

**Turnout at local elections:  
the relevance of contextual variables**

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## 1. Introduction

Elections are a core element of representative political systems. Participation in elections is seen as an important indicator to measure the democratic degree of political systems. Franklin (2002: 148) correctly states: “the health of democracy is often seen in terms of its level of turnout.” When turnout figures tend to decline, which appears to be the case the last few decades in most Western countries, this causes worries on the side of the political system. Similarly, scholarly attention for this topic, which is one of the classic ones in political science, has intensified.

Most of the research on electoral participation focuses on the importance of individual (social demographic and social-psychological) variables and political attitudes to explain turnout (e.g. Lijphart, 1997; Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998; De Winter & Ackaert, 1998). Less attention is paid to the influence of the broader social, cultural, institutional and political context variables on turnout. Even when this approach is followed, attention has almost exclusively gone to cross-national variations (e.g. Jackman & Miller, 1995 ; Blais & Dobrzynska, 1998) instead of to variations within one country. Yet, local elections allow researchers to analyse electoral participation taking particular local political, social, cultural and institutional factors into account. By consequence, we use for this paper the municipalities as unit of analysis. At this level, it is possible to measure the impact of political as well socio-demographic contextual characteristics on turnout and blanc/ invalid voting. This is not possible for aggregated analyses at the level of constituencies for general elections or even higher levels.

We take municipalities in Flanders, a region of Belgium, as units of analysis. Belgium is an interesting case to analyse. Compulsory voting constitutes one of the main characteristics of the Belgian electoral system. The system of compulsory voting adds a particular element to the phenomenon of abstentionism, which remains possible despite the regulations concerning compulsory voting. Two sorts of abstentionism do occur: visible and hidden abstentionism. Visible abstentionism refers to voters that are not turning up at the polling station to cast their vote. Given that turning up is in principle compulsory (but hardly sanctioned), not appearing in the polling station has (at least morally) a negative connotation among the broad public. Hidden abstentionism refers to voters that visit the polling booth, but cast a blanc or invalid vote. Except for those cases where voters accidentally released an invalid ballot, only the voter himself knows this, which renders this form of absentionism less visible for the external environment. Given these differences in visibility, we expect to find different underlying

mechanisms for these two sorts of abstentionism. The last general election results pointed out that nearly 11 pct. of the registered voters did not show up at the ballot station and that nearly 6 pct. of the voters casted a blanc or invalid vote.

We limit our analysis to the Flemish municipalities. As a result of successive state reforms in Belgium, it is nearly impossible to find data of contextual variables that are comparable for the three regions. Yet, this paper starts with a description of the evolution of electoral absenteeism and blanc/invalid votes in Belgium.

## 1. Electoral abstentionism in Belgium

### *a. Visible abstentionism: absenteeism*

Table I presents the evolution of electoral absenteeism for general elections, local elections and elections for the European Parliament during the period 1976 - 2010.

**Table I: Evolution of electoral absenteeism for general elections, EP elections and local elections**

General elections		EP-Elections		Local Elections	
Year	Pct.	Year	Pct.	Year	Pct.
1977	5,1	1979	8,6	1976	5,3
1978	6,0	1984	7,9	1982	5,8
1981	5,5	1989	9,3	1988	6,5
1985	6,4	1994	9,8	1994	7,7
1987	6,6	1999	9,4	2000	8,4
1991	7,3	2004	9,1	2006	7,0
1995	8,9	2009	9,6		
1999	9,4				
2003	8,4				
2007	9,1				
2010	10,3				

This table indicates first of all that during the whole period under consideration, the rate of absenteeism is the highest at elections for the European Parliament, followed by general elections and finally local elections. Absenteeism has been increasing till the end of the

previous century. The figures for the beginning of this century suggest a decline. However, this decrease seemed – at least for EP and general elections - to have been an accidental event.

Hence, two phenomena have to be explained: a) the differences between elections according to the elected body; b) the evolution of absenteeism over time (increase till the end of the previous century and decrease at the last few elections).

