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ARTICLE

From Opportunity to Motive. Examining the Determinants and Motives of Turnout and Abstention in the Flemish Local Elections of 2024

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Abstract

The abolishment of compulsory voting for the 2024 local elections in Flanders offers a unique setting to study the determinants and motives of electoral participation. The sharp drop in turnout raised questions about who chooses (not) to vote when it is no longer mandatory, and why. Using representative panel data from the Belgian Local Elections Studies 2024 (N = 1,459), we analyse the social and political profile of voters and non-voters. This shows that different factors matter. While a favourable socioeconomic status, personal involvement in local politics, being older or being ideologically left increases the odds of turning out the most, being younger, having foreign roots, having no party identification, or having an identification with a radical party decreases them the most. Motives for (not) voting also vary. While normative considerations like civic duty are dominant among voters, non-voters seem primarily propelled by situational motives (like being otherwise engaged) or feelings of powerlessness and disengagement. Finally, we study which groups of citizens chose to turn out or abstain for which reasons. Our findings reveal a combination of profound patterns of political socialisation, political sophistication, the place-bound expression of political life, as well as a personal political logic. Overall, our findings underline the enduring impact of social and political features on local electoral participation. They also highlight how rationales and profiles interrelate. Attempts to increase turnout must thus respond to a variety of mechanisms.

Keywords: Local elections, Flanders, Voter turnout, Abstention, Voting determinants, Voting motives

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Introduction
The 2024 local elections in Flanders marked a turning point in Belgian democracy. For the first time, citizens in this region were no longer obliged to turn out to vote, while compulsory voting remained in effect in Brussels and Wallonia. Until then, Belgium had long been one of the few countries worldwide upholding compulsory voting. Arguably following the trend in most democracies, in 2021, the Flemish regional government decided to abolish it for the local elections. In those of October 2024, the new electoral rules thus came into effect for the first time, leading to an immediate and drastic drop in aggregate turnout to 63.5% of all voters (compared to 92.6% in 2018).

The present article seeks to answer two fundamental questions regarding this event: (1) which factors explain who went out to vote and who stayed at home, and (2) what reasons do (specific groups of) citizens give to justify their decision to participate in the election (or not)? Gaining insights into the determinants and motives of individual-level voting behaviour in local elections is relevant for academic and societal reasons. Scientifically, studying the real-life effects immediately after the abolishment of compulsory voting offers a unique opportunity for turnout research adding to existing insights on more common instances of electoral participation. For one thing, political systems rarely change such a fundamental electoral rule, particularly against concerns about declining turnout, said to reflect citizens' distrust of the representative model (Hooghe & Kern, 2017; Putnam, 2000). For another, elsewhere, the abolishment lies further in the past or remains subject to debate, only to be treated hypothetically. This makes it harder to estimate its current effect on turnout or leaves us with gauging mere intentions (not) to vote rather than actual behaviour (Dassonneville et al., 2023; De Ceuninck et al., 2006; De Winter et al., 2014; Vollaard et al., 2022). The Flemish case thus enables us to assess whether the same dynamics are at play as in systems where compulsory voting has already been abolished for a longer time (Smets & van Ham, 2013). Furthermore, we also explore the motives different (groups of) citizens use to explain their decision to vote or abstain. This received much less attention in the extant literature. Our contribution is based on a post-electoral survey conducted shortly after the local elections. This timely assertion allows us to analyse the vote and obtain a realistic picture of (the motives for) (non-)participation in a pertinent case.

Furthermore, we speak to wider cross-national debates on elections and voting at the local level (Gendzwill et al., 2022). In line with the traditional second-order argument, studies show turnout in local elections tends to be significantly lower than

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that in their national (or other higher-ranked) counterparts. Still, evidence remains scarce on this (and other) typical aspect(s) of the level allegedly being closest to the citizens (Cancela & Geys, 2016; Dodeigne et al., 2020; Hennau & Ackaert, 2022; Smets & Van Ham, 2013; Vollaard et al., 2022). Probing into the municipal layer, this research helps to fill that gap. Moreover, it focuses on individual-level aspects of the local vote. This adds to existing studies concerned with the aggregate level (Kouba et al., 2021). Finally, little is known about the motives for (not) voting locally. We aim to work more in-depth on this issue by linking motives with voters' and non-voters' profiles.

