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

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# seven

## **Conclusions and Discussion: What About the Rain?**

In this chapter the implications of the research presented in this book will be discussed. As the concluding sections of the various chapters contain summaries of their findings, this chapter will not reiterate these again. Rather, a set of more general concerns will be addressed. The first section discusses whether it is always necessary to analyze contextual effects at the individual level. The second section discusses who may be affected by contextual characteristics, and the third and last section considers the conceptualization of political context.

### **7.1 Context and Individual - A Close Enough Look?**

The main subject of this dissertation is the influence of political context on the individual voter. It is argued that the influence of contextual factors is not equal for all voters. Some voters will be more affected by contextual factors than others. The extent to which voters are affected by the political context is determined by their individual characteristics. These cause some voters to remain virtually immune to the context of the election. In terms of the specific dependent variable investigated here, electoral participation, such voters will either vote regardless of what the election is about, while others will not vote at all, no matter what electoral circumstances. These certain voters or certain non-voters are beyond the influence of contextual factors.

However, there is also a segment of the electorate that is affected by the context of the election. For this part of the electorate, the probability of participation in an election is influenced by the particular circumstances of the election. Chapters 5 and 6 showed that specific parts of the electorate in Great Britain and Sweden, termed "Convinced" voters, are more likely to participate in an election if their favored party might just about win the election. In close elections, where the leading parties are in a neck and neck race, supporters of each of these leading parties show a greater probability to vote than in elections where the race is not as close. These Convinced voters see their probability to vote affected by a contextual characteristic, i.e. the closeness of the election.

The analyses of Chapters 5 and 6 also showed that not all people are equally strongly affected by the closeness of the election. For people who do not support any of the parties in the lead, the so-called "Condemned" voters, it made little difference whether the election was close or not. Their willingness to participate was not affected a great deal. They were not completely unaffected: an overall tendency of increased electoral participation was established for close elections, affecting this group of Condemned voters as well. But the degree to which this segment of the electorate was influenced by the closeness of the election fell far behind the effects noted for Convinced voters.

We may therefore conclude that the central argument of this book is upheld. Voters are indeed influenced by contextual characteristics, by factors connected to the election as such. And the degree to which they are affected by these factors is determined by their individual characteristics. In the examples examined in this book, it was shown that an individual's party affiliation and party support influence whether or not they are affected by the closeness of the election, and if so, to what degree<sup>1</sup>.

Having established that contextual characteristics do indeed affect individual voters, and to different degrees, this inevitably begs the question: does it make a difference? Do we improve our understanding of the processes that determine electoral participation if we take the electoral context into account? The answer to this depends on how we wish to determine what constitutes an improvement.

The 'standard' approach to determine whether an alternative analytical model is an improvement over the existing model is to look at the amount of variance explained by the new and improved model, usually summarized by some kind of model fit-statistics, such as, an R-square estimate. For this measure, bigger is better, so a new and more complex model should be justified by a substantial increase in variance explained. Rated by this standard, the Individual-Context model proposed in this book is something of a disappointment. The variance explained was certainly higher for this model than it was for the simpler and more 'traditional' models in the analyses presented in Chapters 5 and 6. The R-square estimate increased - but not by a substantial amount. However, we did see substantial improvement on another count.

Section 2.5 of Chapter 2 presented predictions of turnout levels based on the competing models. One model contained information on individual voters only, while the alternative model contained information on individual voters combined with contextual level information of the elections. The two models were tested by determining how well they could reproduce the actual turnout levels of the elections analyzed. The results were presented in Table 2-4 and Figure 2-1. These results showed that the Context & Individual model performed substantially better in predicting turnout rates than the 'traditional' model. In all but one election, the Context & Individual model outperformed the 'traditional' model by predicting turnout rates that were considerably closer to the actual election turnout rates. In other words, the new model appeared to add little to variance explained at the individual level, but for predicting aggregate levels of turnout the Context & Individual model is a definite improvement. It is therefore better able to shed light on turnout variations from one election to another, a notoriously weak point of more 'traditional' models that only consider information from individual voters.