The first phenomenon can be explained in several ways. First of all, the variable "tourist behavior" during periods in which elections take place seems to have a strong impact, especially with regard to European elections. According to tourist behavior data, over two hundred thousand Belgians are abroad on weekends in June. This number corresponds more or less to the difference between the number of absenteeists at European elections and at general elections<sup>1</sup>. Yet, one should deduce from this figure the number of children. In addition, over a hundred of thousand persons are abroad during a weekend of December, month in which several general elections have taken place. Therefore, the difference between the rate of absenteeism at European and general elections is only partially explicable by the variable "tourist behavior". Thus it is necessary to call upon other interpretations to explain in a more exhaustive manner differences between types of elections.

First, voters' perceptions of the political importance of the elected body is important. Belgian citizens consider the federal parliament as more important than local councils. The European Parliament is considered least important (Swyngedouw, De Winter & Schulpen, 1990) and European elections are in general considered as second-order elections (Schmitt 2005). This varying perception can suffice as explanation for the difference of absenteeism level between general elections and EP-elections. Yet, although the voter attaches apparently less importance to local elections than to general elections, absenteeism at local elections is surprisingly not higher than at general elections. Moreover, the seat distribution technology used for local election tends less toward proportional representation voting (PRV) than is the case for general elections (Ackaert: 1994). Normally, according to empirical findings on the relation between the existence of PRV and turnout, absenteeism should increase when the electoral system is less proportional (Kaempfer & Lowenberg, 1993; Karp & Banducci, 1999;

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<sup>1</sup>June is always the month for the EP-elections. The information on tourist behavior is drawn from a survey by a regional economical office (West-Vlaams Studiebureau of the Gewestelijke Ontwikkelingsmaatschappij of the West-Flanders province).

Milner, 2004; Brockington, 2004; Selb, 2009). Probably this is due to the fact that the direct stakes of local elections are larger. Stakes affect turnout (Franklin, 1999; Siaroff & Merer, 2002; Dalton, 2008). Citizens have a more direct impact on the designation of the executive at the local level than at the federal level. For instance, at local elections of 8 October 2006, in nearly 52% of the municipalities, voters have, directly appointed the (single party) political majority (Ackaert e.a., 2007). At the federal level, since 1954 all governments have been coalition governments.

Also the proximity and the knowledge of elected bodies is higher for municipal councils than for the other (higher level) elected bodies. Although the formal powers of the local level in Flanders are rather limited, this policy level is important since its competences are highly relevant and visible for citizens (Deschouwer, 2009). This also can boost political participation.

Belgian trust indicators also show that institutions at the local level always score higher than institutions at a higher (regional, national, European) level (Kampen & Van de Walle, 2003). It can reasonably be expected that political institutions that are trusted by the people tend to attract more voters willing to cast a vote, and hence a higher voter turnout (Hooghe et al, 2011)

Finally, the social distance between the voter and the elected representatives is smaller for the municipal councils, followed by the federal Parliament and the European Parliament. This is for instance reflected in the much higher number of preferential votes cast for candidates at local elections than at general elections<sup>2</sup>.

Now, we turn to explanations for the evolution over time.

The overall increase of absenteeism in the period 1977-1999 can be explained by purely demographic factors. There are good reasons to believe that there is a relationship between the growth of the absenteeism since 1977 and the demographic evolution of the population entitled to vote. Like many other post-industrial societies, Belgium is confronted with an

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<sup>2</sup>At the general elections, nearly 50% of the electorate uses the preferential vote (instead of a list vote). Although complete figures are not available, the proportion of preferential votes at local elections is estimated around 80% (Ackaert, 1994; Wauters, 2000; Wauters, Verlet & Ackaert, 2011 – forthcoming).

aging of the population. This phenomenon can be expressed by an "aging index", i.e. the ratio persons over 60 years and children between 0 and 14 years, multiplied by hundred. In 1970, this indication was at 81. By 1990, it had grown to 115 (Alen & Billiet, 1990). As the social integration of the elderly becomes less intense, also their political integration weakens. In addition, the elderly often have health problems that prevent them to go out and vote.

