



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.

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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 arenas. 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:

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).

“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

who consider the policy level to be less influential. Since we predict this to hold for each election separately, this leads to following general hypothesis:

H2: The less important a voter considers the policy level, the less likely it is that (s)he will turn out to vote.

The second-order theory not only assumes that voters consider second-order arenas to be less important, it also predicts the same for parties and media (Marsh, 1998; Schmitt, 2005). Parties are expected to invest less in second-order campaigns because the benefits of higher turnout are smaller and obtaining more votes does not yield equal returns (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Second-order elections serve mainly as a marker of parties' electoral strength in the first-order arena (Oppenhuis, Van der Eijk, & Franklin, 1996). Consequently, parties mobilize less financial means (Petithomme, 2012), do not use top politicians to populate the second-order ballots, and campaign on first-order issues (Franklin & Van der Eijk, 1996). Because parties devote less attention and funds to second-order campaigns compared to first-order campaigns, the mobilizing potential dampens. A similar point can be made for media attention. If voters are less interested and parties do not focus their attention on a given arena, media have little incentive to provide much space for the campaign (De Vreese, 2003). This dynamic can work both ways – if media decide to devote less space to the second-order campaign, parties have less possibilities to make themselves and their positions known, resulting in less commitment on their part (Campbell, 2006; Schuck et al., 2011). As a result, second-order arenas receive only sparse attention both in election times (De Vreese, 2003) and routine periods (De Vreese, 2001). In such arenas voters have to work harder to obtain information about the electoral struggle. In the first-order arena this campaign information is widely and easily available (Marsh, 1998). Also Reif and Schmitt (1980) expected that the effect of campaign efforts of parties and candidates on turnout is greater in second-order arenas compared to first-order arenas.

However, due to other factors such as education or political interest, some voters are more likely to obtain information regardless of party and media efforts (Zaller, 1992). If voters do get informed about a second-order election micro level data have shown that they take it into consideration when casting their vote (Hobolt and Wittrock, 2011). Accordingly, the expectation is that regardless of the electoral arena, voters that obtained more information from the campaign will be more likely to turn out (Franklin & Van der Eijk, 1996). This effect, however, will be stronger in second-order arena's where less information is available. So if citizens are exposed to campaign messages this probably provides new information, which is added to a relatively small 'stack' of pre-existing information. Conversely, there is a larger supply of information related to the first-order arena meaning that messages are added to a larger stack of pre-existing information. As a result, we expect the following:

H3: Voters that are exposed to an electoral campaign are more likely to turn out.

H4: The positive effect of campaign exposure on turnout is greater in second-order elections compared to first-order elections.

3. Elections in the Netherlands

In order to understand how turnout differs between different elections we briefly sketch the specific contexts of these elections. The Netherlands is a consociational democracy in Western-Europe with roughly 16 million inhabitants. It features a highly proportional system of representation, resulting in a high number of parties with representation in the national parliament (Andeweg and Irwin, 2005), and high electoral volatility (Mair, 2008). The Netherlands was founded as a 'decentralized unitary state' with three levels of government: national, provincial and municipal. The province level never was very important in terms of policy and most decisions are made on the national level. However, the municipal level also matters: the decentralization of some national competences has mainly benefited the municipal level and not the provincial level (Hulst, 2005). All municipal governments are up for election every 4 years, and are elected on the same day. Similarly, national parliamentary elections are held every 4 years as well, whereas EP elections are held every five years.

The EP elections in the Netherlands took place on June 4th 2009 (election results for all elections under study are provided in Table A.1). Many parties formed electoral alliances for this election,³ though they ran on separate lists. In total, 17 parties competed in the election. The most remarkable winner was the Eurosceptic PVV led by Geert Wilders, which managed to obtain four seats; conversely the pro-European D66 also gained seats. The social-democratic labour party (PvdA) lost four seats. The 'killer' issue of the campaign was, unsurprisingly, the economy (Schuck et al., 2011), though the clear gains by PVV/D66 suggest that European positioning mattered as well. None of the leading national politicians participated in the election.⁴ The municipal elections were held on March 3rd 2010. The campaign for these elections was interrupted by the resignation of the national government two weeks before election day. This resignation potentially increased the importance of the municipal elections as a 'first order' marker (Oppenhuis et al., 1996). CDA, SP and PvdA were the clear losers of the elections; D66 and VVD made the biggest gains. Wilders' PVV only competed in two cities, but managed substantial gains in those cases. Finally, the national elections were held on June 9th 2010. 18 parties participated of which 10 parties were able to get representation in parliament. The ballot was won by VVD, though it became a close race with the PvdA who had been lagging behind in the pre-campaign polls. In the end, the two opponents – Rutte (VVD) and Samson (PvdA) joined into a coalition after the elections. Wilders' PVV managed to

³ PvdA/European Social-Democrats and GroenLinks formed an alliance, as did CDA/ChristenUnie/SGP and VVD/D66/European Liberal Democrats.