The benefit of combining individual and contextual information in a single model is thus established. But is it always necessary to go into such a detailed analysis as presented in Chapters 5 and 6 to answer questions on political context? In these two chapters, not only was contextual information added to the model, but the *influence* of this contextual information was also expected to vary at the individual level in a model dubbed the Individual-Context model. The turnout predictions for Swedish elections in Section 6.5 of the previous chapter

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1 That is, for Great Britain and Sweden. For the Netherlands, the influence of closeness proved not to be statistically significant or even run counter to expectations (cf. Table 2-3). We must keep in mind, however, that the analyses presented in Chapter Two paid only limited attention to potential individual level variation in the effect of closeness.

showed that the Individual-Context model improved our accuracy in predicting turnout. Turnout predictions for the British elections presented in Section 5.4 of Chapter 5, however, did not show such an unequivocal improvement. Is the level of detail of the Individual-Context model always required to establish whether a contextual factor will influence electoral participation in country A or Country B, in Election X or Election Y? The answer depends on the specific aims of the analyst, as well as on the characteristics of the electorate.

Chapter 4 showed that the closeness of the election has an effect on turnout rates in several countries, among which Great Britain and Sweden. In principle, this suffices if all we desire is to answer the question whether closeness has an effect on turnout in Britain or Sweden: it does. If we ask the same question for the Dutch electorate, or for Germany with regards to supporters of the small FDP or Grünen party, the answer - based on the analysis of Chapter 4 - is negative. But, as Chapter 3 argued, the latter conclusion may be misleading. Composition effects of the electorate may hinder our perception here.

Chapter 3 offered a theoretical examination of the influence of closeness at the individual level. Four categories of voters were presented, three of which we dubbed Convinced, Confounded and Condemned voters, next to a remaining Base category of voters. These categories of voters react in different ways to the closeness of an election. The analyses of Chapters 5 and 6 showed two clear findings. Convinced voters have a greater propensity of voting in a close election, while Condemned voters do not react strongly to the closeness of the race. The composition of the electorate determines how easily these individual level effects can be detected at the aggregate level as well. If the segment of Convinced voters in the electorate is sufficiently large, turnout levels will reflect the responsiveness of this category of voters to the closeness of the election. If the segment of Convinced voters is not so large, and Condemned voters make up a large part of the electorate, the closeness of the election will only affect a small part of the electorate. Its small size may obstruct the detection of this individual-level effect in the aggregate. In Germany, the race of small parties against the five percent threshold that must be overcome to acquire parliamentary representation affects only a small part of the electorate - not large enough to be discernable at the aggregate level. In the multi-party system of the Netherlands, a substantial segment of the electorate supports parties that are not in the lead. For these Condemned voters, the closeness of the election is hardly relevant.

If all we want to know is whether the closeness of the election affects turnout in the Netherlands, the aggregate level analyses of Chapter 4 suffice. If we want to know whether the closeness of the election - or any other contextual factor - influences Dutch voters, we need to dig deeper. For contextual factors that affect only part of the electorate, or for which it is unclear how many voters are affected and in what way, an individual level analysis is required. That analysis will have to combine contextual and individual level information in a single model, and that model has to allow for individual level variation in the effect of the contextual factor of interest.

Aggregate level analyses proved sufficient in determining whether closeness of the election is of influence in Great Britain or Sweden. However, the individual level analyses of Chapters 5 and 6 show that the situation is somewhat more complex than the picture portrayed at the aggregate level. For Great Britain, Chapter 5 showed that some parts of the electorate, the Convinced voters, are indeed affected to a considerable degree by the closeness of the election. Other parts of the electorate, i.e., the Condemned voters, were at the same time

hardly affected by this closeness. Aggregate level analysis is unable to detect such individual level variation. For Sweden, the picture was comparable to that of Great Britain at the aggregate level, but not at the individual level. Chapter 6 showed that the influence of the closeness of the election varies little between different categories of voters in Sweden. Virtually the entire electorate turned out to be affected by closeness to the same degree, in contrast to British case. Again, only individual level analyses can determine this. The findings of this dissertation demonstrate that whether a contextual factor - such as the closeness of the election - has an influence that varies between voters is an empirical question that cannot be answered by aggregate level analyses.