Additionally, also the societal relevance of addressing our research questions goes beyond the 2024 Flemish electoral cycle. Obviously, the sudden decrease in turnout spurred much discussion interpreting the local (non-)vote. Did the absence of more than a third of all eligible voters reveal a severe crisis of local representative democracy? Or should it be seen as a mainstreaming towards European standards for local (non-)participation based on several reasons (Gendzwill, 2021)? The answer depends on the profile and motives of those who did (not) turn out to vote when this was no longer compulsory. However, apart from speculations in the public debate often fed by aggregate explorations (making inferences from variation between municipalities), much remains to be uncovered at the level of the individual voters.

This article is based on survey data collected from a citizen panel in October 2024 as part of an interuniversity research project called the Belgian Local Elections Studies (BLESS 2024). It proceeds as follows. The second section sets out the theoretical framework. It presents a literature review of the determinants and motives for turnout or abstention, leading to several hypotheses. Sections 3 and 4 describe the research context, and its design, data and methods. In section 5, we present the empirical findings and answer the research questions. Finally, conclusions and discussion figure in section 6.

Theoretical Framework

Voting is often regarded as a key form of political participation in representative democracy (Verba & Nie, 1972). However, the decision to do so remains far from evident because the expected benefits may not outweigh the alleged costs. As the odds of an individual impact on the outcome seem low, voting does not necessarily offer the most rational option. The initial step to participate in the electoral process thus forms part of "the paradox of voting'" (Blais, 2000; Downs, 1957). This holds especially when voting is not compulsory and people do not risk a sanction for remaining absent (Gratschew, 2004). Which (groups of) citizens turn out (or not), and how they motivate that choice, are therefore fundamental questions that also guide our study of the unique 2024 local elections in Flanders.

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The answers to these questions remain contested in the literature (Smets & Van Ham, 2013). Different factors can determine turnout, and their importance varies between contexts and voters (den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022; Gallego, 2009; Kouba et al., 2021). For the former, studies provide explanations at the aggregate (macro) level (den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022). In local elections, for example, reasons include institutional provisions such as concurrence with first-order contests or configurations of local autonomy (Cancela & Geys, 2015; Kouba et al., 2021). They also pertain to place-bound features such as municipal size or the local (governmental) efforts to increase turnout (Bolgherini et al., 2024; van Ostaaijen et al., 2019). However, inferences at the individual (micro) level cannot be made straightforwardly from such aggregate analyses (Dassonneville et al., 2017). Keeping the local political system (i.e., context) constant, our study probes into this individual voter level. The review below distinguishes the determinants for voting or staying at home from the motivations for doing so.

Determinants of Voting

To understand why certain groups of citizens go out to vote while others abstain, we draw on various meta-analyses of the literature on (local) elections with a particular relevance to our research context (den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022; Hennau & Ackaert, 2022; Smets & van Ham, 2013). Table 1 summarises the determinants of voting discerned in our literature review, organised into broad social and political types, each with their own subdivisions, features and derived hypotheses.

Table 1 Determinants of voting

Types	**Features**	**Hypotheses** *Higher turnout for people with…*
Social		
Demographic profile	Gender, age and foreign roots	*a privileged demographic profile (**H1**)*
Social standing	Socioeconomic status and social ties	*a favourable social standing (**H2**)*
Political		
Personal involvement	Political understanding, interest, satisfaction, trust and cynicism	*positive personal involvement in politics (**H3a**), and even more so in local politics (**H3b**)*
Partisan preferences	Ideological self-placement and party identification	*pronounced partisan preferences (**H4**)*

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Among the social determinants, we first distinguish between the demographic profile and the social standing of the voters. The impact of demographic factors has been singled out as one of the most prominent findings in election research (Leighley & Nagler, 2014). Key features include gender, age and ethnicity. Certain groups within these demographic strata may possess more resources that they can use as political assets, affecting, in turn, their propensity to vote (Hennau & Ackaert, 2022).

Age has been identified as a first and consistent demographic predictor of individual turnout (Smets & van Ham, 2013). Its effect can be either positive or curvilinear (den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022; Hennau & Ackaert, 2022). While young people typically show higher abstention rates, turnout can then either increase further or decrease again over time, as older people gradually withdraw from social life or face more practical obstacles to voting. The effect of gender, a second demographic feature of interest, appears less straightforward. Whereas classic bias in public life used to favour the odds of men voting, such gendered patterns seem to have waned over time (den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022). Some studies even revealed that women participate more in elections than men nowadays (Smets & van Ham, 2013). Finally, based on the assumption that ethnic minorities possess fewer political resources, a migration background emerged as a negative predictor of turnout in several studies (Smets & van Ham, 2013), even though the effect tends to decrease over time as well (den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022). Taken together, these insights suggest that turnout may be higher among people with a privileged demographic profile (H1).

