Electoral participation in the Netherlands: Individual and contextual influences

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Abstract. Research into electoral participation has produced two traditions, one focusing mainly on individual level explanations while the second concentrates primarily on aggregate level explanations. By bringing these two research approaches together, we are not only able to explain individual electoral participation more thoroughly, but we also gain additional insight into the influence of aggregate level characteristics on individual behavior. We combine eight National Election Studies held in the Netherlands between 1971 and 1994 enabling us to study variation on the individual and the contextual (aggregate) level, including interactions between these two levels. Findings show that the addition of contextual characteristics form a significant improvement to an individual level model predicting electoral participation. Findings also confirm our expectation that the influence of individual characteristics such as education or political interest is dependent upon contextual characteristics describing for instance the salience of the election.

Introduction

Research into the determinants of individual political participation at elections by nature focuses on personal characteristics. Research conducted in the Netherlands shows no exception to this rule (for a brief overview, see below). Although personal characteristics play a key role in determining political participation we claim that they show only half the picture, and cannot explain substantial variation in turnout between countries or fluctuations in turnout between elections within one country. In order to explain these fluctuations in average turnout levels, attention has to be paid not only to individual characteristics, but also to the context in which individuals are placed. Research focused on levels of turnout does exactly that, paying attention to the contextual characteristics of elections and political systems (cf. Blais & Carty 1990; Powell 1980, 1986; Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980). However, it often fails to incorporate the individual component, restricting explanations to the aggregate level or running the risk of ecological fallacies (but for a recent attempt explaining individual behavior using contextual data, see King 1997).
In our research, by combining the individual and the contextual approach, we aim to explain better both individual electoral participation, as well as aggregate turnout levels – even though we restrict ourselves to one political system.

The two research traditions, focusing on the individual level or the aggregate level, have produced an extensive body of research, but little has been done to incorporate the two into one model for explaining electoral participation. Combining the separate approaches brings considerable benefits (cf. Coleman 1990; Carmines & Huckfeldt 1996). It offers explanations on how contextual effects translate into individual behavior. At the same time it places individual characteristics within the boundaries of the political context, showing the influence these aggregate characteristics can have on individual behavior. An example can show two forms these influences can take. Political interest is often found to have a profound influence on electoral participation at the individual level, explaining a substantial degree of the variance found between individuals. During close race elections – a contextual characteristic – intensive media coverage may increase political interest in the electorate, and consequently aggregate turnout levels. Alternatively, the heightened media coverage of a close race election may ensure that even the politically less interested are fully aware of the political situation, thereby reducing the impact of political interest (Campbell 1960). In the first example, contextual characteristics directly influence personal characteristics – a close race increases political interest – without actually influencing the relationship between the individual characteristic and electoral participation. Including contextual characteristics is then more informative, but not vital in our understanding of electoral participation. In the second example, the addition of the contextual characteristic reveals that the influence of an individual characteristic is dependent on certain contextual characteristics, in other words an interaction between the two levels occurs. In this case, including contextual characteristics will allow us to make a more correct estimate of the influence of individual characteristics. In this research we will show that including information on the characteristics of the election and the political system will improve our ability to predict electoral participation at the individual level and may offer us additional insights into aggregate level effects.

In order to show the influence of the electoral context on individual behavior, and hence on turnout, we need information as well as variation on both of these levels. Thus, we need survey data to compare the influence of individual characteristics on electoral participation, and we need additional information on the context of an election to estimate the influence of contextual characteristics. Since only one survey would provide us with only one context – the influence of which would be constant – we need more than one
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survey to compare different electoral contexts, and thus estimate the influence of different contextual characteristics. This has led us to combine election surveys held in concurrence with parliamentary elections in the Netherlands from 1971 to 1994, offering us information on a large number of individuals under varying contextual circumstances. Such a combination of surveys enables us to assess the influence of contextual characteristics on different groups of individuals sharing individual characteristics, showing us whether a certain factor exerts equal influence for all voters or whether it is especially strong for some, while less consequential for others. Also, since the surveys used span a total of eight national elections held in a period of 25 years, they enable us to examine whether patterns of individual or contextual influence have changed over time, in general or for specific groups of voters.

