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

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As Chapter 2 showed, individual electoral participation can be explained better when information at the contextual level is included in the model. The accuracy of the analytical model used in Chapter 2 was substantially increased when information at the individual and the contextual level was included: prediction of actual turnout levels improved. The improved predictions indicate that our ability to explain variations in turnout rates that occur between elections has improved over that of models based on individual level information alone.

In addition, Chapter 2 also showed that some voters may be affected by a contextual effect more than others. This phenomenon will be further reflected upon in the current chapter. Although the addition of contextual level information tends to increase the predictive power of the model as a whole, caution should therefore be taken in this matter, since the effect of contextual level characteristics is not necessarily a uniform effect. Empirically, this was shown in the analyses of Chapter 2. Table 2-3 showed that the effect of all contextual characteristics showed significant interactions with political efficacy. This indicates that the influence of the contextual characteristics varies with individual characteristics of voters - in this case political efficacy. This concept of a variable influence of the political context - not to be confused with variability of the political context - will form the main theme of this and the following chapters. This chapter argues that combining the contextual and individual level of explanation is more than merely adding extra variables to an equation that is to be estimated. Rather, it requires a complete integration of the two levels in both theory and empirical analysis.

First, the theoretical framework that allows the integration of contextual and individual level information will be presented here. The explanatory model at both levels will be depicted, after which the integration of the two models is presented. Subsequently, a theoretical exploration of the influence of three contextual characteristics on individual voters is presented. In this exploration, the main focus is on individual variation of the effect of these contextual characteristics. Can a theoretical argument be developed that would lead us to hypothesize that the effect of contextual characteristics is unlikely to affect voters uniformly?

On the basis of practical arguments, one contextual characteristic is then selected for further empirical exploration: the ‘closeness’ of the election. The effects of this aspect of the (political) context on individual voters are elaborated empirically in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 of this study.
3.1 The Need for Context

Chapter 2 showed that contextual information helps explain individual behavior. This section will lay out step by step how electoral participation can be explained through these two levels of information, and how these two explanation can be combined in a single model.

Individual characteristics such as age, education or gender help us explain why some people tend to vote, while others do not. They explain differences within the electorate, and they tend to do so consistently across contexts. Higher education tends to go with an increased tendency to vote, as does age, up to the point where health becomes an inhibiting factor. Gender tends to have a varying impact between countries, but the effect is typically very stable within a country. If women vote more - or less - than men, they tend to do so consistently in the various elections held within a country. Figure 3-1 shows graphically how individual characteristics explain electoral participation, which in term determines turnout1.

Figure 3-1 Electoral Participation and Turnout Explained by Individual Characteristics

Although individual characteristics tend to have a very stable influence on electoral participation, this does not mean that variations in turnout between elections do not occur. Changes in the strength of the effects of individual characteristics are possible. Across decades, we may find that, e.g., age becomes less powerful in the explanation of electoral participation, as may gender or education. Such differences will be reflected by different values of the effect parameters, depicted as the bottom arrow in the graph.

Equally, shifts in the composition of the electorate may cause changes in turnout levels. Improved access to educational facilities may bring about an increase in the level of education of the electorate, while an influx of young voters may shift the age composition of the electorate. Such changes in the composition of the electorate will affect the level of turnout, and are reflected by the right hand arrow of the graph.

Although theoretically they could, empirically these changes are not observed to take place overnight, and they also do not tend to happen frequently. Especially where socio-demographic characteristics are concerned, these changes are very gradual processes. The level of education of a country does not increase or decrease greatly.

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1 Note that the right hand arrow from electoral participation to turnout does not indicate a causal effect in the traditional sense, but rather reflects that the sum of individual actions (electoral participation) determines the aggregate outcome, i.e. turnout.
between two elections, nor does the average age of the electorate.

Other individual characteristics however, such as party evaluations, political interest or political efficacy can theoretically change dramatically, and virtually overnight. Although such dramatic changes are only seldom observed, they form a potential explanation of between-election fluctuations in turnout that cannot be explained by socio-demographic characteristics. But in practice this explanation is merely shifting the focus of the question. To affect turnout levels, large numbers of voters would have to change their behavior in similar ways. The question then becomes: why would the party evaluation or the level of political interest of such a substantial amount of voters change in unison?

Outside influences - beyond the individual voter - are a viable explanation for the short-term, substantial changes in turnout that can be observed between virtually every election. Contextual characteristics - characteristics describing the political, economic, institutional and societal make up of the country - can affect the composition of the electorate, as well as the influence of individual characteristics on electoral participation. Thus, contextual characteristics can explain fluctuations in turnout that may not be explained satisfactorily by individual level characteristics. Examples of contextual characteristics that can explain short-term fluctuations are political and economic characteristics such as incumbency of a candidate, (changes in) the party landscape, economic factors and any type of gaffe or, conversely, success, of any of the main political actors.