The 1981 general elections constitute a temporary break in the regular increase of absenteeism. Also this can be explained by demographic factors. In 1981, the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 years. Compared with the year 1978, the electorate of 1981 increased by more than 500.000 units (Fraeys, 1982). Many researchers have indicated that absenteeism is higher than average among youths (a.o. due to unfinished political socialization). So given this arrival of numerous young adults on the electoral market in 1981, absenteeism should have increased. It did not, on the contrary. This opposite effect can be explained by the specifications made by Lancelot (1968), who found that young citizens seem to refrain from voting only after their first electoral experience. This specification allows us to explain the decline of the absenteeism in 1981 by demographic factors, as well as its considerable increase at the next general elections of 1985.

The first elections during this century suggested, as mentioned above, a slight decrease of absenteeism. This was the case for all types of elections. We can only offer some partial explanations for this trend. Although nothing changed in the nature of the described demographic process, it is likely that the social structure of the 'new' aged categories differs from the previous generations. However, more research is needed to make this clear and to identify the impact of scolarisation, better health conditions, participation in welfare on the degree of political participation of the older age categories. Secondly, we may not forget that 'states with the least facilitative legal systems have the lowest turnout' (Milbrath & Goel, 1977). Particularly for the local elections, rules became more facilitative in Belgium. This was mostly the case in the Flemish region<sup>3</sup>. Yet, the evolution in variation of absenteeism do not reflect this institutional changes perfectly. In the Flemish region (were the most flexible rules were introduced), absenteeism decreased from 6,9 to 5,6 percent, in the Walloons from 9,1 to 8,1 pct. and in the Brussels region from 17,1 to 13,0 percent (Ackaert a.o., 2007). Moreover, this decline seemed, at least for EP and local elections, to have been a single event.

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<sup>3</sup> Ballot stations prolonged in the Flemish region their opening hours and rules concerning voting by proxy became more pliable.

*b. Hidden abstentionism: blanc and invalid voting*

Table II gives an overview of the evolution of the blank or invalid votes at general, provincial and local elections and elections for the European Parliament between 1976 and 2010. Concerning general elections, a distinction is made between the House of Representatives and the Senate<sup>4</sup>.

**Table II: Evolution of blank or invalid votes for general elections – provincial elections - EP elections and local elections.**

Year	House	Senate	Province		E.P.-elections		Local elections	
	Pct.	Pct.	Year	Pct.	Year	Pct.	Year	Pct.
1977	7,2	8,1	1977	7,5	1979	12,4	1976	3,6
1978	8,4	9,3	1978	8,8	1984	10,9	1982	4,8
1981	7,3	8,2	1981	7,6	1989	8,4	1988	4,7
1985	7,4	8,5	1985	7,8	1994	8,9	1994	5,0
1987	6,6	7,4	1987	7,0	1999	7,0	2000	5,1
1991	7,0	7,6	1991	7,5	2004	5,4	2006	4,7
1995	7,5	8,7	1994	7,5	2009	6,3		
1999	6,0	6,2	2000	6,9				
2003	5,3	5,6	2006	6,7				
2007	5,1	5,7						
2010	5,8	6,6						

This table shows that, till the end of the previous decade, blank or invalid voting is highest at elections for the European Parliament, followed by elections for the Senate, the provincial council and the House. Blank or invalid voting is lowest for local elections. The last series of elections suggest shifts in the ranking order.

Curiously, there is a difference in blank or invalid voting rates of around one percent between the House and the Senate till 1995. That difference reduced after 1995 but increased again later on. The blank or invalid vote at the elections for the provincial councils was, in the period that general and provincial elections coincided, situated between the House and Senate rates. The differences in blank or invalid voting rates differ between types of elections and can again be explained by the political importance the voters confer to the elected bodies.

<sup>4</sup> Before the 1994, elections for the provincial councils coincided with general elections. Due to the constitutional reforms of 1993, in 1994 provincial elections coincided for the first time with the local elections.

This variable does not fully explain these differences. Although local councils are considered to be less political important than the federal Parliament, the number of blank or invalid votes is considerably lower at local elections. The limited political importance of local councils can – as explained with regard to absenteeism - again be compensated by the more direct electoral stakes, the larger proximity of the citizen to this elected body and the smaller distances between the citizen and political representatives at this level.

