Rain falls on all of us (but some manage to get more wet than others): political context and electoral participation

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Introduction
Explaining Electoral Participation

This book is not about weather forecasts, the impact of rain on the individual or the influence of the greenhouse effect on worldwide precipitation patterns. Sincere apologies to all who have read the title, yet not the subtitle. This book is about electoral participation, and how the characteristics of an election may affect the individual voter's decision to participate or not.

Electoral participation is a widely studied subject, so one might justifiably wonder what this study aims to add to all that's been said before. This chapter outlines the added insight into the understanding of electoral participation this research intends to offer.

1.1 Who Votes?
If voting is of concern, the obvious first question is: who votes in elections? Not everybody votes: some vote at every election, while others never vote. And then there are those who vote sometimes, but not always. Especially this latter, may-or-may-not-vote group will be of special interest for this research. What may explain that people participate in one election, but not another?

There is a substantial amount of literature that explains to us why people do vote. The typical approach is to investigate participation in election Y, held in country Z by using information on individual voters, typically collected in a large-scale survey at the time of the election. The data are entered in an analytical model, and the best predictors for electoral participation are revealed. A typical analysis may show that young people vote less frequently than older people, while the higher educated show a high tendency to vote, compared to lower educated. Frequent churchgoers tend to vote more often than the less religiously persuaded, while politically interested voters show an unsurprisingly higher chance to participate than those who indicate that they care less about politics. A similar pattern is often detected for political efficacy. Union membership frequently proves a positive indicator for electoral participation, while gender sometimes make a difference in the rate of participation as well. Depending on information gathered through the election survey, even more predictors of participation can be determined. Income, party identification, and even marital status, class or social economic status are but a few.

1.2 Why Vote?
Why then do the higher educated vote more often than lower educated? Why does a frequent act of religious worship instigate people to vote? Why would the frequent reading of a

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1 Throughout this work, referring to the electorate as 'voters and non-voters' will become tedious and tiresome. Therefore, the term 'voters' will be used throughout to refer to voters and non-voters alike. This means that with the term 'voter' a prospective voter is meant; a member of the electorate, eligible to vote, who, come Election Day, may or may not turn out to cast a vote. Where specifically 'voters' or 'non-voters' is meant, this will be made clear in the text.
newspaper, or discussing the affairs of the day with others encourage someone to take the trouble of voting on Election Day? To answer that, it is helpful to take the pros and cons of voting into account. Voting can be more or less troublesome, and it can be more or less attractive. The direct benefit of voting is obvious: taking part in determining the course of the country. How large this benefit is depends on several factors, one of which is the perception people have of the degree to which politics is actually able to steer the course of events in a country, or the degree to which they believe politicians will take the average voter's opinion for granted. Such factors may limit the benefit of voting. Benefits of voting, sometimes less obvious, can be thought of as well. If one is part of a community where electoral participated is highly valued, participation in an election may offer a chance to identify with that community. I vote, because I am part of and care for this community.

On the other hand, voting takes effort as well. The most obvious effort is perhaps the time it takes to go out to the voting booth. That may be more to ask of someone who works 80 hours a week than of a part-time employee, just as it may be more to ask of a remote farmer than of a city dweller not two steps away from the polling station. And that's leaving rain or shine still out of the equation. But other costs of voting exist as well. To make a choice for a party or candidate, information on the vote options is required. That information may be collected through a thorough examination of newspapers, election broadcasts and party manifestos. But shortcuts may also be taken. If a trusted source, which could be anyone ranging from a life partner to the vicar or the union leader, says Party X is the best option, reaching a decision becomes a far less strenuous affair.

Milbrath and Goel use the terms facilitative and motivational to distinguish between individual characteristics that facilitate or motivate people to participate in an election (Milbrath & Goel, 1979). Facilitative factors influence the amount of effort that a voter has to overcome to partake in the election. Examples can be cognitive skills, or access to information regarding the elections. Education can thus function as a facilitative factor, as can religion or union membership, when respected leaders give cues for best possible vote options.

Motivational factors influence the amount of effort a voter is willing to overcome to participate in an election. One potential positive motivational factor is group membership. Some social groups perceive 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 voting may be a way to express that they belong to the group. As Durkheim (1897) argued, people will abide to social norms, depending on their level of integration into social groups. Conversely, a strong belief that politicians will do as they please irrespective of electoral outcomes certainly lowers the benefits of voting, and diminishes a person's inclination to participate. Political cynicism and efficacy are thus characteristics that affect an individual's motivation to vote.