⁴ An exception is PVV leader Geert Wilders who was the 'list-pusher' on the list of his party.

increase its seat share substantially (see [Appendix A for all results](#)).

Since there is no systematic comparative analysis of party and media communications in the three campaigns available, it is difficult to compare the amount and type of content the media offered to the audience. Nevertheless, based on separate campaign studies, it is fair to say that the media offered most information on the national elections. The 2010 campaign was in line with previous national campaigns covered extensively in all news media, television broadcasters created extra political programs and the three main election debates attracted a large audience ([Van Praag and Van Aelst, 2010](#); [Takens et al., 2013](#); [Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010](#)).

The Dutch EP campaign received less attention in the national media. With 18 percent of television newscasts in the final three weeks of the campaign referring to the EU elections the attention was comparable to EP campaigns in other countries and even slightly higher than for the previous European election ([Schuck et al., 2011](#)). TV-broadcasters organized several debates between the main candidates, but these debates attracted a relatively small audience.⁵ In the Dutch EP election campaign parties tended to focus on both European and national (first-order) considerations ([Adam and Maier, 2011](#)). To our knowledge no research is available on the 2010 local election coverage. The national news media devoted little attention to the campaign and covered the local elections almost completely from a national perspective. The only debate on television was between the eight national party leaders and focused heavily on national issues.⁶

4. Methods

This study uses data of the LISS panel (Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social sciences) administered by Centerdata (Tilburg University, The Netherlands, for more information see <http://www.lissdata.nl>). The LISS panel is a representative sample of Dutch individuals who participate in monthly Internet surveys. The panel is based on a true probability sample of households drawn from the population register. Households that could not otherwise participate are provided with a computer and Internet connection. A longitudinal survey is fielded in the panel every year, covering a large variety of domains including work, education, income, housing, time use, political views, values and personality ([Scherpenzeel and Das, 2010](#)).

We use data obtained for the European, municipal and national parliamentary elections. Over the course of the two-year period (2009–2010), two pre-electoral and three post-electoral surveys were presented to the members of

Table 1

Overview of election timings and panel survey wave timing.

Election	First-order?	Date	Pre	Post	Actual turnout	Reported turnout
European	No	4/6/2009	4/2009	6/2009	36,9%	55,0%
Local	No	3/3/2010		3/2010	54,1% ^a	72,4%
National	Yes	9/6/2010	5/2010	6/2010	75,4%	88,3%

^a Turnout varied between 43,6% in Eindhoven and 82,5% in Schiermonnikoog.

the LISS panel. All waves had similar timings: the pre-electoral waves were always fielded one or two months before the elections, and the post-electoral waves in the month of the election, with data collection starting a few days after election day. Only respondents that participated in all five waves were retained in the analysis ($N = 2692$). The LISS panel consists of 8093 respondents: the response rate for the actual sample used in analysis is 33%. Because non-response is substantial – presumably because we require respondents to participate in five waves – we weigh the sample on age, gender and education so it more closely resembles the Dutch population.⁷ We also imputed missing items within each wave to avoid the biasing effect of list wise deletion ([Myers, 2011](#)). We used multiple imputation; reported standard errors take variations between imputations into account.⁸ [Table 1](#) shows an overview of the three elections, their timing, the availability of pre- and post-electoral data, the actual turnout and reported turnout in the sample.

Theoretically, European and municipal elections are second-order elections whereas the national parliamentary elections are clear first-order elections. Indeed, actual turnout in the latter is markedly higher compared to the 2 s-order arena's. As [Table 1](#) shows the turnout rates in the (weighted) sample differ from the actual turnout rates. We opted to weigh the data for socio-demographic variables and *not* for political preference because this is too closely related to the dependent variable of turnout. The bias of more politically involved citizens is highest in the EP (+18%) and the local (+18%) elections, and slightly lower for the national (+13%) elections. Although this bias is substantial it is also systematic. The turnout rates in our sample have the same relative order as the actual turnout rates with substantial gaps between national, local and European elections. Thus, while the sample has an across-the-board overrepresentation of turnout, the relative turnout rates between the elections – which is the core issue of this study – are as we would expect them to be.

The importance of the policy level was measured through a set of three items. Question wording was as follows: “How important is what is discussed and decided in

⁵ On June 2 2009 the current affairs program *Eén Vandaag* organized a debate that attracted 524.000 viewers, which is substantially less than the average number of 900.000 viewers the program normally has (*Volkskrant*, 3/06/2009).

⁶ The debate opened with question on a recent discussion in the national government about a rapport on the Dutch involvement in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Local parties that have become more important over the years were not invited ([Boogers and Voerman, 2010](#)), while the PVV with candidates in only two cities did participate.

⁷ Weights were calculated using Stata's *survwtg* module. We used raking because no full cross tabulations on age, gender and education were available. Population data for 2009 was obtained from the Central Bureau for Statistics (www.cbs.nl).

