How Second Order are Local Elections?

Voting Motives and Party Preferences in Belgian Municipal Elections.

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Abstract

A defining characteristic of second-order elections is that voters base their decision on considerations that were developed for a different policy level. Therefore, this kind of elections does not contribute to the quality of democratic representation. Municipal elections are often considered as second-order elections. In this article we use data from an exit poll (n=4,591) held during the 2012 municipal elections in Belgium. Results suggest that although voters predominantly invoke local aspects as determining their vote choice, still three quarters votes for the same party locally as for federal elections. Among voters who deviate from their federal party preference, knowing local candidates and concern about local policy issues are the main sources of deviation. The conclusion therefore is that local candidates do make a difference and contribute strongly to the salience of electoral decisions on the local level.

Keywords : Second-order election ; Local elections ; Belgium ; Exit poll ; Vote choice heuristics

Word count: 8,042

1. Introduction

The principle of free and fair elections is based predominantly on the mechanism of electoral accountability: at elections office holders are held accountable. However, the principle of accountability cannot always be guaranteed in second-order elections, when voters do not judge the track record of that specific level of government. It was shown that local elections hardly contribute to this process of electoral accountability in the US, often due to a lack of information about local politics (Berry and Howell 2007). Schakel and Jeffery (2013), however, recently argued that it is all too easily assumed that national elections are first-order elections, while all elections at a lower geographical level are second-order elections.

Second-order elections are characterised by the fact that ‘many voters cast their votes in these elections not only as a result of conditions obtaining within the specific context of the second-order arena, but also on the basis of factors in the main political arena of the nation’ (Reif and Schmitt 1980, 9). In most electoral research, European Parliament elections are used as a prime example for this phenomenon, as numerous voters are guided by national considerations. As a result voters do not hold their members of the European Parliament accountable for what they have done in the European Parliament (van der Eijk, Franklin, and Marsh 1996).

In most countries, elections for local authorities too will be considered as second-order elections (Berry and Howell 2007; Cutler 2008; Webber *et al.* 2014). Heath *et al.* (1999, 409) qualified this statement to some extent by labelling local elections as ‘elections from one-and-three-quarter order’. Even though national considerations affect the local vote choice, it is argued that arena-specific factors play a more important role in local than in European

parliament elections (Heath *et al.* 1999, Rallings and Thrasher 2005). The question remains, therefore, whether local elections fit in this specific definition of second-order elections, or whether voters take into consideration local voting motives.

The aim of the current study is to investigate to what extent local elections in Belgium are characterised by elements of first- and second-order elections. Based on a representative exit poll survey of the 2012 local elections in Belgium, our main research question is whether voters follow their federal party preferences (as we would expect in typical second-order elections) or whether local considerations lead them to deviate from this preference. The features of the municipal councils election in Belgium make it a most-likely case of second order elections. First, the same parties compete in federal elections in a vast majority of municipalities (Wauters, Verlet, and Ackaert 2012). Second, since 2007 Belgium was confronted with an extended period of political instability, and political parties strongly politicised these elections as part of the ongoing power-struggle at the federal level.

In this article, we first present an overview of the literature on second-order elections and the second-order characteristics of local elections. Next, we elaborate on factors that can incite taking into account context-specific considerations in the vote choice process. We subsequently present the data, the 2012 PartiRep exit poll, and the methodology used. This section is followed by a presentation of the results and we end with some thoughts for further research.

2. The problem of second-order elections

Within democratic theory different mechanisms are described that ensure a linkage between voters' preferences and politicians representation of these preferences through policy choices.

Voters can evaluate retrospectively the performance of parties and politicians and subsequently hold them accountable (Prezworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999, Mansbridge 2003). Voters reward and punish incumbents and ‘throw the rascals out’ (Miller and Wattenberg 1985; Downs 1957). In contrast, prospective voting theory assumes that voters assess party programs and subsequently decide what party to vote for (Norris 1997, Prezworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999). Both roads towards representation, however, are hampered if issues and performances of parties at another level of governance influence vote choices. In that case, voters are no longer able to clearly express their evaluation of past performance or their expectations on future policy on that specific level of government (Norris 1997).