Contextual characteristics may also be of a more stable nature. Systemic characteristics such as the institutional make up of a country, the voting system or the day of the week elections are held are examples of these. Variations within countries in these systemic characteristics are typically few and far between. They do however serve as more plausible explanations for the variation found in turnout levels between countries than individual characteristics do (cf. Lijphart 1999; Franklin 2002).

In short, contextual characteristics provide explanations for short-term turnout variation within a country as well as long-term variation within and between countries. However, as Figure 3-2 shows, this solution comes at a price.

Figure 3-2 Turnout Explained by Contextual Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXTUAL CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>TURNOUT</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS</td>
<td>ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION</td>
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Figure 3-2 shows that the contextual approach explains variation in turnout by differences in contextual characteristics. It also shows something else: how the contextual approach ignores the individual voter completely. Individual behavior is not part of the model, turnout is presumed to be solely determined by contextual characteristics. Although it is unlikely that any researcher focusing on contextual explanations will actually believe that turnout rates are the product of voting systems, shifts in the party system and the economic mood alone, the absence of the individual voter in an equation of which the outcome is ultimately dependent on this individual voter is of course a structural flaw of the contextual approach. Contexts do not vote - voters do. Turnout is the result of individual level behavior, and a contextual level explanation will therefore have to make clear how contextual characteristics affect individual voters.

An integration of the two levels of information into a single model is therefore a potentially fruitful exercise. The model will become more complete, by taking account of influences at the contextual and individual level that voters are exposed to when deciding to vote. The past decade has indeed seen the establishment of a research tradition that aims to overcome the shortcomings of the individual as well as the contextual approach by combining the two into one model (e.g., Franklin 1996; Anduiza Perea 1997; van Egmond, de Graaf & van der Eijk 1998). Individual electoral participation and aggregate level turnout is in this approach explained with the use of both individual and contextual characteristics. This way, the voting decision is modeled at the individual level, while it is at the same time acknowledged that an individual voter does not operate in a vacuum, but in a context that influences the individual, through factors connected to the political system and the present day situation in the society that the political system is part of.

The benefits of this approach are substantial. Fluctuations in turnout that cannot be explained by changes in individual characteristics or in the distribution of those characteristics alone may now be explained. And suggestions regarding the influence of the political context on individual voters that cannot be tested in contextual level models - as in these models the individual level is absent - may now be tested since the causal link between the two levels is part of the model.

The graphical representation of this model is given in Figure 3-3. The causal link between contextual characteristics and turnout is not a direct one, as the influence of the context is mediated through the individual level, indicated by the dashed top arrow.

Figure 3-3 Electoral Participation and Turnout Explained by Individual and Contextual Characteristics

![Diagram](image-url)
Empirical analyses that reflect the theoretical model presented in Figure 3-3 are typically cast in the form of a regression model, most often a logistic regression to acknowledge the dichotomous character of the dependent variable. Included in the model are indicators for individual level characteristics (age, education, etcetera) explaining the dependent variable: individual electoral participation. Added to this is information regarding the context of the election, typically through the use of variables added to the model as if they were individual characteristics. All respondents that are sampled from a particular context thus have identical scores. In this way individual and contextual level information is used to predict individual behavior, and both individual characteristics of voters and characteristics of the elections are given their rightful place in the explanatory model. An example of such a model is found in Chapter 2, for the analyses on participation in Dutch parliamentary elections.

Is the model in Figure 3-3 sufficient to explain electoral participation using contextual and individual characteristics? Unfortunately, no. The model in Figure 3-3 contains a serious theoretical flaw: contextual characteristics are assumed to be equally influential for all voters. Regardless of their individual characteristics, the model of Figure 3-3 implies that all voters are affected by the electoral context in the same way, without individual variation. The model in Figure 3-3 imposes uniform contextual effects since it does not specify any interaction between contextual and individual level characteristics. This is not a feasible assumption, as can be demonstrated by way of a few examples.

Let us take the example of media attention. Awareness of the election, an obvious individual-level prerequisite of electoral participation, is generally thought to be positively influenced by the volume of media attention for an upcoming election. It is irrelevant what causes media attention, economic or political scandal, an extremely close election race, the entrance of a new player in the political arena and so forth. The main expectation is that media attention positively affects voters’ consciousness of the election. However, for a voter to be influenced by media attention, exposure to the media is required. Either directly, by picking up a newspaper or not zapping away when the TV-news comes on, or indirectly through discussions with friends or colleagues when politics is a topic of conversation. In the absence of exposure, media attention will not reach, and therefore not affect voters. As not all voters are equally exposed to media - directly or indirectly - the assumption of uniform contextual effects lacks plausibility.