These types of explanations can equally serve for interpreting differences between the House, the provinces and the Senate. The political importance and the proximity of the Senate used to be considered as lesser than those of the House. Also social distance between voters and representatives has an impact. This distance is larger for the Senate than for the House. Before 1995, the boundaries for the House elections were smaller ('arrondissements') than for the Senate, electoral districts consisted of a merger of two or more House electoral districts. These differences were reflected in the number of votes of preference cast, which for the House is approximately 10% higher than for the Senate (Das, 1988). From 1995 onwards, Senate elections use the main regions as constituency, while for the House, the (lower) provincial boundaries form the electoral districts. Owing to the enlargement of the electoral districts, the Senate elections have attracted prominent party figures (party leaders, (deputy) prime ministers, etc.) as candidates. Therefore, the importance of the Senate elections has increased. This could be an explanation for the decline in the gap between House and Senate in terms of blank/invalid votes, despite differences in district size that remain.

As far as provincial council elections are concerned, the political importance of the province has long been considered as limited (Orianne, 1967). This can explain the fact that blank or invalid voting was at that administrative level traditionally higher than for the House. The fact that the use of the blank or invalid vote at elections for the provincial councils is however not higher than for the Senate probably had a double origin. In the first place, during the eighties, the political interest for the provincial institution has increased. Little by little, provinces invested a lot in their recognition as an important level in the administrative organization of the country (Maes & Delmartino, 1986; De Ceuninck & Steyvers, 2007). In the second place, many local representatives are candidates for the provincial council elections what reduces the



social distance between voters and candidates<sup>5</sup>. The coincidence of provincial and local elections later on reinforced this trend.

Concerning general elections, it is possible to discern a slight decrease of the proportion of blank or invalid votes between the beginning and the end of our period of observation. However, this trend is not constant. In comparison with the year 1976, the blank or invalid vote proportion has increased at local elections but neither in a continuous way. Blank or invalid voting decreased clearly for the European elections.

## **2. Research questions**

The main research question is the identification of the variables that affect electoral non-participation at the local level. Electoral non-participation can be indicated by absenteeism as well by the use of blanco/invalid votes. It is common sense that both expressions of non participation are considered to be equal, although factual evidence is missing. As indicated in the introduction, we expect because of the differences in visibility that the underlying mechanisms will be different for these two forms of abstentionism.

For this reason, we discern in our analysis absenteeism from blanc/invalid voting. By consequence the second research question deals with similarities (or the absence of it) between the factors influencing electoral absenteeism on the one hand and blanc/invalid voting on the other hand.

## **3. Assumptions**

We introduce four blocks of variables. The first is related with the social demographic structure of the municipalities. The second one indicates the volume of social capital. The third one is consisted out of political characteristics and the last one refers to voting technology.

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<sup>5</sup>We dispose only of information about the involvement of mayors in the provincial elections. About 18% of the Belgian mayors were candidate for a seat in the provincial council in 1991(Ackaert, 1992).

a. *Social demographic variables*

The first one includes social demographic variables (size, age-structure, SES-distribution, ethnic-cultural diversity) of municipalities. The size of the place of residence has often been described as an important independent variable for explaining political participation. Milbrath and Goel distinguish two trends in literature (Milbrath & Goel, 1977). One version expects a higher political involvement in urban areas because city inhabitants are perceived to be closer to the (political) centre than rural dwellers. Others state that due to impersonal, complicated and distant life in cities, electoral participation will be more intensive in rural areas. Nevertheless, Frandsen confirmed after exploring the relationship between size and turnout in five European countries since the 1970s the conclusions of Dahl and Tufte's 1973 classic study *Size and Democracy*, which claimed that citizens' motivation to participate is greater in small governmental units than in large ones (Frandsen, 2002).

