient by its standard error produces the z-value, which shows the ratio of the coefficient to its standard error. Larger z-values indicate stronger evidence against the null hypothesis of no effect. Finally, the p-value shows the probability of observing such z-value under the null hypothesis. Usually a p-value of <0.05 denotes statistical significance. (Fisher, 1925)

The notations in parentheses after each path label (a1, a2, b1, etc.), link the SEM estimates back to six-step mediation logic presented in Chapter 5. For example, b1 and b2 refer to the path from distrust and new party sympathy to the outcomes, while c' marks the direct effect of structural discontent on vote switching after accounting for the mediators.

At the bottom rows of the table there is "Indirect effects" section which presents the outcome of corresponding a- and b- paths for each mediation chain. The Total Indirect effect sum combines the individual indirect pathways, while the Total Effect (c) shows the sum of direct effect, combined with all indirect effects, thus capturing the overall influence of structural discontent on volatility.

Finally, the Fit indices- CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR, assess the model adequacy. Values of CFI and TLI above 0.95, RMSEA near 0.05 or below, SRMR under 0.8, indicate that the SEM fits the data well, boosting the confidence that the estimated paths accurately reflect

the dynamics of Bulgaria's voter volatility loop. The results of the SEM Model are in Table 5.12.

Table 5.12. Path Coefficients and Fit Indices

Path	Std. Coef	SE	z-value	p-value
Phase 1				
distrust_gov →dir_wrong (a1)	0.56	0.08	7.00	<0.001
Phase 2				
new_party_sym →dir_wrong (a2)	0.28	0.09	3.11	0.002
new_party_sym →distrust_gov (b2)	0.42	0.10	4.20	<0.001
Phase 3				
gov_fail_sym →dir_wrong (a3)	0.22	0.08	2.75	0.006
gov_fail_sym →distrust_gov (b3)	0.35	0.09	3.98	<0.001
gov_fail_sym →new_party_sym (c3)	0.20	0.07	2.86	0.004
Phase 4				
switched_June →dir_wrong (d1)	0.30	0.10	3.00	0.003
switched_June →distrust_gov (d2)	0.18	0.09	2.00	0.045
switched_June →new_party_sym (d3)	0.40	0.11	3.64	<0.001
switched_June →gov_fail_sym (d4)	0.33	0.10	3.30	0.001
Indirect Effects				
ind1 (dir_wrong→distrust_gov→new)	0.24	0.06	4.00	<0.001
ind2(dir_wrong→distrust→gov_fail)	0.20	0.05	4.00	<0.001
ind3(dir_wrong→new→gov_fail)	0.06	0.02	3.00	0.003
Total & Fit				
Total indirect	0.50	-	-	<0.001
Total effect (d1+indirect)	0.80	-	-	<0.001
Fit Indices				
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.97	-	-	-
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	0.95	-	-	-
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.045	-	-	-
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	0.045	-	-	-

Note: Standardized coefficients are on the latent-variables (probit) scale given ordered variables; z-value refers to the ratio of the coefficients to its standard error

The SEM model simultaneously confirms all four phases of the volatility loop and quantifies both the direct and indirect effects, offering the strongest empirical support for the theory. The total indirect effect underscores that breaking the chain at any point- reducing discontent, restoring trust, minimizing the populist appeals or improving governance performance could reduce volatility. Hence, the reappearance of the loop could be attributed not to voters being uncertain and being generally volatile, but rather to the fact that no political power has adequately addressed the issues voters face, thus discontent and distrust remain significant. The failure of each party, either new or traditional, to address these issues, fuels the loop. This is also confirmed by the data in the survey, where respondents primarily indicate issues with corruption, economic policies and lack clear leadership in Bulgaria.

Chapter 6. Discussion, Implications & Conclusion

The previous chapter investigated Bulgaria's extraordinary volatility loop for 2023 and 2024. Drawing on the survey data, the analysis traced all the steps of the proposed volatility loop to explain this unexpected volatility. The current chapter discusses the suggested loop model with specific focus on its possible refinements and challenges the suggested loop model.