Another example can be found in the discussion about the effects of Sunday voting. A number of authors have suggested that weekend voting may increase turnout figures (cf. Crewe 1981; Oppenhuis 1995; Franklin 1996). Oppenhuis suggests that weekend voting may be a facilitative contextual factor as the time pressure of the hectic working week is absent and voters will therefore find it easier to participate. This is a plausible line of argument, leading to the expectation that Sunday voting will indeed influence turnout rates positively. Yet this effect only applies to some voters. It applies to those who have a hectic working week, and a relaxed weekend. It does not apply to those who are far more flexible in their daily schedule such as part-time workers, pensioners, students, the unemployed and perhaps housewives (m/f). This part of the electorate may well be able to find the time to vote at any day of the week, and hence will not be affected by the day of the week the election is held.

\[\text{Cf. Coleman, 1990.}\]
And obviously, Sunday voting will actually be an obstacle to those who have to work on Sundays - bartenders, nurses, but also those working Sunday-shifts.

Lastly, argued from a different starting point, there must be room for influences of the electoral context. For some parts of the electorate, however, the combination of personal characteristics ensures that they always will participate - or that they never will - come hell or high water. For such voters, contextual effects have no impact. For other parts of the electorate there is room for contextual effects, as their (non-) participation is not fully fixed by other factors. It follows therefore, that the influence of the electoral context is not necessarily equal to all voters.

To accommodate the potential variability of contextual effects, an amendment of the model presented in Figure 3-3 is needed. Such a model is presented in Figure 3-4. It is the same model as presented in Figure 3-3, including individual and contextual level information to predict individual level behavior. In addition, an interaction term between contextual and individual level characteristics is made an explicit part of the model. It is represented by two arrows: one arrow from contextual characteristics to electoral participation, with a second arrow from individual characteristics pointing at it, reflecting the dependency on individual characteristics of the contextual influence. These two additional arrows reflect contextual influences that are dependent on individual characteristics. As argued above, this is a more plausible representation of the influence of political context. In addition, the explicit interaction term also forces the researcher to make explicit how the contextual characteristic is expected to influence voters, rather than unthinkingly opt for the assumption of a uniform contextual influence.

Figure 3-4 Electoral Participation and Turnout Explained by Individual and Contextual Characteristics, Allowing for Individual Variation in Contextual Influence

In Figure 3-4 contextual effects form an integral part of the model explaining electoral participation, but the influence of contextual effects is not presumed to be equal for all voters. By doing so, the model explicitly calls for hypotheses about possible variation of contextual effects for different kinds of voters. The model still allows the context to be treated as a uniform phenomenon, much like rain falling down on all of us. Yet this model also allows,
and even invites, individual variation in the effects of this uniform context. Yes, rain does fall on all of us, but some still happen to get more wet than others - determined by individual characteristics. Some individuals carry umbrellas at all times, providing useful protection against precipitation. But there are also some poor souls without anything to shield them from the vagaries of the weather (or, the context of an election).

3.2 What Context, and What Effect?
The current section will explore how uniform contextual effects may have a variable influence on the electorate, affecting voters in different ways. Three examples will make the variable impact of contextual characteristics concrete.

Contextual characteristics can be determined by the institutional arrangements of the polity, the (party-) political landscape or other politically relevant circumstances. Some of these characteristics will be rather stable when viewed from within one polity, such as for instance the electoral threshold, or Sunday versus weekday voting. As a consequence, variation in such a contextual characteristic can usually be found between different political systems, not within a single system over time. Other characteristics can be more variable, and show considerable fluctuations between elections in a single system, as well as between different political systems. Examples of such characteristics are the closeness of the election race, or whether there is an incumbent candidate or a coalition endeavoring to remain in office.

Three characteristics will be discussed here. First, Section 3.2.1 will discuss a motivational contextual characteristic, the presence or absence of concurrent elections. Does the combination of two elections held on the same day affect voter turnout? Secondly, the day of the week elections are held will be discussed, a facilitative factor. Sunday versus weekday voting was already mentioned briefly above, and will be further discussed in Section 3.2.2. Lastly, the closeness of the election may have both a motivational and a facilitative effect on voters. It will be discussed further in Section 3.2.3. The possible influence each of these characteristics may have on voters will be discussed at the theoretical level. Expectations and assumptions regarding the influence of the contextual effect on individual voters will be made explicit. Subsequently, the practicalities of testing these assumptions and hypotheses empirically will be discussed, taking into account restrictions regarding availability of data and actual variation found in the contextual characteristics.

3.2.1 Concurrent Elections
Political commentators often suggest - especially after an election showed a disappointingly low turnout - that elections for several political bodies should be held concurrently, so as to improve turnout. In this way, less prominent second-order elections may benefit from the interest that first-order elections generate (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Reif 1984). It is not the aim of this study to make policy recommendations about such proposals, but rather to show how concurrent elections may have an effect on some, but not on other voters.