Next to these demographic traits, our study also incorporates voters' social standing, captured by their socioeconomic status and social ties. Regarding the first, we will consider core indicators such as education, occupation, income and social position (Nevitte et al., 2009). Education has often been found to be an impactful predictor of voting. The highly educated are more likely to turn out. Although the results of existing research appear less conclusive, a similar rationale is often developed for occupation. In this line of thought, those active in work life are assumed to vote more often (Smets & van Ham, 2013). It is furthermore expected that the same holds for well-off citizens with a higher social position (den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022). In sum, social inequalities endure and translate into imbalances in political participation (Guntermann et al., 2019).

In addition, we investigate the importance of people's social ties. This element refers to the integration of voters into their community. Starting from a sense of belonging, citizens may develop social contacts and participation, which provide them with social capital that drives voter turnout (Fiorino et al., 2021). Those actively involved in associational networks face lower thresholds for obtaining political information and, consequently, are also more inclined to vote (den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022). Democratic values transferred by organisations (Smets & van Ham, 2013), as well as their power as socialisation agents (den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022), further

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contribute to this mobilisation process. Oppositely, one can expect people to be more hesitant to vote when confronted with social isolation (Hennau & Ackaert, 2022). In combination, a favourable social standing thus likely increases turnout (H2).

Next, we shift our focus to the political determinants of voting. Here, personal involvement in politics should be separated from partisan preferences (Smets & van Ham, 2013). As an overarching concept, political involvement encompasses cognitive aspects such as political understanding and interest. Besides, it also includes confidence in politics, as reflected in the concepts of satisfaction and trust (van Deth et al., 2007). These political traits are all likely to enhance voter turnout (Smets & van Ham, 2013). Sometimes, the effect can also work the other way around, as particularly negative attitudes may increase abstention (Hennau & Ackaert, 2022). Political cynicism is a noteworthy concept in this regard, described as the extent to which citizens hold politics in general and politicians more specifically in disrepute while attaching a negative loading to both (Agger et al., 1961). Research suggests that cynicism may dampen the intention to vote but can also translate into using voting as a means of protest (e.g. by voting anti-establishment; see Pattyn et al., 2012). Overall, we expect that positive personal involvement in politics will increase turnout (H3a). However, one cannot simply equate local political dynamics with national counterparts (Wegschaider et al., 2022). Therefore, we will distinguish between personal involvement in local and national politics. Since recent research into this relationship found evidence for the importance of local political performance for local political support (notwithstanding some relation to a more general political attitude; see Steenvoorden & van der Meer, 2021), we expect that turnout will increase more among citizens who exhibit positive personal involvement in local politics (H3b).

This brings us to voters' partisan preferences as the final factor included in our study. Generally, it is assumed that turnout benefits from identification with a political party, even if partisanship may play a lesser role in local government (Hennau & Ackaert, 2022). Specifically, we can expect that a preference for parties at the fringes of the ideological spectrum taps into the intersection of political cynicism and party alignment. Lastly, an effect of ideological self-placement has been put forward, suggesting that conservative voters are more likely to vote (Smets & van Ham, 2013). In sum, we expect higher turnout for people with pronounced partisan preferences (H4).

Motives for Turnout and Abstention

Besides assessing the main voting determinants in the context of these unique Flemish local elections (RQ1), this study also explores the motives for (not) casting a vote (RQ2). How have people reasoned for their choice to vote or stay at home, and to what extent is the variation in turnout and abstention motives accounted for by

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the determinants of voting? Before arguing the importance of that connection, we situate this section in broader debates on voting motives.

Plenty of research exists on citizens' justifications for voting for a specific party or one or more of its candidates (Fisher et al., 2018). However, this choice stems from a prior, and perhaps even more fundamental, decision whether to vote at all. Both choices cannot simply be equated and should thus be scrutinised separately. Furthermore, most studies of this part of the election process concern national elections, colouring their local counterparts only to some extent (Marien et al., 2015; Dodeigne et al., 2022). Addressing motives for turning out or abstaining in local elections thus seems well-justified. To conceptualise these, we compile our own categorisations based on existing studies (pertinent to our research context), separating specific turnout motives from abstention motives. Table 2 summarises both types and their features.

