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

van Egmond, M.H.

Citation for published version (APA):
van Egmond, M. H. (2003). Rain falls on all of us (but some manage to get more wet than others) : political context and electoral participation.

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Chapter 3 argued that the influence of contextual characteristics need not be uniform to voters, and attempted to show how contextual effects vary in impact depending on voters' individual characteristics. This argument was elaborated for three contextual characteristics: concurrent elections, Sunday voting and the closeness of the election. The closeness of the election appeared the most viable variable for an empirical demonstration of this general theory. The differential impact of closeness on different segments of the electorate was hypothesized to be linked to differences in affect for political parties. These differences were explicated in a threefold distinction between Convinced, Confounded and Condemned voters. Specific expectations about the nature and direction of the effect of closeness on these categories were derived.

The current chapter continues our exploration of the influence of 'closeness' on voters. But to go forward, first we have to take one step back. A more detailed description of the influence of closeness on the individual voter will help our understanding of the influence of closeness. Chapters 5 and 6 will examine the influence of closeness at the individual level. The second part of the current chapter will examine the influence of closeness at the aggregate level. We will therefore start out with an explanation of the impact of closeness on the individual voter from the Downsian perspective (Downs, 1957), as well as from the viewpoint of expressive voting (Harrop & Miller, 1987). We will see that a close election is likely to have an impact on all kinds of voters, irrespective of whether they behave in Downsian or expressive manner.

The next question that must be addressed is what is meant by a close election? There is no single answer to this. The examples of various countries that will be presented below demonstrate that defining closeness requires a country-specific approach. When made concrete, the abstract concept of a close election refers to different specifications of what is compared with what in a political system. The theoretical concept of closeness therefore requires a practical specification tailored to specific political systems. And, as will be shown, this custom-made concept of closeness may even require to be time-specific, in order to take into account temporary features of the political arena or the political agenda. After elaborating the concept of closeness, an additional section will discuss when we may deem an election close.

After having established how closeness affects voters, and what it is that makes an election a close one, we will need to establish how to measure closeness. More than one option is available here, and the choice between them will be determined by theoretical as well practical arguments. The pros and cons of the different options will be discussed in Section 4.2.2 below, and explored empirically in the analyses that make up the last part.
of this chapter. The outcome of the discussion will determine the empirical indicator of closeness that will be used in the individual level analyses in Chapters 5 and 6.

The implications of the points introduced above will materialize in the second part of this chapter. On a per country basis, the concept of closeness will be operationalized and its impact examined. In doing so, we will follow an approach often taken in the literature, by examining the effect of closeness on turnout levels. An aggregate level approach, in other words. This approach allows us to get a quick and informative view of the overall influence of closeness in various political systems, and is helpful in selecting countries for the individual level analysis of Chapter 5 and Chapter 6. If we find at the aggregate level that closeness is influential, we know that closeness must also be influential at the individual level. The next step, taken in Chapters 5 and 6, is then to find out whether closeness is important for all voters, or only for some voters. It should be noted that the aggregate level approach presented in this chapter has obvious shortcomings when attempting to draw conclusions at the level of the individual voter (cf. Chapter 3).

The country analyses presented in the second part of this chapter will show that, at the aggregate level, demonstrable effects exist of closeness on turnout, and hence on voters - at least in some countries. But the analyses will not allow demonstration of the opposite: that no effect of closeness on voters can be established, simply because no effect on turnout levels can be established. As the previous chapter argued, individuals need not respond to contextual effects uniformly. As a consequence, aggregate level analyses cannot be tests of individual level hypotheses. Small segments of the electorate may be affected - too small to yield unequivocal results at the aggregate level. Opposite effects of contextual characteristics on different segments of the electorate may cancel out, again falsely suggesting an absence of the contextual effect. And the presence of aggregate level effects may even lull us into a false sense of certainty: that closeness affects turnout figures, and hence all voters in the estimated fashion. Chapter 5 will show that, in spite of the convincing aggregate level findings that will be presented in the current chapter, the closeness of the elections does not affect all voters uniformly, or equally. Subsequently however, Chapter 6 will show that this individual level variation in contextual influence is not a uniform truth over different political systems.

4.1 Why More Turnout in Close Elections?
In the work of Downs (1957), closeness of an election is, ceteris paribus, expected to increase turnout. Downs described a rational voter weighing the costs and benefits of his actions, set within a perfect two-party system. Such a two-party system provides clear choice options - there are only two parties to vote for. It also provides for clear consequences of the vote-choice in terms of the allocation of government power following the election outcome. In this setting, a neck and neck race between the two parties is expected to increase turnout, as a voters' expected benefit increase and the costs connected with voting fall.
Figure 4-1 summarizes the effects a close election race. For the voter, the benefit of voting consists of contributing - through one’s vote - to the election of a government whose policy standpoints and preferences best match those of the voter. The probability of this expected benefit is highest in an election in which the two contenders are tied in a close race, since the chance to swing the election is greatest. The possible influence of a voter is thus at its maximum, and rational choice argues that as the probability of the preferred outcome increases, while the costs remain unchanged, the probability of participation in the election will increase. Moreover, a close election race is expected to increase the campaign and mobilization efforts made by parties. With victory uncertain, yet within reach, candidates and parties will go all out to win votes and get convinced supporters to the polls. This means that in a close election a higher than average portion of the electorate may be expected to be exposed to these campaign efforts.

Finally, resulting in part from increased party efforts, media attention devoted to the election can be expected to increase the closer a race is. A neck and neck race is attractive material for news reporters (cf. Norris, Curtice et al. 1999; Donovitz 1998; Brants & van Praag jr. 1995) It produces a clear and easily conveyed summary of what the election is about, which makes for captivating news-reports that quickly get the picture across. In addition, candidates and parties will try their utmost to create attractive sound-bites and picture opportunities to make sure that their efforts will be covered by reporters. Continuous updates of the current standings through opinion polls (the ‘horse race’) will illustrate just how close the candidates are. All in all, it ensures that more people are likely to hear or read about elections the closer they are. The relatively low complexity of a news message when it is framed to highlight the closeness of the race, ensures that even a modest interest in the news is enough to get a grasp of what the election is about. Increased campaign efforts as well as heightened media attention increase the awareness among the electorate of the election and of what is at stake. Thus, both help to lower the information costs associated with making a choice in the election, which will increase the chance to participate.

The Downsian approach has been criticized for being too strict a model of human behavior, as its own reasoning could not account for the fact that people bother to vote at all. The chance that a single vote would make the difference in an election is so small, that the costs will always outweigh the expected benefits of voting. By definition, voting can therefore not be rational behavior. In reaction to this, the argument has been made that the Downsian model should be read in a semi-collective way. Although the chances of one voter determining the election outcome are minute, voters are likely to see themselves as part of a
group of voters that will respond in the same way to the electoral circumstances. The probability that such a group will affect the outcome of the election is far more realistic.\(^2\)

Does the argument above imply that closeness can only be influential if one assumes voters to be sensitive to (changes in) expected costs and benefits? What influence can closeness exert if the act of voting is not regarded as instrumental, but rather as an expressive deed reflecting sociological and socio-psychological loyalties that are not affected by costs or benefit considerations? Actually, the outcome is rather similar to that predicted by the rational choice model. If the act of voting is seen as an opportunity to express one's allegiance to a political party (or social class, or religious group, etcetera) then the possible influence of closeness is dependent on the steadfastness of that allegiance.