The main argument for concurrent elections is that many people are inclined to vote in some elections, but not in others. Voters will deem some elections important enough to turn out, whereas other elections cannot generate such interest and are given a miss. For these 'unpopular' elections, turnout may be improved by combining them with more important elections. However, concurrent elections need not be an incentive to all voters. Individual
level research has shown that not all potential voters stand an equal chance to participate, or, put differently, are likely to give the election a miss. Certain individual characteristics make for habitual voters: voters that participate in virtually all elections. For these voters, moral considerations, genuine political interest or loyalty towards a political party or social group are incentives strong enough to ensure their participation in all elections, regardless of the perceived importance of that election. Contextual influences - including concurrent elections - will for these voters not affect their likelihood to participate, since they participate anyway. If individual behavior is constant over contexts, characteristics of context become irrelevant.

The above implies that concurrent elections as a contextual influence can only affect the occasional voters: the complement of the habitual voters whose participation in the election is not certain. Depending on the political system, a smaller or larger part of the electorate will be immune to contextual influences, and the size of this segment of the electorate is actually a system characteristic in its own right. In most western democratic systems, these immunized voters are likely to share certain individual characteristics. One example of such an individual level characteristic is having a high level of education. Apart from providing cognitive skills, schools also teach pupils about the norms and values of a society. In democratic systems, electoral participation is a civic duty that is part of the norms and values of society. An extended education engrains this sense of civic duty, and, as a consequence, highly educated citizens tend to be part of the immunized segment of habitual voters (cf. Wittebrood 1995). The same sense of civic duty may ensure that religious voters will also be habitual voters in certain countries. The church ensures that these voters participate, regardless of the context of the election. Habitual voters may also be found among party members, or strong party adherents, for whom an election provides an opportunity to express their party loyalty. These are but a few individual characteristics that can ensure electoral participation, regardless of whether elections are held concurrently - or, for that matter, any other aspect of the electoral context.

The hypothesized variation in the impact of concurrent elections is testable in empirical analyses. A significant interaction between the contextual characteristic - election is held concurrently or not - and personal characteristics that identify habitual voters is expected. Concurrent elections are expected to increase turnout, but only for occasional voters whose participation is uncertain. A highly politicized system with many habitual voters is likely to see a relatively small overall change, should it switch to concurrent elections to boost turnout.

3.2.2 Sunday Voting
A number of researchers have suggested that Sunday or weekend voting will have a positive effect on electoral participation, although their theoretical explanations of this often remain remarkably scanty. Crewe simply states that holding elections on a rest day "presumably raises turnout by a fraction" (Crewe 1981, p. 241). Oppenhuis restates this, but adds "[i]t is hard to tell why this would be so" (Oppenhuis 1995, p.30). Like Franklin (1996), he suggests that it is because work or school does not get in the way of electoral participation on a free day. This would imply that Sunday voting only has a positive influence on workers and students. However, this distinction is not reflected in the analytical models, in which "Sunday voting" is included as a dummy variable to influence everyone. An interaction term with occupation, or a specific indicator signifying whether Sunday is a day off would be more appropriate here, so that a positive influence on workers, and an absence of such an effect on
non-workers could be detected. As was already discussed in Section 3.1, for some voters Sunday voting will facilitate participation, while for other voters it will not make a difference, or even hinder participation. Even then, however, matters may be more complicated.

Research into European elections has shown that - regardless of occupation - Sunday voting may for some people actually have an adverse effect on turnout. Some respondents indicated that after a week of hard work, they were not going to sacrifice their day of relaxation to the call of the voting booth (Blondel, Sinnott & Svensson 1996). Rather than spending their valuable free time voting, the ‘new worker’ generation indicated they would opt for spending their leisure time outside in the park. If any, the effect of weekend voting would not be positive for this group. This flies directly into the face of the previous reasoning, as it pertains even to the same segments of the electorate who would, according to this hypothesis, be less inclined to vote, rather than more inclined. However, this alternative effect of Sunday voting need not necessarily affect the whole of the workforce: possibly, only the younger generations share this ‘leisure is sacred’ attitude, which would call for an interaction term taking age or cohort into account, to fully tease out the differential impact of Sunday voting.

A different effect yet may exist for groups that hold Sundays as sacred, although in more traditional terms. Devout Christians may be opposed to the conduct of such worldly affairs as an election on a Sunday. If we take the Dutch case presented in Chapter 2 as an example, we can see that the consequence of turning to Sunday elections will be twofold. Dutch Reformed and Calvinist voters - staunch voters in the Netherlands - would cease to participate, leading to a lower turnout in Sunday elections. As a sidestep, these voters are also known to primarily support specific parties, notably the Christian parties, so that not only turnout, but also the election outcome is likely to differ for Sunday elections.