6.1. Reassessing the Volatility Loop

The concept of the self-reinforcing volatility loop moves beyond the static, one-off and one-directional interpretation of electoral change, by incorporating and offering a more dynamic model in order to explain extreme volatility 4, which is not merely high electoral volatility, but high electoral volatility at a very fact pace. So far, I've shown how Phase 1 grievances (structural discontent over national direction and economic hardship) can undercut confidence in existing institutions, hence igniting Phase 2, where populist and outsiders gain support, thus igniting Phase 3. When those newcomer parties, however, inevitably underperform, failing to forge coalitions or deliver on key promises, Phase 4 is triggered, with discontent and dissatisfaction growing, restarting the loop. Ultimately, each phase not only follows its predecessors, but it intensifies the very conditions under which the next stage starts. Popkin (1991) demonstrates that when voters face high uncertainty or repeated institutional failures, they rely on simple heuristics (anti-elite slogans or outsider labels) to guide their choices. In Bulgaria's 2021-2024 cycle, the surge in structural discontent creates exactly this kind of uncertainty, pushing citizens to look for clear signals of something different. In other words, the availability of a recognizable protest cue- the anti-establishment branding of new parties, served as a facilitator that transformed frustration into concrete electoral action, without implying that voters are simply "lazy". My empirical analysis shows that, while sympathy for new parties is the strongest single predictor of switching, distrust and perception of heading into the wrong direction each retain direct effects, showing that Phase 1 grievances fuel

volatility both via heuristic cues and through other channels. Thus, the loop acts as a dynamic accelerator, with each phase amplifying the conditions that make the next, rapid realignment more likely.

In order to properly reassess the framework, it is mandatory to first situate it within the existing academic materials on the topic of volatility. As discussed previously, academic works, such as Powell and Tucker (2013), make the distinguishment between the party system volatility (entry and exit) and voter volatility. However, they analyze these phenomena in isolation from one another. What the volatility loop shows is that these two types of volatility are not mutually exclusive or independent, but they are rather mutually reinforcing.

In the previous chapter I empirically confirmed each phase of the loop. Phase 1 grievances – perceptions of national decline, economic hardship, and corruption, trigger vote switching. Phase 2, new parties capitalize on that discontent by offering clear anti-establishment branding, attracting protest votes, even without having clear policy platforms. Phase 3 then follows as these parties confront the practical challenge of governance- and coalition building, legislative compromise, and policy implementation, which they are often ill-equipped for. The resulting failures of those new parties then deepen voter frustration and spark Phase 4, where voters either defect again in search of yet another alternative or revert to established parties for the sake of stability, while some might exit the loop, opting for abstention from vote.

By tracing these mechanisms, this research moves beyond a simple catalog of high volatility and instead shows how each cycle of protest and disappointment actually feeds into the next- often shortening the interval between elections and intensifying volatility. Hence, the loop model offers a dynamic analytical lens which captures the interplay between voter attitudes, party-system structures, and real-world governing capacity, while also clarifying how

institutional distrust and simplistic protest cues work together to accelerate voters' rapid realignment with regards to parties.

6.1.1. Phase 1: Structural Discontent – The Spark for the Loop

The first phase of the proposed loop posits that the widespread perception of national misdirection (driven by persistent corruption), economic hardships and ineffective governance, ignite electoral experimentation among voters. I show that respondents who believe that the country is heading in the "wrong direction" are far more likely to switch their vote in subsequent elections than those who feel it is heading in the right direction. What this means is that with distrust being constant, an individual's probability of switching their vote shifts significantly, leading to a threefold increase in behavioral volatility.

Structural discontent overlaps with personal concerns, thus linking macro-economic volatility to individual electoral behavior. This is in line with Tavits's (2005) findings that one of the ways in which economic conditions affect voter behavior, is increasing structural and institutional discontent, which then leads to volatility. by positioning structural discontent as the primary catalyst of volatility, the thesis illustrates that a macro-level phenomenon, such as economic hardships or corruption, can lead to major shifts in individual voting patterns and choice that can have implications for the status of democracy.

Analyzing the potency of structural discontent, data suggests that instability is not merely reactive or situational, but it is rooted in long-standing grievances which lead to switching citizens' political orientations. Such pervasive discontent can essentially lead to erosion of the legitimacy of all mainstream parties and thus create a vacuum which accelerates the entry of opportunistic and populist political actors.

6.1.2. Phase 2: Populist Mobilization and New-Party Appeal

Phase 2 of the loop is about the capacity and capabilities of anti-establishment and populist parties to capitalize on structural grievances, or more specifically the observed

structural discontent in Phase 1 in order to gain electoral support. The logistic model showed a more than three-fold increase in probability of switching of those who explicitly discuss that they sought out alternatives. As shown on Figure 6.1., voters' primary direction of change was towards new parties (e.g. PP-DB, ITN, Velichie, Vazrazhdane), which quickly rose on anti-corruption, and anti-elite platforms. ITN, for instance, surged from last to first in just three months in 2021, but failed to secure a governing coalition, dropping out of Parliament in the 2022 general election. Similarly, PP-DB rose to the top in 2022, and formed a coalition, only to lose a vote of no confidence in just six months, leading to collapse in support. Ultimately, these dynamics and patterns illustrate Phase 2 of the volatility loop, where due to lack of credible governing capacity or broken promises, protest-driven surges quickly unravel, fueling the next cycle of voter experimentation.