Table 2 Motives for turnout and abstention

Turnout		**Abstention**	
Types	*Features*	*Types*	*Features*
Strategic	Vote impact and electoral stakes	**Disengagement**	Lack of knowledge, interest and lower stakes
Substantive	Policy (dis)satisfaction, opinion and support	**Substantive**	Policy (dis)satisfaction and unsuitable electoral offer
Normative	Civic duty and historical achievement	**Powerlessness**	Lack of political efficacy and form of protest
Situational	Personal or social habit	**Situational**	Personal circumstances and practical considerations

First, we distinguish four types of motives to explain why citizens turn out to vote. A first type can be termed as strategic. It pertains to the perception of high(er) stakes in (particular) local elections, revolving around issues with direct impact on people's lives, which in turn may increase the willingness to turn out (Gendzwill et al., 2022; Hennau & Ackaert, 2022). In the context of the 2024 Flemish local elections, strategic motives may further refer to the general feeling that turning out can have a greater impact after the abolishment of compulsory voting or to more specific calculations such as preventing a party one does not support from winning votes or seats (Bali et al., 2020). Moreover, this type of motive could have been strengthened by two electoral reforms, entered into force in 2024 (see also research context). The first

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implies that the candidate with the most personal votes of the largest list obtains the (initial) right of initiative to form a governing majority. The second determines that the candidate with the most personal votes of the largest party group in the coalition automatically gets designated as mayor (Steyvers, 2020). Considerations on the formation of the governing majority and the mandate-holder embodying it may thus have gained prominence in establishing the stakes of local elections (Verthé et al., 2015; Gendzwill, 2021).

A second type of turnout motives can be denoted as substantive. Policy concerns are a common thread in this category. More generally, voters then turn up to express their satisfaction with the policies of the outgoing majority, or they go out to vote to try to change existing ones by putting a new party in power. Alternatively, voters are willing to support the policy ideas of a particular party and/or candidate(s) or to express their opinion on a specific policy theme (Dandoy et al., 2020; Dodeigne et al., 2022).

The remaining types seem more distant from the actual vote in a particular election. The third could be seen as normative. It refers to an internalised (almost moral) obligation to vote. For some people, voting simply remains the right thing to do. Citizens then turn out because they consider voting a fundamental civic duty (Bali et al., 2020). Here, the burden of history also looms, as people might be prompted to turn out because they feel indebted to their ancestors who fought for the right to vote. The fourth category of turnout motives is situational. For some people, voting may be a personal habit developed in previous elections. This could be reinforced by one's circle of family and friends getting to the ballot box (Hennau & Ackaert, 2022; Vollaard et al., 2022). This "habitual element" (Dekker, 2014) highlights the potentially self-reinforcing impact of voting (Smets & van Ham, 2013), whereby political socialisation translates into regular mobilisation (den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022).

In parallel to our conceptualisation of the four basic types of turnout motives, we also discern four types of motives for abstention. The first refers to a lack of knowledge and interest, denoted as disengagement.[2] Certain citizens indicate limited comprehension of or enthusiasm for politics in general. In that sense, they represent the politically apathetic or indifferent people (Pammett & LeDuc, 2003; den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022). Some may also perceive lower stakes in (particular) local elections (Hennau & Ackaert, 2022). Thus, this first type basically mirrors that of strategic voting. The second type of abstention motives is again substantive. It could apply

2 A lack of knowledge might also be an indicator of low political self-esteem. However, our dataset does not include a variable that we could use to mesure self-esteem. As political self-esteem is linked with the concept of political self-efficacy, we included an indirect measure as one of the (clustered) strategic voting motives.

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to people simply being satisfied with their government (hence not seeing a reason to turn out for change), as well as to those dissatisfied with the existing policy or government (but not able or willing to alter this by turning out to vote). Driven by a negative assessment of the electoral offer (Pammett & LeDuc, 2003), this voter type may further be unaware of a suitable party or candidate. They simply do not know who to vote for.