Whether we care about individual level variation or only about aggregate level effects is not only contingent on our research question, but it also carries a normative component. The way in which context has different consequences for the electoral participation of various segments of a society has ramifications for the extent to which elections attain the democratic ideal of political equality. Consider the example of weekday versus Sunday voting, discussed in Section 3.2.2. There it was argued that some parts of the electorate may be more likely to vote in elections on Sunday, while others, such as for instance devout Christians, may object to Sunday voting and consequently participate in smaller numbers. If these two segments of the electorate are of equal size, the contextual effect will balance out at the aggregate level, and turnout, in quantitative terms, will be equal to weekday elections. In qualitative terms, there is likely to be a substantial difference, however. If devout Christians tend to support specific political parties, the outcome of an election held on Sundays is likely to differ from weekday elections.

The norm of political equality is clearly violated if large inequalities exist in electoral participation. Whether or not such equalities exist, and whether or not they are related to contextual factors, cannot be determined by aggregate level analyses, and therefore requires individual level analyses.

### 7.1.1 *Explaining Between-country Differences*

The argument of the previous section is also helpful in understanding the between-country variation in turnout levels shown in Figure 1-2 of Chapter 1. The consequence of country differences in contextual characteristics is that voters are confronted with different circumstances, and therefore show different behavior, leading to on average higher turnout in one country, and lower turnout in another.

Figure 1-2 shows that, even though substantial variation in turnout exists between elections within a single country, it may easily be surpassed in magnitude by between-country differences. In this figure, turnout is structurally lowest in Great Britain. These differences between countries should not be attributed to characteristics inherent to the people of each of them. There is no reason to assume that the British are by nature less interested in politics, or the Swedes are cognitively superior to the Dutch, and so forth. Rather, these differences are the consequences of political and systemic circumstances - the electoral context - that *are* different between Sweden, the Netherlands and Great Britain. For example, in Sweden we saw that large segments of the electorate are affected by the closeness of the election, since the two-bloc structure implies that all parties are part of the race. Large segments of the electorate are therefore more motivated to participate when the race between the two blocs is a close one. In the Netherlands, large segments of the electorate are *not* affected by the

closeness of the election, since their favored party is not in the lead. However, because of the proportional representation system in the Netherlands, these third parties still remain viable government parties and attractive options to voters. In Great Britain the majority system ensures that any voter who wants to vote for a potential government party sees his or her choice limited to two parties at the national level. The British constituency system also implies that such a voter might even be without a favored party option at the local level, since the party of their choice might not run, or stand no chance of winning in the local constituency. These are but a few examples of the differences in circumstances voters are confronted with in different countries.

The consequences of varying electoral contexts contribute to the explanation why in some countries large segments of the electorate refrain from voting, while in other countries virtually the whole of the electorate participates. British voters are not instinctively less inclined to vote, but they cast their vote under circumstances that more often provide disincentives to vote than is the case for Dutch or Swedish voters.

## 7.2 Who may be Affected?

In the opening section of this chapter, the argument from Chapters 5 and 6 was repeated (cf. Figure 5-2 and 5-3 of Chapter 5, and Figure 6-2 and 6-3 of Chapter 6) that contextual characteristics do not influence all voters, but only a particular segment of the electorate. This segment consists of those voters whose participation in the election is not a certainty - we may call it the *occasional electorate*. This occasional electorate participates in some elections, but not in others. Whether these occasional voters participate in the particular election at hand is determined by the characteristics of that election<sup>2</sup>. In other words, the electoral participation of the occasional electorate is dependent upon the context of the election.

To explain variation in turnout over different elections in a single country, we have to look at the occasional electorate. By participating in greater numbers in one election while failing to do so in another, it is this segment of the electorate that is mainly responsible for changes in turnout<sup>3</sup>. These voters determine the ebb and flow of turnout rates. Habitual voters, who participate in every election, do not cause variation in turnout. Neither do abstainers, who never participate.