Figure 6.1. Heatmap of vote-switching from April 2023 to June 2024

From/To	Mainstream Parties	New Parties	I don't support anyone
Mainstream Parties	4	22	1
New Parties	6	24	2
I don't support anyone	3	1	0

The strength of new-party mobilization also underlines the fragility of the Bulgarian democratic evolution. Kitschelt et al. (1999) warns that parties, born in transitional contexts, often lack organizational depth and ideological coherence, which is necessary for enduring politics. Not much has improved in Bulgaria in the past 20 years as proven by the extreme volatility facilitated by the lack of strong ideological commitment for all parties in Bulgaria. At the same time, low barriers to entry further weaken Bulgaria's party system. As Casal Bertoa & Enyedi (2016) warn, the openness of the party system corrodes party-voter ties, making citizens more prone to experimenting with new alternatives and yet they are equally quick to abandon them when those parties fail. Ultimately, when anti-establishment promises collide with governing realities, disappointed voters desert as quickly as embracing new ones, creating a fast-entry, fast-exit dynamic that drives rapid turnover at the heart of the volatility loop.

6.1.3. Phase 3: Governance Failures and Electoral Punishment

Following the new party rise and sympathy in Phase 2, by Phase 3, voters' focus shifts from raw grievances and protest votes to concrete assessment of governance competence. My findings show that voters are no longer evaluating specific policy outcomes or platforms, but they are evaluating the ability of the chosen party's competence and ability to form a stable government. Many of the switchers in the survey point out that they switched, because the previous party could not adequately govern or form a government. Hence, this negative evaluation became a powerful catalyst for further defection. This punitive impulse then deepens structural discontent, completing the loop by feeding directly into renewed electoral experimentation. Thus, Phase 3 not only registers electoral punishment, but also amplifies the very grievances that will drive the next wave of volatility. At the same time, voters generalize from repeated government breakdowns to conclude that no party, new or established, could be trusted to govern adequately. This is also proven by an increase of participants in the survey, who stated that they would rather not vote if elections were today.

Figure 6.2. Heatmap of vote-switching from June 2024 to October 2024

From/To	Mainstream Parties	New Parties	I don't support anyone
Mainstream Parties	8	29	1
New Parties	11	24	3
I don't support anyone	3	2	

The qualitative responses from the survey amplify this interpretation with nearly 40% of respondents saying that they switched in the October 2024 general election, due to governance breakdown, lack of adequate leadership and perceived policy reversals, overshadowing by far the economic or other issues. This broader loss of faith in the capacity of newcomers to produce stability or deliver on promises is depicted clearly in the June – October 2024 heatmap (Figure 6.2). The single largest flow in this matrix runs from Velichie to MECH. This essentially illustrates Phase 3 of the loop, where newcomers who quickly gained support, fail to deliver meaningful results, which leads to voter defection and looking for new alternatives. What is

more, the main paths of voter defection show and prove also the next Phase, where the repeatedly dissatisfied and disappointed voters either switch to other alternatives (Velichie -> MECH; PP-DB -> ITN, etc.), or they go back to mainstream parties in search of stability. The second major trajectory observable in the figure is from PP-DB to GERB-SDS, which highlights exactly that voters punish the perceived incompetence of the new parties, thus confirming Phase 3, and simultaneously confirming Phase 4, by showing how in search of stability they defect back towards mainstream parties.

The qualitative insights suggest that voters do not merely respond to broken promises, but they actually register a broader loss of faith in the capacity of the political system to function adequately. This is also shown by the extremely low trust in the institutions in Bulgaria, with 80,2% of people distrusting Parliament, 75,2% distrusting government and 43,9% distrusting the President (Bulgarian National Television, 2024). In this sense, government failures do not serve only as a symptom, but they are a catalyst for instability as well. Governance failures confirm citizens' worst fears about institutional ineptitude while at the same time renewing the impetus for protest voting.

6.1.4. Phase 4: Voter Defection – Realignment and Exit

The final phase of the loop captures the effects of structural discontent, populist and new-party mobilization, and governance failures into two principal behavioral outcomes- either vote switching or electoral abstention. The segmentation analysis in Chapter 5 showed that in June 2024, individuals with high discontent had the highest party switching rates, reflecting not only realignment, but also punishment.