Although it is unlikely that elections are actually held on Sundays in countries where a large part of the population objects to this on religious grounds, the effect of Sunday elections may still be a factor in countries where the religious section of society is less dominant. The effect of Sunday versus weekday elections on religious voters therefore calls for interaction terms to control for this. To make matters even more complicated: workers may turn out more in Sunday elections, but not religious workers, or younger workers. Although politically interested younger workers might participate in greater numbers on Sundays than they would on weekdays.

### 3.2.3 Closeness of the Election

A substantial amount of research includes the degree of party competition or the closeness of the election race as a contextual influence on electoral participation (cf. Powell 1980; Crewe 1981; Rallings & Thrasher 1990; Flickinger & Studlar 1992; Franklin 1996, 1999; Blais & Dobrzynska 1998; van Egmond, De Graaf, & van der Eijk 1998; Pattie & Johnston 1998). Invariably however, a close race between the two largest parties is treated as a contextual factor that is expected to have a generic, positive effect on turnout.²

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² Pattie and Johnston (1998) specifically point to the gap between "...an analysis of individuals taken out of their local contexts, or of contexts with no individuals." (p. 267) and express the explicit aim to bridge this gap, but then nevertheless proceed to enter contextual indicators in an individual level model, without reference to possible individual variation in this influence.
It is not inconceivable that a close race between the two leading parties or candidates will have a positive influence on turnout for the whole of the electorate. A close race is likely to create extra media attention, which in turn is likely to increase awareness of the election among the electorate and hence increase the chance to participate. However, as argued above, this heightened awareness will only affect those voters who were not already certain about participating.

Another positive effect a close race may have on turnout is likely to affect an even more specific segment of the electorate. Voters may be more likely to participate in a closely fought election since they may feel their vote might just tip the scale and thus determine the outcome of the election. However, this incentive will not affect all of the electorate. It is understandable that strong supporters of the parties vying for the lead will regard a close election as an extra incentive to vote. It is rather unclear, however, why a supporter of any of the other parties should feel affected by the closeness of the election race - a race between parties other than the one the voter cares about. For these voters, the closeness of the race is a contextual characteristic that may well be without significance. Any analysis considering the influence of a close election race on turnout should therefore include information on support for the different parties. Based on this information, hypotheses regarding the expected influence of election closeness on different voters can then be specified and tested.

3.3 When Theory Meets Practice
So far in this chapter, the discussion has remained at the theoretical level. As in Chapter 2, however, it is the aim of this study to test theoretical assumptions with empirical analysis. But when theory meets practice, problems abound.

3.3.1 Methodological Considerations
Combining information at the individual and the contextual level in one model adds complications to the empirical analysis. Multiple levels of influence call for an analytical model that takes into account that the information and influence on individuals stem from separate levels - context and individual. This is the point that has been raised in Section 3.1 of this chapter, and led to the model presented in Figure 3-4.

Many authors argue that logistic or OLS regression is unsuited as a method of analysis for such data, and multi-level models should be used instead. The problem is of a statistical nature. If individuals are influenced by their political context, and we take samples of individuals in different political contexts, the individuals in each of the samples have something in common: their political context. In survey-analytical terms this implies that there is no independence of observations between the members of the same samples, as far as the contextual variables are concerned. Independence of observations is one of the underlying assumptions of regression analysis and related methods. If this condition is not met - if the observations are clustered - the estimation of the standard errors is biased. The typical result, in the case of positive correlation between the clustered observations (so called positive intra-class correlation), is that the standard errors of parameters representing contextual effects will be underestimated. Underestimated standard errors increase the risk of

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4 On this matter, see Goldstein, 1995, and for a recent overview Steenbergen and Jones, 2002.
a Type I error. As a consequence, OLS regression may falsely suggest that contextual effects are statistically significant where in reality they are not.\footnote{In the analyses of Chapter 2, this aspect was not given full attention so as not to burden the exploratory analyses. In the analyses of Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 multi-level models are used.}

This problem has been recognized in the literature, and especially so in the literature on educational research, where the influence of the school class on the achievements of individual students is a comparable analytical problem. Here too, information at the level of the individual - the pupil - as well as the context - the school class - is analyzed in a single model. The statistical solution developed in that field is multi-level modeling, also known as random effects modeling (cf. Goldstein, 1995). This solution is now becoming more popular in political science as well (see for instance Steenbergen & Jones, 2002).

Multi-level modeling is essentially a regression model that allows for explanatory variables at different levels. Using regression analysis parlance, the model is estimated based on the individual level explanatory variables, but the intercept and/or the slope of the regression are allowed to vary between contexts. Multi-level modeling assumes that the contextual characteristics are values drawn randomly from a distribution of values describing those contexts, which explains the alternative name of random effects modeling. The model thus estimates a regression line based on individual characteristics, and a distribution around that regression line based on variation that can be explained by the contextual characteristics. In doing so, it also takes account of the different number of degrees of freedom at the various levels of information.