In this study, we investigate electoral accountability at local elections as research indicates that information on federal politics might be more readily available than information on local politics (Put, Maddens, and Smulders 2014; Lefevere and Van Aelst 2014; Webber *et al.* 2014). We should note that electoral accountability is not the only factor to assess the democratic legitimacy of local government. Several studies assessed the effect of citizen involvement on political trust and democratic legitimacy at the local level (e.g. Geissel 2009; Michels and De Graaf 2010). Both participation and accountability can be considered as key factors in the creation of democratic legitimacy. Given the data at hand, however, the scope of the present analysis remains limited to the quality of local democracy by focusing on the quality of accountability at the local level.

Within the research tradition on second-order elections different defining elements of ‘second-order’ elections are referred to: the turn out rate, the stakes of the elections and the voting motives. First, low voter turnout is considered an important indicator of the second-

order nature of an election and found to be lower in elections that were considered second-order (Heath *et al.* 1999; Lefevere and Van Aelst 2014; Rallings and Trasher 2005). Second, studies on second-order elections also questioned voters directly on the importance of the different levels of governance (Lefevere and Van Aelst 2014). Third, differences in vote choices between elections at different levels of governance can be another indicator. Small and newer parties tend to obtain larger vote shares in second-order elections than in national elections and parties in the national government tend to lose votes in second-order elections (Marsh 1998; Reif 1984; van der Eijk, Franklin, and Manin 1996). The losses of parties in government can reflect a natural popularity cycle, especially second-order elections in the middle of the electoral cycle often reflect a low popularity of parties in office. Further, Reif and Schmitt (1980) argued that second-order elections have no immediate consequences for the composition of the national government, which allows expressing discontent when voting. Rather than voting for parties that have a chance of gaining seats or even office, voters can ‘vote with the heart’ in a second-order context (Heath *et al.* 1999). Finally, voters can use their vote in second-order elections to send a signal to parties and to comment on their performance (van der Eijk *et al.* 1996). In this study, we provide a brief overview of the turnout level and perceived importance of the 2012 Belgian local elections. Subsequently, we investigate in depth whether federal considerations influence local vote choices thereby serving to signal the ‘political mood of the moment’ to the national political leaders (Anderson and Ward 1996).

3. Second-order local elections?

The question whether local elections should be considered as pure second-order elections is debated. Previous studies revealed that local elections cannot be equated with EU elections in terms of the second-order election framework. Studies on the UK and the Netherlands

indicated that local elections take a middle position in terms of the first- and second- order election framework. Regarding voter turnout, for example, rates for local elections are generally lower than national elections but higher than EU elections (Heath *et al.*, 1999; Lefevere and Van Aelst 2014; Rallings and Trasher 2005). This observation led Heath et al. to label local elections as elections of one-and-three-quarter order.

Moreover, empirical studies show that in a context of multilevel governance, voters can and do develop party allegiances specific to the particular political context at stake (Clarke and Stewart 1987). In addition, only few local competences are part of large ideological debates (Jennings and Niemi 1966). As a consequence, ideological preferences guiding vote choices for higher levels of governance are less relevant when choosing local representatives. Moreover, personal ties with local candidates are assumed to strongly affect local vote choices and could therefore render national preferences less relevant (Fuentes and Villodres 2010). As Jennings and Niemi (1966, 89) stated: ‘The impact of “friends-and-neighbors” politics and local traditions are sufficiently great in small- to medium sized towns to create a disproportionate amount of both partisan and Independent deviation at this level’. This does not mean friends, neighbors and local political contacts are absent at the national level. In effect, vote-seeking goals of federal Members of Parliament often result in strong investments in constituency service and personal contacts (Fenno 1978; André, Gallagher, and Sandri, 2014).

In sum, we can distinguish two determinants of vote choice causing voters to deviate from their federal political preferences in municipal elections. First, local issues cannot always be interpreted in terms of (national) ideological positions. As a consequence, we expect voters of

whom the vote choice is driven by local considerations to deviate more from their federal vote intention:

Hypothesis 1: Voters who take into account local voting motives are more likely to deviate from their federal party preference.

Second, ‘friends-and-neighbors’-politics is considered to be of foremost importance in a local electoral context and trends toward personalization of politics might even reinforce this motive (Wauters, Verlet, and Ackaert 2012; Karvonen 2010). Therefore, we expect voters whose vote choice is determined by local candidates to deviate more from their federal vote intention:

Hypothesis 2: Voters who take into account the appeal of local candidates, are more likely to deviate from their federal party preference.

