

**CONTEXT WITHIN A CONTEXT: ON THE DIFFERENT IMPACT OF 'CONTEXTUAL FACTORS' IN  
NATIONAL AND SECOND ORDER ELECTIONS**

(very draft version – comments most welcome)

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## **Objective**

The main objective of this paper is to compare the effects of interaction between two types of contextual variables. We distinguish the 'traditional' institutional and social contextual factors (federalism vs. unitarism, electoral rules, party system format, disproportionality and the like) at the first MACRO level and we add to it – a sort of – 'meta-contextual' variable at the second MACRO level, which is the type of election (national vs. European). We investigate its' impact on voter turnout, which is one of the major problems in studies on EP elections. The research is only partly conclusive about the causes of this phenomenon, but in almost all European countries the turnout in EP elections is significantly lower than in national elections. Studies in electoral research (most often implicitly) assume that macro-level determinants of voter behaviour operate in the same way on both levels (i.e. in national and in EP elections level). This assumption might be misleading and thus it needs in-depths scrutiny. Briefly: it remains an open empirical question whether contextual (macro-level) factors have a similar effect on voter turnout in both national and EP elections.

Our scholarly curiosity is focused on checking whether – and if yes, to what extent – we can claim that the same 'traditional' contextual variables exert a different influence on voter participation depending on the 'meta-context' of the type of an election. The relationship controls for the impact of socio-demographics. Our paper is a comparison of those countries which feature in both CSES and PIREDEU projects.

## **Theoretical background**

The broadest conceivable understanding of a context refers to an environment in which individuals are located, in which they live and decide to behave in a certain way. Sprague (1982: 100) insists that in terms of the structure of the impact, contextual analysis seeks to answer how these 'environmental properties determine variation in a given behaviour

of interest'. The most obvious set of institutions for behaviourally oriented political scientists is, of course, the institutional design of countries' political institutions (Klingemann 2007). The other way to conceptualize 'context' derives from macro-sociology, it is about the social settings in which individuals live and is founded on an assumption of behavioural interdependence, and empirically manifests itself as aggregate of individual traits, say average educational attainment in a country (Hukfeldt & Sprague 1993). In case of this analysis, we concentrate predominantly on the impact of political institutions (sometimes their consequences) at the first macro level, but we ask ourselves additional question whether this institutions perform similarly in two 'meta-contexts' – national and European.

According to the well-established scholarly research and literature voter turnout is a function of both individual traits and contextual factors. It is assumed that people vote (or abstain) because of two major reasons. Firstly, they have certain characteristics (traits, attitudes, resources etc.), which have an impact on their decision whether to vote or to abstain. Some people are 'better equipped' with these resources, some are poorer in this regard. Secondly, they live in particular (cross-nationally distinct) socio-political *milieus*. Those *milieus* are different as far as 'ease' of voter decision is concerned: some are 'voter-friendly', other are more 'demanding'.

Accordingly, in empirical research into voter turnout two key approaches can be distinguished. If students of politics are about to explain voter turnout, they usually either refer to institutions, or analyse citizens. While first approach addresses macro-level variables, the second is first of all focused on individual-level characteristics. Models of the first approach for the most part address question of cross-national variance in voter turnout, whereas second approach models are principally used to answer the question why some individuals vote while other do not.

There is a vast scholarly literature, based on rich empirical evidence, showing that voter turnout is in fact a function of both micro-level and macro-level characteristics, and the interplay between them (c.f. Anduiza-Perea 2003, Franklin et al. 2004). There is however another important scholarly thread, on the so-called *second-order elections [SOEs]*, that covers the other part of our story presented in this paper, namely the impact of the type of elections on voting behaviour (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Carrubba and Timpone 2000; Koepke and Ringe 2006). The theory, proposed and developed by Reif and Schmitt three decades ago – in its trivialized form and focused on the issues of interest to us in this paper – goes as follows: The SOEs (de facto are and so are perceived by citizens) have lower stakes – they do not decide about power distribution among the most important political institutions, they do not determine who governs in the country. Because they are considered less important, several consequences follow: (a) the turnout is lower than in the national elections, (b) voters overproportionally vote for opposition parties, (c) they tend to vote more *sincerely* and less strategically (Blais et al 2001; Alvarez and Nagler 2000), (d) they vote *expressively*, i.e. wishing to convey a critical message to the incumbents that they are not performing as good as expected (Oppenhuis et al. 1996). In addition, SOEs main campaign theme is more related to national than EU politics (Marsh 1998; Hix 1999). As a consequence, small parties receive relatively higher support, whereas governmental and big parties lose support.