The third type of abstention motives refers to feelings of political powerlessness, defined as a lack of political efficacy (Hennau & Ackaert, 2022). Citizens exhibiting such motivations stay at home because they perceive that their vote does not make a difference. This may express a degree of negativity or outright cynicism. The belief then arises that politicians do not listen to or care about those eligible to vote. Protest forms a related motivation of this type. Not turning out that way symbolises a degree of resistance against the alleged establishment and its associated decisions (Van Bockhove & Moors, 2022). The fourth and final type represents situational motives for abstention. These often pertain to the personal circumstances of specific citizens or administrative obstacles encountered along the way (Pammett & LeDuc, 2003). In fact, some people stay at home due to illness, being on holiday or prioritising work obligations. Simple practical considerations, including procedural ones, may thus also hinder turnout (Krouwel et al., 2018).

In the empirical part of the article, we will assess to what extent certain features of those who (do not) show up at the ballot box also explain variation in the rationales for doing so. Studying this link has remained hitherto neglected in electoral research. Given this scarcity, we do not formulate explicit hypotheses to guide our analysis. Instead, by looking into the unique case of the 2024 local elections in Flanders, we aim to complement our assessment of the general voting determinants with new, exploratory insights into the reasoning behind people's fundamental choice to turn out or stay at home, and the variation therein.

Research Context

Our study was conducted in Flanders, one of the three regions and the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Within the Belgian federal state, the regional level serves as the supervisory authority and primary point of reference for municipalities within its territory. Flemish municipalities (N = 285) have a limited set of municipal competences, an intermediate level of local autonomy and their local elites have direct access to central decision-making via the cumulation of political mandates (typical for the Southern European Napoleonic tradition; Steyvers, 2022; Steyvers et al., 2022). In addition, local government in Flanders is characterised by a consensual, party-dominated tradition of decision-making. It has a monistic local government system in which executive politicians are also members of the municipal council, in addition to their membership of the board of mayor and aldermen. Formally, the

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municipal council holds greater decision-making power, but in practice, the executive body assumes a dominant position. Despite this collective nature, there is a clear tendency towards presidential leadership within the executive through the position of the mayor (Steyvers et al., 2022; Verhelst et al., 2011).

Only the municipal council is directly elected for a six-year term via a list PR system. Voters can choose to cast a list vote or a vote for one or more specific candidates (within one list). Traditionally, a substantial number of personal votes is cast in local elections as nearly 80% of all voters opt for a specific candidate (Valcke et al., 2025; Wauters, 2024). Seats are distributed via the Imperiali method. This proportional formula implies a relatively fragmented local party system. Flemish politics is also noteworthy for its partitocracy and national political parties dominate in local elections, although various types of non-national lists are also quite common (Marien et. al., 2015; Steyvers & Heyerick, 2017). After the elections, the executive board of mayor and aldermen is formed based on a majority in the council.

The abolishment of compulsory voting in the local elections is the most fundamental change to the electoral rules in Flanders since the regions were given responsibility for local government in 2001. However, it was not the only reform being part of a larger agenda, included in the 2019–2024 Flemish government agreement and implemented by the Decree of 16 July 2021. Other reforms concern the abolishment of the transferable effect of the list vote (making personal votes more important), the semi-direct election of the mayor (appointing the vote champion of the largest party group in the majority as mayor) and the (transient) right of initiative to form that majority for the vote champion of the largest list (Steyvers, 2020). The overall objective was boosting trust in local representative democracy by stressing individual freedom of choice and establishing a more direct connection between voters and elected officials.

The reforms also exhibit ideological and strategic motives stemming from a partisan bargain, even if not all parties in the majority wholeheartedly agreed (Steyvers, 2020; Reuchamps et al., 2024).[3] The issue remains contentious in the current government: taking the oath two weeks before the local elections, the majority agreed to conduct a thorough evaluation and, where desirable, adjust the new regulations on local elections (Crevits, 2024; Vlaamse Regering, 2024). More recently, the Minister for Home Affairs openly stated she would prefer to reintroduce

3 The Christian-Democrats (CD&V) only accepted it in a trade-off, preventing the mandatory merger of (small) municipalities and preserving the existence of the provinces.

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compulsory voting (Vlaams Parlement, 2025). The topic thus continues to divide, also across party lines.[4]

Data and Research Methods

The present study is part of an interuniversity research project called Belgian Local Elections Studies (BLESS 2024). Data were collected through both online and offline surveys conducted by a data collection infrastructure, The Social Study (TSS). Established by all Belgian universities, TSS developed a representative sample of the national population, consisting of over 5,500 panellists aged 16 or older. The election survey was launched immediately after the local elections held on 13 October 2024. It was sent to a selected sample of 2,833 panellists, resulting in a response rate of 80.7% (N = 2,286). After cleaning and selecting our target population of Flemish voters aged 18 or older, we finalised a dataset of 1,459 cases. The dataset also includes sampling weights, created by TSS based on official Flemish population data, to adjust for demographic imbalances in gender, age, and education. These weights will be used as a post-stratification check in our analyses.