4. Who deviates?

We concentrate on local party choices that deviate from federal party preferences. The reasons therefore are largely pragmatic. Some voters might take into account local policy issues or candidates before concluding that they should still vote for the same party for municipal and federal elections. Analytically it is almost impossible to distinguish these voters from those who simply follow their federal party preference in local elections, thereby arriving at a congruent set of party preferences. Therefore, the analysis will be concentrated on non-congruent voters, with different local and federal party preferences. This allows for sufficient analytical leverage to investigate the importance of local issues and candidates.

This is a rather conservative test, given that we can be confident that this group has different voting motivations for the local and the federal level.

Investigating non-congruent party preferences, the role of political sophistication is important. Most empirical studies suggest that sophisticated voters are better able to distinguish policy levels. First, voting for different parties for different levels of governance could imply that voters take into account factors specific for the electoral context at stake. Such deliberative choices necessitate voters to be informed about the competences at all levels of governance (Campbell and Miller 1957, Heath *et al.* 1999). Second, voting for different parties for different offices can result from strategic considerations of voters. In a mixed electoral system, splitting tickets on a single ballot can be a way of indicating one's preferred coalition (Karp *et al.* 2002; Schoen 1999) or signalling that a balance of power between parties is needed (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2004). Empirical research indicates that a substantial group of the ticket-splitters are indeed sophisticated voters who act strategically (Karp *et al.* 2002, Rallings and Trasher 2003, Schoen 1999). Third, most authors assume that rising levels of political sophistication lead to a process of partisan dealignment (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002). Partisanship in general offers a heuristic short cut to electoral decision making, as voters simply can rely on the cues provided by political parties and no longer have to seek information on all policy issues (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). High levels of political sophistication, however, render the need for this kind of partisan cues largely obsolete, and it can be assumed that voters with higher levels of political sophistication are more likely to use forms of split-ticket voting to express their opinions. It has to be mentioned that high politically sophisticated voters were previously found to be more likely to be partisans (Albright 2009; Marthaler 2008). Most empirical research, however, demonstrates that voters who split their tickets at different levels of governance are more politically sophisticated and

act strategically (Karp et al. 2002; Rallings and Trasher 2005; Schoen 1999). These arguments, therefore, lead to the expectation that especially the highly politically sophisticated voters will deviate from their federal preference in local elections:

Hypothesis 3: Politically sophisticated voters are more likely to deviate from their federal party preference.

Importantly, supply side considerations too have to be considered, as the number of nature of the parties running for office differs in each municipality. Especially in the smaller municipalities, national parties might not compete, form a pre-electoral coalition or use a local label. Furthermore, particularly in the smaller municipalities local candidates and their closeness to the voters can overrule national party preferences.

5. The case of the Belgian 2012 local elections

As far as we know, studies applying the theoretical framework of second-order elections to local elections are scarce (Cutler 2008, Heath *et al.* 1999) and indicate that these elections are ‘less’ second-order than EU elections as arena-specific factors tend to be important for explaining voting behaviour (Cutler 2008).

We aim to contribute to this literature by studying the case of the 2012 Belgian local elections. This election offers a most likely case for local elections to be second order. If these elections are not second order, the probability that Belgian local elections are second-order is small. Local politics has become more professionalised over time and in a vast majority of municipalities national political parties compete in elections (De Rynck *et al.* 2010, Verhelst, Reynaert, and Steyvers 2013). This nationalisation of local politics, the fact

that the elections were held simultaneously in all 589 Belgian municipalities and that these were the first elections after the 2010-2011 political crisis (Hooghe 2012) strengthened the idea of the 2012 elections being a referendum about the performances of the federal government. The framing of the opposition parties strengthened this idea. The crisis was caused by the growing apart of the two language communities. After the 2010 elections, linguistic tensions rendered the formation of a federal government an almost insurmountable task. After 541 days of negotiations, a government took office in December 2011 (Hooghe 2012).