For steadfast backers of their particular political party, closeness should not be of influence. Indeed, if nothing can keep loyal voters from turning out to support their party, by the same token no room is left - nor required - for an additional incentive such as a close election. However, some voters may typically identify with a party, but not always make it to the polls, for example because their loyalty is less strong. These occasional voters may still see elections as an opportunity to express their loyalty to a political grouping, but their electoral participation is less stable than that of the habitual voters discussed above. For the occasional voters, for whom participation is uncertain, the closeness of the election can be a significant influence, as it may give them the extra push they sometimes need.

In essence then, an expressive explanation of voting will predict comparable effects of closeness as the rational choice model does. If voting is seen as wholly expressive with all voters having exceedingly strong loyalties to parties, then voters will participate regardless of anything else, including closeness. If voters' loyalties prove themselves to be of all kinds of degrees, then closeness will be of influence, just as it will be in the rational choice model.

### 4.2 Determining the Closeness of the Election

After having established how a close election may influence voters, the next natural question is: when is an election close? This question contains two further ones. First: which phenomena are to be compared for establishing closeness? Second: is closeness a dichotomy, or a continuous variable, and how do we expect it to be related to turnout? With respect to the first question, when comparison is being made, the party landscape will be the deciding factor. In a two-party or two-candidate system, it is relatively easy to perceive what the election race will be about. There are only two contenders, so if they are neck and neck, the election is going to be a close one.\(^3\) If support for the two contenders is less equal, the election will be less close.

Few countries, however, exist that have pure two-party systems, and consequently we may also say that there is more than one form of closeness, although in practice it is more of a variation upon a theme. Party systems with more than two parties may complicate the practical definition of who competes with whom, but it does not mean that the concept of a close election race is not applicable to these systems. A straightforward extension of the two-

---

2 It is important to notice that such a group of voters need not be organized in any way. The knowledge among groups of voters that other voters will act "just like me" suffices.

3 There is a - near academic - caveat here. If the two contenders derive their support from an electorate that is extremely stable in its choices, then even if the election is close, the outcome will still be a foregone conclusion, since the (slightly) smaller party will not overtake the (slightly) larger one.
party race is a competition between two groupings of parties. Such groupings can be long-standing associations - the left vs. the right, religious vs. secular, et cetera - but they may also be less long-lived alliances, such as for example an incumbent government coalition versus the opposition. If the alternative party groupings are discernable to the electorate, the competition between these blocs can meaningfully be interpreted as the closeness of the election. Section 4.3 below, will present several of such long-standing or ad hoc party groupings.

But there is a third alternative operationalization of an election race conceivable, one that does not even require more than one contender. A party need not necessarily compete with other parties, but may also race to beat a threshold. Such a threshold is sometimes imposed by the electoral system of the country, to limit the number of parliamentary parties. But, perhaps less easily recognized, such thresholds may also be self-imposed. A party that is part of an incumbent government coalition may exit the coalition if it fails to retain its share of the electorate or any other self-imposed target. A dominant party may refuse to take up governmental responsibility if does not win an absolute majority, or a certain share of the vote. If these thresholds are recognized by the electorate and are conceived as real thresholds, not just empty campaign rhetoric, the same concept of a close election is applicable as the more readily recognizable one in a two-party race.

From the above it is clear that the concept of the closeness of an election is not limited to the traditional two-party race. Different political landscapes can create different sorts of races, and Section 4.3 will present a number of empirical examples. It is unlikely that each and every political system (let alone each election) can be characterized as more or less close in one respect or another, as will become evident in Section 4.3. But the applicability of the notion of closeness is not limited to two-party systems alone. In Section 4.4 we will return to the question of which circumstances make the closeness of an election a relevant factor for voter participation.

4.2.1 Close Enough?

Thus far, 'the closeness of the race' and 'close elections' have been used rather arbitrarily to describe the same concept: an election in which two competitors are running neck and neck. As we have seen in the previous section, that need not be limited to two competitors, and it could even be one competitor in a race of its own, but the important question is: when do we call a race close?

There is no reason to regard closeness as a dichotomous variable. Even though elections may be dubbed 'close' or 'not close', in reality this will mean that the race is close to a certain degree. It may vary from extremely close to not close at all. The closeness of an election is a continuum, with the degree of closeness expected to influence turnout. The nature of the relationship need not be linear, however: if a party is far ahead, it does not make much difference whether the lead is, say, 20 or 25 percent. It becomes a different story if the lead is not so large: a 7 percent lead is considerably different from a lead of 2 percent. When it gets this tight, the closeness of the election is likely to be of influence to voters.
Figure 4-2 shows the hypothesized relationship between closeness, indicated in this example as the gap between the two leading parties, and turnout. As the gap between the parties increases, the election becomes less close, and turnout is expected to fall. There is no clear theoretical lead that may suggest beyond what point along the horizontal axis an election will no longer be considered close by the electorate of a given country. This point is to be established empirically, and is likely to vary between different systems. However, the complicated nature of the hypothesized relationship between closeness and turnout implies that a substantial amount of data (i.e., a large number of elections) is required to provide us with unequivocal answers. The analyses presented below will not allow us to establish the fall off point for the influence of closeness, since we will not be able to control for other factors affecting turnout. Figure 4-2 is therefore a stylized picture: other factors influencing the level of turnout are assumed to be controlled for. We can only expect to empirically find the pattern of Figure 4-2 in countries where contextual factors other than closeness are not of influence - an assumption that is not feasible. In addition, the pattern of Figure 4-2 can only be detected empirically if all voters are affected by the closeness of the race, a matter that is contested in Chapter 3.4 In inspecting the empirical data presented below, the reader may want to keep in mind that Figure 4-2 reflects the relationship at the individual level.

4.2.2 Measuring Closeness
Measuring closeness is not an easy task. Argued very strictly, it should be done on an individual basis: closeness is an impression that is in the eye of the beholder. Often, such thorough measurement is unattainable, and alternative indicators have to be sought. Part of the contradictory empirical findings regarding closeness and turnout (cf. Blais, 2000, p. 59) may actually be based on the data used to indicate closeness. A discussion of conceivable indicators is therefore appropriate.

Blais (2000, p. 58) argues that closeness can be measured in two ways, namely objectively and subjectively. Subjectively, it refers to a subjective perception of the closeness of the election, i.e. how close the individual voter expects the election to be. Such data would indeed be most preferable, as indeed the individual perceptions, not the actual facts, will count when voters make up their mind. This however, requires survey data collected shortly before the election.