Our initial research aim is to determine which factors influence whether Flemish citizens voted in the 2024 elections. The analytical approach we developed begins by profiling voters and abstainers. To distinguish between these groups, our survey asked whether individuals participated in these local elections. We recoded the responses into two categories: voters, including those casting valid votes (N = 1,029; 74.7%) or blank/invalid votes (N = 3; 0.2%), and abstainers (N = 346; 25.1%). To evaluate the possible effect of the underrepresentation of abstainers (i.e. 36.5% in reality), we generated a second weighting factor to adjust for the actual turnout rate. This factor was multiplied by the sampling weights and normalised for use as an additional sensitivity analysis in the study.

We will assess voter profiles by running a multiple logistic regression analysis to estimate the likelihood that certain groups of citizens participated in the elections. To this end, we selected a wide range of variables and clustered them into the overarching theoretical constructs discussed in the literature review.[5] These will be introduced step by step as predictors in four regression models, reflecting

4 The Minister responsible for Home Affairs in the previous Flemish government, which decided on the abolishment of CV, was a member of the liberal Open VLD, but that party is no longer part of the majority formed after the regional elections of June 2024 (the party name was changed to 'Anders' as of January 2026). The current Minister responsible for Home Affairs is a member of the Christian-democratic CD&V.

5 Because our constructs reflect broad theoretical concepts, each of which has different constituting elements that cover a part of the concept scope, we have created formative indices that prioritise conceptual and external validity over internal validity (Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer, 2001).

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the idea suggested by Dekker (2014, p. 215) that electoral participation should be reconstructed as a "multi-step" funnel in which "demographic and socioeconomic, personality and socialisation variables influence political cognitions and affections, which in turn are the most proximate causes that affect voting/non-voting". Given our focus on the Flemish local elections and the individual voter level, the systemic or institutional context remains constant. In Appendices 1 and 2, we detail the operationalisation of the individual variables used to build these models. Those variables were either included in the BLESS 2024 election survey or in the recruitment survey completed by the TSS panel.

The effect of the first group of variables, reflecting citizens' demographic background, is tested in Model 1. Given the potential curvilinear nature of the age effect, we introduce the categories younger (i.e. younger than 35) and older (i.e. older than 54) as predictors, with the middle-aged group serving as the reference category. Gender and foreign roots (up to the third generation) complement the model. Model 2 introduces citizens' socioeconomic status (SES) and social ties as indicators of their social standing. To measure SES, we constructed a formative index of four classic variables: education, occupation, income, and social position. The four variables were dichotomised and summed, resulting in a 0–4 scale index (N=1,267; x=1.85; s=1.16). To capture the theoretical construct of people's social ties, we created a second formative index based on four variables that were standardised (due to their different answering scales), summed and divided by four: identification with inhabitants from the municipality, social connectedness, social contacts, and participation in social activities (N=1,304; x=.004; s=.61).

Models 3 and 4 add the political characteristics to the analysis. To measure people's personal involvement in politics through cognitive and confidence factors, we created two other formative indices. One taps into general political involvement; the other specifically addresses involvement in local politics. Having this distinction allows us to address hypothesis 3b, which states that involvement with the electoral context at stake affects turnout more than general political involvement. The variables that constitute these indices are the following: political interest, political understanding, satisfaction with democracy, trust in parties, and political cynicism (*national politics*); and interest in local politics and satisfaction with local democracy (*local politics*). Both indices were created by summing the standardised variables and dividing the sum by the number of items (for national politics: N=1,347; x=.004; s=.67; for local politics: N=1,361; x=.002; s=.78). In the final model, we take stock of citizens' political preferences along ideology (left-right versus centrist as a reference category) and party identification (none and radical party versus other party as a reference category).