The relationship between gender and political participation is also a frequently recurring finding in the study of political participation. This relationship is partly due to traditional role perceptions (the political role in a family was assigned to the man) and the unequal position of women (compared with men) in various segments of society (education, employment, etc.). However, recent research reveals the existence of a variety of gender gaps across modes of participation rather than an overall gender gap in political behavior. With regard to electoral participation, different scholars notice that after controlling for attitudinal characteristics, women are more likely to vote than men (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2011; Childs, 2004).

Traditionally, the relationship between electoral absenteeism and age is explained by three mediating variables, the integration into the community, availability of time and the health of citizens. The integration into society grows gradually with the marriage (or cohabitation) and the professional involvement. Reaching a high(er) age increases the possibility of the confrontation with physical obstacles and a reduced social integration. Jennings & Markus argue that participation in more demanding modes of political action does decline with the onset of old age. But, the age-related decrease of political activity can not be proven for less demanding forms of engagement including voting (Jennings & Markus, 1988). Dalton (2008) makes a distinction between types of participation. In his view, older people tend to prefer more traditional modes of participation, such as casting a vote in elections. Younger people participate not less, but rather differently and they are using different participation instruments. They opt for more direct, temporary, issue-specific and elite-challenging activities such as setting up an electronic community to fight for a cause. Consequently, they

tend to participate less in classic participation procedures and it can be expected that turnout will be lower among young people.

The impact of SES can be understood in the frame work of the resource theory. This theory states that participation depends upon the ‘resources’ one has (Verba, Nie & Kim, 1978). Resources include among others money, education, time, civic engagement and access to political information. Some citizens are better equipped than others to participate. From several studies, it appears that people from lower socio-economic classes often lack these vital resources and –as a consequence– participate less in political activities. We should note that the effect of these variables will be tested here on the macro level. It is not an analysis of resources on the individual level that we are undertaking here, but an analysis of the influence of the social structure of a municipality.

Concerning the influence of ethnic-cultural diversity, the general assumption is that the level of diversity has no direct impact on political participation but an indirect one by the effect of diversity on social capital. Putnam registered that a wide array of measures of social capital and civic engagement are negatively correlated with ethnic diversity. In areas of greater diversity, confidence in local government, local leaders and local news media is lower, political efficacy decreases and the frequency of registering to vote is lower. Putnam explains it by: “people living in ethnically diverse settings appear to ‘hunker down’ – that is, to pull in like a turtle.” (Putnam, 2007).

#### *b. Social capital*

The end of the previous paragraph already introduced the importance of social capital for political participation. The attention for the relevance of social capital for political participation is growing. Social capital is not only reflected in interpersonal trust and commitment but also in the confidence that people put in (political) institutions what increases political participation. Two components of social capital can be distinguished: structural and cultural components (Putnam, 2000). One structural element of social capital that is relevant here is the associational life of a community. Voluntary organizations based on membership can be seen as ‘schools of democracy’ where social and civic skills are learnt. Moreover, voluntary organizations play an important role in the recruitment of candidates. We hypothesize that a flourishing associational life increases the chance that people are aware of the importance of a voting. The associational life of a community is measured by the number of voluntary associations at the local level as proxy. The choice for this indicator is not only

based on substantive reasons but also on practical opportunities. Recent data on the number of associations at the local level in Flanders are available (Lauwereysen & Colpaert, 2004). Moreover, this proxy serves as a particularly good indicator for social capital as the formal voluntary association is the most important form of horizontal interaction and reciprocity.

### *c. Political variables*

Much attention has been paid in literature towards the impact of political variables on electoral participation. Milbrath and Goel discerned the influence of the party system and the importance of elections (Milbrath & Goel, 1977). Concerning the party system, they concluded that turnout was lowest in multi-party constituencies and highest in two-party constituencies. Milbrath and Goel explained further on that persons are more likely to turn out for elections they perceive to be important. By consequence, we can assume that in (local) political systems where the voter has a direct impact on the composition of the executive body (board of alderman and mayor) turnout will be larger than in municipalities where this organ is composed after a process of multiple party coalition building. In fact municipalities where citizens can confirm or reject the incumbent single party majority are characterized by party polarisation. Several scholars described party polarisation as an important factor in explaining electoral turnout (Franklin, 1999; Siaroff & Merer, 2002; Dalton, 2008).