The above, deliberately short and simplified, description of the ontology of EP elections is an important starting point for the design of our analysis. Its' design relates the voting behaviour directly to the type of election it takes place (in our terminology – to the 'meta-context'), without accounting for particular 'traditional macro-institutional context'. In our analysis both contexts are taken into account.

In this particular paper we are first of all interested in investigating effects of macro-level variables. Their impact on voter turnout is twofold. Firstly, they have a direct impact on

decision whether to vote or to abstain. Secondly, they also have an indirect impact on decision whether to vote or to abstain: context (macro-level variables) structures the relationship between micro-level variables and voter turnout.

### **Research questions and hypothetical expectations**

Because of the novelty of our approach, aimed at testing how one context operates within a higher level context, we put forward – rather than detailed hypotheses – several research questions and hypothetical expectations. We claim that contextual variables can have a direct and an indirect impact on our dependent variable (voter turnout). They directly influence the decision whether to vote or to abstain, but also condition the relationship between independent and dependent micro-level variables.

Thus we expect two types of effects of contextual variables: 1) direct impact of contextual variables on micro level dependent variable (i.e. voter turnout); 2) indirect impact of contextual variables on micro level dependent variable: they condition the relationship between micro-level independent and dependent variables.

*Figure 1 about here*

We are interested in studying to what extent these effects are similar (or different) in two meta-contexts (in national and EP elections). We of course control for the micro-level ‘usual suspects’, which obviously have an impact on voter turnout in both meta-contexts. At the MICRO-level two groups of variables are included in the analysis: sociodemographic (gender, age, education, place of residence) and political (pid, satdem, political radicalism). Our hypotheses pertain to both direct and indirect effects of contextual variables on voter turnout; however, our models control for the effects of micro-level determinants of voter turnout.

We propose the following hypothetical expectations regarding the direct effects:

HE1.1: Semipresidential design (directly elected Heads of State) of a political system is anticipated to impede voter turnout in both types of elections.

HE1.2: In more consensual multi-party systems, the ones unveiling higher proportionality of the vote--seat distribution, we expect higher turnout, mainly because votes are not wasted and because there is more programmatic choice etc.

HE1.3: Decentralization and federalism are expected to enhance electoral participation; moreover, we anticipate that its' impact is even stronger in the EP meta-context, because of the widespread incentives to represent local/regional idiosyncratic interests that are recognized and thus can be directly address at EU level.

HE1.4: Communist legacies of a country are envisaged to hinder electoral participation.

HE1.5: The more affluent the country (GDP per capita) the more likely its citizens to participate; however underdeveloped and poorer countries of EU have very strong incentive to influence the composition of their representatives in the pan-European institutions where distribution of huge amounts of funds are being decided.

HE1.6: We expect high aggregated educational attainment to enhance participation.

HE1.7: We expect polarization of political system to enhance participation.

We further propose the following hypothetical expectations regarding the indirect effects:

HE2.1: We expect that polarization of political system conditions the relationship between pid and voter turnout (the higher the polarization, the stronger the relationship between pid and voter turnout).

HE2.2: We expect that economic inequalities condition the relationship between pid and voter turnout (the smaller the inequalities, the weaker the relationship between pid and voter turnout).

HE2.3: We expect that polarization of political system conditions the relationship between political extremism and voter turnout (the higher the polarization, the stronger the relationship between political extremism and voter turnout).