Table 1 presents the turnout rates for national elections in the Netherlands from 1971 until 1994. It shows two things: stability and change. The turnout rates for the period 1971–1994 all fluctuate somewhere around the 85 percent mark, with the highs and lows between 88 and 78 percent. However, the differences in turnout between adjacent elections should not be neglected. To explain these fluctuations using personal characteristics only would suggest that considerable variation in the aggregate or individual characteristics of voters occurs between elections. We deem this unlikely. Although certain personal characteristics, such as political interest or party attachment, can show a significant degree of variation at the aggregate or individual level, this is rather less likely for a number of other characteristics. For even if the aggregate level of education or age in the Netherlands should rise as significantly as to explain the increase in turnout between 1982 and 1986, it is unlikely to think that these levels would drop in almost the same degree in the ensuing three years, producing the 1989 turnout figures. Another suggestion then would be that the influence of the individual characteristic has changed in nature, resulting in a change in behavior although the personal characteristics have stayed the same. Should this explanation be accepted, influences originating on the contextual level might then falsely be attributed to the individual level, obscuring our view of the actual process. We will argue that the variation in turnout levels as reflected in Table 1 is due largely to variation in the context of the elections. The relatively limited amount of this variation will mean that the variation that contextual variables can explain will be restricted.

Previous research

International research on electoral participation is numerous, and stems from a long tradition (for a recent overview see Franklin, 1996). For the Nether-
lands, significant research on electoral participation is found in Schmidt (1981, 1983), Jaarsma et al. (1986), Castenmiller and Dekker (1987), Schram (1989), Leijenaar (1989), Van der Eijk and Oppenhuis (1990), Smeenk, De Graaf and Ultee (1995) and De Graaf (1996). Rather than going into detail, we present the general findings of this research. These indicate that the chance of voting increases with an increase in age, being religious and increased religiosity, as well as having a higher income, education or class position. Less consistent is the influence of gender or occupation. Next to these socio-demographic characteristics, political interest and involvement have a strong positive influence.

Contextual effects have not been widely used in research on national elections in the Netherlands. Jaarsma et al (1986), Schram (1989) and De Graaf (1996) use dummy indicators to identify the separate election years in an aggregate analysis. Although this approach enables us to identify influences related to the specific election, it does not allow us to say from what that influence stems. By introducing theoretically interpretable contextual variables, we improve upon the nominal level information of year-dummies.1

Explaining electoral participation

The factors that influence political participation in general, and electoral participation specifically, can be grouped into two categories. Voting can be more or less troublesome, and it can be more or less attractive. Milbrath and Goel use the terms facilitative and motivational factors (Milbrath & Goel 1977; see also Verba & Nie 1972; Oppenhuis 1995). Contextual characteristics influence voters in that they raise or lower these barriers and incentives.

Facilitative factors influence the amount of difficulty that a voter has to overcome to partake in the election. Examples can be cognitive skills, or the ease with which a ballot can be cast. Education, on the individual level, and voting by mail or on Sundays, on the contextual level, are characteristics that can function as facilitative factors. However, these tend to be of a rather stable character, and – by the same reasoning as used before – are less suited for explaining between-election fluctuations within a single country. What will change more substantially between elections is the degree to which informa-