⁸ Imputations were done by matching missing values with values from similar respondents in terms of age, gender and education. The amount of imputed data points depends on the variable, but ranges between 90 data points for policy level importance in the European election waves and a single data point for policy level importance in the local election waves.

the [council or parliament of that policy level] for your personal life?”. Answers ranged from 1 (not important at all) to 7 (very important). We include importance measures for the local council, the European Parliament, and the Second Chamber in each regression. We use a relative measure, since we assumed that the impact of ‘how much is at stake’ on turnout for different policy levels depends on how it is perceived relative to these other levels: we subtracted the mean policy level score from the absolute score. For example, the relative importance of the EU policy level is obtained by subtracting the mean scores for the local, national and European policy levels from the absolute score given to the European policy level. This gives us a measure of the extent to which the policy level up for election is given *greater* or *less* importance compared to the other levels. As a control we estimated the models using the absolute measures, but this did not yield substantially different results (see Appendix C). Finally, these measures were always measured in the pre-campaign wave. This is important, since it preempts post-hoc rationalization: voters that turned out might attribute higher importance to that policy level. However, because importance scores are measured prior to the campaign and election day, this cannot occur.

Campaign exposure was measured through the following 4-point scale question included in each post-electoral wave: “Did you follow the electoral campaign very intensively, intensively, not that intensively, or not at all?”. The first two categories were grouped together because the very intensive category contained too little respondents to obtain regression estimates, resulting in a three point scale: (very) intensively, not that intensively, not at all.

Finally, we also add a series of control variables. The most important of these is prior turnout. Habitual voters will be more inclined to turn out compared to habitual non-voters, regardless of whether the contest is first- or second-order (Plutzer, 2002). Moreover, behavior in one election may affect behavior in subsequent elections (Gerber et al., 2003). Consequently, previous turnout – or turnout habit if you will – will predict future turnout all else being equal (Fowler, 2006). Thus, prior turnout in first-order elections may cause turnout in second-order elections as well. The cross sectional nature of extant data on second-order elections mostly inhibits operationalizing the impact of prior behavior, especially since reported turnout is subject to substantial bias (Holbrook and Krosnick, 2013). However, the LISS data enable us to track prior turnout, since each post-electoral wave included a question on turnout: “Nowadays, for one reason or another, some people do not vote. Did you vote in the most recent [election], held on [date]?”. Because turnout was measured shortly after election day, recall bias is kept to a minimum. Answers to this variable were coded with 0 indicating the respondent did not turn out to vote, and 1 indicates that she did turn out to vote.⁹ For the first election in the dataset (European

Table 2

Overview of aggregate turnout, policy level importance (mean relative score for all respondents, abstainers and voters), and campaign exposure (% of respondents following the campaign (very) intensively).

Election	Turnout	Importance of policy level			Campaign exposure
		All	Abstainers	Voters	
European	55,0%	–0.25 (0.02)	–0.19 (0.02)	–0.29 (0.02)	9%
Local	72,4%	0.20 (0.01)	0.08 (0.03)	0.25 (0.02)	18%
National	88,3%	0.71 (0.02)	0.40 (0.04)	0.75 (0.02)	36%

elections) we had to rely on a recall question (the last elections were held in 2006¹⁰). For the municipal and national parliamentary elections, we can simply rely on turnout as it was measured immediately after the elections. In addition to this critical control variable, we also add various controls routinely used in models predicting turnout: gender, age, education (“No or lower secondary”, “Secondary”, “Higher education”), political interest (seven-point scale ranging from “Very uninterested” to “Very interested”) and newspaper reading (four-point scale – “(Almost) every day of the week”, “A few times a week”, “A few times a month”, “Seldom or never”) (Franklin & Van der Eijk, 1996).

5. Results

Is the perceived importance of a policy level related to turn out? Table 2 presents results regarding the turnout rates, mean relative importance of the policy level, and campaign exposure in the three elections. In short, this table replicates to a large extent the macro analyses performed by previous studies, but adds an explicit measure of the ‘less at stake’ dimension.

The results support Reif and Schmitt’s contention that, indeed, it is the less at stake dimension that is causing lower turnout in second-order arenas. Looking at all respondents, we see a linear increase in both the mean relative importance and turnout as we move from the European over the local towards the national level. This confirms our first hypothesis. The European level seems, compared to the local and national level, to be rather ‘third-rate’ (Irwin, 1995) than second-order. The *negative* relative score implies that across all respondents the European level gets lower importance scores than all other levels. Also the difference between local and national elections, both in terms of turnout and importance, is substantial and highly significant.

When the mean relative scores are split for those voters that turned out to vote (voters) and those that did not (abstainers), the results offer even more support for the idea that the less voters perceive there is at stake, the less likely they are to turn out. For both national and local

⁹ It should be noted that we had an alternative measure at our disposal which measured frequency of voting behavior prior to 2006; however, inclusion of this variable did not alter the effects of the other variables in the model. Results of this analysis are available upon request.