HE2.4: We expect that maturity of democracy conditions the relationship between age and voter turnout (the younger the democracy, the weaker the relationship between age and voter turnout).

HE2.5: We expect that proportionality of political system conditions the relationship between pid and voter turnout (the more proportional the system, the stronger the relationship between pid and voter turnout).

## **Data**

We use CSES (module 2) and EES/PIREDEU (2009) data. Altogether 17 countries are included in the analysis. Our paper is a comparison of those countries which feature in both CSES and PIREDEU projects (SI, CZ, PL, HU, RO, BG, DE, IT, FR, FN, IR, PT, NL, DK, ES, SK, GB).

## **Research design**

In order to test our hypothetical expectations we employ multi-level logistic regression with random intercept and slope (due to the dichotomous character of the dependent variable). We model voter turnout as a function of several micro-level and macro-level variables. We run two identical models (on national data and EP data).

## **Empirical analyses**

Firstly we present an introductory baseline model of MICRO-variables' impact (without MACRO-variables).

*Table 1 about here*

Two important messages can be drawn from the unit-specific model with fixed effect: 1) the significant variance of selected intercepts shows that – after controlling for all MICRO-variables – there remain unexplained differences between countries in our dependent variable (i.e. turnout level); 2) Some MICRO-variables influence our dependent variable in a similar way across all countries, while others' (indicated at the bottom of table 1) impact differs by country. The models that follows take this (the fact that these impacts differ) into account.

In the next step of the analysis we explain to what extent the differences in voter turnout between countries (that had not been explained by MICRO-variable) can be explained by MACRO-variable (note that our models account for country differences in MICRO impacts). Several models are run (separately) in order to account for each variable's effect. In the paper we present only – as an example – the effect of the directly elected Head of State (all the results are available from the authors upon request).

*Tables 2 and 3 about here*

Firstly, we find that directly elected Head of State impedes electoral participation; this effect is significant in national elections (NE), but insignificant in European Parliament elections (EPE). Secondly, we find that higher proportionality enhances participation in NE; this effect is irrelevant in EPE. Thirdly, we find that decentralization does not have a significant effect in both META-contexts (although the effect is in the expected direction). Fourthly, we observe strong and significant effect (impediment of voter turnout) of communist legacies, more pronounced in EPE META-context. Fifthly, we note significant effect of the affluence: the more affluent society (GDP per capita), the higher participation; in EPE the effect is more significant. Sixthly, a significant effect of (aggregate) scholarization level can be observed: it boosts participation in both NE and EPE, the effects are significant in both contexts. Finally, polarization does not have an effect whatsoever.

*Table 4 about here*

In the last step of our empirical analysis we test hypotheses related to the indirect effects. We are here trying to answer the question of how certain important MICRO-variables perform in different MACRO-contexts. The (only possible) starting point for us is the knowledge about mechanisms of the NE; and we ask question whether they operate similarly in the EPE. In other words, the sheer curiosity is to test whether the patterned relationships exert similar effects in the other META-context.

Our previous results suggest there are four such MICRO-variables for the NE and five for the EPE (three of them overlap). In H2.1 through H2.5 only selected relationships are tested.

We find indeed that communist legacies condition the relationship between age and voter turnout: the younger the democracy, the weaker the incriminated relationship. Our hypothesis is weakly confirmed (at  $p=0.08$  level, but  $N=17$ ) in the NE META-context; the relationship even more strongly influenced by communist legacies in the EPE META-context ( $p=0.03$ ). We also find that proportionality of the political system conditions – in both META-contexts – the relationship between pid and voter turnout; our hypothesis is confirmed, because the effect is in the predicted direction (the more proportional the system, the stronger the relationship between pid and voter turnout). And also the effect of inequalities on the relationship between pid and voter turnout (the smaller the inequalities, the weaker the relationship between pid and voter turnout) is statistically significant (but only in the EPE META-context).