Table 1. Turnout rates for national elections in the Netherlands, 1971–1994

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<tr>
<td>Turnout (%)</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>83.5</td>
<td>88.0</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>81.0</td>
<td>85.8</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>78.7</td>
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</table>
Motivational factors influence the reasons why a voter will make the effort of participating in an election. An important influence on this motivation can be the perceived importance of the election in the eyes of the voter. In a close race, each vote could swing the balance, hence voters may be more encouraged to participate than in an election where the outcome seems almost a certainty. Likewise, the importance of the elected institution, as perceived by the voter, will influence the amount of effort a voter is willing to sacrifice. Reif & Schnitt (1980) introduce the notion of ‘second order elections’ when they explain the dramatically lower turnout rates for (distant) European Parliament elections, as compared to the (much closer) ‘first order’ national elections. Next to these outcome-related motivations, other reasons to participate in an election exist. Durkheim (1897) has argued that people will abide to social norms, depending on their level of integration into social groups. Some social groups perceive of voting as a civic duty, and will place a positive incentive on electoral participation, or, adversely, condemn electoral abstention. Examples of such groups are certain religious denominations, socio-political associations such as political parties or labor unions or the higher educated. For members of these groups the acquisition or retainment of social status through electoral participation can function as a motivational factor. Thus, integration into certain social groups can function as an individual motivational characteristic. Powell (1980) found the reflection of this on the aggregate level. He shows that strong links between political parties and social groups provide parties with a context in which voters are more easily mobilized, leading to higher turnout rates in systems with relatively dominant social cleavages, or where the political system is a close reflection of the dominant social cleavages.

Facilitative and motivational factors may be unrelated, although this is not a necessity. Indeed, some factors can play a double role. For example, education has a facilitative function in that it provides the necessary cognitive skills to keep track of the political process. At the same time it is also found that an extensive educational career indicates a prolonged exposure to a sense of voting as a civic duty, and so functions as a motivational factor.

Whether individual and contextual characteristics are related and, if so, how is a matter that will be investigated in this research. Individual voters, with all of their individual characteristics, live and vote within the context of their political system. If no relation between contextual and individual charac-
teristics exists, the estimates for the influence of the contextual characteristic will be equal for all voters. However, if there is an interaction between context and individual characteristics, the impact of the contextual characteristic will be different for different groups of voters. This may result in stronger or weaker effects, and possibly even a positive influence for some, and a negative influence for others.

A model incorporating individual and contextual characteristics

Contextual characteristics

Integrating contextual characteristics in a model explaining individual behavior is a complicated matter, and existing research is rather limited. In addition, since we are dealing with only a limited number of time-points in a single country, we can by no means attempt to include all possible contextual characteristics, and our ability to use the most suitable indicators will be hampered. Nevertheless, we aim to show its value.

Based on contextual characteristics, we expect that turnout will increase if:

- The perceived importance of the election increases;
- The perceived influence on the consequences of the election increases;
- Dominant social cleavages are more closely reflected by the political system.

On the basis of these three expectations we have selected a total of four contextual indicators. Since no constitutional changes regarding mandatory voting, timing of the elections or votes/seats distribution occurred in the period from 1971 until 1994, no facilitative contextual characteristics were introduced in the model. The perceived importance of the election can be determined by the level of the election, as Reif & Schmitt (1980) proposed. Since we analyze Dutch national elections only, the level of the election is a constant, and will therefore not be included in the model. However, next to the level of the election, the perceived importance of an election can be influenced by campaign efforts of political parties. Intensive campaigning may increase the awareness of the election and give voters the impression that much is at stake, thus increasing the perceived relevance. Since no direct data on campaign efforts exist, we will use the time since the previous election as an alternative. We argue that quickly ensuing elections will deplete party funds and consequently restrict campaign intensity (see also Franklin, van der Eijk & Oppenhuis 1996). Furthermore, we argue that a number of elections held shortly after another may alienate voters. For, even though they voted only a
little while ago, they are called to the polling booth once again. This may give
them the impression that their previous opinion is trivialized by ‘politics’,
and hence so may the current. This would decrease the voters’ incentive to
participate. This factor, also measured by the time since the previous election,
would decrease the perceived importance of subsequent elections as well.
Turnout will then increase if time since previous election increases.