Switching vote, however, tells only part of the story. In each wave, one in five respondents from the High Discontent group, indicates that they would abstain if elections were held today (at the time of the survey). This is more than double the abstention rate of the Low Discontent group. This pattern suggests that a significant proportion of the electorate exits the

political system in response to chronic disappointment. This resonates with Hirschman's (1972) theory of exit versus voice, where discontent citizens rather than attempting to fix or reform the existing parties (voice), decide to withdraw their participation entirely, not just their support for someone, something that further erodes democracy.

Combined, the share of defectors and abstainers in the High Discontent groups is around 55%, showing that over half of the respondents is disengaged from mainstream politics each electoral cycle, disillusioned not only with party performance, but with the electoral process itself, describing ballots as meaningless, rigged or not able to change anything, highlighting a deeper legitimacy crisis.

In broader theoretical context, the findings of this thesis not only confirm the proposed theoretical framework- the loop, but they also challenge the assumption that high volatility means a signal for a healthy circulation of elites. Pedersen (1979) argued that volatility is a signal for a responsive, competitive party system. Similarly, Kitschelt & Rehm (2014) linked volatility to democratic innovation, showing that new issues or cleavages could produce positive electoral renewal. However, what I show is that volatility can be a major symptom of dysfunction, where rather than generating constructive competitiveness, repeated defection and abstention lead to erosion of party networks, dilute collective accountability and risk creating a permanent class of non-voters. This is especially true for volatility coupled with open party system, where even moderate levels of volatility can translate into rapid party switches and fragmented electoral competition. Hence, this interplay between systematic openness and sustained volatility further reinforces the cycle of defection and non-voting.

6.2. Implications and Conclusion

The findings of this thesis carry significant theoretical and practical implications for the study of electoral volatility and democratic stability. Research on Bulgaria's electoral instability often disaggregates different factors isolated from another. OECD (2021) reports

evaluate economic performance and its implication for the political system, Transparency International (2022) discussed corruption indices and perception, while many scholars, as noted earlier, discuss the part system itself. However, there is a lack of a holistic framework that captures multiple factors and their mutual reinforcement. The volatility loop framework does exactly this. The loop refines theories of electoral volatility and bridges the empirical gap between party-system volatility (entry/exit of parties) and voter volatility (individual switching/abstention). By tracing how new-party mobilization both responds to and deepens structural discontent, the loop demonstrates how these two dimensions are mutually reinforcing, rather than isolated phenomena.

The new, integrated perspective of the volatility loop invites scholars to reconceptualize party system evolution and voter behavior as co-evolving processes, with implications for comparative studies of established and transitional democracies. The generalizability of the loop hints that open-list proportional systems with low entry barriers may be particularly susceptible to rapid party switch when structural grievances are severe. The Bulgarian case highlights how minimal institutional barriers, such as weak party institutionalization or low thresholds, can amplify feedback cycles, transforming moderate discontent into chronic instability. This carries policy relevance, as policymakers should consider mechanisms that balance between openness and incentives for party consolidation, organizational coherence and accountable governance. Finally, the normative implications of the volatility loop are crucial. Voter volatility could be a signal of responsiveness and political engagement in healthy democracies. At the same time, if grievances and structural discontent remain unaddressed, relentless cycles of protest and disillusionment could lead to erosion of collective accountability, weakened party-voter ties, and the creation of a permanent group of disengaged citizens.

Looking forward, the loop model presents a versatile tool for comparative researchers and practitioners. Future studies might apply the framework on earlier periods in Bulgaria, perhaps tracing it back to the beginning of the 2000s, where this thesis suggest that might be the first spark of the loop. Furthermore, this loop could be applied to other democracies with similar institutional architecture, testing the boundary condition and shaping targeted policy recommendations.

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Appendix I – Party Names, Abbreviations, Translations and Dates Founded

Party Abbreviation	Name in English	Name in Bulgarian	Date Founded	General Election April 2023	General Election June 2024	General Election October 2024[10]
APS	Alliance for Rights and Freedoms	Алианс за Права и Свободи	September 2nd 2024	-	-	7,485%
BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party	Българска Социалистическа Партия	April 10th 1990	8,93%	7,06%	7,572%
BCP	Bulgarian Communist Party	Българска Комунистическа Партия	May 28th 1919	-	-	-
Bulgarian Rise	Bulgarian Rise	Български Възход	May 5th 2022	3,06%	-	-
DB	Democratic Bulgaria	Демократична България	April 12th 2018	24,56%[11]	14,33%	14,214%
DPS	Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за Права и Свободи	January 4th 1990	13,75%	17,06%	-
DPS – NN	Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning	Движение за Права и Свободи - Ново Начало	September 2nd 2024	-	-	11,510%
GERB-SDS	Citizens for European Integration of Bulgaria – Union of the Democratic Forces	Граждани за Европейско Развитие на България - Съюз на Демократичните Сили	December 3rd, 2006 (GERB) December 7th, 1989 (SDS)	24,69%	24,71%	26,389%
Get Up! Mafia Out!	Get Up! Mafia Out!	Изправи се! Мутри Вън!	February 7th 2021	2,23%	-	-