National parties generally consider local elections strategically important (Wille and Deschouwer 2007). Belgian municipalities have a distinct autonomy despite their limited overall budget and competences compared to other European countries (Deschouwer 2009, Hooghe et al. 2010). Local governments can raise their own taxes and they are the largest public investors in the country (Hooghe et al., 2010; Vermeir and Heyndels 2006). Media coverage for local elections is less intensive compared to elections at higher levels of governance. To the extent that local elections receive coverage from national media outlets, the focus tends to be on a limited number of large cities or municipalities where federal or regional political leaders run for election (Ackaert, Reynaert, and Van Aelst 2007). Political leaders regularly accumulate offices on various levels of government and this too might render local elections a national test of popularity (Geys and Heyndels 2006).

More generally, local representatives are elected every six years and seats are allocated proportionally (Imperiali method). Each of the 589 municipalities in Belgium includes a single constituency and depending on its size between 7 and 55 local representatives have to be elected. The party or coalition of parties obtaining a majority of seats in the local council

can form a local government (i.e. a College of the Mayor and Aldermen) (Put, Maddens, and Smulders 2014). The list system for local elections can be characterised as ‘semi-open’ and voters can cast either a list vote or preferential votes for one or multiple candidates within one list. Traditionally, a substantial amount of preferential votes are cast in local elections (Wauters, Verlet, and Ackaert 2012; Marien, Wauters, and Schouteden forthcoming). At all levels of government, participation in the election is compulsory.

6. Data and methods

We use the data of the PartiRep exit poll 2012, a representative voter survey organised in the context of the October 2012 municipal elections in Belgium. The exit poll format implies that voters were interviewed immediately after leaving the polling station. The main advantage is that a bias due to recall errors and flawed memories is limited to a minimum. Furthermore, answers in an exit poll survey are not influenced by the election outcome (Carsey and Jackson 2001; Wright 1993). Respondents provide information about their party choice and voting motives before knowing the election results.

The sample design consisted of a three-step procedure. First, 40 of the 589 municipalities were randomly selected within regionally based socio-economic clusters ensuring sufficient regional and socio-economic variation. Subsequently, polling stations were randomly selected in each municipality and the number of stations in a municipality was in proportion to its number of inhabitants. Finally, interviewers had to invite each fifth voter leaving the polling station to participate to the survey.¹ Fieldwork resulted in a dataset of 4,591 randomly

¹. Interviewers were at their assigned polling station for the full period polling stations were opened. This implies they were interviewing from 8am to 1pm where paper ballots were used, to 3pm where votes were cast electronically and to 4pm in municipalities in the Brussels capital region.

selected respondents and the overall response rate was 37.9%, which is in line with this specific survey format (Dassonneville, Marien and Hooghe 2012).

The dependent variable measuring deviant voting was constructed by combining information from the respondents' reported local vote choice and their vote intention for hypothetical federal elections.² Ideally we would have had local and federal elections on the same day to compare vote choices for both levels, which was unfortunately not the case on 14 October 2012. Therefore, we have to rely on a recall question of respondents 2010 vote or on a hypothetical question. We believe a hypothetical question offers a better proxy as recall questions are plagued by a substantial measurement error because respondents do not recall or report their actual vote (van der Eijk and Niemöller 2008; Waldahl and Aardal 2000). Moreover, within the previous two years voters can have changed parties. As the 2009 and 2010 elections were rather volatile, a question on previous voting behaviour was not relevant to understand the 2012 electoral dynamics. Therefore, we believe a hypothetical question on one's federal vote is a better proxy for federal vote choice than a recall question. Yet it has to be acknowledged that asking about hypothetical federal elections immediately after voters have voted for local elections might inflate the percentage of congruent voters. The advantage of the procedure is that if respondents indicate that they did deviate from their federal party preference, they indeed consciously expressed a distinct preference for the local level.

Comparing local vote choices with federal vote intentions, a number of difficulties arise. First, at a local level, party lists and party names are quite diffuse with joint lists of multiple parties or national parties running under local labels (Heyerick and Steyvers 2013). We

². Question wording for the federal vote intention was the following: 'What party would you vote for if today federal elections were being held'.

carefully analysed the exact composition of all local lists and assigned as many local lists as possible to a national party.³ Second, a number of mostly smaller national parties do not run for election in each single municipality making congruent voting impossible (Wille and Deschouwer 2007).. For 3% of the respondents in the sample the party of their national preference did not run in their municipality, not even under a different label or on a joint list, therefore these respondents were excluded from further analysis.