¹⁰ Between 2006 and 2009 two elections were held: Provincial elections in 2007 and ‘Waterschaps’ elections in 2008. However, the provincial elections are indirect elections, and the Waterschaps elections were postal elections and are currently planned to become indirect elections as well. We therefore leave them aside.

elections, those that turned out rate the importance of the policy level higher compared to those that abstained. For the European level, the relative scores seem to suggest an atypical dynamic (lower relative scores for voters compared to abstainers), yet the absolute importance scores show that voters actually rate the European level as more important (3.68) compared to abstainers (3.24). The lower relative score is caused by the fact that voters tend to rate the other levels as even more important, which results in a more negative *relative* score for the European level. For reference, all absolute scores are provided in [Appendix B](#). We will elaborate on this finding in the conclusion.

Also campaigns seem to be meaningfully correlated to turnout. Again, we see a linear rise in campaign exposure from the European to the national level. In European elections nine percent of the respondents were (very) attentive to the campaign, compared to 36 percent in national elections. As such, voters' attention to the campaign seemed to be less in second-order contests. It should be noted that the lower degree of attention to the campaign is also partially a supply effect: as we discussed in the case description, parties and media also tended to devote less attention to second-order campaigns, or incorporated first-order considerations in their communication. This seems to suggest that when political actors and media invest less in second-order campaigns, this generates less attentiveness to those campaigns amongst the public, which in turn increases abstention.

While these results are in line with our expectations, we also hypothesized individual level effects: the less at stake dimension would also matter *within* an electoral context –

that is, voters who ascribe less importance to a policy level will be less likely to turn out compared to voters that do perceive the level as more important (H2), and voters with high campaign exposure would be more inclined to turn out compared to voters with low campaign exposure (H3). To test these hypotheses we estimate three logistic regression models predicting whether a voter turned out (1) or not (0) in the European, local and national elections. [Table 3](#) reports the regression results. To ease interpretation of the coefficients, [Table 4](#) depicts the predicted probability of turning out to vote for varying values of the key independent variables (full probability changes are reported in [Appendix C](#)). The other independent variables are kept at their mean or median level for these calculations.

Contrary to our expectation, the importance of the policy level does *not* seem to have a straightforward impact on turnout (H2). In the local (0.36 (0.13), $p < 0.01$) and national (0.26, (0.14), $p < 0.10$) elections the coefficient of the corresponding policy level is positive and (almost) significant. In the European election the coefficient is not significant, though positive (0.06 (0.09), $p = 0.523$). The impact of policy level importance is also relatively minor – compared to voters who consider the local level unimportant, voters who consider it highly important only have a 6 percent higher chance to turn out to vote; for the national elections the increase is only 3 percent. In the European elections this increase is a mere 2 percent and insignificant (see [Table 4](#)). Thus, while the results for local and national elections do confirm that the importance variables capture a meaningful, but substantively minor predictor of turnout,

Table 3

Logistic regression estimates predicting turnout (1 = turned out to vote, 0 = abstained) in European, Local and National elections.*** $p < 0.001$,** $p < 0.01$,* $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.10$ ($N = 2692$)^a.

	European elections		Local elections		National elections	
	Coef	S.E.	Coef	S.E.	Coef	S.E.
Importance of policy level						
• European level	0.06	(0.09)	0.09	(0.11)	−0.06	(0.15)
• Local level	0.07	(0.11)	0.36**	(0.13)	−0.06	(0.17)
• National level	0.05	(0.09)	0.00	(0.10)	0.26+	(0.14)
Campaign exposure (ref: Not at all)						
• Not that intensive	1.41***	(0.11)	1.50***	(0.14)	1.20***	(0.20)
• (Very) Intensive	2.47***	(0.29)	2.01***	(0.26)	1.89***	(0.30)
Voted in previous election? (ref: no)						
• Yes	1.98***	(0.19)	2.05***	(0.13)	2.26***	(0.20)
• Not eligible to vote	2.28***	(0.31)				
Gender	0.14	(0.10)	0.29*	(0.12)	0.34*	(0.17)
Age	0.02***	(0.00)	0.01+	(0.00)	0.00	(0.01)
Education (ref: Low)						
• Middle	0.22+	(0.12)	0.51***	(0.14)	0.24	(0.19)
• High	0.55***	(0.14)	0.57***	(0.17)	0.43+	(0.25)
Income (/1000)	0.06	(0.04)	0.02	(0.09)	0.15*	(0.07)
Political interest	0.02	(0.04)	0.06	(0.05)	0.15*	(0.07)
Newspaper reading (ref: seldom or never)						
• Every day of the week	0.39*	(0.16)	0.41*	(0.17)	0.08	(0.22)
• A few times a week	0.32+	(0.18)	0.16	(0.19)	−0.05	(0.27)
• A few times a month	0.32	(0.22)	0.12	(0.23)	0.27	(0.33)
Constant	−4.35***	(0.39)	−2.68***	(0.43)	−2.21***	(0.50)

^a To keep the N constant across regressions, we omit non-eligible voters from the regressions; since these are mainly young voters, this might distort the results. However, when we allow the N to vary – enabling us to include these respondents – the model estimates remain stable.