## **Conclusions**

First and foremost we find that META-context (the type of election) matters. Contextual MACRO-variables influence individual behaviour differently in the national

elections and in the European Parliament elections. Secondly, we have shown there are micro-micro relationships that are universal across two META-contexts (i.e. the impact of sex). But we have also shown that there are other, country-specific ones (i.e. age, pid). Thirdly, we confirmed that direct MACRO-effects are different in both META-contexts. Some seem to be universal (semi-presidentialism, communist legacy), though often they differ in their significance (i.e. affluence). Some other differ more generally (i.e. political system proportionality – which is significant in the NE, but insignificant in the EPE). Finally, MACRO variables do exert in both META-contexts a different effect not only directly, but indirectly as well, on patterned relationships between micro-micro variables. For instance, age influences voter turnout similarly in both new democracies and mature democracies, however its impact is much stronger in the EPE META-context.

Further analyses are needed, most notably concentrated on precise interactions between the three levels of analyses presented in this paper. What definitely will help us understand the theme we introduce – 'context within a context' – is, on the one hand, more cases (be it in time or in space) and, on the other hand, more detailed separate analyses of country case-studies.

**Tables and figures**

Figure 1. Two types of effects of contextual variables.

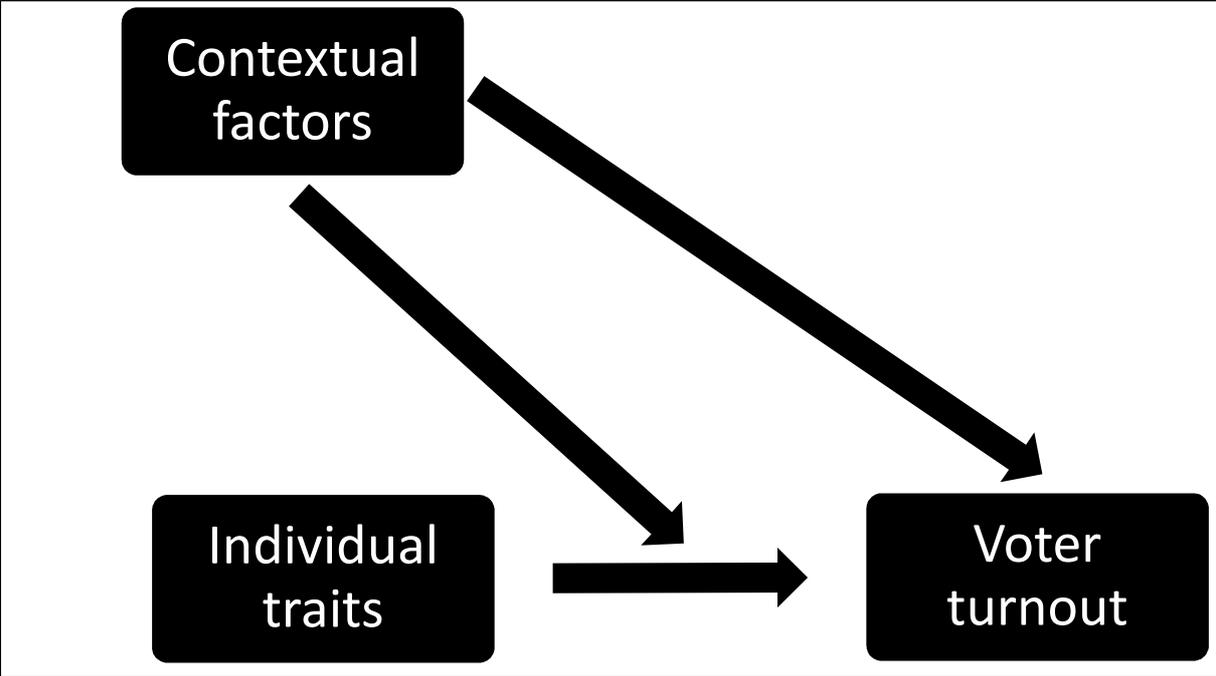


Table 1. Baseline MICRO model; multilevel logistic regression with random intercept and slopes.