The voters’ perception of the influence on the consequences of the elec-
tion will be influenced by the votes/seats ratio. Its influence can work in two
directions. A more proportional system will increase the directness of voter
influence in that the distribution of seats is a more accurate reflection of the
distribution of actual votes (cf. Blais & Carty 1990). However, the coalition
negotiations that often necessarily follow an election in a proportional system
can obscure the direct consequences of the election. A majority system, with
its natural tendency towards a two-party system, tends to offer a more trans-
parent view on the consequences of the election. Since the proportionality
of the electoral system is a near constant in our analyses, we have tried to
measure the perceived influence on the consequences of the election by in-
dicating whether the incumbent coalition has expressed the wish to continue
in the existing formation after the election, thus offering the voters a clear
choice. We expect this to have a positive influence on turnout.

A second factor influencing the perceived consequences of the elections is
the closeness of the race. If a clear favorite for the election win exists, voters
may feel their influence can only be marginal, and consequently decide to stay
home. If, on the other hand, the outcome is undetermined and a close race is
likely, voters may feel that their vote could just sway the balance, thus greatly
enhancing the rewards of their effort and their likeliness to participate. Since
the Netherlands is a multi-party system, some difficulties arise measuring
the closeness of the race. It was decided to use the gap between the two
largest parties, as measured in election polls prior to the election, as indicator.
Being the largest party is not wholly trivial even in a system where coalition
governments are the norm, since it is custom since 1972 that the largest party
will initiate coalition negotiations. We thus expect that a large gap between
the leading two parties will decrease turnout figures.

Powell (1980) found that strong links between political parties and so-
cial groups provide a context that facilitates political parties in mobilizing
voters. We therefore expect a close reflection of dominant social cleavages
by the political system to increase turnout rates. In the Netherlands, reli-
gion and class/income traditionally are the predominant social cleavages,
although their influence has declined over the period we study (Franklin et
these cleavages with party choice was used to determine the impact of social cleavages on the political system.

Individual characteristics

Based on the previous research we reported regarding non-voting in the Netherlands, one facilitative and a number of motivational factors will be introduced on the individual level. To understand the complex matter of politics, and to make an informed decision whether and who to vote for, a certain degree of cognitive skills is required. Education provides these cognitive skills. We therefore expect a positive influence of this facilitative factor.

To understand the functioning of some of the motivational variables, the concept of integration is important. In democratic societies, voting is one of the main opportunities for citizens to influence the political course of the country. Integration into society increases the level of commitment to society, and will induce citizens to participate in the political process. Therefore, we expect a positive influence of integration on the chance to vote. As proxies for measures of integration into society we have selected income, class, and age. These characteristics tend to have a positive correlation with degree of integration (cf. Hout & Knoke 1975; Rose 1974).

Next to these indicators of general integration, we expect an even stronger positive effect on turnout from membership of specific groups or categories in society that hold strongly to a norm of voting as a civic duty. We expect this to influence members of certain religious denominations and labor unions, but also for higher educated and politically interested. Religious denomination and degree of religiosity, union membership, party attachment, political interest and political efficacy are therefore added to the set of independent variables and expected to positively influence the chance to vote.

We have already mentioned that the influence of gender on turnout is not entirely straightforward, and that its impact varies with the number of other characteristics that are being controlled for (cf. Leijenaar 1989; Van der Eijk & Oppenhuis 1990). We will therefore include gender in our model without prior assumptions towards both the existence and the nature of a difference in turnout between men and women.

Since our data set consists of eight surveys, covering the period of 1971 to 1994, we are able to analyze whether the relationship between personal characteristics and electoral participation has changed in nature or strength. Notably, we will examine the influence of education, to see whether we can explain the puzzling fact that although aggregate levels of education have increased over the past decades, turnout levels have not followed suit.
Combining data on the individual level and the contextual level may not only enable us to make more accurate estimates for characteristics on both of these levels. It also gives us the opportunity to examine whether contextual influences are equal for all voters, or more influential for some, and less for others. In more technical terms, this means that interactions between contextual and individual characteristics may be found. Since not much previous knowledge is available to us on this matter, our expectations will be of a general nature.