Facilitative factors thus raise or lower the barriers to voting, while motivation factors influence the willingness of a voter to overcome those barriers. Although the notion of facilitative and motivational factors may be useful to understand how certain individual characteristics work to influence the likelihood to vote, the system is not perfect. There are characteristics that contain both facilitative and motivational aspects. Education, to give an example, helps lowering information costs by making political news and information easier
to process (facilitative) while it may also work to ingrain civic norms that value electoral participation, making voting per se an appreciated act (motivational). Being less than perfect, the notion of facilitative and motivational factors still provides a useful insight in the logic of voting.

1.3 A Stable Vote?
Let us return to the stereotypical analysis of voting presented above. It was aimed at explaining electoral participation in election Y in country Z. What now, if time passes, and another election presents itself? Well, again typically speaking, another analysis is performed, predicting electoral participation in what now has become election Y+1. Again individual electoral participation is predicted on the basis of information gathered around election time. Roughly the same kind of information is entered into the model, and in virtually all cases, outcomes remarkably similar to those achieved for the previous analysis are obtained. Age again shows a positive relationship with voting, as do education and religiosity, while the politically cynical voters still tend to participate in fewer numbers.

Such a similar outcome is of course quite a relief. The explanation regarding facilitative and motivational factors influencing voters, the barriers and incentives to voting, would lose its value if analyses proved that the relationship between individual characteristics and the chance to vote fluctuated considerably between elections. And the loss of this explanatory scheme put aside, more seriously would be our concern if for instance the higher educated voters voted in large numbers in one election, while abstaining in another, without the real world having been turned on its head as well. At best, that would be a suggestion that we have not captured the relation between education and electoral participation very well.

Apparent then, we have nailed down the factors that determine electoral participation with analyses replicated over time and space. They are found to work in single analyses, and they work in largely the same way in follow-up analyses. Moreover, the reader can rest assured: these factors have been shown to work in virtually similar ways in a very comprehensive range of analyses of electoral behavior. Does that mean we know now what determines electoral participation? Well not quite, as Figure 1-1 will make clear.

Figure 1-1 Turnout Rates - Sweden, the Netherlands and Great Britain, Parliamentary Elections 1970-2000

Figure 1-1 shows turnout rates for parliamentary elections in three European countries: Sweden, the Netherlands and Great Britain. These countries are selected here for illustrative purposes: they are not extreme cases of the democratic universe. It is a revealing picture indeed: it shows that turnout figures do vary substantially between elections. Since it was
established above that the influence of individual characteristics on electoral participation is very stable over elections, the variation in turnout figures cannot be attributed to variation in the influence of personal characteristics. Alternative explanations are therefore required.

If the nature of the relationship between individual characteristics and electoral participation - the strength and the direction of the effect, in technical terms - does not vary, the 'outcome' of the equation, namely turnout rates, can only vary if the individual characteristics vary. This means that either the composition of the electorate changes substantially, or the individual characteristics vary substantially within persons. Of course, there is also the possibility of omitted variables: we may simply have not found the complete answer to the question of electoral participation. For characteristics at the individual level, however, research into electoral participation has evolved well enough to preclude this option.

To explain the pattern reflected in Figure 1-1 on the basis of compositional changes alone, is rather difficult. If, as we have just seen, the relationship between determinants of electoral participation does not change over time, then variation in turnout would have to be explained by variation in, e.g., the educational composition of the electorate. The number of highly educated voters should increase in elections where turnout is high, while these higher educated should vanish again in elections that show lower turnout. In other words, to explain variation in turnout rates through individual characteristics requires the sum of these characteristics to change accordingly, since their relationship with electoral participation remains stable. In view of the fact that some of the largest fluctuations in turnout appear between elections that follow each other rather quickly (cf. the Netherlands, for the elections in 1981 and 1982, or Great Britain, for the two elections held in 1974), these changes would have to be quite dramatic at times. We would therefore have to conclude that either personal characteristics (an individual's level of education) or the composition of the electorate as a whole (the number of higher and lower educated people in a country) are expected to be markedly volatile.