		NATIONAL ELECTIONS	EUROPEAN ELECTIONS
<b>FIXED EFFECT</b>	<b>IND. VAR</b>	<b>Coeff. (S.E.)</b>	
	INTERCEPT	<b>1.43 (0.21)***</b>	<b>-0.25 (0.155)</b>
	AGE	<b>0.02 (0)***</b>	<b>0.01 (0.002) ***</b>
	FEMALE	<b>0.02 (0.05)</b>	<b>-0.32 (0.037) ***</b>
	EDUC_SEC/EDU_AGE	<b>0.38 (0.05)***</b>	<b>0.04 (0.01) ***</b>
	EDUC_TER	<b>0.82 (0.07)***</b>	--
	RESID_2	<b>-0.03 (0.1)</b>	<b>0.06 (0.048)</b>
	RESID_3	<b>-0.06 (0.08)</b>	<b>0.07 (0.061)</b>
	RESID_4	<b>-0.31 (0.06)***</b>	<b>0.06 (0.052)</b>
	PID01	<b>0.89 (0.12)***</b>	<b>0.57 (0.097) ***</b>
	SATDEM	<b>0.23 (0.03)***</b>	<b>0.12 (0.041) ***</b>
	POL_RAD	<b>0.01 (0.01)</b>	<b>0.02 (0.004) ***</b>
<b>RANDOM EFFECT (only sign. effects)</b>	<b>Variance of the INTERCEPT</b>	<b>0.7121 ***</b>	<b>0.898 ***</b>
	<b>Variance of regression slopes</b>		
	AGE	<b>0.0001 ***</b>	<b>0.0001 ***</b>
	EDUCATION	--	<b>0.001 ***</b>
	RESID_2	<b>0.0747 ***</b>	--
	RESID_24	--	<b>0.167 ***</b>
	PID01	<b>0.1815 ***</b>	<b>0.114 ***</b>
	POL_RAD	<b>0.0004 ***</b>	<b>&lt;0.000 ***</b>
SATDEM	--	<b>0.031 ***</b>	

Source: CSES, EES. Sig. levels: \* 0.1; \*\* 0.05; \*\*\* 0.01.

Table 2. MACRO-var impact on turnout (example: whether "directly elected HS" explains cross-country differences in participation unexplained by MICRO-var).

		NATIONAL ELECTIONS	EUROPEAN ELECTIONS
FIXED EFFECT	<b>IND. VAR</b>	Coeff. (S.E.)	
	INTERCEPT:		
	intercept	1.123 (0.252) ***	-0.154 (0.185)
	<b>Direct head</b>	<b>-0.667 (0.301) **</b>	<b>-0.093 (0.202)</b>
	AGE	0.02 (0.003) ***	0.012 (0.002) ***
	FEMALE	0.012 (0.044)	-0.324 (0.037) ***
	EDUC_SEC /EDU_AGE	0.381 (0.053) ***	0.043 (0.01) ***
	EDUC_TER	0.808 (0.07) ***	
	RESID_2	-0.009 (0.101)	0.057 (0.048)
	RESID_3	-0.027 (0.074)	0.065 (0.061)
	RESID_4	-0.266 (0.063) ***	0.056 (0.052)
	PID01	0.912 (0.121) ***	0.573 (0.097) ***
	SATDEM	0.225 (0.031) ***	0.122 (0.041) ***
	POL_RAD	0.013 (0.003) ***	0.017 (0.004) ***
RANDOM EFFECT (only sign. effects)	<b>Variance of the INTERCEPT</b>	0.522 ***	0.351 ***
	<b>Variance of regression slopes</b>		
	AGE	<0.000 ***	<0.000 ***
	EDUCATION	--	0.001 ***
	RESID_2	0.101 ***	--
	PID01	0.161 ***	0.13 ***
	POL_RAD	<0.000 ***	<0.000 ***
	SATDEM	--	0.019 ***
<b>Variance of the Intercept explained by Direct head</b>		18%	0%

Source: CSES, EES. Sig. levels: \* 0.1; \*\* 0.05; \*\*\* 0.01.