The objective measures of closeness that Blais refers to are actual election results. The

---

4 Actually, the upper boundary of the inverted s-curve, the point beyond turnout will not rise, is determined by the proportion of consistent non-voters in the electorate. The lower boundary, the point below turnout will not fall, is determined by the proportion of constant voters in the electorate. See also Chapter 7.
assumption is that the electorate will correctly anticipate these actual results (Blais, *ibidem*). Actual election outcomes seem at first instance attractive for indicating closeness. As election returns are usually well documented, data availability is typically not a problem, which means that virtually all elections ever put on record can be analyzed. In addition, election outcomes are also the most correct information in determining (retrospectively) how close the elections actually turned out to be. Not surprisingly therefore, election returns are commonly used to assess the influence of closeness on turnout. There is a drawback to this, however, which appears to elude many researchers who use election results for indicating closeness: election outcomes tend not to be known before the actual affair is over. As the actual result of an election is not available to voters before the election, voters cannot base their behavior on this result. Consequently, the actual election outcome need not be an indicator of the closeness of the election, which we expect to affect voters’ behavior. This point is most clearly brought out in elections with ‘surprising’ outcomes. If the actual outcome differs substantially from prior expectations, closeness based on actual outcomes would give us an incorrect value. If an election is commonly perceived as particularly close, we expect turnout to be positively affected, at least among some segments of the electorate (cf. Chapter 3). If actual election results subsequently show that it was not that close a race after all, analyses of closeness and turnout based on the election outcome would suggest that turnout was uncommonly high for an election that was not very close. An example if this is found in the 1992 elections in Great Britain. For the elections of that year, the opinion polls predicted a dead heat, with Labour leading the Conservatives by as little as one percent. The actual result saw a Conservative lead of over 7 percent. Based on actual election outcomes, we would conclude that the election was not very close, and a high turnout would not be expected. The opposite is equally possible: an election that was expected to be a forgone conclusion could turn out to be a dead heat between the main contenders. In such a case, turnout would be strikingly low for an election that proved very close in *hindsight*. Both situations obscure our view of the influence of closeness. The British election of 1992 is an example of a *false negative*: an election appears not close in hindsight, but was experienced as very close by the electorate when it decided to participate or not. The second case is an example of a *false positive*: an election that proved in retrospect to be very close, but was not expected to be so beforehand. However, since the election was not expected to be close, and voters were not aware of how close it would turn out to be, the closeness of the election can not have motivated people to participate.

Other sources of information regarding the closeness of the election are therefore preferred, sources of information in line with the theoretical concept of closeness as an impression in voters’ minds. For this impression to take form, the information needs to be available *before* an election. A valid indicator of closeness should therefore be based on information that is available before the election. Such an indicator ‘before the facts’ that is often readily available can be obtained from opinion polls. Opinion poll data is often available to the electorate before the elections. Indeed, in many countries, the ‘race’ as reflected by the polls has become a central part of the media coverage of elections. Newspapers and TV news programs thus ensure that the latest figures are directly brought to

---

5 Note Cox (1988) as an exception.
the public, typically in conjunction with the changes since a previous poll. Any voter interested in politics is thus likely to be informed about the parties’ standings of the moment, and the easily digestible character of the information ensures that even a marginally interested audience is likely to pick up some of the information in passing. In as far as these data are still available after the election, they are a much better indicator of closeness as conveyed to and perceived by the electorate at the time of the election.

For opinion poll data to form an acceptable indicator for the closeness of the election, some requirements have to be met. First, the data will have to be available to the public, in other words published in the media, and published shortly before the elections. Opinion polls published six months before an election are of no use, since voters’ preferences can change substantially in the intervening period. Second, the opinion polls will have to show a certain degree of consistency. Typically more than one poll is presented in the run up to the election, often from competing polling agencies. Contradictory opinion polls result in a situation that is difficult to interpret, for both voters and researchers of electoral participation. Thirdly, the polls need to be reliable and credible. Implausible opinion poll predictions will be dismissed by voters, and will not influence them.

The final part of this chapter will compare the closeness-turnout relationship for actual outcome data and opinion poll data, respectively. Based on the argument set out above, closeness based on opinion polls is expected to be a better predictor of turnout than closeness based on election outcomes, if indeed closeness is of influence at all.

Ironically, the actual accuracy of opinion polls is not of real importance. Opinion polls by themselves create the reality (i.e., the character of the context in which an election takes place) to which the electorate may respond in the run up to the election. If the polls turn out to be ‘wrong’, voters will only find that out after they have already acted on them. The exception to this argument is of course a track record that is so bad that voters lose confidence in the polls, and will no longer regard them as valid indicators of the political situation. In such a case, it is likely that the attention devoted to opinion polls by the media will also decrease.

While opinion polls are more widely obtainable than subjective measures of closeness, their availability is still not universal, especially in comparison to election outcome data. Not all countries have an established history of polling, moreover, their transient news value often leads to poor documentation and archival of polls. All of this puts restrictions on the number of elections that may eventually be analyzed.

4.3 Different Countries, Different Races

This section will make the step from theory to practice. The potential influence of the closeness of an election on turnout will be analyzed for a number of political systems. As was argued in Section 4.2, different political systems call for different operationalizations of the closeness of the election. Determining what the race is about in each country will therefore form an important part of the current section.

As mentioned already, the analyses presented here are all at the aggregate level. Turnout rates will be compared to see the extent to which the election was close. This allows a quick but informative overview of the influence of the closeness of the election on turnout in different political systems and of different interpretations of closeness. But, as was already mentioned in the first section of this chapter, these analyses are inconclusive with respect to
the effect of closeness on individual voters. Where there is reason to do so, we will discuss this in the analyses below, which may help the reader to get a better understanding of the concept of closeness, and how it may affect some parts of the electorate, but not others. The implications of these explorations at the individual level will further be analyzed in Chapter 5 and 6.

The political systems and elections that will be analyzed are the US Presidential Elections, and parliamentary elections in the UK, the Netherlands, Ireland, Norway, Sweden and Germany. This selection allows us to explore the relationship between closeness and turnout in several political systems, varying in several characteristics such as party landscape and electoral system. The limited number of elections available for each of these systems implies however that the analyses are exploratory in character: when data are available for a small number of elections to study, the number of degrees of freedom is small, so that the complexity of models is restricted here. The following analyses therefore present plots of turnout vis-à-vis the closeness indicators, measured by election outcomes and opinion polls, respectively. Linear regression lines are included in the plots. Although the actual relationship between closeness and turnout is not expected to be linear (cf. Figure 4-2, above), a linear relationship will be used as a heuristic in describing the relationship. A visual inspection of graphs and regression lines will indicate whether or not this way of summarizing the relationship falls short. In inspecting the following plots, the reader may therefore want to keep Figure 4-2 in mind.

4.3.1 U.S. Presidential Elections

The one-dimensional, two-party system that was used by Downs to develop his original model of rational interactions between voters and parties is a very favorable context for the notion that a close election will increase turnout levels. There are two parties that compete for a single prize, which is indivisible. Niche parties that cater to the preferences of small segments of the electorate are not natural to, or encouraged by, the system. Accepting the assumption that a close race mostly affects voters who support one of the parties in the race, and that the two main parties cater to the preferences of the majority of the electorate, such a two-party system ensures that a close race will affect a large portion of the interested voters and not just a small segment of the electorate. As turnout is the sum of the actions of all voters, the influence of an election race affecting a large part of the electorate will most likely be visible in a statistical analysis at the aggregate level.

