First-order, second-order or third-rate? A comparison of turnout in European, local and national elections in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Second-order elections are characterized by low turnout. According to the second-order theory this is because people feel there is less at stake. This study tests whether the less at stake argument holds at the macro and micro level using panel survey data obtained in three different Dutch elections. Furthermore, it examines whether campaigns' mobilizing potential differs between first- and second-order elections. We find that at the macro level perceived stakes and low turnout go hand in hand and differ strongly between national, local and European elections. At the micro level the impact of perceived stakes on turnout is limited and contingent on the type of election. Also, campaign exposure affects turnout, but the effect is substantially larger in second-order contests.

1. Introduction

Electoral participation is widely considered to be an important indicator of democratic functioning: high turnout is good for democracy, whereas low turnout is bad (Franklin, 1999, p. 205). Unsurprisingly, a large body of literature studies the determinants of turnout. Our knowledge of participation in elections has advanced, leading to a variety of explanations for why some people turn out to vote, whereas others abstain. Despite this extensive work, several questions remain unanswered. One of the unsettled issues is understanding why some types of elections are plagued more consistently by low turnout rates than others. In other words: why do people decide to turn out in one election, but abstain in the other? The second-order theory, developed by Reif and Schmitt (1980), explains low turn-out in European elections. It argues that in so-called second-order arenas, for

example the European and local level, voters are less likely to turn out due to their perception that the stakes are lower. Conversely, in the national first-order arena turnout is higher because the perceived importance of the policy level is higher. Since the first elections for the European Parliament in 1979 the second-order theory has received ample support. Across time and countries turnout in European, and to a lesser extent in local elections has remained low compared to national contests.

This study addresses two areas that remain underdeveloped in the extant literature. Firstly, the 'less at stake' dimension of the second-order framework has, to our knowledge, never been explicitly studied. Low turnout is seen as both the cause and consequence of the lower stakes. This study tests, both at the macro and the micro level, whether lower turnout in second-order arenas can be attributed to voters' perceptions of lower stakes in these elections. Do people who consider the policy level to be less important indeed abstain, and vice versa? Secondly, the different role of campaigns in first- and second-order contests has received little attention. Existing studies

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have compared second-order campaign coverage in different countries (Schuck, Xezonakis, Elenbaas, Banducci, & de Vreese, 2011; De Vreese, 2003), or the impact of different types of campaign information (Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011). However, a second assumption of the second-order theory, namely that the perception of there being less at stake itself is caused by party and media investing less in second-order campaigns, has received little attention. If this assumption is correct, then the role of campaigns in first- and second-order campaigns should differ in two ways. On the one hand, the absolute amount of exposure to campaigns in second-order contexts should be lower, since both supply (party and media campaign efforts) and demand (voters are not seeking campaign coverage because they think there is less at stake) are lower. On the other hand, if and when second-order campaigns do reach voters their mobilizing effect should be higher compared to first-order campaigns because these campaign effects occur in an information-sparse context.

Empirically, this study presents original panel data obtained in the Netherlands in 2009 and 2010. In this period, the Dutch voting population was faced with European parliamentary, local, and national elections. The panel data allow us to track the same individuals as they are faced with sequential options to turn out in first- and second-order arena's. With this integrated design we follow Norris' suggestion to further develop the insights based on the second-order theory beyond the EU context (1997, p. 113).

2. Explaining turnout in first- and second-order arenas

The second-order model starts from a hierarchy in electoral contests with national elections being more important than all other elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). These other elections include local, regional and European parliamentary (EP) elections, and are determined mainly by what happens in the national political arena (Marsh, 1998). This distinction between first- and second-order elections is based on the argument that there is simply 'less at stake' in second-order elections compared to first-order elections. Citizens consider their vote to be less important in second-order elections compared to first-order elections. From a purely rational voting perspective, this means that while the costs of voting remain equal across elections, the expected returns are lower in second-order arenas (Downs, 1957).[1]

In addition, also parties and media consider them as having less impact. Based on this assumption, the theory posits that participation in second-order arenas will be lower compared to first-order arenas. Or as Reif and Schmitt (1980, p. 9)[2] put it more than 30 years ago:

"*Since less is at stake in secondary elections, fewer voters may consider them sufficiently important to cast ballots. This attributing of less significance to such elections may also be noted among top-level politicians, party activists, and political journalists.*"

Multiple studies have confirmed that across countries European elections have a lower turnout than national elections (Blondel et al., 1997; Flickinger and Studlar, 2007; Mattila, 2003; Stockemer, 2012). Local elections also proved to have lower turnout than national elections (Morlan, 1984), but voter participation remained mostly higher than for European elections (Heath et al., 1999; Rallings and Thrasher, 2005). So local elections seem less second-order than European elections and can be more accurately labeled as "*one and three-quarters order*" (Heath et al., 1999, p. 391).

Surprisingly, in all these studies the less at stake dimension is never really measured. Perhaps the fact that turnout was systematically lower was sufficient proof that there is actually less at stake. But it is not clear whether low turnout is the consequence of the fact that voters believe that second-order elections are less important *to them*. Therefore, we suggest to measure the less at stake dimension by asking voters how important the parliament or council of each policy level is for their personal life. The question focuses on the impact of the representative body which is elected and not on the policy level in general. In line with the second order theory we expect this variable to be highest for the national level, lowest at the European level, with the local elections taking a middle position. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: *The less important voters consider the policy level, the lower turn out will be.*

This first hypothesis is tested at the macro level and allows comparisons between different types of elections. The follow up question is whether the less at stake dimension also matters *within* a certain type of election. Do voters participate in second-order elections because they believe the policy level matters? This is what Reif and Schmitt (1980, p. 18) suggested: "*Voters who consider a given second-order political arena to be important will be more inclined to vote*". This assumption needs to be tested at the individual level. Although the second-order theory is based on assumptions at the level of the individual voter, much of its empirical support stems from the macro level (Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011; Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2010; Mattila, 2003). More recently, scholars have tested aspects of the theory at the level of the individual voter (Van Aelst and Lefevere, 2012; Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011; Schmitt, 2005). Most of these studies focused on other aspects of the second-order theory, but mostly ignored the aspect of turnout. Schmitt (2005) included turn out in the EU elections, but did not explicitly address to what extent lower turnout is caused by voters considering the arena to be less relevant.

In line with the original assumption of Reif and Schmitt (1980) we expect that citizens who consider the representative body of the policy level more important for their personal life will be more inclined to turn out than people

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[1] The cost of voting may actually increase when parties and media devote less attention to second-order elections: because information is less easy to acquire, voters must exert more effort to obtain it (Stockemer, 2012: 27).

[2] Of course, the theory posits several other expectations as well — but they are less relevant for the purpose of this study: parties that are in government at the national level at the time the second-order elections are held will lose, smaller parties are expected to gain (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Rosema, 2004).