While multi-level modeling provides an elegant solution to the analytical problem of how to take clustered contextual information into account, this solution does come at a price. The emphasis on contextual variation in the model puts rather strict requirements on the empirical data to be used in a multi-level analysis and on the way they are collected. Whereas traditional data collection in political science aims for a large degree of variation at the individual level, a proper multi-level design requires sufficient variation at the contextual level as well. Depending on what is defined as the contextual level, the difficulties this can create are clear. In analyzing the impact of the political context on electoral participation, the contextual level is the election, which means that a substantial number of elections have to be combined in one way or another, be it over time or between countries. As elections remain rather infrequent events, and elections from which individual level data are available even scarcer, this may imply that the analytical model is expected to do more than is technically desirable.

3.3.2 Empirical Complications
Apart from technical analytical problems, there are problems of an empirical nature to be dealt with as well. Choosing the correct analytical method to analyze the available data is only part of the problem. Making sure that those data are available and of sufficient quality to enable empirical analysis is the other issue to be dealt with. In this section the practical obstacles for testing hypotheses regarding concurrent elections, Sunday voting and a close race empirically will be examined, to establish which of these contextual characteristics is amenable to fruitful empirical analyses.
To investigate the influence of a contextual characteristic of any kind, variation in that characteristic is essential. Variation can be obtained by combining cases (i.e., elections) between systems, by combining cases from one system over time or by a combination of the two, provided of course that this actually yields contextual variation. As different political systems tend to vary on more characteristics than just the one under study, comparison within one system may be preferable so that the confounding influence of other system characteristics is minimized. With this in mind, the possibilities for empirical analysis of the three examples given above will now be evaluated.

Concerning concurrent elections, two cases immediately spring to mind: Sweden and the USA. Perhaps the best example of a system with variation in concurrent elections is the United States House elections. In ‘on’ years, these elections are held concurrently with presidential (and at times gubernatorial, senatorial and a slew of additional) elections, while in ‘off’ years no presidential elections are held. This is the perfect ‘field experiment’ for concurrent elections, since US House elections occur frequently, offering a large number of cases for analysis at the contextual level. In addition, variation is within the political system, which ensures that confounding influences, encountered when comparing countries, are kept to a minimum. In addition, there is a large amount of individual level data available for US House elections, both in ‘on’ years as well as ‘off’ years.

In Sweden, elections for government bodies at different levels (national, local) are at present held concurrently, while before 1970 they were held separately. Swedish research does indicate that turnout in local elections increases substantially when these elections are held concurrently with national elections (research by Oscarsson, personal correspondence).

Outside the USA and Sweden, concurrent elections occur only sporadically. Luxembourg has held elections for the European Parliament concurrent with national elections ever since the former started in 1979, allowing for comparisons with other EU member states that do not hold EP elections concurrently with national parliamentary elections (cf. van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996). Because of the relatively limited number of cases, the influence of concurrent elections is best analyzed in a within-country analysis. Between-country comparisons of the effect of concurrent elections are much more difficult to establish.

The day of the week elections are held is generally determined by law, and applies to all elections held in a country, regardless of the body elected. This means that a comparison of the influence of Sunday versus weekday voting will in practice only be possible between political systems. The number of control variables required will then likely far outnumber the number of countries available for analysis. Reducing the number of explanatory variables increases the risk of an omitted variable problem. As a consequence, the analytical model becomes unsolvable. To test the influence of Sunday versus weekday voting on the individual level may therefore prove unsatisfying.

A close race suffers less from the limitations in variation found with the two previous examples. Although certain party systems may show a structurally low or high degree of competition, limiting within-system variation, a substantial number of polities remain in which the outcome of the election may be an easy victory in one election, while a fierce battle in the next. This ensures that comparison is possible both within and between systems, so that an abundant amount of data is available for analysis. This is not to say that the modeling of
individual variation of the influence of close election races will be simple and straightforward, as other complications remain. Nevertheless, it appears that analyzing the influence of a close election race offers the best chance of testing hypotheses empirically. The remainder of this chapter will elaborate further on how a close race may affect voters individually.

3.4 Up Close, and Personal: A Close Election Race
How may closeness affect individual voters? This section aims to shed light on that question by deriving hypotheses for specific categories of voters. As no research specifying the workings of closeness at the individual level is available, the assumptions and hypotheses will be based on broader notions regarding political participation. This exercise in hypothesizing underlines the contention made earlier in this chapter, that the effects of contextual characteristics should preferably be theorized at the individual level.

The influence of a close election race on voters may be of a motivational or of a facilitative nature. The facilitative effect may follow from an increased awareness of the election among the electorate as a result of increased media attention and intensified campaigning. Voters may be made more aware of the election and, consequently, show a greater propensity to vote. In today’s mass media societies this facilitative influence may affect nearly the whole electorate, although it is also the case here that individual variation is possible, as media consumption is typically not uniform. This facilitative effect of closeness will be returned to briefly in Chapter 4, but will not form the focus of this research.