The dependent variable, deviant voting, is binary with value '1' if respondents deviated from their federal vote choice in the municipal elections. Consequently, the analyses take the form of logistic regression analyses. The data structure is hierarchical with individuals nested in 40 municipalities, therefore, random intercept models are used (Snijders and Bosker 1999).

Vote choice determinants were measured by an open-ended question asking respondents to explain in their own words why they voted for the list they just casted a vote for. For investigating vote choice heuristics, open-ended questions are considered the most appropriate method because respondents are not restrained to a limited number of pre-imposed categories (Lefevere 2011). The answers were coded in 16 different categories of vote choice heuristics (Lefevere 2011). On a number of items, coders could differentiate whether or not the local level was referred to. Regarding issues, for example, policy themes with a clear reference to the local context were labelled 'local issue' while references to policy themes pertaining to national or regional politics (as e.g, state reform) were labelled 'national issue'. Similarly, references to 'local' and 'national' candidates were distinguished with references to personally knowing a particular candidate or living in the same

³. Voters who indicated to have voted for a joint list of socialists and greens, for example, are only coded as deviating from their federal preference if they indicated neither the socialist nor the green party for their federal vote intention.

neighbourhood as a candidate coded as ‘local candidate’. In contrast, if a respondent motivated his/her vote by referring to a nationally known politician who was not a candidate in the respondent’s municipality, this was coded as ‘national candidate’. As soon as the candidate referred to was effectively on a local list – regardless of whether or not this candidate is or was active on other levels of government – this reference was coded as ‘local candidate’. Coders could use up to three codes to categorise respondents’ vote choices. As an indicator of inter-coder reliability, the Cohen’s κ -value for the code assigned to a response was 0.70 (Dassonneville, Marien, and Hooghe 2012; Landis and Koch 1977). For the multivariate analyses we focus on the categories ‘local issues or policy’ and ‘local candidate’ as these are the clearest expression of local voting motives.

Testing the third hypothesis requires a measure of political sophistication. In the literature, a number of operationalisations for political sophistication are used. Questioning political knowledge was impossible for 40 different electoral contexts, therefore, a number of frequently used proxy variables were included (Dalton 1984, 2012). Particularly, we include education level and political interest (a combination of reported interest in local and national politics, both on a 0-10 scale and combined into a 0-10-sum-scale).

We control for socio-demographics in the analyses by including respondents’ sex, age and the region of the municipality (Flanders, Wallonia or Brussels). Voters who locate themselves at ideological extremes were found to have more stable vote choices than voters in the ideological centre as extreme voters have fewer options to deviate. A centrist voter can move to the left or the right, while the ceiling effect inhibits an extreme left voter to move further to the left (Dassonneville 2012). Therefore, we control for the impact of voters’ ideological position on deviant voting by a variable of ‘ideological extremeness’ that is

constructed by recoding respondents' self-placement on a 0-10 left-right scale. Extremeness is operationalised as the distance between the voter and the middle position of '5'. Both extreme left and extreme right voters, therefore, can obtain a maximum score of '5' on extremeness. Finally, we control for the occurrence of pre-electoral coalitions (PECs) between political parties at the local level. In several municipalities political parties took part in the elections with joint lists, e.g. between the Socialist and Green party. To control for the existence of these PECs, we created a variable that measured voting on a local PEC. We expect that PECs have a broad appeal and attract voters beyond the constituent parties, leading PEC voters to deviate more from their national party than voters who did not vote for a PEC (Golder 2006). In addition, we created a variable that measured whether one's national party took part in the elections as a PEC. While a PEC can have a broad appeal, voters can also decide to desert their national party as a result of this joint list (Gschwend and Hooghe 2008). Descriptive statistics for all independent variables are listed in Appendix 1.

7. Results

Before investigating deviant voting behaviour in municipal elections, we briefly describe two other commonly cited aspects of second-order elections: the turnout levels and importance attached to the level of governance.