All of our contextual characteristics are motivational in character. We do not expect the influence of these contextual characteristics to be equally strong for all voters, however. We expect that those individuals with a relatively low chance on participation will be more affected by contextual characteristics than individuals with a high chance on participation. The latter will most likely participate in the election regardless of specific circumstances, while less likely voters may need an incentive stemming from the contextual level to participate as well. As a consequence of this, expected positive influences from personal characteristics such as education, age or political interest will be reduced by contextual characteristics. In our model, this means that interactions between these personal characteristics are expected to be negative for contextual characteristics that we expect to have a positive influence on electoral participation (Continue Coalition, Time since Previous Election, and Cleavage Relevance) and positive for interactions with Gap Two Largest Parties, a contextual characteristic that is expected to have a negative relationship with electoral participation.

Data and operationalization

To test the influence of contextual characteristics on turnout rates through their effect on individual behavior, we have selected eight National Election Studies administered in concurrence with the national elections held in the Netherlands in the period 1971–1994. This presents us with variation at the contextual and individual level, while at the same time ensuring a sufficient degree of comparability over all eight surveys. However, confining ourselves to only one political system does mean a limitation on the possible variance, especially with regards to constitutional arrangements such as the distribution of seats, weekday versus weekend voting or mandatory voting, since all of these remain constant in the Netherlands in the period under scrutiny here. We will return to this later.

After selecting for missing data, the eight Dutch National Election Studies (DNES) contain a total of 8,939 cases (72 percent of all completed inter-
views). To ensure that no bias was introduced due to different sample sizes, in the aggregated data set each year was weighted so as to have an equal sample size. In addition, the data were weighted according to turnout rates. Although non-voters show a consistently lower rate of participation in the Dutch election studies, no clear evidence has been found to assume that the sampled fraction is not a correct representation of the total group (cf. Jaarsma et al. 1986; Smeets 1995). Therefore, it is permissible to weigh the data according to actual turnout rates, allowing us to make population predictions on the basis of our model.

Since a complete structural model is as yet not our aim, a regression model is the most suitable technique for our analysis. Actually since we are using both individual and contextual level data, a multi-level approach would be appropriate. However, the small number of cases on the second (contextual) level would not allow for a sensible application of multi-level analysis. In view of the dichotomous character of our dependent variable (voted or not) and its skewed distribution, a logistic regression will be used. Logistic regression is a non-linear multiplicative technique that allows us to estimate the influence of a variable on the chance that a person will vote, given all the other characteristics of that person. So, the influence of a characteristic can change over different values of the other characteristics. The result of this is that our estimate of the chance to vote will remain within the logical boundaries of 0 and 1.

The operationalization of the contextual variables is as follows. The closeness of the race is measured as the gap in percentage points between the two largest parties, as measured in a national opinion poll held one week prior to the election. This variable, Gap Two Largest Parties, is expected to show a negative relation with turnout. Additionally, Continue Coalition is a dummy variable, indicating whether or not the wish to continue was expressed by the incumbent coalition. A positive influence on turnout is expected. However, since this situation has only occurred once in the period that we study, in effect this variable turns into unique identifier for the year 1986. This means that caution is required in interpreting this variable.

The Time since Previous Election, as an indicator for perceived relevance, is measured in years. The expected relationship is positive. Cleavage Relevance is measured through a multinomial regression of party choice on religion, class and income. The pseudo R-square is then taken as the degree to which the political system is determined by social cleavages. The expected effect is positive.

The individual characteristics have been operationalized as follows. Class is measured on a five-point scale based on type of occupation. The categories are unskilled manual labor, skilled manual labor, self-employed, routine non-
manual labor and skilled non-manual labor. Unskilled manual labor is the reference category, to which all other categories are coded as contrast.

Education is coded in four categories, ranging from primary (base reference category) through lower secondary (LBO/MAVO), higher secondary (HAVO/VWO/MBO) to polytechnic/University level education. In addition, each level is coded as a contrast to the preceding level, to show the impact of an additional level of education. To determine the effect of two increments in educational level, both the parameters need to be added.

Dummy indicators were constructed for the lowest income quartile and for female voters, while age was measured in increments of 5 years since the age of 17.