In principle this volatility may occur for some variables. For others this is very unlikely. The degree of political interest or efficacy, the level of education or religiosity of a person can of course change over time, but it is difficult to imagine how someone may go down in level of education over time. Variation in the electorate through entry of new, young voters and exit of older generations - cohort replacement - or possibly immigration may shift the balance between voters and non-voters. But such compositional changes do not occur as frequently and as quickly as the fluctuations in turnout figures would require (cf. van der Eijk & Niemöller, 1983, p72-76). An influx of higher educated youngsters might hypothetically serve as explanation for the high turnout figures in the first election held in 1974 in Britain, but that explanation is thwarted if the second election in 1974 is taken into account where we see turnout go down again considerably. Surely all those hypothetical highly educated new voters could not have vanished within less than a year. The electoral composition argument therefore does not suffice in explaining the turnout variations of Figure 1-1.

Could personal characteristics vary sufficiently to explain the turnout variations of Figure 1-1? Could, over the space of 5 years, levels of political interest in the Netherlands have gone up, down and up again for individual voters to explain the marked drop and recovery in turnout rates during the elections of 1981, 1982 and 1986? In theory, yes. Political interest is a characteristic that may vary over time, far more so than, e.g., education, which typically increases during one's youth, after which it remains stable. It is not inconceivable
that a person’s political interest increases and decreases over time. But it is unlikely that whole segments of the Dutch electorate went on a synchronized political interest roller-coaster ride in 1981, 1982 and 1986, to produce the dip and recovery in turnout rates observed for these elections, unless they were affected by an outside influence. Individual variations in personal characteristics are not at all inconceivable, but they are likely to be randomly dispersed between individuals, and thus cancel each other out at the aggregate level. To produce variations in turnout at the aggregate level, such individual variations would have to occur in unison for (segments of) the electorate. The explanation for the picture presented in Figure 1-1 then becomes the following. People tend to be rather stable in most of their personal characteristics and behavior, and if they do change, this is likely to be cancelled out by another voter changing in another direction. But the surroundings voters find themselves in change as well, sometimes slowly, sometimes rather abruptly and significantly. These contextual changes can affect the behavior of large segments of voters, which explains the variations in aggregate turnout shown in Figure 1-1.

Variations in the circumstances of the election, which may be called context factors or the contextual characteristics of the election, hold the key to explaining the variation in turnout between elections, determining which election will see a high turnout, and which a low turnout. The argument is made easier if Figure 1-2 is inspected, below. Figure 1-2 may illuminate why the step of turning to context characteristics to explain variations in turnout levels is so much easier made when comparing countries.

Figure 1-2 Turnout - Sweden, the Netherlands and Great Britain Compared, Parliamentary Elections between 1970 and 2000.

From Figure 1-2, it is evident that turnout rates show considerable variation between countries as well as within. Although the elections held in these three countries over the period 1970-2000 show considerable variation in turnout rates, at the same time there is little overlap in the bandwidth of this variation between the countries. Comparing turnout over the decades depicted in Figure 1-2, Swedish turnout rates are consistently higher than Dutch ones, while these in turn are consistently higher than the British.

It is tempting to argue again that the differences in turnout rates between these three countries are to be attributed to differences in the composition of the electorate. But although each of these countries is unique in itself, they do not differ enough to explain the marked differences in individual characteristics that would be required to create such
different turnout levels between countries. Britain is not a country filled with uneducated politically disinterested non-voters, nor is Sweden made up of politically aware, socially integrated and extremely high-educated voters. With regard to the point that aggregate levels of political interest or efficacy do indeed vary between these countries, this is more likely to be the result of other, contextual, characteristics, than an inherent trait of the Anglo-Saxons or the Nordic people. Should the Swedish social and political landscape come close to reflecting the British one, Sweden’s high turnout rates will become a thing of the past. It is in other words the context of the election, determined by political, systemic and societal characteristics, that matters. The electoral system, the time between elections, the number of political parties, the day elections are being held, the number and size of constituencies, single party or coalition governments and a whole host of other characteristics of a society, political and non-political, have been shown to influence the willingness of voters to partake in elections. Some of these characteristics are very stable. The electoral system, or the day elections being held are typically matters that vary between countries, but remain unchanged for long periods within a country. This explains the consistency in the difference in turnout rates between Sweden, the Netherlands and Great Britain. Other factors, such as the closeness of an election race, or the time between two elections, show much more short-term variation. These more variable contextual characteristics can help to explain variation in turnout that is much less structural, such as for instance the difference in turnout between the two elections held in 1974 in Great Britain, or 1981 and 1982 in the Netherlands. These latter, more variable contextual characteristics may help us understand why turnout is high in one election, while lower in another, even though the country need not have changed fundamentally. Such contextual characteristics can offer us explanations that work within a political system, as well as between political systems, and these will form the focus of this research.