First, turnout rates at elections are considered an indicator of the importance voters attach to a policy level and therefore of the second order nature of elections. Despite compulsory voting laws, a proportion of the electorate does not turn out to vote. Looking at the turnout rates in elections at different levels of governance, therefore, gives an indication of the 'order' of different elections. Figure 1 shows the evolution of turnout rates in Belgium for the federal, European and local elections. The turnout rates for EU-elections are systematically lower,

while the local level turnout rates are at about the same level or higher than the federal elections.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

As compulsory voting could hinder a comparison of turnout rates for different levels of governance, we verified whether the same pattern emerges from survey data on voters' likelihood to turn out to vote for different types of election if compulsory voting were abolished. This results in a similar pattern; while in terms of turnout EU elections are second-order in Belgium, this is not the case for local elections (Table 1).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

A similar conclusion is reached if the *stakes* of the levels of government are investigated. Respondents in the 2012 exit poll rated the local level as most important for their personal lives (Table 2). The difference to the federal level is marginal, while the EU once more is clearly considered of lower order. However, these data were collected in the context of local elections, which is likely to make the local context more salient than other levels of governance.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

In sum, in terms of turnout and the less at stake-argument, Belgian local elections do not fit the second-order election framework. In contrast to previous research in other countries, there are no indications of the local level taking a middle position between the federal and European levels either. The question therefore arises whether the same conclusion could be reached when investigating another defining characteristic of second-order elections i.e.

voting choices and voting motives.

First, we analyse the extent to which voters took local-specific factors into account. In Table 3 we present the extent to which different categories of vote choice heuristics were mentioned. The local context clearly dominated the choices voters made in October 2012. The most often mentioned heuristic for the vote choice is ‘knowing a candidate on a particular list’, followed by issues that deal with government and opposition at a local level and ‘local issues’. When explicitly asked about voting motives, voters clearly emphasise local voting motives. References to the party or to ideological motivations are less common. This answering pattern shows voters take the local level seriously and claim their voting behaviour is determined by local considerations.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Next, we investigate the extent to which voters deviate from their national party choice. From all voters who could vote for their preferred national party, 73.6% effectively did so (Table 4). While most voters invoke local vote considerations, almost three quarters of all voters vote for the same party locally and federally. One quarter of the electorate deviated and voted for a different party at the local level than they would do for federal elections, even though their preferred national party was on the ballot in their municipality. This is more or less in line with the findings for the British 1994 local elections, where Heath *et al.* (1999) found one fifth of the electorate to deviate. The fact that about a quarter of all voters deviates from the federal choice results in sufficient cases to investigate why they did so.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

To investigate the causes of deviant voting behaviour, we present the results of multilevel logistic regressions (Table 5). First, we constructed an intercept-only model to assess the amount of variance at the municipality-level. With only 3% of the variance in deviant voting situated at the municipality-level, it is clear that we should look at the individual level to explain deviant voting behaviour ($\rho\text{-coefficient}_{\text{intercept-only model}} = 0.029$). A tendency to deviate from a federal party preference in local elections is spread rather evenly across municipalities and independent of municipality characteristics. Therefore, we do not examine in-depth the factors that are situated at the supply side.⁴

In Model 1, we investigate the effect of the socio-demographic control variables sex, age and the region of residence. Voters in Walloon municipalities are significantly less likely to deviate from their federal preference than voters in Flanders. The results do not indicate significant effects of sex or age on deviant voting behaviour. Overall, including these socio-demographics contributes to a small decrease of the log likelihood statistic of the intercept-only model. In addition (Model 2), the results show in line with expectations, PEC-voters being more likely to deviate from their national party than voters who have not voted for a PEC. Further, the results in Model 3 show that there is no significant difference in the likelihood to deviate from one's national party between voters whose party took part in the municipal election as a PEC and voters whose party took part in the election independently. In sum, it seems that voters follow their national party into local pre-electoral coalitions but a pre-electoral coalition can also increase the likelihood that voters who would otherwise not

⁴ We compared the fit of the intercept-only model to the fit of an ordinary logistic regression that does not take into account random variation at the level of municipalities. This likelihood ratio statistic is 19.63 and has a p-value (for one degree of freedom) of 0.000. Consequently, we have to reject the null hypothesis of no between-municipality variation in deviant voting and therefore we use multilevel modeling techniques.

vote for one of the parties in a coalition deviate from their national vote and choose the local PEC.