True two-party or two-candidate systems are rare: against all odds, third-party candidates with absolutely no chance of winning seem bound to appear wherever an election is called. This is true for the USA as well, where third party candidates often vie for the presidency. For all practical purposes however, these minor party candidates may be ignored, not in the least since the far majority of the electorate does so as well. Taken this into account, the Presidential elections of Downs’ native USA usually qualify as a two-party system. Presidential elections can justifiably be viewed from a national perspective, and they also

---

6 Winning is defined here in the narrow sense of the word, of capturing (some of) the office(s) to be filled by the election. Of course, a third party can deem its quest fruitful with smaller successes: in the 2000 US presidential elections Ralph Nader was content with a vote share that would win him federal funding, rather than the presidency.

7 With a few notable exceptions, such as the candidacies of McCarthy, Anderson and Perot.
tend to be the dominant political race in the country, which makes them very suitable for testing the influence of closeness on turnout.

Figure 4-3  USA - Presidential Elections

Figure 4-3 indicates that the expectation of an aggregate effect of closeness on turnout is not warranted on the basis of either national election outcomes or opinion poll predictions. Moving from left to right, turnout is expected to fall, and a downward sloping regression line is expected. This is clearly not observed. Moreover, the regression model is unable to explain the variance in turnout at all. A visual inspection of the separate data-points does not suggest that the poor fit is caused by forcing a linear equation on a non-linear relationship.

An explanation for the apparently absent influence of closeness on national turnout levels may be found in an erroneous implicit assumption. Although the presidential election is a race between two national candidates, the Electoral College ensures that it is rather a situation of 50 simultaneous statewide elections than a single national race. Even in the closest race, only a few states are 'battlegrounds' where the race is close and where the state’s results may determine the national outcome. A state-level analysis may therefore be more appropriate than the national analysis presented here.
Figure 4-4 presents such a state-level analysis, comparing turnout rates per state for the 2000 and 1996 presidential elections. For conciseness of presentation, rather than presenting closeness as a continuous variable, a somewhat crude dichotomy has been introduced: whether or not a state was regarded as a ‘battleground’ state in the final weeks of the 2000 elections. Battleground states are states that are expected to show a very close election race, and are often the focal point of the electoral campaigns of both candidates. Figure 4-4 shows that the increase in turnout from 1996 to 2000 indeed is higher in the 17 battleground states than elsewhere. All but one (Maine) show an increase in turnout over the 1996 election, and all but four (Arkansas, Maine, Washington and West Virginia) show an increase in turnout that exceeds the average increase in turnout of 2.2 percent for the USA as a whole. Where the non-battleground states show an average increase in turnout of 1.9 percent (lower line), the average turnout increase is 3.3 percent for the battleground states (upper line). These figures suggest that closeness is of importance for turnout in the American system - but only if one knows where to look: at the level of the actual races rather than at the (artificial) national tally. At the national level, the impact of closeness is negligible. At the state level however, it significantly influences turnout, at least in 2000.

8 Figure 4-4 presents the turnout rate per state as compared to turnout in that state in the previous Presidential election. Structural turnout variations between states, caused by different levels of education, voting regulations and so forth would render a state by state comparison of turnout rates fruitless.

4.3.2 Great Britain

Apart from the United States, there are other examples of two-party or two-candidate competitions, such as the parliamentary elections in Great Britain. In Britain, two large players, Labour and the Conservatives, dominate political competition. These are the only two viable alternatives for a majority in the House of Commons, and the majoritarian electoral system almost ensures that the ‘race’ will therefore be between these two parties, with all other parties being close to insignificant as far as the ‘prize’ of winning a parliamentary majority is concerned. That part of the electorate which considers voting for either of these parties is the part that is most likely to be affected by the closeness of the race between the Conservatives and Labour. This is however not the entire electorate. For supporters of the smaller parties such as the Liberals and Social Democrats, and national parties such as SNP and Plaid Cymru, a close election may be far less relevant. Closeness is thus likely to affect a large part, but not necessarily the entire electorate.

**Figure 4-5** Great Britain - Two Largest Parties

The influence of closeness at the national level is much more apparent in the British than in the American case. There is a clear linear relationship between closeness and turnout, without any trace of nonlinearity, which is highlighted by the regression line and the substantial explained variance. One could even consider the 2001 elections an outlier. The linear trend does not contradict the relationship hypothesized in Figure 4-2, as that figure refers to the individual level. The influence of closeness appears strongest if opinion poll data is used, as was hypothesized.

In Britain too, we may consider the election itself a multi-level one (like in the USA), with separate constituencies, and an overall result in parliament. This raises the question whether closeness matters more from a national perspective or from a local one. This question will be left for later (Chapter 5) where it will be discussed in detail.

---

10 See also the discussion in Chapter 3, summarized in Table 3.1.

11 If the 2001 elections are removed from the analysis, the estimate is -0.48, with an R² of 0.32 for the actual outcome data, while b is -0.43 and R² is 0.43 for the opinion poll data. Although the concept of outliers may appear non-applicable to an analysis of actual election outcomes, the reader is reminded that other contextual factors may influence the election and are ignored in this analysis.
4.3.3 Calling a Multi-party Race - The Netherlands

The straightforward nature of closeness in a two-party system is changed dramatically if closeness is applied to a multi-party political system. Determining what the race is about, and determining who is in the lead and by what measure, can become very complicated.

In the Netherlands, single-party governments are inconceivable and the political landscape is sufficiently fluid for coalitions to be formed from a relatively large collection of parties. This makes the outcome of an election, in terms of coalition formation by no means a predictable affair. As not even the largest party is guaranteed a place in government, parties tend to keep their options open before the election, merely hinting at coalition preferences and only rarely ruling out any options before the election takes place. ‘Never say never’ is a vital rule for prospective coalition partners in Dutch politics.

Obviously, this presents serious problems in operationalizing the concept of closeness in such a political landscape. Indicating closeness by measuring the gap between the largest two parties lacks substantive political meaning. Although it is an unwritten rule that the largest party takes the lead in coalition negotiations, in the end the largest party may still not even be part of the coalition. Any relationship between turnout figures and closeness measured as the gap between the two largest parties is therefore likely to be weak, at best.