Religion was operationalized both according to denomination and religiosity, measured by frequency of church attendance. In the Netherlands, three dominant religious denominations exist: Calvinist, Dutch Reformed and Roman Catholic. These three denominations are traditionally represented by their own political party. In addition, an other category is included. This small category, comprising only 4.2 percent of all respondents, contains a wide variety of religious denominations, some of which actually oppose electoral participation. We therefore expect this category to show a lower chance to vote than the three main denominations. The reference category for religion is not religious. Since the 1960s the Netherlands has shown a steady decline in church adherence, especially in the Catholic Church. This has led to a situation where information on merely the denomination could be misleading. To remedy this, a measure of religiosity in the form of church attendance is introduced. Where useful, interactions between denomination and church attendance were introduced.

Party Attachment and Union Membership are indicated by dummy variables, coded positive if a respondent expressed a preference for a political party, or is a member of a labor union. Political Interest and Political Efficacy are measured on five point scales from low to high using four indicators (see Anker & Oppenhuis 1995: 323–330 on the construction of these scales).

Results

Predicting individual electoral participation

Table 2 shows the results of the logistic regression analyses of the chance to vote. Four subsequent models have been tested, presented in four times three columns. It is often argued (cf. Campbell et al. 1960; van Deth 1989) that socio-demographic characteristics, such as class, income or education, are mediated through psycho-political characteristics, in our model Party Attach-
Table 2. Logistic regression of the chance to vote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Model I</th>
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<th>Model II</th>
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<th>Model III</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Sig</td>
<td>ExpB</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Sig</td>
<td>ExpB</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Sig</td>
<td>ExpB</td>
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<td>Class (reference: Unskilled manual labor)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skilled manual labor</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.69</td>
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<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.37</td>
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<td>Routine non-manual labor</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>1.09</td>
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<td>1.83</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>0.34</td>
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<td>Education (reference: Primary education)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LBO/MAVO vs primary</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.16</td>
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<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.33</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>Lowest 25% Income</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>Age (5 year increments)</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.16</td>
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<td>0.13</td>
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<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.17</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>0.49</td>
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<td>Religion (reference: No religion)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calvinist</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>6.34</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>Catholic</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
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<td>-0.20</td>
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<td>0.58</td>
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<td>1.78</td>
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<td>Other Religion</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.70</td>
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<td>Weekly</td>
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Table 2. (continued)

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<th>Model IV</th>
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<td>Time since Previous Election *HBO/University vs HAVO . . .</td>
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<td>Time since Previous Election *Age</td>
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<td>(20)</td>
<td></td>
<td>541.59</td>
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ment, Political Interest and Political Efficacy, in explanatory models of electoral participation. To assess this, the first model contains socio-demographic characteristics only. In the second model, the psycho-political characteristics are added. Socio-demographic effects that are mediate through psycho-political characteristics will then decrease, as compared to the first model. In the final model, the contextual characteristics are added.

The socio-demo graphic model shows a chi-square improvement of 811.9 at the loss of 20 degrees of freedom, significant improvement over the null model. A closer look at the parameter estimates shows that all effects are in the hypothesized direction with the exception of Gender, for which no prior assumptions were formulated. Education, as well as low income and age tend to have a clear influence on individual electoral participation. In addition, women show a distinctly higher chance to vote than men, other characteristics held equal. Class shows the limited influence expected in the Netherlands. When looking at religion, initially clear differences between the three denominations could be identified. Controlling for degree of religiosity through church attendance levels much of this variation out. It should be noted that no additional influence of church attendance was found for Calvinists, probably best explained by the consistent church attendance throughout this group.

Adding psycho-political characteristics improves the chi-square value significantly by 541.6 at 3 degrees of freedom. Model II also confirms that a large part of the sociodemographic influence is mediated through the psycho-political characteristics. This is reflected in a decrease in effect estimate for almost all socio-demographic characteristics, with the exception of gender. As a consequence, the influence of class is almost completely mediated through other characteristics, with only the difference between unskilled manual labor versus skilled non-manual labor remaining statistically significant as a direct effect. Likewise, in education the step from secondary to tertiary is the only remaining significant increase. The effect of a low income on electoral participation remains virtually unaffected, implying that this influence cannot be explained by political interest, party attachment or political efficacy but rather remains an influential factor on its own. The increased influence of gender suggests that, when controlling for political interest, party attachment and political efficacy, women show an even greater propensity to vote. The three psycho-political characteristics added, political interest, party attachment or political efficacy, show the expected substantial positive influence on electoral participation.