Table 3. Summary of MACRO-variables effects on participation; multilevel logistic regression with random intercepts and slopes.

<b>T3: MACRO CONTEXTUAL EFFECTS ON OVERALL PARTICIPATION IN COUNTRIES (Each model includes one MACRO-variable to explain intercept, after controlling for MICRO-variables' effects)</b>			
		<b>NATIONAL ELECTIONS</b>	<b>EUROPEAN ELECTIONS</b>
<b>DISPR.-GALLAGHER</b>	<b>Coeff. (S.E.)</b>	<b>-0.113(0.025) ***</b>	<b>-0.015 (0.047)</b>
	<b>Explained variance of the Intercept</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>(FISCAL) DECENTRALIZATION</b>	<b>Coeff. (S.E.)</b>	<b>1.527 (1.28)</b>	<b>0.825 (0.616)</b>
	<b>Explained variance of the Intercept</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>8,4%</b>
<b>COMMUNIST LEGACY</b>	<b>Coeff. (S.E.)</b>	<b>-0.817 (0.278) **</b>	<b>-0.525 (0.173) ***</b>
	<b>Explained variance of the Intercept</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>35.2%</b>
<b>LOG GDP</b>	<b>Coeff. (S.E.)</b>	<b>0.35 (0.165) **</b>	<b>0.592 (0.090)***</b>
	<b>Explained variance of the Intercept</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>50.0%</b>
<b>HIGH EDU PERCENT</b>	<b>Coeff. (S.E.)</b>	<b>0.047 (0.021) *</b>	<b>0.026 (0.012) *</b>
	<b>Explained variance of the Intercept</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>23.9%</b>
<b>POLARIZATION</b>	<b>Coeff. (S.E.)</b>	<b>0.006 (0.009)</b>	<b>-0.005 (0.005)</b>
	<b>Explained variance of the Intercept</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>

Source: CSES, EES. Sig. levels: \* 0.1; \*\* 0.05; \*\*\* 0.01.

Table 4. Multilevel logistic regression with random intercepts and slopes and cross-level interactions.

		NATIONAL ELECTIONS	EUROPEAN ELECTIONS
FIXED EFFECT	IND. VAR	Coeff. (S.E.)	
	INTERCEPT:	1.425 (0.213) ***	0.461 (0.215) **
	AGE		
	intercept_AGE	0.022 (0.003) ***	0.031 (0.003) ***
	COMM_LEG	-0.008 (0.004) *	-0.010 (0.004) ***
	PID01		
	intercept_PID01	0.901 (0.125) ***	1.932 (0.407) ***
	DISPR. GALLAGH.	-0.049 (0.016) ***	-0.044 (0.022)*
	POLARIZATION	0.006 (0.005)	0.0003 (0.003)
	GINI	0.009 (0.019)	-0.034 (0.013)**
	POL_RAD		
	intercept_POL_RAD	0.009 (0.006)	0.012 (0.004) ***
	POLARIZATION	<0.000 (<0.000)	<0.000 (<0.000)
	Fixed effects of Female, Education, Residence and Satisfaction with democracy included in the models		
RANDOM EFFECT (only sign. effects)	Variance of the Intercept	0.706 ***	0.715 ***
	Variance of regression slopes		
	AGE	<0.000 ***	<0.000 ***
	EDUCATION		0.001 ***
	RESID_2 /Resid_4	0.070 ***	0.110 ***
	PID01	0.209 ***	0.131 ***
	POL_RAD	<0.000 ***	<0.000 ***
	SATDEM		0.011 ***

Source: CSES, EES. Sig. levels: \* 0.1; \*\* 0.05; \*\*\* 0.01.