



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