Research at the level of the voter shows a relation between voting on anti-system parties and potential absenteeism in case compulsory voting would be abolished (Ackaert & De Winter, 1993). The vote on a anti-system party can be considered as an alternative for electoral abstaining for citizens who reject the overall functioning of the political system (Hooghe et al, 2011). By consequence, it is worth to examine the impact of a anti-system party on turnout and blanc/invalid voting. We use here the presence of extreme right wing parties as independent variable.

### *d. Voting technology*

We earlier proved that electronic voting stimulates voters to cast a preferential vote (Wauters, Verlet & Ackaert, 2011). The system of electronic voting has gradually been introduced in Flanders. In 1994, only in the municipalities of the Antwerp arrondissement and in one municipality in East-Flanders, this system was used (in total 32 municipalities or 10 % of all municipalities). For the local elections of 2006, a system of electronic voting was used in 143

local municipalities (or 46 % of all municipalities). In such a system a screen with all parties and with the possibility to cast a blanc vote is first presented to the voter. More, the 'blanc vote' button is presented in the same layout as the buttons with the party names. This might suggest the citizen that this kind of vote is as an equally valid alternative and stimulate the voter to cast out a blanc votes. In municipalities where paper/pencil voting is still the rule, the alternative is not explicit but rather implicit. On the others hand, the existence of computer voting might create a threshold for citizens who are (in line with political resources theories) less familiar with ICT-tools and keep them away from the ballot station.. Therefore, we hypothesize that electronic voting will increase absenteeism as well as blanc/invalid voting.

#### **4. Data**

Data on these four groups of variables are gathered by using several sources. Data on political, electoral and geographical data were found in a database on local governments (X, 2009). Most of the data on the socio-economic and geographic profile of Flemish municipalities were found on the website on local statistics of the Flemish government (Studiedienst Vlaamse Regering, 2009). The data on electronic voting come from the Belgian Home Department. For the number of associations at the local level in Flanders we as mentioned refer to Lauwereysen & Colpaert (2004).

The social demographic variables are:

- pct. of citizens younger than 35;
- pct. of citizens older than 65;
- pct. of females;
- pct. of unemployed youth;
- pct. of citizens with non EU roots.

The social capital variable is expressed by the number of voluntary organisations on 1000 citizens.

The political variables are:

- number of political groups in council on the eve of the elections;
- number of candidate lists;
- existence of single party majority on the eve of the elections;
- presence of Vlaams Belang candidate list;

Finally, electoral technology refers to the use of computer voting.

The analyses are based on the use of hierarchical regressions for 307 of 308 municipalities<sup>6</sup>.

## 5. Results

We shall first discuss the impact of the different variables on electoral absenteeism and secondly on the use of blanc/invalid voting.

### a. Electoral absenteeism

Table 1 estimates the impact of the different groups of variables on the level of electoral absenteeism.

**Table III: determinants of electoral absenteeism**

Inhabitants	0,217 ***	0,173 ***	0,069	0,103 *
Age: pct. - 35	-0,193 **	-0,118 *	-0,036	0,045
Age: pct. + 65	-0,093	0,113	0,217 ***	0,278 ***
Pct. females	0,499 ***	0,296 ***	0,230 ***	0,255 ***
Pct. unemployed youth	-0,175 ***	-0,188 ***	-0,206 ***	-0,187 ***
Pct. non EU origin	0,296 ***	0,311 ***	0,286 ***	0,215 ***
N. of associations / 1000 citizens	- -	-0,342 ***	-0,285 ***	-0,251 ***
N. of political groups/council	- -	- -	0,286 ***	0,257 ***
N. of candidate lists	- -	- -	0,076	0,039
Single party majority	- -	- -	0,034	0,032
Presence Vlaams Belang	- -	- -	-0,010	0,002
Electronic voting	- -	- -	- -	0,227 ***
<b>Adj. R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>48,8%***</b>	<b>56,6%***</b>	<b>63,1%***</b>	<b>67,2%***</b>