In model 4 we include the measures of voters' reported choice heuristics. The reference category is all not local-specific heuristics, which we compare to mentioning local issues or local candidates as the main voting consideration. Both referring to local issues and local candidates significantly increases the probability of a deviant vote. Consequently, we find evidence supporting our first two hypotheses. Comparing the size of the coefficients indicates that referring to a local candidate has a more profound impact than taking into account local issues. It seems that 'friends-and-neighbours'-politics are more important for understanding why voters deviate than local issues. Even in a densely populated and urbanised country like Belgium, local politics still proves to be, to a large extent, a matter of friends, neighbours and local personal contacts.

Finally, we test the hypothesis that the higher politically sophisticated deviate more. The results indicate that the lower educated are significantly less likely to deviate compared to respondents with a middle level of education. The highly educated, however, are not significantly different from the middle group. The effect of political interest is not significant. Our third hypothesis, therefore, is only partly confirmed. Voters that place themselves at the extremes of a 0-10 left-right scale are less likely to vote for a different party in municipal elections than in federal elections. Furthermore, the effects for the vote choice heuristics are robust to controlling for ideology and political sophistication.

[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

8. Discussion

Our aim was to investigate whether local elections should be considered as second-order elections, where local political considerations play only a limited role in determining vote choice. Therefore, we investigated the nature of local elections and the factors that influence voters to cast different local and federal votes using the case of the 2012 Belgian municipal election.

When asked about their voting motives, a majority of respondents invoked local considerations, ranging from candidates over policy issues to an evaluation of the current municipal authorities. On a discursive level at least, voters do not consider municipal elections as second order elections, but they claim that they do pay attention to what goes on in their own local community. In their minds, local elections are not second-order elections. Despite these considerations, three quarters of all voters voted for the same party on the local and federal level. Self-evidently this does not imply that these voters simply follow their federal preference. They might still develop a vote decision based on local considerations that leads to the conclusion that they prefer the same party on both levels.

A quarter of the voters deviate from their federal preference and remarkably local candidates were of crucial importance in explaining this deviation. The appeal of a local candidate has the potential to attract voters that otherwise would not vote for that specific party. While the saying that all politics is local is still valid, one might say that for municipal elections politics is indeed very local. Voters personally know the candidates on the list, which renders the election less dependent on national considerations. The impression is reinforced that local government is less a matter of ideology and more about personality, experience and personal networks. Future research should explore what the role of these local candidates is in federal

elections. The literature on personalisation states that ‘individual politicians have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities’ (Karvonen 2010, 4). It would be interesting to investigate whether these local candidates also obtain votes in federal elections because of their local positions rather than because he/she is a candidate from a given party.

Besides knowing candidates on the list, choosing a particular party for the municipal elections because of local-specific issues was a significant determinant of voter deviance. Deviation seems to be the outcome of a well-considered choice and fits images of ideal-type democratic representation. This idea is further strengthened by the fact that higher educated were more likely than lower educated to prefer a different party in municipal and federal elections.

This study has some limitations as it is focused on one municipal election in a single country. Even though our findings are in line with previous research on British local elections, more research is needed before we can claim that local elections are less second-order than supranational elections and that local candidates cause this difference. The currently available evidence, however, clearly suggests that the local level should not be dismissed too easily, as it can offer the context for a clear process of electoral accountability and democratic representation. In Belgium, at least, local elections are to a lesser extent second-order than is often assumed. Therefore, we concur with Schakel and Jeffery (2013) that it is all too easily assumed that national elections are first-order elections, while all elections at a lower geographical level are automatically labelled as second-order elections. In this line of reasoning, an interesting avenue for future research would be to supplement this study by research on the influence of local arenas on the federal level.

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Figure 1. Evolution of turnout in federal, local and European elections in Belgium (1974-2014)

Sources: <http://www.ibzdgip.fgov.be/> - <http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be/nl/eur/results> - <http://verkiezingen2007.belgium.be/nl/cha/results> - Hennau and Ackaert 2013.

Table 1. Willingness to turn out to vote if compulsory voting were abolished (0 = never, 3 = always)

	Mean score (0-3)
EU parliament elections	1.64 [1.58;1.69]
Federal parliament elections	1.85 [1.79;1.90]
Regional parliament elections	1.90 [1.84;1.95]
Local elections	2.09 [2.03;2.14]

Source: PartiRep Belgian Election Study 2014. Data are weighted for socio-demographic characteristics. 95%-confidence intervals in brackets.