Figure 4-6 The Netherlands - Two Largest Parties

![Graph showing turnout and gap between two largest parties](image)

- Actual outcome: $b = -0.30$, $R^2 = 0.05$
- Opinion polls: $b = 0.03$, $R^2 = 0.00$

Figure 4-6 presents a rather mixed image. If we look at the actual outcome data, a linear relationship can be detected, but only if we consider the elections of 1972 and 2002 as outliers. A strong negative trend can then be detected. However, for the opinion poll data there is no argument for removing the 2002 data from the model. The 1972 data could still be regarded an outlier, but so could the 1986 data. Indeed, if a strong negative slope is not hypothesized, then the elections of 1998, 1981 and 1977 may also be regarded outliers. Since the removal of one or two data-points has such a strong impact on the relationship between closeness and turnout, the conclusion will have to be that the influence of the closeness of the election is not straightforward in the Netherlands. However, this does not mean that factors apart from closeness may explain the particular results for 1972, 2002 or any of the potential outliers. Explaining these is not the particular aim of this chapter.
An alternative form of closeness can be conceived of as well for the Netherlands. This would look at elections as a race between the incumbent government coalition versus the 50 percent mark of parliamentary seats. The question then becomes whether or not the governing coalition is able to maintain its majority in the elections. This presupposes, of course, that a coalition actively seeks a renewal at the end of its mandate to govern. This is actually relatively rare in the Netherlands: in the last three decades, only two of a total of nine cabinets made continuation their election-goal. Defining closeness as the gap between coalition support and a 50 percent majority mark presents us with only two cases. To make matters more complicated: usually there are no alternative coalition alliances or ‘shadow cabinets’ presented as alternative to the incumbent coalition. Parties may hint at coalition preferences before an election, but only on one occasion (1972) were firm commitments made before the election. Figure 4-7 presents the influence of closeness defined as the gap between the two largest parties, as in Figure 4-6, with the exception of 1972, 1986 and 1998, when closeness is defined as the gap between the incumbent or proposed coalition and 50 percent of the vote.

Figure 4-7 shows that the relationship remains weak and susceptible to the influence of outliers. Although the results improve somewhat, closeness still appears a concept of limited value in explaining Dutch turnout figures. It appears to be a concept that needs to be defined for each election.

4.3.4 Ireland: One or More Parties?
The Irish political party system can be described as a multi-party system, although the balance of power is far more skewed than in the Dutch political landscape. Since gaining government power in 1932, Fianna Fáil has dominated the political system, only infrequently handing government power over to a coalition formed by Fine Gael and the Labour Party. Well into the 1980s, the Irish political landscape showed Fianna Fáil pitched against the rest of the field, reinforced by Fianna Fáil’s refusal to enter into any coalition governments.

---

12 This occurred in the 1986 elections, when the incumbent CDA/VVD coalition sought re-election, as well as in 1998, when the PvdA/VVD/D66 or ‘purple’ coalition vied continuation (Cf. Table 2.2, Chapter 2).
whatsoever (cf. Mair & Marsh 1999). Forced by electoral misfortunes, this stance was abandoned from 1989 onwards, after which the Irish political landscape became considerably more open. Consequently, government formation have become far less predictable as old barriers gave way and coalitions previously unthinkable were formed.

For the period until the mid-1980s, closeness may be operationalized as the gap between Fianna Fáil’s support and a majority. From the mid-1980s onward, any influence that this sort of closeness may have had is likely to diminish, as by that time a Fianna Fáil majority had become unlikely. It is hard to provide an acceptable alternative to this race, as no other single party has come close to a majority and as the coalition preferences of parties were rarely proclaimed before an election (the sole occasion is 1997, when Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats proposed a coalition before the elections were held). Closeness - as depicted by the gap between Fianna Fáil’s share of the vote and 50 percent - may therefore show an influence on electoral participation in Ireland until into the 1980s, although its impact is likely to diminish after that.

Figure 4-8 Ireland - Fianna Fáil vs. 50%

The difference in findings based on actual outcomes and opinion poll data is remarkable, and contrary to expectation. A healthy relationship between turnout and closeness exists based on election outcomes, while the opinion poll data suggests an absence of any relation. Apart from suggestions that the Irish would simply tell opinion pollsters one thing and then do something other at the polling station, an alternative explanation might be found in the specific operationalization of closeness in Ireland. Imagine a ‘frozen’ electorate where between-party fluctuation at elections is zero. The degree to which the otherwise stable voters turn out will determine each party’s share of the vote. Differential turnout between party adherents will determine who will win or lose, and how close the race is. As a result,

---

13 Actually, 50 percent of parliamentary seats are essential in a parliamentary system, not necessarily a majority of the popular vote. The complicated nature of Ireland’s STV system makes the exact translation of electoral support measured in opinion polls into seats virtually impossible. Therefore, in the analyses undertaken popular vote share was used as indicator.

14 Although the absolute deviation is used, for the period observed here only once did Fianna Fáil actually gain more than 50 percent of the vote. A decrease of closeness therefore implies a decrease in Fianna Fáil’s support.
closeness will be dependent on differential turnout of party loyalists, not vice versa. The degree of closeness will be associated with the willingness of the different segments of the electorate to participate in a particular election. This process may elude us when using opinion poll data if no provision for individual turnout probability is made, and could therefore explain the findings of Figure 4-8. As a provision for turnout probability is inherently reflected in actual election outcomes, opinion polls may thus prove confusing, rather than illuminating. In addition to this, the race in Ireland is actually a multi-level race as well, with elections taking place in multi-member constituencies. Aggregate analyses seem therefore insufficient in determining the influence of the closeness of the election on turnout in Ireland.

4.3.5 A Scandinavian Two-bloc Race

As in Ireland, the party system in Norway and Sweden has been dominated for most of the modern era by a single large party, in both countries the Social Democrats, opposed by a number of smaller parties. In such a multi-party political landscape the concept of closeness as a race between the two largest parties is not meaningful, since the gap will be too large to be meaningful if a relationship at the individual level is hypothesized as illustrated in Figure 4-2. However, in both countries it has become commonplace to look at the party system in terms of two opposing blocs. On the one hand, the social-democratic bloc formed by the social-democratic party combined with parties further to the left, and a bourgeois bloc consisting all other parties on the other hand. In Norway, these two blocs are composed of Det Norske Arbeiderparti (Labor party) together with the Sosialistisk Venstreparti and the Rød Valleianse on the left, and Høyre, Kristelig Folkeparti, Senterpartiet, Venstre, and the Fremskrittspartiet on the bourgeois side, together with small (and usually short-lived) emerging parties on both sides. For Sweden, the left side is made up by the SAP (labor party), the Vänsterpartiet and in recent years the green Miljöpartiet, while the bourgeois camp is made up of the Center party, Moderaterna, Folkpartiet, Kristdemokraterna and, for a short period, the Ny Demokrati party.

The political landscape in Norway and Sweden is viewed as a two-bloc structure - by both the electorate and the political elite.\textsuperscript{15} Elections are therefore seen as competitions between blocs, frequently focusing on whether or not the social democrats will be strong enough to form the government. In periods that 'bloc-discipline' is high, the multi-party political landscape in these countries overlays a more basic division in two camps. By defining closeness of an election as the gap between these two blocs, this concept is applicable to the Swedish and Norwegian cases. Defined in this way, closeness may affect turnout levels, especially because the bloc competition involves virtually the entire electoral spectrum, in other words almost the entire electorate.

\textsuperscript{15} Especially in Norway, the strength of 'bloc-discipline' varies over time. Sometimes parties do not opt or only temporarily commit themselves to a bloc. In the nineties, there appears to be a downward trend in bloc-discipline, as the European community issue consistently splits the traditional party alignment.
For Sweden, the data suggests an aggregate level relationship between closeness and turnout, as can be seen in Figure 4-9. This relationship is visible when looking at election outcomes, and even more so when looking at opinion poll data.