Table 4

Predicted probability of turning out to vote (versus not turning out), for different values of independent variables. All other independent variables are kept at their mean or median value.

	European elections		Local elections		National elections	
	Prob	S.E.	Prob	S.E.	Prob	S.E.
Importance of European level						
• Low	0.54	(0.03)	0.76	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
• Medium	0.55	(0.03)	0.77	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
• High	0.56	(0.04)	0.77	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
Importance of local level						
• Low	0.54	(0.03)	0.74	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
• Medium	0.55	(0.03)	0.75	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
• High	0.56	(0.04)	0.80	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
Importance of national level						
• Low	0.54	(0.04)	0.77	(0.02)	0.89	(0.01)
• Medium	0.55	(0.03)	0.77	(0.02)	0.90	(0.01)
• High	0.56	(0.04)	0.77	(0.02)	0.92	(0.01)
Campaign exposure						
• Not at all	0.25	(0.03)	0.50	(0.03)	0.78	(0.04)
• Not that intensive	0.58	(0.03)	0.82	(0.01)	0.82	(0.01)
• (Very) intensive	0.80	(0.05)	0.88	(0.02)	0.96	(0.01)

importance of a policy level does not seem to affect turnout in European elections, the clearest example of a second-order election.¹¹ That for the EP elections the less at stake variable does not work at the individual level is, however, not necessarily in contrast with the second-order theory. Voters that do turn out for the European elections may do so because of national motives, irrespective of how much they perceive is at stake in the European elections. We will elaborate this argument and potential alternative explanations in the conclusion.

On the other hand, campaign exposure (H3) does matter, and it does so regardless of the electoral context. In all three regressions the coefficient for campaign exposure is highly significant. When electoral campaign efforts reach the electorate, it incentivizes them to go out and cast their vote. Campaign exposure might also overrule the effect of the importance variable and explain the insignificant coefficient for ‘importance of electoral arena’. However, when we estimated the models for various subgroups of voters depending on their level of exposure to the campaign, there was no such pattern in the results. Furthermore, stepwise regressions also did not support this. As such, it seems that campaigns help voters to ‘tune in’, independently of their prior perceptions of the electoral arena. It is not unthinkable that this strong causal effect of campaigns on turnout works partly in the opposite way: voters who were already planning to go out and vote might have been more likely to follow the campaign for information. For the national elections we have a measure of turnout intention and we can test this alternative hypothesis. Turnout intention is highly significant as expected, but the coefficients of campaign exposure remain significant and positive. This suggests that the effect of campaign exposure, at least in

the national elections, occurred independent of the intention to go voting before the start of the campaign.

H4 expected that the effects of the campaign depend on the election. Fig. 1 offers support for this hypothesis. In the EP and local elections the effect of campaigns is greater compared to the national elections. In the EP elections being unexposed or very intensively exposed to the campaign resulted in a 55 percent increase in one's probability to turn out. Exposure to local (38 percent) and national (18 percent) campaigns had a substantially less – if still sizeable – impact on turnout (Table 4). This finding suggests that campaigns are a critical factor in getting voters to the polls, in particular in second-order contests. However, two important points should be taken into account. Firstly, second-order campaigns are not able to reach as many voters as first-order campaigns do (see Table 1). But if they do reach voters, their effect is much stronger. Less interested voters will probably pick up some information on the importance and stakes of the election, even if they are not that attentive to the campaign. In information-sparse environments the mobilizing effects of campaigns on voters that do get exposed is clearly greater. Secondly, once we take the absolute probabilities into account, it is clear that for second-order contests the campaign only serves to narrow the turnout gap compared to the first-order contest: only for highly exposed voters do the turnout probabilities approach national-level turnout.

As to the control variables, habitual voting is obviously a key determinant of turnout, with a large substantial impact as well (see Table C2 in Appendix), regardless of the contest. For example, compared to non-voters, respondents who voted in the 2006 national elections were much more likely to go out and do so again in the EP elections (68% probability of turnout), compared to abstainers in the 2006

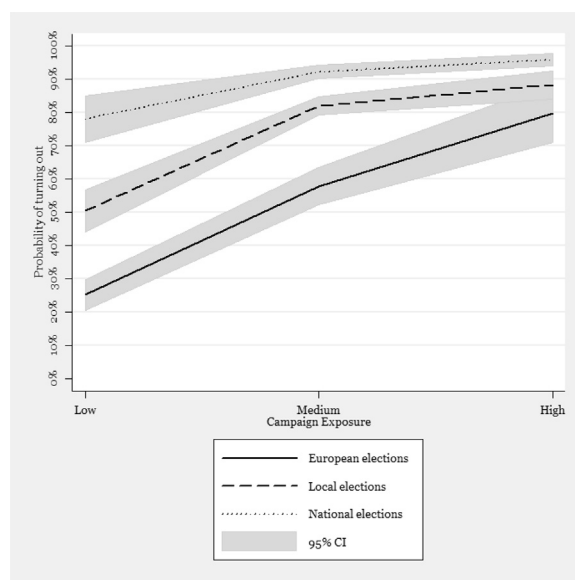


Fig. 1. Probability of turning out in European, local and national elections, for respondents with low, medium and high exposure to the campaign.