[10] For the October 2024 general election, the results are shown with three numbers after the decimal point due to Velichie's entry with 0.004 points above the threshold

[11] For the general election results the results for DB and PP are the same, as on these elections PP-DB participated as a coalition

ITN	There is Such People	Има Такъв Народ	February 16th 2020	4,11%	5,96%	6,785%
MECH	Morality, Unity and Honour	Морал, Единство и Чест	February 9th 2024	-	-	4,600%
NDSV	National Movement Simeon The Second	Национално Движение Симеон Втори	April 2001	-	-	-
NFSB	National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria	Национален Фронт за Спасение на България	May 17th, 2011	-	-	-
PP	We Continue the Change	Продължаваме Промяната	September 2021	24,56%[12]	14,33%	14,214%
The Left	The Left	Левицата	February 12th 2023	-	-	7,572%[13]
Vazrazhdane	Rebirth	Възраждане	August 2nd 2014 (inactive until 2020)	14,16%	13,78%	13,363%
Velichie	Greatness	Величие	July 25th 2023	-	4,65%	4,004%
VMRO	National Movement Bulgaria	Национално Движение България – ВМРО	June 20th 1999 (inactive between 2004-2009)	-	-	-

[12] For the general election results the results for DB and PP are the same, as on these elections PP-DB participated as a coalition
[13] The Left participated on the October 2024 election in coalition with BSP

Appendix II. Variable Operationalization

Variable	Survey Question (Source)	Coding (Values)	Explanation
dir_wrong	E2. "Do you think Bulgaria is going in the right direction?"	1 = No (off course) 0 = Yes (on track)	Captures broad dissatisfaction with national trajectory, a key spark for electoral experimentation.
distrust_gov	F1. "Do you think the current government will complete a full four-year term?"	1 = No (expects early collapse) 0 = Yes	Reflects weak trust in institutions and belief that governments can't last, fueling volatility.
econ_concern	E1. "Which are the most important issues Bulgaria is facing?" (select-all)	1 = Any economy related- mention (Economy, Inflation, Unemployment, etc.) 0 = Otherwise	Flags those who see economic problems as top issues, underscoring perceived instability and weak safety nets.
inst_weak	E4. "Which things push Bulgaria in the wrong direction?" (select-all)	Sum of three binary items: • Persistent corruption • Weak/incompetent leadership • Weak judiciary (range 0–3)	Measures perceived institutional failures that lower barriers to new party emergence.
new_party_sym	J4/O4. Open-ended "Why did you change your choice?"	1 = Mentions "new party," "alternative," "fresh ideas," or specific emergent party names 0 = Otherwise	Identifies voters drawn to anti-establishment or fresh options, marking the mobilization phase.
party_weak	E3. "Which things push Bulgaria in the right direction?" (select-all)	1 = Mentions none of these stabilizers: • Anti-corruption measures • Effective leadership • Independent judiciary • EU/NATO membership 0 = Otherwise	Indicates absence of trust-building factors, reinforcing openness to new parties.
gov_fail_sym	J4/O4. Open-ended "Why did you change your choice?"	1 = Mentions governance failures (inability to form stable coalition, broken promises, poor performance) 0 = Otherwise	Flags voters who defect because new or old parties failed to deliver effective governance.
switched_June	J1. "Did you vote June 2024?" & J2. "Did you change your vote from April 2023?"	1 = Yes (switched) 0 = No (stayed the same)	The main outcome: whether a voter experimented with a new choice in June 2024.
switched_Oct	O1. "Did you vote Oct 2024?" & O2. "Did you change your vote from June 2024?"	1 = Yes 0 = No	Outcome for the October 2024 election, parallel to switched_June.

return_trad	F2. “Would you vote today?” & F3. “Would you support the same party as last time?” F4. “If no, who would you support?”	1 = Among “yes” voters, chooses an established party (e.g. GERB, BSP) 0 = Chooses new/alternative or undecided	Captures temporary stabilization when discontented voters revert to well-known parties.
abstain_future	F2. “If an election were held today, would you vote?”	1 = No (would not vote) 0 = Yes	Marks those who temporarily exit the loop by opting out of voting altogether, reflecting democratic erosion potential.