The motivational influence of closeness is based on an expected increase in the perceived significance of the election to voters, as in a close election each vote may be seen as being crucial. Voters may perceive the opportunity to swing the balance as an incentive to vote. The focus of this research will be on this latter, motivational effect of a close election race.

Why then should the effect of a contextual constant in an election - the size of the gap between the leading parties - vary between voters? After all, the facts that define the contextual characteristic remain objectively the same and equal to the whole of the electorate: a 1 percent gap between two parties (as indicated by opinion polls) is simply a 1 percent gap. However, the influence of this context characteristic effect will not be the equal to all voters. The explanation for that is quite simple: in general, voters do not care about all parties equally. Neither need they therefore be equally stimulated by the gap between any two parties. Voters may care for one, or for several parties, while they may not care at all for other parties. It is reasonable to assume that a close race will affect a voter if one of the parties in the lead is a party he or she cares about. By the same token however, it is also reasonable to assume that a close race will affect a voter rather less if the parties in the lead are parties that voter does not care about. In that case, it actually does not matter how close the race is, since it is a race between two options that are both unattractive. The motivational influence of a

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6 It is important to distinguish here between a choice made in the voting booth, which is usually restricted to a single party in most western democratic systems, and a preference, that is not necessarily restricted to one party. Even though voters will commonly have to limit their choice to one party or candidate, there is ample research underlining that voters hold preferences for more than one party, and also that their dislikes for non-preferred parties vary between parties, which may influence their behavior (Cf. van der Eijk & Oppenhuis 1991; Tillie 1995; van der Eijk & Franklin 1996).
close election race will thus not affect these voters, but only affect voters who consider voting for either of the parties in the lead. This implies that the motivational influence of a close election race is dependent on individual characteristics, more specifically party preferences. Put in simple terms, to be affected by the closeness of the race between two parties, a voter will have to care for at least one of these parties, and thus consider at least one of the parties in the lead as a viable option to vote for.

With this reasoning as a starting point, a threefold categorization of voters will now be introduced. The three categories will be named the Convinced, the Confounded and the Condemned voters. The determining factor in establishing which ‘C’ will fit the voter is preference for the political parties in the lead - or lack thereof.

### 3.4.1 Categorizing Voters: the Convinced Voters

The motivational influence of a close race is most obvious for voters who support one of the leading parties. Obviously these voters will want to support their preferred party in the election and thus will participate. They may therefore be aptly called Convinced voters. For these voters, a close election is of most significance as their party stands a good chance of winning the election - or losing it - and the opportunity to secure this victory or avert defeat should work as an incentive to turn out on election day. Consequently, these voters are expected to be most susceptible to the influence of a close race. This effect may even be augmented for part of the Convinced voters, if the rival party in the lead is evaluated negatively. Then it becomes a race not just about good, but about good versus evil, which should enhance the influence of closeness.

### 3.4.2 The Confounded voters

The situation becomes somewhat more complicated for voters who are attracted to both parties in the lead. These voters will be labeled Confounded voters, as their wealth of choice may actually become a problem. As already mentioned, even though most political systems allow their voters to choose only one candidate or party, this does not mean that voters will consider only one option during the process of determining which candidate or party to vote for. They may hesitate between several parties or candidates, all offering various attractive policy standpoints. Voters may therefore find themselves in a situation where they have narrowed down their options to a few, or even two parties, and these may be the two parties in the race for the lead.

Voters who are attracted to both parties in the race for the lead may show distinctive, possibly even surprising behavior. These voters are cross-pressured: they are tugged at from opposing sides as both their favored parties are in the race for the lead and thus in desperate need of their vote. A vote for one party would be a vote against the other: they are damned if they do, and damned if they don’t. To make matters worse, it is an important vote as well, since in a close election any single vote could tip the scales. The outcome of this conundrum could be that the tugging from both sides results in no movement at all. Instead of participating in the election, voters faced with an abundance of attractive electoral alternatives may opt out and stay at home, so as not to vote against either of their favored parties. The severity of this predicament will increase with the intensity and balance of their support for the leading parties, and the closeness of the election. Therefore, Confounded voters are expected to show a reduced propensity to vote in close elections.
The third category is the Condemned voter. This concerns voters who find neither of the parties in the lead acceptable at all as an option to vote for. The situation for these non-supporters should be rather less complicated than for the Confounded voters. In essence, Condemned voters are condemned to vote for a party they know will not win. They are therefore not expected to be affected by the closeness of the election race. After all, why meddle in a race in which none of the potential winners is attractive? To Condemned voters, none of the *leading* parties are acceptable alternatives in the voting booth. It then follows that such a voter will not derive a motivational incentive from a close election race, since affecting the outcome of the race - by voting for one of the leading parties - is not a valued option.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Affected by closeness?</th>
<th>Effect on participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convinced</td>
<td>Favors one of the parties in the lead</td>
<td>Very likely</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confounded</td>
<td>Favors both of the parties in the lead</td>
<td>Possibly</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condemned</td>
<td>Favors neither of the parties in the lead</td>
<td>Unlikely</td>
<td>Absent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-1 summarizes the expected motivational effect of closeness on the three categories of voters. Convinced voters favor only one of the parties in the lead, they are expected to be affected by closeness, by showing an increased propensity to vote in close elections. Confounded voters favor both parties in the lead. Their chance to vote may, through cross-pressure, be affected by closeness in a negative way. Condemned voters favor none of the parties in the lead and are not expected to be affected by closeness - at least not the motivational effect of closeness. An effect on participation is therefore expected to be absent.