Table 2. Mean rating of assessed importance on one's personal life of decisions taken at different levels of governance

	Mean (0 = not important at all; 10 = very important)
Local council	6.04 [5.96;6.11]
Regional parliament	5.87 [5.79;5.94]
Federal parliament	5.95 [5.87;6.03]
EU parliament	5.52 [5.43;5.60]

Source: PartiRep exit poll 2012. Data are weighted for socio-demographic characteristics. 95%-confidence intervals in brackets.

TABLE 3 Most important reason for local vote choice

	% respondents mentioning consideration
(I know) a local candidate	21.1
Local government and opposition	19.8
Local issue	19.5
Ideology of this party	11.1
Party (in general)	9.9
I am against something or someone	8.0
I am a member of a particular (social) group	7.2
Habitual voter for this party	5.6
Followed peers	4.3
A Politician (in general)	4.3
National policy issue	2.7
Constituency service of a candidate	1.4
Size of the party (large or small)	1.4
National government and opposition	1.0
Media or vote test	0.7
I support a particular national politician	0.6

Data: PartiRep exit poll 2012. Answers to open-ended question on most important reason for vote choice.
Multiple answers by respondent possible.

TABLE 4. Frequency of deviance

	% of all voters	% of voters who could vote for their federal preference
Federal preference available	97.14	100.00
Deviant vote	25.63	26.39
Same vote	71.51	73.61
Federal preference not available	2.86	-
Total	100.00	100.00
	(N=3,444)	(N=3,348)

Data : PartiRep exit poll 2012. Data are weighted for socio-demographic characteristics.

TABLE 5. Motives for a Deviant Party Choice on the Local Level

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)
Female		0.100 (0.081)	0.108 (0.081)	0.092 (0.082)	0.058 (0.083)
Age		-0.005 (0.002)	-0.005* (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.003)
Region (ref : Flanders)					
Brussels		-0.256 (0.190)	-0.062 (0.203)	-0.133 (0.186)	-0.119 (0.180)
Wallonia		-0.271* (0.136)	-0.280 (0.148)	-0.217* (0.134)	-0.183 (0.131)
Education level (ref : middle)					
Low					-0.267* (0.129)
High					0.093 (0.092)
Political interest					-0.017 (0.017)
Ideological extremeness					-0.081** (0.028)
Voting motive (ref : not local)					
Local issue or policy				0.365*** (0.086)	0.355*** (0.090)
Local candidate(s)				0.955*** (0.099)	0.945*** (0.099)
Voted on local PEC		0.312** (0.103)		0.309** (0.105)	0.320** (0.105)
National party in PEC			-0.167 (0.110)		
Intercept	-1.003*** (0.067)	-0.812*** (0.145)	-0.701*** (0.148)	-1.301*** (0.157)	-1.133*** (0.186)
N voters/N municipalities	3,243/40	3,243/40	3,243/40	3,243/40	3,243/40
ρ	0.029	0.018	0.024	0.016	0.014
Log likelihood	- 1,859.831	- 1,850.724	-1,854.04	-1,803.850	-1,795.586
Wald		19.08**	11.60*	112.16***	126.82***
McFadden pseudo-R ²		0.005	0.003	0.030	0.035

Data : PartiRep exit poll 2012. Significance levels: * p<0.05; ** p<0.01 ; *** p<0.001.

APPENDIX 1. Descriptive statistics of independent variables

	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Min.	Max.
Female	3,243	0.47	0.50	0	1
Age	3,243	45.22	16.79	18	95
Flemish region	3,243	0.58	0.49	0	1
Brussels-capital region	3,243	0.14	0.35	0	1
Walloon region	3,243	0.28	0.45	0	1
Low level of education	3,243	0.17	0.38	0	1
Middle level of education	3,243	0.38	0.48	0	1
High level of education	3,243	0.45	0.50	0	1
Political interest	3,243	6.10	2.51	0	10
Ideological extremeness	3,243	1.65	1.55	0	5
No local voting motive	3,243	0.57	0.49	0	1
Local issue motive	3,243	0.38	0.49	0	1
Local candidate motive	3,243	0.21	0.41	0	1
Voted on local PEC	3,243	0.25	0.43	0	1
National party in local PEC	3,243	0.22	0.41	0	1