Although the Norwegian party system shows a bloc division similar to that in Sweden, the 'bloc adherence' of political parties is typically not as strong. The issue of EU membership proved a challenge to the bloc structure particularly in the elections of 1973 and 1993, when pro and con positions cut straight through bloc-lines. In spite of this, Figure 4-10 demonstrates the presence of a relationship between closeness and turnout for both opinion poll and actual outcome data.

Excluding the EU dominated elections of 1973 and 1993, the effect of closeness on turnout in the Norway is very strong: $b$ is -.90 with an $R^2$ of .84 for the actual outcome data, while $b$ is -.87 with an $R^2$ of .65 for the opinion poll data. This finding supports the thesis that the EU-membership issue cuts across the traditional bloc structure, making these elections less susceptible to the effect of closeness as defined between blocs.
4.3.6  Germany: a Race between Parties or Coalitions?

Closeness can be defined in several ways in the German political system. The ‘traditional’ close race is about government power, but that does not yet solve the question how to define it. Two large parties dominate the political landscape: the Christian Democratic CDU/CSU and the Socialist SPD. Absolute majorities are rare: only once, in 1957 did the CDU/CSU obtain 50.2 percent of the vote. Neither of the two large parties can expect to attain an absolute majority by themselves. Grand coalitions are equally rare, and have happened only once (from 1966-1969). Consequently, the competition for government power is between these two large parties, where each strives to be the leader of coalitions with one of the minor parties, while the chancellor is either the CDU/CSU or SPD leader. From this view, closeness concerns the gap between the two dominant parties.

![Figure 4-11 Germany - Two Largest Parties](image)

Figure 4-11 shows that closeness defined as the gap between the two largest parties appears to have little influence at the aggregate level in Germany. However, using actual outcome data, a weak relationship can be detected. If opinion poll data is used, virtually no relationship between closeness of the election and turnout can be established.

Alternatively, competition for government power - and hence closeness - may be defined as a race between coalitions, or one coalition against the 50 percent mark of the vote. German governments are virtually always coalitions, and from the 1960s until 1998, these coalitions were typically between the FDP and either CDU/CSU or SPD. Rather than wait for the outcome of the election and then determine their choice between either of the two large political parties, the coalition preference of the FDP was virtually always known before the election (cf. Bawn 1999; Roberts, 1988). Therefore, closeness of the race may also be defined as the gap between the coalition - the incumbent or a newly proposed coalition - versus a legislative majority.
Neither of these interpretations of closeness appears fruitful in explaining turnout fluctuations in Germany. Figure 4-12 displays a largely unstructured pattern, regardless of whether the race between parties or coalitions is examined, and regardless of whether opinion polls or actual outcomes are used. Closeness does not appear to be a relevant concept in German political participation - at the aggregate level. Whether closeness is without influence at the individual level cannot be established from these aggregate level analyses.

One explanation for a possible absence of an effect of closeness on turnout in Germany may be found in the particular make-up of the German political landscape, in which the two largest parties have for a very long time been at the mercy of the FDP’s coalition preferences. Having fallen from grace with the FDP, the only route to government power left open to SDP or CDU/CSU is an absolute majority, an outcome never achieved after 1957. The red-green coalition of 1998 is the first example of a break in kingmaker role of the FDP (apart from the Grand Coalition of 1966). For the electorate, it therefore appears that there is not much left to choose after the FDP has made up its mind, while the FDP is unlikely to opt for a coalition that is not certain to gain a majority. As a result of this, closeness measured as the gap between the two largest parties or coalitions is a concept that may lack substantive meaning and influence in the German system.

There are, however, other possibilities for looking at close races in the German system. For each of the smaller parties, there is a race that involves whether or not they gain parliamentary representation. Such races typically involve the FDP, but in a somewhat less comfortable position. The German electoral threshold of 5 percent was consciously set up to prevent a host of splinter parties from entering - and potentially paralyzing - parliament, a reaction to the experiences of the Weimar republic. This device has indeed proved successful in keeping the number of parties relatively limited. Occasionally, however, it also proves a hurdle for some of the parties that have already been well established as part of the regular German landscape, notably the FDP, the Grünen and recently the PDS. A close race for

16 Gaining a minimum of 5 percent of the nationwide vote is not the only way to enter parliament: gaining at least 3 seats directly through ‘Erstimmen’ is sufficient as well, an approach that has proved successful for the (regionally concentrated) PDS. For the ‘other’ minor parties this is an even more remote option than the 5 percent hurdle.
these parties and their supporters means making sure they get enough votes to make it into
the Bundestag. When their support threatens to fall below the 5 percent, these parties are
forced to engage in extra campaign efforts to avert this, which in turn leads to additional
media attention. Considering the vital role the minor parties play in the coalition formation,
their exclusion from parliament is not an altogether trivial affair. The impact of such a form
of close race on turnout rates at the aggregate level is however likely to be small, as it will
affect only a limited section of the electorate, namely those who sympathize with these
parties and - possibly - their potential coalition partners. At the aggregate level the effects of
closeness defined in this way will therefore be marginal, although at the individual level they
may well be of importance, be it only to specific segments of the electorate. At the aggregate
level, significant results are therefore unlikely to show up. Empirical analyses confirm this:
for both the FDP and the Grünen the explained variance is very small, while the b-estimate
is often positive where it is expected to be negative\textsuperscript{17}.

4.4 Comparing Closeness

The aim of this chapter was to determine whether closeness affects turnout levels in different
political systems, going beyond the two-party setting originally described by Downs (1957).
In the empirical journey of this chapter, a few findings stand out. For one, it has become
apparent that the concept of closeness is useful in different political and electoral systems.
Closeness is a concept that can be applied in different systems and under different
circumstances. That is not to say that the specification of this concept is identical in all
systems. In the approach taken in this chapter, it was not attempted to force closeness into the
straightjacket of one identical universal operationalization, which would have been the gap
between the two largest parties. As we have seen already, for certain countries, e.g., Sweden,
Norway, such an approach would hardly make sense. Rather, cross-cultural equivalence or
comparability was sought in which closeness is comparable in meaning and practical
operationalization, allowing for comparisons between countries that a strict identical
operationalization would not allow\textsuperscript{18}. In practical terms, this means that the operationalization
of closeness applied in this chapter varies from one system to the other. Indeed, in some
systems it varies even from one election to the next. These variations are based on a single
theoretical concept of closeness, which will be discussed further below. But first let us see
how the different concepts of closeness match up in a combined analysis.

A combined graphical analysis of closeness versus turnout for the political systems
treated in this chapter is presented below. All but one system is presented; as was already
established above, for the USA closeness should not be measured at the national, but rather
at the state level. As sufficient information at the state level was not available, especially
regarding opinion polls, the USA is left out of this comparative analysis.

\textsuperscript{17} Estimates for the FDP are .05 for b, R\textsuperscript{2} equals .00 for actual outcome data, b is .25 with an R\textsuperscript{2} of .01 for opinion poll
data. For the Grünen b equals .67 with R\textsuperscript{2} of .03 for actual outcome data, b equals -.51 and R\textsuperscript{2} equals .05 for opinion poll
data. Only in the last case is the relationship in the expected direction.