¹¹ Note that we use relative measures. However, if we use absolute measures the results for the EP elections remained insignificant. The results of these regressions are reported in Appendix B.

elections (23% probability of turnout). The effect of prior voting is found in all three models. This is evidence of the spillover effect also found by Gerber et al. (2003) in a US setting: turning out to vote for one election increases the odds of turnout in a different electoral context. Interestingly, the substantive impact is slightly lower in the first-order contest compared to the second-order contests: a 21 percent difference for the national elections versus 36 percent and 45 percent in the local and EP elections. Age always has a positive effect on turnout, yet its impact is larger in second-order contests. The fact that it is not significant in the first-order campaign may be attributable to the fact that a ceiling effect occurs: in national elections the baseline probability of turning out is already high. Political interest does not have large effects either. This may be due to the fact that more interested individuals will tend to have higher campaign exposure, so a part of its impact is contained in the highly significant effect of campaign exposure.¹² Nonetheless, political interest always has the expected positive impact on turnout, and is significant in the national election contest.

6. Conclusion and discussion

This study examined whether voters' perceptions of how much is at stake in an election affects turnout, and the role of campaigns therein. Based on Reif and Schmitt's (1980) second-order election model we expected that the extent to which voters' perceive there is at stake, and their exposure to the campaign would have a large impact on turnout. In contrast with previous research, we attempted to directly tap the 'less at stake' dimension that is central to the second-order theory. In line with the second-order model we firstly predicted that lower turnout in second-order arenas is caused by the perception that the elected representative body has little impact on people's daily life. Secondly, we expected that campaign exposure would have a greater effect in second-order elections because such second-order arenas have lower overall visibility. This causes scarcity of information on second-order arenas which creates a larger potential for campaigns to make a difference in getting voters to the polls.

Our findings regarding the 'less at stake dimension' are twofold. On the macro level the perceived stakes correlated perfectly with turnout in each Dutch election. The low perceived impact of the European parliament correlated with low turnout for the European elections, the opposite was the case for the national parliament elections, with the local level taking a middle position. Our operationalization of the less at stake dimension is clearly helpful to explain the large differences in turn-out between different types of elections. Partly in contrast with the aggregate results, modeling turnout at the individual level did not yield the expected results. The impact of perceived stakes was contingent on the elections. Whereas it mattered in local and to a lesser extent also in national elections, it was

insignificant in EP elections, which are central to the second-order model. Apparently, whether someone considers the European parliament as inconsequential for their personal life or not does not help us to predict whether a voter will stay at home or show up on election day. Furthermore, EP elections differ from other elections because the EU itself is the object of political discussion: some voters and parties are in favor, others against. Such contention is mostly absent in local and national elections. This contention may affect the role of perceived stakes on turnout: Eurosceptic voters may attribute less importance to the EU, yet turn out to vote because there is a party that perfectly represents their views on this matter. For instance, the Freedom party of Wilders campaigned against the EU. While the respondents that prefer the party consider the EU to be very unimportant they do turn out to vote. Conversely, voters who favor the EU may perceive it to be more important, and also turn out to vote. Indeed, we found some evidence of a curvilinear effect of the perceived stakes dimension on turnout in the EP election.¹³ However, our data do not allow us to directly tap people's position towards the EU. Nonetheless, the above suggests that the insignificant finding at the individual level does not automatically invalidate this assumption of the second-order model. On the contrary, voters that attribute little importance to the European policy level may turn out due to first-order considerations, such as punishing the incumbent government. This was shown by the relatively low absolute importance voters in EP elections attributed to the European compared to the national level. In fact, if we combine the aggregate and individual findings the second-order character finds strong confirmation. In general voters agree that the European level is of little importance to them, and voters that do turn out have mainly national incentives.

Our findings regarding the different impact of campaigns in first- and second-order elections complements this conclusion. Across elections, if campaigns reach people they have a positive effect on the probability of turning out to vote. This suggests that while policy importance is not enough to mobilize the electorate, communicative efforts of parties and media for that level are. Most importantly, as suggested by Reif and Schmitt (1980) the impact of campaign exposure is larger in second-order elections compared to first-order elections. But while the impact of exposure on turnout is higher in second-order elections, these campaigns reach less voters which severely dampens their mobilizing potential. Second-order campaigns are less important to parties, who invest less in them. Furthermore, they garner less attention in the media. Therefore, they reach less voters, but their impact on turnout is greater when and if they do reach voters.