The size of the occasional segment of the electorate may of course vary over time. Such variation is likely to be the result of changing political circumstances that modify voters' certainties or preferences. Compositional changes may also be the result of cohort replacement, when the influx of young voters and the dying off of the old change the proportions of the various electoral segments.

The composition of the electorate with regard to habitual voters, habitual abstainers and occasional voters could offer us valuable insights into the turnout rates we may expect in a given political system. The composition of the electorate may tell us what maximum and

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2 "Characteristics" here refer to the *values* of specific elections on *variables* that are used to describe elections.

3 In addition to contextual characteristics affecting the occasional voters and hence turnout, one can also think of chance as a process that determines whether or not *any* voter turns out to vote. This formulation leaves open the possibility to regard 'chance' as the set of omitted relevant variables (cf. King, Keohane & Verba, Chapter 2). However, chance is, by definition, not expected to influence turnout *systematically*.

minimum levels of turnout may be attained. The degree of variation to be expected is determined by the size of the occasional electorate compared to the size of the habitual voters segment. A small occasional segment of the electorate can only create minor turnout variations, while systems with a large occasional segment of the electorate may face far greater turnout fluctuations.

From the considerations above it follows that it would be attractive for further empirical research to have individual-level indicators for these segments. To a certain extent, an indication of the size of the occasional electorate may be derived from observed turnout rates and variation therein. But such derivations will most likely be very imprecise, and can at best only be proxies for what is essentially an individual level characteristic: the degree of certainty of a voters' electoral participation.

With such an instrument, the probability of electoral participation for all members of the electorate could be measured. Ideally, such an indicator would be comparable between systems and over time, so that it could contribute to comparative research on turnout and electoral participation.

Through the use of such a measure, aggregate measures could be constructed to describe political systems. The size of the occasional electorate might be calculated and used as an explanatory variable in between-country or over-time comparative research. But such a measure of the certainty of electoral participation would also be of interest at the individual level. As a dependent variable, to determine what are the most important factors determining electoral participation, or the intention to participate. But it could also be used as a mediating variable in the sort of research that has been carried out in this book, establishing the influence of contextual factors on individual behavior.

The development of indicators such as the certainty of electoral participation is a matter of further research. Franklin (2003) suggests that we look at psychological lock-in processes. According to his argument, choosing for a particular behavioral option, e.g., voting or non-voting, increases the chance of choosing that same option again at a future occasion. After having chosen for the same option uninterruptedly in a series of successive occasions, "lock-in" would occur, i.e., approaching certainty (chance=1) to choose that same option again at future occasions. Lock-in would remove a person from the occasional electorate to the ranks of the habitual voters, or the habitual non-voters. Obviously, new voters entering the electorate will necessarily form part of the occasional electorate. But older voters may be part of that segment as well.

Another option to establish an indicator for the certainty to vote is to look at past electoral participation. When taking into account participation in first- as well as second-order elections, a measure with sufficient predictive power may conceivably be achieved. A drawback of such a retrospective measure is of course that it is likely to be less accurate for younger voters, simply because their vote record is not as extensive as that of older generations. And first time voters would have no record of voting at all. Moreover, memory effects and social desirability could generate bias towards high certainty. Such deficiencies in the measuring instrument could in part be amended by adding information from additional individual characteristics such as education or political interest. But one can also think of a newly developed scale, measuring a voter's attitude towards electoral participation, or a probability to vote question - measuring just that.

### 7.3 Conceptualizing Political Context

This book has examined the influence of the political context on individual behavior, and the interplay between individual and contextual level effects on electoral participation. It was argued and demonstrated that an integration of contextual and individual level information improves our understanding of individual level behavior. Although the empirical analyses in this book focused on electoral participation, the argument is not restricted to this domain. Many of the fundamental research questions in the social sciences consider the behavior of individuals within their social context. To examine individual behavior, we need to examine the context as well.