\textsuperscript{18} On the notion of cross-cultural equivalence or comparability see Mokken, 1971, who also refers to Przeworski and
Teune, 1966.
Figure 4-13  Closeness and Turnout - Between-Countries Comparison

Closeness (actual outcome)

\[ b = -0.77 \quad R^2 = 0.16 \]

Closeness (opinion polls)

\[ b = -0.82 \quad R^2 = 0.18 \]
In this overall analysis, a clear downward trend can be detected, as Figure 4-13 shows. The explained variance shows that here is a moderate relationship between closeness and turnout. The relationship is of about the same magnitude for the two indicators for closeness, actual election outcome data and opinion poll data.

In the analysis of Figure 4-13 we are no longer focusing on one country, but comparing between countries. As a consequence, the influence of contextual characteristics is likely to increase. Differences between elections from different countries are typically greater than differences between elections within a single country. In the graphs of Figure 4-13 this is reflected by patterns in the data from a single country. For example, the Irish elections tend to cluster in the lower half of the graphs. These patterns are an indication of omitted variables, explaining turnout differences between countries. Ideally, variables describing contextual differences should explain this between-country variation in a comparative analysis such as that presented in Figure 4-13. However, such an analysis falls beyond the scope of this chapter. In Figure 4-14 we nevertheless attempt to correct for these country characteristics.

Figure 4-14 attempts to balance out the between-country differences. The graphs again present closeness vis a vis turnout, but this time turnout is presented in an amended form. For each country, turnout per election is presented as the deviation from the average turnout for that country. A positive turnout figure thus indicates that turnout for the particular election was above average for that country, while a negative turnout figure indicates that turnout was below the country average turnout. The expectation is that close election will see a positive turnout figure, while turnout is expected to drop in less close elections. The interrupted line indicates the zero line, or average turnout. The uninterrupted line is again the linear regression estimate.
Figure 4-14  Closeness and Turnout - Deviation from Average Country Turnout

Closeness (actual outcome)

Turnout relative to country average

b = -.55  \[ R^2 = .22 \]

Closeness (opinion polls)

Turnout relative to country average

b = -.48  \[ R^2 = .18 \]
The graphs presenting turnout as deviation from the average per system turnout present a somewhat tighter pattern, especially in the case of actual election outcomes. For the opinion poll predictions, the pattern is about the same as in Figure 4-13, although a clear linear trend can still be detected. Our efforts to establish a comparable notion of closeness have thus paid off.

4.4.1 Defining Closeness

So what then is closeness? What defines a close race, if we decide to go beyond the needlessly restrictive definition of the gap between the two largest parties? Elements of the answer have already been suggested in our discussion of closeness for the different political systems in this chapter.

Closeness as treated in this chapter can be broadly defined as 'a race for something'. It is a race in which a party strives to make it beyond a certain hurdle. This hurdle may take different shapes, making closeness a flexible concept. In the classic case, closeness is regarded as the horse race between two parties or candidates. The hurdle to overcome is thus a relative one: the vote share of the competing party. This implies that in this case the line is not drawn at 50 percent, but could well be lower, if third parties manage to gain a sizable share of the vote as well.

In other forms of closeness the line may well be drawn at 50 percent, the hurdle to overcome being a majority of the popular vote\(^\text{19}\). In the case of a pure two-party or two-candidate race, this amounts to closeness to one's opponent. If more than two parties are involved, several forms of closeness may be defined. It may be a simple race of the two largest parties fighting for the lead. Alternatively, one party may be pitted against a number of other parties. The latter group may propose to form a coalition government, but that is not a requirement. Thirdly, groups of parties may compete for a majority, as seen in the case of Sweden and Norway. Lastly, closeness may be defined as the race of one or several parties against a self-imposed or constitutionally imposed hurdle.

A constitutional hurdle is introduced in some political systems if electoral regulations impose an electoral threshold that will have to be met, making elections for small parties a race against parliamentary extinction if they fail to beat the threshold. Closeness for these parties and their electorate is about making it beyond the hurdle of the electoral threshold.

Lastly, the hurdle to overcome may be self-imposed. To aim to better their electoral chances, and convince their electorate that the heat is on this election, parties may sometimes connect political consequences to their electoral success that are not necessarily imposed by the electoral system or the political landscape. A large (or even the largest) party may indicate in advance that it will refuse to take part in government if it does not win a certain share of seats in the election. Smaller coalition parties may also adopt this strategy. Even though an electoral majority may not be at stake, the message communicated to the electorate is still that there are hurdles to be overcome, where their vote is vital.

\(^{19}\) Of course, for parliamentary elections parties will generally be more focused on gaining a large share of the seats that of the popular vote. In general, however, the latter is required for the former, even in so-called non-proportional and district systems.
4.4.2 What Makes Closeness Work?

Determining what different forms and shapes closeness may take is one thing, but it is not enough to ensure that the electorate will be receptive to it. For that, a few more conditions will have to be met.

First, the race will have to be relevant and significant to the electorate. The gap between the two largest parties can always be determined in any established democratic system, but this does not mean that it will be important for the electorate. In the Dutch multi-party landscape, coalition negotiations following the election play a crucial and determining role. Being the largest party after an election is at best a good hint that the party will end up in government. However, the shape and course of that government is strongly dependent upon other parties - frequently including the runner-up in the race as well. Closeness in the form of a race between the two largest parties may therefore bear little significance to the Dutch electorate. A declared intention of the incumbent coalition to continue after the election may make closeness a very relevant concept, especially if an electoral victory for the coalition is in peril.

Second, the aspect of the election to which the concept of closeness applies will have to be recognizable or identifiable for some segments of the electorate. This means that is has to be clear to voters what the race is about, and who is a viable contender in the race. That may sound trivial in a two-party or two-candidate system, but this merely underlines the advantage these systems have when it comes to the possible influence of closeness in comparison to systems with a more complex party landscape. It seems plausible that an electorate that is accustomed to a certain concept of closeness - be it two competing parties, two competing blocs, or one party trying to beat the threshold - will be more likely to respond to the degree of closeness, not only because of the actual political reality of the race, but also because they have learned to understand elections and the political process in the terms that define closeness in their system. An electorate that is unaccustomed to closeness in a particular form is likely to react less strongly to it or in a less predictable or uniform way. In other words, closeness is likely to be more influential if it ‘grows’ on the electorate.

Thirdly, closeness will need to be communicated to the public. As closeness is in essence dependent on the behavior of others, a voter will need to be "informed" of this intended behavior of others in some way or another. One mechanism for this is, of course, everyday conversations, but the most important role is likely to be played by the mass media. If the concept of closeness, and the closeness of the race is a frequent news item, its influence is potentially far greater than in a situation where media attention is focused on other aspects - be they substantial policy standpoints or candidate-focused human-interest items. Horse-race journalism and the frequent presentation of opinion polls convey a clear message to the electorate that something is at stake and this is the race to follow. This point is of course not unconnected to the previous two points. Even though one might be an optimist and expect the (news-) media to play an educational role, it is unlikely that the choice of topics presented in news bulletins and on front-pages will be wholly unconnected from the way the public is accustomed to view elections and the political process. Thus, in systems where the race is not

---

20 This is a hypothetical condition, of course. In practice, the political instinct of the professionals that make up the government coalition concerned will certainly think twice before committing themselves to a coalition that is in danger of losing its majority.
between the two largest parties, the media are unlikely to focus on this aspect of the election. It is therefore not unlikely to assume that different political systems create different media styles as well. In a system with two large dominant parties such as Great Britain, horse race journalism and a strong emphasis on opinion polls is in some sense encouraged by the political reality and its party landscape. That is not to say however that trends of 'internationalization' in the media, where national news providers tend to copy the approach taken by international news providers such as CNN or BBC World, may not introduce an aspect of horse-race journalism which is initially unfamiliar to a country. This could in turn influence the way the electorate perceives the election and the campaign (Cf. de Vries & van Praag, 1995).