The addition of the contextual characteristics in Model III increases the chi-square value by 110.0 at 4 degrees of freedom, a statistically significant improvement. However, not all of the separate contextual characteristics
prove to be statistically significant in their own right. The Gap Between the Two Largest Parties and Cleavage Relevance do not show a significant influence on electoral participation. As we hypothesized, Continue Coalition shows a positive effect on turnout, as well as Time since Previous Election. Adding contextual characteristics does have an effect on some of the individual characteristics included in the model, notably education. Special attention to education was therefore paid when analyzing contextual and individual interactions.

A number of interaction terms were modeled, but not all of them proved robust. To investigate whether the individual level characteristics had changed in nature or importance over time, interactions between time and a number of individual characteristics were introduced. Although these proved significant at first, this changed as soon as contextual/individual interactions were introduced. The interactions between time and individual characteristics were thus removed from the model.

The interactions between contextual and individual characteristics that remained statistically significant are presented in Model IV. In total, the models chi-square value improved by 18.0, at the cost of 5 degrees of freedom: a statistically significant improvement. The interactions between Time since Previous Election and education and age were expected to be negative. With the exception of the interaction with HAVO/VWO/MBO vs LBO/MAVO education, all interactions are indeed negative. The interaction between Gap Two Largest Parties and political efficacy was expected to be positive, which was also sustained by the data. This suggests that contextual characteristics do indeed lessen the differences that are found on the individual level.

**Predicating aggregate level turnout**

It was our aim in this research to demonstrate the influence of contextual characteristics of elections on turnout rates. The limited number of elections we could study posed a restriction on our effort. One consequence of this is that we do not have significant proof for our assumption that a more clear perspective of the consequences of an election, in the form of the coalition that may be formed following it, will enhance electoral participation. Although the indicator we used for this construct was in the expected direction, restricted variation on the contextual level – the situation only occurred in 1986 – has turned it into a unique identifier for one election, seriously complicating the theoretical interpretation of the empirical findings. Equally, the effect of a close race, measured by the gap between the two largest parties, and cleavage relevance could not be determined unequivocally. This is not to say that these characteristics may not have the influence we hypothesized. Rather, additional data would be needed to prove our expectations. Furthermore, al-
though the influence of time since the previous election was significant and in a positive direction, as we hypothesized, to determine whether this can be accounted for by campaign efforts, or a kind of political exhaustion of an electorate that has been repeatedly called to the voting booth, will have to be determined with more detailed data.\footnote{8}

Although problems estimating the statistical significance of each of the separate contextual effects exist, it is our aim to show the improvement of turnout prediction that can be gained when contextual characteristics are added to a model based on individual characteristics. To demonstrate this improvement, we have predicted turnout rates on the basis of individual characteristics (Model II), as well as on individual characteristics plus contextual characteristics and interactions (Model IV).\footnote{9} Figure 1 shows deviations of actual turnout rates in percentage points.

The improvement in prediction is reflected in the consistently lower deviations from actual turnout for the model including contextual characteristics. The exact prediction of turnout in 1986 is of course due to the variable Continue Coalition. The largest deviation of actual turnout, based on the contextual-individual model, is for the year 1971. Apart from fluctuations that we cannot theoretically explain, one appropriate explication is available. Until 1967, mandatory voting laws were in effect in the Netherlands. The elections of 1971 were thus the first ‘free’ elections where participation is concerned. It is feasible to argue that in reaction to this newly gained freedom a disproportional large part of the electorate decided to stay home, whereas

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Predicted turnout levels – deviations from actual turnout.}
\end{figure}
we expect this effect to wear off and become insignificant when the remembrance of mandatory voting becomes more distant. To not further strain the model on the contextual level with what is in essence another year-specific dummy, we have chosen not to introduce an indicator for this effect.