Our findings regarding the less at stake dimension suggest that its role in first- and second-order campaigns is

¹² To test this, we regressed political interest on campaign exposure. The average R^2 was 0.24 for the EP elections, 0.40 for the local elections, and 0.33 for the national elections.

¹³ When we added a quadratic term for European policy level importance, it indeed suggested that turnout was highest for voters rating the EU as very unimportant and very important; turnout was lowest in the middle of the scale. However, the quadratic term failed to reach significance in the full model.

less straightforward than assumed. This might be partly due to our measure of the less at stake dimension that focused on the perceived impact of a policy level on someone's *personal life*. This measure indeed showed remarkable differences between the policy levels. Yet, perhaps voters do not see the impact of the EU as occurring on their personal life, but in a broader context. For the EP elections, which are essentially transnational elections, personal impact may not fully tap the perceived stakes. People might see Europe more as having a 'collective threat' for national culture or identity. We hope future studies will tackle this and try to tap different types of perceived impact.

Nevertheless, our results suggest that the campaign dynamics of elections can be either a virtuous or a vicious circle. In second-order election campaigns, people believe that the election has little impact on their personal lives. Parties are less willing to invest in campaign efforts – literally in terms of financial means, but also figuratively by fielding their top politicians in the campaign – and news media are less committed as well. The critical part of the electorate that might have been pulled towards the ballot is not mobilized since the low information environment signals that, indeed, there is not that much at stake anyway. The result is that many citizens do not turn out. Low demand and supply for information on the elections strengthen each other in a negative way. Our findings of a positive campaign exposure effect suggests that this vicious circle can be stopped, but unfortunately actual exposure to second-order campaigns remains extremely low.

The national level on the other hand is seen as highly important, a belief that is partly grounded in reality and partly perpetuated by parties and media who focus their full attention and means on these elections. First-order campaigns are a critical component in first-order arena's virtuous circles: voters perceive them as important for their personal lives, media and parties focus personnel and money towards these first-order ballots, causing higher turnout, which in turn strengthens voters' perceived importance of the first-order arena. As a result of both dynamics there is a huge perception gap regarding the importance of the national and European policy levels: the European level, including the EP, has gained power over the years, but citizens have not realized this or simply cannot relate it to the choices they face on election day (Schmitt, 2005). Or from another perspective, politicians and journalists have failed to persuade the public that there is something at stake. Both actors have contributed to the present democratic deficit. Perhaps not only by disregarding the true importance of European elections, but also by strengthening the idea that in particular national politicians have a huge influence on our daily lives. It seems that a combined virtuous and vicious campaign circle have created the idea that the national political arena is the only one that really matters. Since national politicians lost much of their political autonomy over the years this perception is not only wrong, but also problematic as it creates false expectations that national politics cannot live up to.

Appendix A. Election results for Dutch European Parliamentary, Local and National elections.

Table A1

Election outcomes for the European, local and national elections.

Party	European election %	Local election % ^a	National election %
CDA	20.0	14.8	26.5
ChristenUnie	6.8	3.8	4.0
D66	11.3	8.1	2.0
GroenLinks	8.8	6.7	4.6
Partij voor de Dieren	3.4	0.3	1.8
PvdA	12.0	15.8	21.2
PVV	17.0	0.8	5.9
SP	7.3	4.2	16.6
VVD	11.4	15.7	14.7
Other	1.5	18.0	2.7
Local parties	/	23.7	

^a Note that we had to group a lot of alliances in the other category to keep results (somewhat) comparable across elections.

Appendix B. Absolute importance of policy levels, for abstainers and voters, per election.

Table B1

Mean absolute policy level importance scores, European elections.

Policy level	Importance of policy level		
	All respondents	Abstainers	Voters
European	3.48 (0.03)	3.24 (0.05)	3.68 (0.04)
Local	3.73 (0.03)	3.39 (0.04)	4.01 (0.04)
National	4.43 (0.03)	4.04 (0.05)	4.76 (0.03)

Table B2

Mean absolute policy level importance scores, Local elections.

Policy level	Importance of policy level		
	All respondents	Abstainers	Voters
European	3.48 (0.03)	3.14 (0.06)	3.61 (0.03)
Local	4.12 (0.03)	3.45 (0.06)	4.37 (0.03)
National	4.58 (0.03)	3.98 (0.06)	4.81 (0.03)

Table B3

Mean absolute policy level importance scores, National elections.

Policy level	Importance of policy level		
	All respondents	Abstainers	Voters
European	3.61 (0.03)	3.16 (0.09)	3.67 (0.03)
Local	4.08 (0.03)	3.29 (0.10)	4.19 (0.03)
National	4.67 (0.03)	3.70 (0.10)	4.80 (0.03)

Appendix C

Table C1

Regression results using absolute policy level importance. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.10$ ($N = 2692$).