4.5 Discussion

This chapter aimed to do two things: to determine whether closeness is a concept that can be applied fruitfully outside two-party or -candidate systems, and whether some previous confounding findings regarding closeness might be better explained with the aid of data from opinion polls, rather than actual election outcomes. The answers derived for the first question have proved themselves to be valid when applied in empirical analysis. With regard to the second question the evidence provided by data analysis is ambiguous.

4.5.1 Reading Opinion Polls

The findings of this chapter do not allow for a single straightforward interpretation regarding the comparison between opinion poll and actual election outcome data. While in certain countries the fit of the model was better based on opinion poll data (e.g., Sweden, Great Britain), in other countries this pattern was not found. A number of factors stand in the way of a clear and unambiguous judgment, although these factors may prove to be useful leads in future work.

Data quality may be one of our problems. One of the major advantages of actual election outcome data is that it is widely available, and of very dependable quality. Election outcomes simply tend to be documented very well, for obvious reasons. This is less true of opinion poll data, although this has improved considerably in recent years. However, especially for earlier decades, data from opinion polls may be hard to come by, and if retrieved, its quality may be dubious. Their timing may be poor (e.g., polls held very early in the campaign), the exact wording of the question may be an unfortunate one or not comparable over time. It is hard to ascertain to what degree the opinion poll actually gained media exposure before an election. As was already mentioned, opinion polls are important as means for voters to gain information about the potential outcome of elections that are still to be held. Communication of this knowledge through the media is therefore vital. If media attention to results from an opinion poll is poor, then it cannot be expected to influence the electorate, and closeness measured by it cannot be a good predictor of aggregate turnout. Ideally therefore, a measurement of the degree of media exposure for each opinion poll should be included in the analytical model. Such information is currently unavailable. Therefore, the analyses in this chapter are based on the assumption that all opinion polls utilized have had sufficient media exposure. This may have been an overly optimistic assumption.

Apart from the quantity of media attention to opinion polls, the quality of this attention may also be of influence. The presentation and interpretation of polls in the media may not
always be unequivocal. Election outcomes are objective facts over which ultimately no discussion is possible. Opinion polls tend to be presented in the form of predictions, which is of course why they are of interest to the media, voters and parties. Predictions, however, are not objective facts, and as we all know, few things lend themselves better to subjective interpretation than electoral predictions based on opinion polls. What is presented to the public may thus be information that is packaged in a multitude of different interpretations, which is likely to lower the polls’ impact.

Perhaps however the findings of this chapter lend insight to a matter that has been touched upon already in section 4.4.2 and the current section. We argued that the impact of closeness is likely to be dependent on horse-race journalism and media attention given to opinion polls. This style of campaign coverage by the media is not equal over countries. The superior performance of opinion poll data in certain political systems may indicate that media coverage of opinion polls reinforces the perception of an election as a ‘race’, with important political consequences. As was suggested already, this is more likely to be the case in systems where the definition of the closeness of the race is relatively unambiguous and transparent, such as in two-party systems.

4.5.2 Analytical Limitations
A second important consideration when putting the findings of this chapter into perspective is the issue of omitted variables. This has been referred to implicitly in some of the discussions of country findings, and explicitly in the country comparison of Figure 4-14 that presented turnout relative to country average.

It has not been the assumption of this research that closeness is the sole factor determining turnout for the countries and elections analyzed. As has been discussed in Chapter 2, a multitude of variables exist that may explain turnout variations at the aggregate level and the aim of this chapter is not to slight their importance. The reasons to focus on one contextual characteristic instead of several have been set out in Chapter 3. But this choice may have had important consequences for the analysis presented in the current chapter.

Outlying data points that now work against the fit of the simple model presented may be explained by factors not included in the model. It may be that we incorrectly attribute little explanatory power to closeness, because of under-specification of the model. A clear example is Norway, where the EU-issue cut across the traditional two-bloc division in the 1973 and 1993 elections. Less easily identifiable factors should not be ruled out for all of the systems presented in this chapter. Nonetheless, the consequences of omitted variables should be seen as grounds for moderate optimism. This is because omitted variables cause ‘false negatives’, in other words, a relationship that actually exists may be hidden from view. The findings in this chapter may thus constitute a minimum that may be improved upon should relevant control-variables be included in future models.

The alternative, a relationship incorrectly attributed to closeness - a situation of a ‘false positive’ - is worrisome too. Since the analyses presented here are bi-variate, the possibility that effects attributed to closeness should be ascribed to other factors cannot be denied. It seems unlikely however that the findings presented here are completely spurious.
4.5.3 A Further Look at Closeness

The focus of this chapter was on the comparability of closeness between systems. It was shown that closeness is of relevance in several political systems - not just the typical two-party polity. But the aggregate level approach adopted in this chapter means that part of the influence of closeness remains beyond our view here.

In the German example presented, it was argued that closeness may be of influence for small parties as well. The electoral threshold is not a trivial obstacle for a number of parties in the German system, and it is not unlikely that it affects the behavior of voters and potential voters of these parties. Yet, in the analyses presented in this chapter none of this showed up - no significant relationship whatsoever could be detected. This is not very surprising in view of the fact that these parties cater to small segments of the electorate. It is unreasonable to expect effects on turnout in these small segments to show up in the midst of the much larger complement that may be unaffected by the race for survival of small parties. An individual level analysis is required to investigate the influence of closeness on these smaller groups within the electorate.

Individual level analysis is also a requirement for another goal of this research: determining individual variation in the influence of closeness on voters, as argued in Chapter 3. The current chapter showed that several political systems are affected by closeness, at least at the aggregate level. For such a relationship to become visible at the aggregate level large sections of the electorate will have to be affected - the reverse of what was the case for the small party race in Germany. Sweden and Great Britain did show strong effects of closeness at the aggregate level, suggesting that sizable segments of the electorates of these countries do indeed respond to closeness. The following two chapters will investigate whether these electorates react to closeness in a single, uniform way, or whether the hypotheses formulated in Chapter 3 can be supported, namely that contextual factors (such as closeness) affect different kinds of voters in different ways.

The individual level analyses for Sweden and Great Britain will be executed on a country-by-country basis. The reason for this is to keep to a minimum the otherwise disturbing effects of differences in system characteristics. Chapter 5 will analyze the influence of closeness at the individual level in Great Britain, while Chapter 6 will do the same for Sweden.