From the discussion of Figure 1-1 and Figure 1-2 it already becomes evident that it only makes sense to talk about contextual influences when making comparisons over time or space. Only if we look at the rate of turnout for several elections, or differences in turnout between countries, can we include contextual factors into the equation. A model that focuses on the influence of individual characteristics in a single election is unable to capture the influence of the political context, since that context will be a constant for all voters in that election. But it would be a mistake to assume that, since it is a constant, the context of the election is without influence on individual voters.

Why then is research on electoral participation not focused on context effects solely? Well, for one reason of course, that would be to ignore the individual voter completely. Which is odd, to say the least, as in the end the rate of turnout is determined by voters, not by the constitutional make-up of the country, or the political landscape as it was at the moment of the election. Aggregate turnout figures are the sum of individual actions, they are not independent of individual voters. Eventually, any change at the system level will therefore have to be explained by bringing in the individuals that do or do not vote. Analyses at the level of the political system may present us with plausible suggestions on the causes of a rise or fall in electoral participation, but, as will be shown in the subsequent chapters, only at the individual level can hypotheses be tested. Macro analysis can never be a substitute for micro analysis.
1.4 Placing the Individual within the Context

Combining information from both levels of analysis, placing the individual voter within the context of the election, is a natural step forward in explaining electoral behavior. It permits testing hypotheses on the influence of individual and context level characteristics on electoral participation. It creates an analytical model that does not treat individuals isolated from the context they live in, and treats the electoral context as influential, without neglecting the fact that voters in the end make the decision to participate or not. Most importantly, it enables an explanation for fluctuations in turnout, without making excessive assumptions about individual characteristics or the composition if the electorate. Combining information on individuals and context leads to a better and more informative model of electoral participation. A model that allows the explanation of individual behavior, as well as variation in turnout found at the aggregate level. This is therefore exactly what will be undertaken in Chapter 2.

In line with recent researchers who have taken the same step (to be discussed in Chapter 3), Chapter 2 will be a first exploration of the practical possibilities of combining individual and contextual level information into a single model. Chapter 2 presents an analysis of electoral participation in the Netherlands. This choice of country is arbitrary; any other democratic system would do as well, as long as empirical data is available. It is therefore not the explanation of electoral participation in the Netherlands per se that is of interest. It is the explanation of the electoral participation of voters in a political system, utilizing information on those individuals and the political system they find themselves in.

Chapter 2 presents an analysis of electoral participation in parliamentary elections in the Netherlands in the period 1970 to 2000. In these three decades, nine elections were held in the Netherlands, all of which have data available for analysis. This enables investigating the influence on participation of individual effects in combination with contextual effects. A full model, presenting all the 'usual suspects' in explaining electoral participation is presented, to which a number of contextual characteristics are added.

The contextual characteristics included in the model in Chapter 2 aim to measure the awareness of the election among the electorate, the perceived relevance of the election and the link between the social cleavages in the country and the political system. Factors influencing the awareness of the election are facilitative in nature, by influencing the ease with which information is made available to the electorate. In Chapter 2, these facilitative factors will be explored through the use of contextual characteristics that influence the media's attention to the election. Factors affecting the relevance of the election are motivational, as they influence the benefits to be reaped from participating. In Chapter 2, these are indicated by characteristics influencing the clarity of the political consequences of an election. Likewise, the time between elections is seen as an indicator of perceived relevance, as quickly ensuing elections may undermine voter motivation. The closeness of the election race may have a motivational function as well, by giving voters the impression that their vote might just swing the balance. Lastly, a strong link between social cleavages and the political party landscape may motivate people to participate as a way to express they belong, as well as facilitate them by lowering information costs involved in seeking out a viable party to vote for. If the church or the union recommends a party, why invest extra time in seeking out other options?
The choice of contextual characteristics in Chapter 2 is in line with the exploratory nature of this chapter. The findings will be used as a starting point for further theorizing in the subsequent chapters. The differential influence of contextual factors on individual voters is explored through the use of cross-level interactions.