To examine the context, we need to know what we are talking about. That is less trivial than it sounds. Often the outcome of an election is explained by referring to particular events connected with the election. The candidates may be particularly dull, the economy might be booming or a political party may have gone through an internal power struggle. *Ad hoc* explanations are offered to account for the outcome of a particular election. Such 'explanations' are popular in the media, when a quick interpretation of current affairs is needed. But even in electoral research such explanations are at times offered, when for instance outcomes from single election analyses need to be brought in agreement with existing knowledge. This is not the kind of contextual interpretation that will bring us forward in our understanding of electoral behavior. Unique, *ad hoc* explanations do not help us to arrive at an adequate characterization of elections. Only when we are able to establish what makes a particular election unique in terms that are also applicable to other elections, can we start to compare elections. By comparing elections in terms of a set of concepts applied to all of them, we can address the question how much of the variation in turnout may be attributed to what contextual characteristics of a particular election.

What comparative electoral research thus needs are concepts and associated measures that describe relevant aspects of the political context, in a way that allows us to compare between elections. When using these contextual characteristics in individualized ways, as illustrated in Chapters 5 and 6, we can determine why some elections see high turnout, while some see a lower turnout.

A substantial number of contextual indicators is already available for research. Most of these indicators describe system characteristics, such as type of electoral system, number of political parties, degree of proportionality, day of the week elections are held and so forth. These are characteristics that are typically very stable: they show little variation within a political system. As a consequence, such indicators work quite well in explaining between-system variations in turnout - e.g., why turnout is consistently higher in Sweden than in Great Britain - but they are of little use in explaining why the Dutch election of 1981 saw a substantially higher turnout than the 1982 election. Indicators for contextual characteristics that can explain these short-term turnout variations are in much shorter supply. Not because the data is more difficult to come by, but rather because the theory behind these indicators is largely non-existent. We often do not know very well what it is that makes turnout high in one election and low in the next, if we refrain from *ad hoc* explanations.

One of the characteristics that can help to explain short-term turnout fluctuations was examined in this book. It was shown that the closeness of the election can help us explain

why voters participate in some elections, and not in others, and hence why certain elections see higher turnout rates than others. To do so, the concept of the closeness of an election was extended beyond the typical two-party race. It was shown that the concept of closeness can be applied to two-party, but also to multi-party, systems and that the 'race' may be between two parties, two blocs of parties, a number of parties versus one party, or even a single party against an electoral or self-imposed threshold. This extension of the concept of closeness also showed that this characteristic is applicable to more than just a single country, and that it can in fact be used in comparative research. The comparability of the measure between countries required some attention, but did not prove to be impossible.

Comparative electoral research has provided a few other suggestions of contextual characteristics that may exert short-term influences on turnout. A number of these were referred to in Chapter 2. The time since a previous election, the premature collapse of a government coalition or pre-election coalition agreements were three contextual characteristics that were examined for the Netherlands, in addition to the closeness of the election. Other contextual explanations have been suggested in the literature. The concept of first and second order national elections has been used to describe elections that are of importance or of less importance to the general electorate. It was developed to explain the low turnout rates witnessed for European Parliament elections in countries that were accustomed to substantially higher turnout rates in national Parliamentary elections, but the concept is equally well applicable to other settings. Congressional elections in the USA see considerable variation in turnout between years when the elections are held in concurrence with Presidential elections, and 'off-years', when they are not.

The contextual characteristics mentioned here are examples of contextual characteristics that have proved informative in explaining between-election turnout variation. These constitute, however, a rather small set. In the metaphor of this research, all kinds of precipitation can be distinguished, according to temperature, volume, duration and physical appearance. What we refer to as hail, snow, sleet or rain can be distinguished in degrees of volume (from torrential rain to drizzle), duration, temperature and additional factors such as wind-velocity. Depending on all these characteristics, different individual reactions will vary in their efficiency to keep us dry. In much the same way, we need to be able to characterize the (short-term) political, social and economic contexts that characterize elections, and that affect us in varying degrees - depending on individual characteristics.

A first step may be formed by taking stock of all the *ad hoc* explanations of turnout offered by the media, politicians and political scientist after any election, and attempting to operationally define these into characteristics that can be applied to every election. These, then, may form the inspiration for further research into the influence of contextual characteristics on individual voters and electoral outcomes, such as turnout.