The block of the social demographic variables explain nearly for 50 pct. the level of absenteeism. Yet, by adding the three other block of variables, we notice that the direction of the relationships does not always remain stable. This is particular the case for the proportion of the elderly in the municipalities. Although this variable does not play a role in the first block, it has in the final model a significant impact. Further, and as predicted, absenteeism increases with the number of inhabitants and citizens with non Belgian roots, what confirms our assumptions. However, the test did not confirm our hypothesis concerning the impact of

<sup>6</sup> We did not take the smallest municipality into account (Herstappe, 70 registered voters).

the social status. Absenteeism seems to decrease slightly with the proportion of young unemployed.

Adding social capital increases the explanatory value of the model. As predicted, the stronger the social the social capital is, the more people seem to visit the ballot stations.

With regard to the political variables, only the number of political groups on the eve of the elections seems to have an impact. As could be expected, a fragmented council seems to confuse citizens and by consequence absenteeism.

Finally, voting technology plays a role. Municipalities where votes are expressed by the use of computers count significantly more absenteists.

### *b. Blanc/invalid voting*

Analogous to the previous table, table IV presents the impact of the different blocks of variables on the use of the blanc or invalid vote.

**Table IV: determinants of blanc/invalid voting**

Inhabitants	-0,134 *	-0,155 *	-0,063	-0,035
Age: pct. - 35	0,295 ***	0,331 ***	0,246 **	0,278 ***
Age: pct. + 65	0,177 *	0,275 **	0,209 *	0,261 **
Pct. females	-0,048	-0,144	-0,108	-0,088
Pct. unemployed youth	0,233 ***	0,227 ***	0,329 ***	0,345 ***
Pct. non EU origin	-0,111	-0,104	-0,127	-0,186 **
N. of associations / 1000 citizens	- -	-0,163 *	-0,206 ***	-0,177 **
N. of political groups/council	- -	- -	0,174 *	0,150
N. of candidate lists	- -	- -	-0,118	-0,148
Single party majority	- -	- -	0,054	0,052
Presence Vlaams Belang	- -	- -	-0,404 ***	-0,394 ***
Electronic voting	- -	- -	- -	0,189 ***
<b>Adj. R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>6,4%***</b>	<b>7,9%***</b>	<b>21,1%***</b>	<b>23,8%***</b>

\*\*\* p<0,001; \*\* p<0,010; \* p <0,050

First of all, compared with absenteeism, the models used for blanc/invalid voting reach a much lower explanatory value. This is particular striking for the social demographic variables who explain only for 6 pct the variance. Yet, the directions of these variables confirm our main assumptions. Municipalities with as well younger citizens and older citizens deal with a higher level of blanc/invalid voting, which might be expected. The use of this (non) vote increases also in municipalities with a larger share of young unemployed people. Yet, in spite

of our expectations, the use of blanc/invalid voting decreases in the final model in municipalities with a large share of citizens with a non-Belgian background. Here too, the volume of social capital has an impact: a higher number of voluntary associations reduces blanc/invalid voting. With regard to the political variables: only the presence of an anti system plays a role. In those municipalities where Vlaams Belang presented candidate lists reduces the proportion blanc/invalid votes. Finally, electronic voting leads to more blanc votes.

## 6. Conclusion



This papers emphasizes the role of contextual variables in understanding turnout at local elections. We distinguish two types of abstentionism: absenteeism (visible) and the use of blanc/invalid votes (hidden). Analysing the determinants of each type lead us to the conclusion that both types of abstentionism are different. These determinants explain absenteeism quite well absenteeism but lead to a lower degree of satisfaction in understanding blanc/invalid voting.

With regard to the social demographic variables, only the share of elderly in the population influences both types of abstentionism. The impact of the other variables are not stable in explaining absenteeism or blanc/invalid voting. For some of them, they are only able to explain one of both types. This is particular the case for the scale of the municipality and the proportion of the women in the population. They only affect absenteeism, not blanc/invalid voting. Concerning the proportion of younger people in the municipality, the reverse occurs.