The conclusions that can be drawn from the analyses of Chapter 2 are twofold. Firstly, and importantly, adding contextual information to a model explaining individual behavior improves the predictive power of the model substantially. This is illustrated in Chapter 2 by comparing actual turnout rates in Dutch elections with predictions that are derived of models with and without contextual information. The models including contextual information consistently outperform models without such information, the difference being considerable.

The second conclusion to be drawn from the model in Chapter 2, is that the model does not conceptualize the influence of context on the individual voter. Although the inclusion of contextual information leads to a better predictive model of individual behavior, the implicit assumption is that contextual characteristics are equally influential to all voters, regardless of individual characteristics. This assumption is theoretically not very plausible, for various reasons. First, context effects cannot influence voters who are already certain of voting on the basis of their individual characteristics. And other voters may simply never vote, regardless of any contextual influences. The influence of contextual factors will thus depend on individual characteristics, and may be different for different voters. Much like rain will fall down on all of us, yet somehow some get more wet than others. Some may carry an umbrella, while some may stay inside. And some may be caught out in the rain and get thoroughly soaked.

1.5 Individualizing Context

Already in Chapter 2, a first attempt is made to ‘tailor’ the influence of the context to the individual. This is done by introducing interaction effects between some contextual and individual characteristics. As virtually no theory on these interactions is available, however, the theoretical logic of doing so is a matter that should be addressed first.

Chapter 3 gives an overview of how electoral participation may be explained at the individual and the aggregate level. With the aid of a graphical representation of the explanatory model, it is shown how both the aggregate level model as well as the individual level model virtually ignore the other. Chapter 3 also shows how this can be amended, and how the two levels of information can be used to explain individual and also aggregate level electoral participation. It is shown how a simplistic form of adding contextual information inherently implies that context effects are assumed to be equal to everyone. An untenable assumption, as argued above. Therefore, Chapter 3 suggests an alternative model, in which it is made explicit that the influence of the context is dependent on individual characteristics. It is argued that such a depiction of the model forces the researcher to specify explicitly what the expected influence of the context on different kinds of voters is.

If contextual influences are not expected to affect the whole of the electorate in a singular way, it becomes necessary to hypothesize how these effects are expected to vary. The theoretical justification for the inclusion of a variable in an explanatory model - so natural at the individual level - is often neglected when contextual level characteristics are concerned. In Chapter 3 the risks of such a ‘lazy’ way of theoretical modeling are elaborated. For different contextual characteristics, differential effects are theorized. One of these, of
particular importance for subsequent chapters, is the "closeness" of the election, a factor that can play a facilitative as well as a motivational role.

Next to theoretical issues, Chapter 3 also addresses more practical issues. Not stopping at theory alone, Chapter 3 also investigates which of the various contextual factors discussed stands the best chance of generating differential effects in actual empirical analysis. It is argued that the closeness of an election is the most promising, and theoretically interesting. Chapter 3 subsequently examines more comprehensively on a theoretical level why it is that some voters are, while other voters aren't likely to be affected by the closeness of the election race. Voters' party preferences are of pivotal importance for the degree to which a voter is likely to be affected by the closeness of the election. Chapter 3 argues that three categories of voters are to be distinguished. These three categories will be identified as Convinced, Confounded and Condemned voters. Convinced voters - who support only one of the parties in the lead, while strongly rejecting the other - will strongly react to the degree of closeness of an election, while Condemned voters - who do not support any of the parties in the lead - are expected to be hardly affected. Confounded voters - who support both of the leading parties - may prove rather unpredictable in their response to the closeness of the election. Subsequent chapters will therefore focus on the differential effect of this contextual factor on electoral participation.

1.6 Making Close Calls

If we know then from Chapter 3 who may be influenced by closeness, the next step is then taken in Chapter 4: when might closeness be influential? In other words, in what kind of elections can we expect closeness to be of influence? Obviously, in two-party elections the race between these two parties is expected to be of influence. But in a more general way, we may hypothesize that closeness can be influential in other systems comprising more parties as well. Chapter 4 argues that closeness can indeed be of influence in a variety of party systems. Chapter 4 examines how the concept of closeness can be operationalized in various political systems, and shows that the common interpretation of closeness as pertaining only to two-party systems is needlessly restrictive.