**Conclusions: Does context matter?**

On the individual level, most characteristics behaved in the way we expected. What is significant, is the influence of *Gender*. In all our analyses, women show a higher propensity to vote than men. This is in contrast with findings in other countries (Blais & Carty 1990; Lipset 1981; Verba et al. 1978; Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980) although existing Dutch research did not seem to find consistent outcomes. It appears that the influence of gender is strongly dependent on what other characteristics are being controlled for. With regards to *Religion* and *Religiosity*, some additional interpretation might be in place. It is clear that information on religiosity is an important addition in explaining the influence of religion. This effect is most likely strengthened by the consistent secularization of Dutch society, a process that has affected the different denominations to varying degrees. The combined picture shows us that Calvinists seem least affected by this process. Dutch Reformed and, even more so, Catholics have shown the highest rates of secularization. In our model this is reflected by the finding that religion has a positive effect on turnout only for frequent church attendants. Non-frequent churchgoers actually show lower turnout rates than the not religious. This latter finding can be explained if we assume that a higher degree of social activity will increase political activity, including voting. If infrequent church attendance is seen as an indicator for lower social activity, the comparison to the more amalgamated not-religious group, containing both active and non-active citizens, is likely to show lower chances of turnout.

Changing influences of our individual characteristics over time could not be detected in our analysis. One pattern that we expected is a possible decline in the influence of education over time. After all, the steady increase in aggregate levels of education over the past decades has not been reflected in an equal increase in turnout levels, which would indicate that the influence of education has decreased. Although initially this was indicated by our findings, addition of interaction terms between contextual and individual characteristics annulled this. Additional research will have to determine whether indeed education has remained unchanged in importance, or sufficient data fails us here.

We did find proof for our thesis that contextual characteristics can limit the influence of individual characteristics. We also showed that motivational
stimuli on the contextual level diminish differences on the individual level, proving that the context of an election affects voters in different degrees. An important finding that can help us explain between-election fluctuations in turnout figures.

Although our ability to draw unequivocal conclusions on contextual influences on electoral participation was hampered by data limitations, we feel that we have shown the value of a model integrating contextual and individual effects. The accuracy of turnout prediction was increased considerably by including characteristics of the election and the political system in which it was held. We feel it is not yet fruitful to speculate why certain hypotheses were rejected while others appeared to be upheld. In future research, based on a more extensive data collection, we will be able to test these hypotheses.

Notes

1. See also Przeworski & Tuene (1970) on using theoretical constructs, rather than nominal labels in comparative social research.
2. Using contextual characteristics moves the level of analysis from the individual to the context, i.e., the election. This means that the number of contextual variables is limited by the number of elections we analyze minus one.
3. However, mandatory voting laws were in effect in the period before 1971. The possible consequences of this will be treated below.
4. The Dutch National Election Studies are an enterprise of the Dutch Election Research Foundation (SKON).
5. This feature is common to election research and not confined to the Dutch election studies; see Katosh & Traugott (1981).
6. Extra caution should be taken here. While we are actually performing an n = 8 analysis on the contextual level, our estimates are based on the 8,939 individual cases in the model, which will bias our estimation of the standard error downwards.
7. Although the difference between LBO/MAVO vs Primary as well as HAVO/VWO/MBO vs LBO/MAVO proved no significant interactions with Time since Previous Election, they were retained in the model because of the additional nature of the variable coding.
8. In an obvious next step, we intend to pool a larger number of data sets to acquire a sufficient number of degrees of freedom, combining data from a large number of political systems in a pooled cross-sectional design.
9. For each individual, the predicted value reflects the chance the individual will participate, predicted by the model. Aggregating the predicted values produces the predicted turnout rate for the complete sample. This was compared to the actual reported sample turnout rate. Since the sample is weighted, sample figures correspond with actual national turnout rates for the elections.
References


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