If there is any relationship revealed for the other social demographic variables, its nature differs whether it concerns absenteeism or blanc/invalid voting. With regard to the impact of the here used SES-variable (youth unemployment), we notice a different impact on absenteeism on the one hand and blanc/invalid voting on the other hand. Municipalities with larger proportions of unemployed youth have less absenteeists but more blanc/invalid voters. The reverse occurs for the impact of the share of citizens with non-EU background.

Social capital plays a role in explaining both forms of abstentionism. A larger associational life reduces the share of absenteeists and blanc/invalid voters.

With regard to the political variables, we discerned only a clear relationship for the number of parties in council and the presence of an anti system party in the electoral competition. The figures indicate that the presence of an anti system party candidate list is an alternative for blanc/invalid voting. Meanwhile, the number of parties or candidate lists do not influence



blanc/invalid voting. If the number of parties confuses citizens, it might hinder them in visiting the ballot station but not in casting a valid vote.

Finally, electronic voting seems not only to keep people at home but also encourages voters to express a blanc vote. When 'blanc' is offered as a real alternative on the computer screen, people use it. By consequence, electoral technology influences electoral participation.

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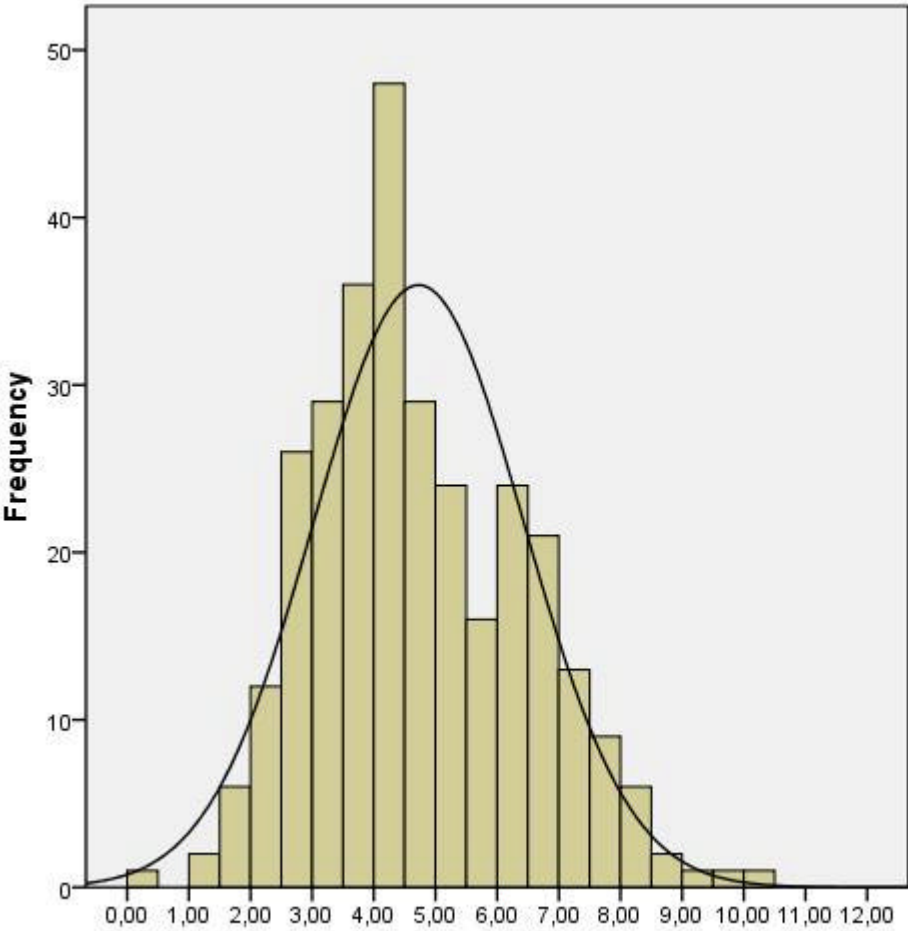
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**Appendix 1: electoral absenteeism – univariate distribution**



**Appendix 2: blanc/invalid voting – univariate distribution**