Chapter 4 is consciously staying 'at the surface', it analyses closeness at the aggregate level of turnout. This allows a quick scan of a variety of systems and preliminary conclusions from where to embark on more detailed analyses at the individual level. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 are dedicated to such in-depth analyses. The impact of closeness on individual voters will be examined for Great Britain and Sweden, respectively. Here again the value of the 'quick scan' in Chapter 4 is made clear, as it was shown that these are two countries that prove susceptible to closeness, at least at the aggregate level. The question to be answered in the two chapters following Chapter 4 is therefore whether the hypothesized individual-level differences in the effect of the contextual factors do indeed occur, and what magnitude they have.

Great Britain is an interesting case where the influence of the closeness of an election is concerned for more than one reason. First and foremost of course, it is a 'first-past-the-post' system dominated by two parties, where the closeness of the race between these two main parties is a frequent theme in the election campaign, used by both the parties to mobilize voters. Nevertheless, the two main parties are not the only actors on the political stage, and they are not even the leading actors on some of the election stages: i.e., within the different constituencies. Although elections are a national affair, in the end the influence of each
individual voter is limited to the local constituency. As a consequence of this, the shape of the political battle that a voter is confronted with in his or her local constituency may differ substantially from what is going on at the national stage.

Chapter 5 examines the electoral participation of individual voters in parliamentary elections in Great Britain between 1970 and 2000. This analysis uses information relating to both the national as well as to the local (constituency) level race. Thus, analysis will examine whether voters are influenced more by the closeness of the race in their own constituency, or the closeness between the two major parties at the national level. As it turns out, the findings of Chapter 5 suggest that voters focus more on the national level than on the race in their own constituency, even though the British electoral system provides voters only direct influence on the local level.

In Sweden, the constituency level is not as significant as it is in Great Britain. More importantly, Sweden has a multi-party system, and proportional representation elections. Some analysts describe the Swedish system as a one-plus party system because of the dominance of the Social Democratic Labor Party (SAP). Chapter 6 shows, however, that Sweden’s multi-party system can be defined as a two-bloc system, pitching the social democratic bloc against the ‘bourgeois’ bloc. Swedish elections focus frequently on the question which of these two blocs will gain government power, although perhaps a more accurate phrasing for most of the second half of the twentieth century is "whether the SAP will retain government power". As was shown in the aggregate analysis of Chapter 4, the result is that the closeness between these two blocs is a factor of considerable influence in Sweden. Chapter 6 demonstrates that this can also be shown at the individual level, by using Swedish election studies for the period 1979-2000.

Chapter 6 shows a notable additional finding: the effect of closeness is of equal magnitude for the whole of the Swedish electorate. This seems at odds with the hypotheses from Chapter 3, which argue that closeness will only affect voters for whom the closeness of the election matters. Section 6.6 of Chapter 6 points at some important data limitations that could explain the absence of individual variation in the influence of closeness. However, even from a theoretical point of view it is not unfeasible that we find closeness equally affects all voters in Sweden. The absence of individual variation in the influence of closeness may well be due to the fact that the two party-blocs comprise the whole of the Swedish political spectrum. As a result of this, closeness affects the whole of the Swedish electorate in virtually the same way. Indeed, if it rains in Sweden, everyone appears to get wet.

This study argues that contextual factors cannot be ignored when explaining individual behavior. At the same time however, it also argues that this influence should be modeled at the individual level - and not only at the aggregate level - as the strength of context effects is dependent on individual characteristics. For some, the context may be irrelevant, namely for voters who will turn out in every election held in the country, irrespective of political or economic conditions. These dependable voters may well be called ‘habitual voters’. Equally irrelevant is the context for a - typically much smaller - segment of the electorate that will never vote in any election. Reasons for such complete lack of electoral participation might include complete detachment from society (e.g., the homeless people, the mentally impaired and so forth), radical opposition to the political system or simply a complete lack of interest. These characteristics will ensure complete electoral abstention, typically unaltered as long as personal characteristics also remain unchanged.
That leaves the middle ground to the occasional voter, where there is room to maneuver. This is where voters typically are inclined to participate, but no guarantees are given. Occasional voters may participate in virtually every parliamentary election, but local elections may at times be given a miss. Or they may express a genuine intention to vote, but in the end find themselves missing out on Election Day for some reason or other. The occasional electorate determines the ebb and flow of the turnout tide. We demonstrate for one contextual factor, electoral closeness, how the occasional electorate is affected by it, and under which circumstances this aspect of the electoral closeness makes them vote, or abstain.