	European elections		Local elections		National elections	
	Coef	S.E.	Coef	S.E.	Coef	S.E.
Importance of policy level						
• European level	−0.02	(0.05)	−0.05	(0.06)	−0.13+	(0.07)
• Local level	−0.01	(0.06)	0.20***	(0.06)	−0.14+	(0.07)
• National level	−0.01	(0.05)	−0.11+	(0.06)	0.21*	(0.09)
Campaign exposure (ref: not at all)						
• Not that intensive	1.41***	(0.11)	1.49***	(0.14)	1.22***	(0.20)
• (Very) intensive	2.48***	(0.29)	2.01***	(0.26)	1.91***	(0.31)
Voted in previous election? (ref: no)						
• Yes	2.00***	(0.19)	2.05***	(0.13)	2.28***	(0.20)
• Not eligible to vote	2.29***	(0.31)				
Gender	0.15	(0.10)	0.29*	(0.12)	0.36*	(0.17)
Age	0.02***	(0.00)	0.01+	(0.00)	0.00	(0.01)
Education (ref: low)						
• Middle	0.22+	(0.12)	0.51***	(0.14)	0.24	(0.19)
• High	0.57***	(0.14)	0.58***	(0.17)	0.44+	(0.25)
Income (/1000)	0.06	(0.04)	0.02	(0.09)	0.15*	(0.07)
Political interest	0.03	(0.05)	0.06	(0.05)	0.17*	(0.07)
Newspaper reading (ref: seldom or never)						
• Every day of the week	0.39*	(0.16)	0.39*	(0.17)	0.08	(0.22)
• A few times a week	0.32+	(0.18)	0.15	(0.19)	−0.04	(0.27)
• A few times a month	0.32	(0.22)	0.11	(0.23)	0.29	(0.33)
Constant	−4.30***	(0.40)	−2.78***	(0.46)	−2.12***	(0.51)

Table C2

Predicted probability of turning out to vote (versus not turning out), for different values of independent variables. All other independent variables are kept at their mean or median value^a.

	European elections		Local elections		National elections	
	Prob	S.E.	Prob	S.E.	Prob	S.E.
Importance of European level						
• Low	0.54	(0.03)	0.76	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
• Medium	0.55	(0.03)	0.77	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
• High	0.56	(0.04)	0.77	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
Importance of local level						
• Low	0.54	(0.03)	0.74	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
• Medium	0.55	(0.03)	0.75	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
• High	0.56	(0.04)	0.80	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
Importance of national level						
• Low	0.54	(0.04)	0.77	(0.02)	0.89	(0.01)
• Medium	0.55	(0.03)	0.77	(0.02)	0.90	(0.01)
• High	0.56	(0.04)	0.77	(0.02)	0.92	(0.01)
Campaign exposure						
• Not at all	0.25	(0.03)	0.50	(0.03)	0.78	(0.04)
• Not that intensive	0.58	(0.03)	0.82	(0.01)	0.82	(0.01)
• (Very) intensive	0.80	(0.05)	0.88	(0.02)	0.96	(0.01)
Voted in previous election?						
• No	0.23	(0.04)	0.54	(0.02)	0.76	(0.03)
• Yes	0.68	(0.02)	0.90	(0.01)	0.97	(0.01)
• Not eligible to vote	0.74	(0.05)				
Gender						
• Male	0.53	(0.04)	0.74	(0.02)	0.89	(0.02)
• Female	0.58	(0.03)	0.79	(0.02)	0.92	(0.01)
Age						
• Low	0.51	(0.03)	0.75	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
• Medium	0.57	(0.03)	0.77	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
• High	0.62	(0.04)	0.79	(0.02)	0.92	(0.01)
Education						
• Low	0.49	(0.04)	0.70	(0.03)	0.89	(0.02)
• Middle	0.54	(0.04)	0.80	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
• High	0.62	(0.04)	0.80	(0.02)	0.92	(0.01)

Table C2 (continued)

	European elections		Local elections		National elections	
	Prob	S.E.	Prob	S.E.	Prob	S.E.
Income (/1000)						
• Low	0.53	(0.03)	0.76	(0.02)	0.89	(0.01)
• Middle	0.55	(0.03)	0.77	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)
• High	0.56	(0.03)	0.77	(0.02)	0.92	(0.01)
Political interest						
• Low	0.55	(0.03)	0.76	(0.02)	0.89	(0.01)
• Middle	0.55	(0.03)	0.77	(0.02)	0.90	(0.01)
• High	0.55	(0.03)	0.78	(0.02)	0.92	(0.01)
Newspaper reading						
• Seldom or never	0.49	(0.05)	0.73	(0.03)	0.90	(0.02)
• A few times a month	0.56	(0.05)	0.76	(0.04)	0.92	(0.02)
• A few times a week	0.57	(0.04)	0.76	(0.03)	0.90	(0.02)
• Every day of the week	0.58	(0.03)	0.81	(0.02)	0.91	(0.01)

^a For continuous variables (Importance of Policy level, Age, Income, Political interest), the Low, Medium and High values correspond to the first quartile, second quartile and third quartile value, respectively. This means that 50% of the values of the independent variable fall between the low and high boundary.

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