Table 3-1 also underscores the risk of a Type II error in an aggregate level analysis. As the aggregate level model assumes contextual effects to be uniform for the whole of the electorate, it follows that variation of influence at the individual level will find its way into such a model as an aggregation of these individual level effects. Table 3-1 shows that the expected effects of closeness at the individual level do not all run in the same direction. Depending therefore on the composition of the electorate - the ratio of the respective Convinced, Confounded and Condemned voter segments - the individual level influences may cancel out in an aggregate level analysis. The conclusion from an aggregate level analysis could therefore be that closeness does not affect electoral participation or turnout.

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7 Compare Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954) and Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaude (1948) who find that voters under cross-pressure both delay their choice and tend to downplay the importance of the election.

8 Some might argue that a Condemned voter may be in a different position if they decide to 'vote tactically', in other words vote for one of the parties that do stand a chance of winning. For Condemned voters this is not an option however, since they do not prefer either of the parties in the lead. Tactical voters will at least have a certain preference for one of the parties in the lead, although the party may not be their first preference.
- but this would be a false conclusion at the individual level, as closeness may certainly affect electoral participation, although differently for different kinds of voters. Whether these different individual effects combine to an aggregate effect is, of course, only dependent on the composition of the electorate.

3.5 Conclusions

This chapter aimed to integrate the two approaches to explaining electoral participation generally used. The benefits of integration have already been brought to the fore in Chapter 2. But an integrated model is more than two levels of information simply added together. It is the argument of this chapter that next to hypotheses regarding the influence of explanatory factors on electoral participation at the aggregate and the individual level, an integrated model requires hypotheses about the interaction between these two levels of influence. Figure 3-4 presented a graphical representation of such an integrated explanatory model.

Section 3.2 proceeded to make the argument of a contextual effect with a varying impact at the individual level conceivable. Three contextual characteristics were selected that are frequently included in models analyzing aggregate level turnout. For concurrent elections, Sunday versus weekday voting and a close election race it was discussed how the influence of these characteristics may vary between voters, depending on their individual characteristics.

The remainder of the chapter laid the groundwork for applying the theoretical model to actual empirical analysis. Problems regarding the method of analysis, as well as empirical data available for research were discussed, on the basis of which one contextual characteristic - the closeness of the election race - was selected for further empirical analysis in this book. The possible effects of closeness on different categories of voters were subsequently explored.

The descriptions of the categories of voters given in the previous section all implicitly referred to an as yet not specified political system with at least two parties. The following chapter will show that the party landscape is actually of crucial importance to the influence of closeness as a contextual characteristic. In Chapter 4, the impact of closeness on turnout is examined at the aggregate level. It will show from a theoretical starting point that closeness may be an important factor in some political systems, but not in others. In some countries, the closeness of the election is unlikely to affect any voter. No aggregate level effect can be established for these countries, since there is no individual level influence. Confusingly however, the absence of an aggregate level effect may also be caused by a balancing out of individual level influences, or an individual level influence that affects too few voters to be noted at the aggregate level. Chapter 5 and 6 will therefore investigate the influence of closeness at the individual level in two systems, namely Great Britain and Sweden. In these two countries an aggregate level effect can be established, as Chapter 4 will show. Since an aggregate level effect can be established, the closeness of the election will affect British and Swedish voters at the individual level as well. The only question to be answered in Chapters 5 and 6 after the aggregate level analyses of Chapter 4, is whether the closeness of the election affects all voters equally.

One concluding remark concerns the generalizability of the argument presented here. The remainder of this study will deal with the influence of closeness on electoral participation. However, the general argument regarding the varying impact of context
characteristics on the individual is by no means restricted to the realms of electoral participation, or political behavior in general. Far more broadly, the theoretical model used is applicable to virtually all of the social sciences, or any research that chooses to look at the behavior of individuals, while simultaneously taking into account the context these individuals act in.