Having outlined the profiles of voters (and non-voters), we will move to our second research goal, considering the reasons why specific groups chose (or declined) to

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participate in the election. In this context, it is important to recognise that voters and non-voters may be motivated by different factors (den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022). To capture this nuance, a filter question in the survey presented voters and abstainers with a tailored list of 12 turnout or 11 abstention motives, respectively (for their operationalisations, see Appendix 3 and 4). Through a multiple-response question, respondents were asked to select all motives that motivated their decision. A follow-up question then asked them to identify the most decisive motive from their list. To address concerns about closed-ended questions, an open-response category was included for motives not listed in the survey (Dodeigne et al., 2022). Where possible, the responses mentioned in the open text field related to the category 'other' were manually assigned to one or more of the closed categories.[6]

To analyse citizens' motives regarding electoral participation in an exploratory manner, we will first describe the reasons provided for turning out or abstaining. Since it is the first time elections have been held without compulsory voting in Flanders, and these motives are less systematically examined in election research, such an assessment will offer important insights into the ballot. To examine this aspect further, we will continue by running a multivariate logistic regression to assess the likelihood that citizens adhered to certain reasons for turning out or abstaining, based on their demographic profiles, socioeconomic status, social ties, personal involvement in national and local politics, and partisan preferences. As these factors are assumed to significantly influence the likelihood of turnout, we can also use them to investigate the motives for voting and abstaining. In this analysis, we first employ the basic (clustered) types of motives identified in the theoretical framework as dependent variables, indicating whether respondents selected at least one item from each type to justify their decision to participate or not. To provide an additional, more fine-grained explanation, the main explanatory models will be complemented by detailed counterparts that focus on the individual motives as dependent variables.

Research Analyses and Findings

Step 1: Explaining Voter Turnout

In the first step of our analysis, we aim to determine who turned out in the 2024 local elections in Flanders (the first and only without compulsory voting). To that end, we estimate multivariate regression models with the predictors discerned earlier (see

6 To ensure reliability, the open-ended responses were assigned to one or more of the specific categories after inter-coder alignment between different researchers.

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Table 1). This approach accounts for the interrelationships between these factors and helps to isolate their independent effect while controlling for the others. As turning out or not is a dummy variable, we opt for a binary logistic variant of regression. In Table 3, we present the odds ratios for the selected predictors, introduced stepwise to illustrate four explanatory models. Scores above 1 indicate higher odds of turnout, while scores below 1 indicate a negative relationship. The regression was tested for multicollinearity, and no problems were found.

Table 3 Explaining voter turnout. Binary logistic regression analysis (N=1,080)

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Demographic profile				
Gender (Ref. = female)				
Male	.869	.877	.735	.739
Age (Ref. = middle aged)				
Younger	.427***	.472***	.402***	.377***
Older	1.944***	2.243***	1.853**	1.809**
Roots (Ref. = domestic)				
Foreign	.453***	.503***	.496***	.502***
Social standing				
Socioeconomic status		1.317***	1.239**	1.202*
Social ties		1.657***	1.134	1.136
Personal involvement				
National politics			1.369*	1.197
Local politics			2.828***	2.761***
Partisan preferences				
Ideology (Ref. = centre)				
Left				1.619*
Right				1.132
Party identification (Ref. = other)				
None				.575**
Radical				.623*
Nagelkerke R^2	**.120*** **	**.165*** **	**.294*** **	**.310*** **

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

In Model 1, we consider the effect of the demographic profile of citizens. This model explains 12% of the total variance in turnout. Three notable (i.e. significant) results emerge: younger individuals and citizens with foreign roots were more likely to abstain, while the older age group appeared more prone to have voted. It is noteworthy that gender seems to have no significant effect on turnout for local elections.

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Model 2 incorporates social standing in the analysis. This involves the formative indices of socioeconomic status and social ties. Adding these indices increases the model's goodness-of-fit to about 17%. The influence of the factors in the demographic profile of citizens remains largely consistent (even if the odds of the older age group turning out have further increased). Both indices also have a positive effect on the propensity to vote. Those who can be situated higher on the societal ladder (i.e. with a favourable position linked to education, occupation, income, and social standing) or have more social connections indicate having voted more often.

Model 3 then further introduces citizens' personal involvement in national and local politics. This step significantly enhances the model's goodness-of-fit to nearly 30%. This appears to be less due to cognition (i.e. understanding or interest) of and confidence (i.e. satisfaction or trust) in *national* politics (the first index). It can rather be related to interest in and satisfaction with its *local* counterpart (the second index). Citizens with a larger personal involvement in the level directly linked to the elections at stake are almost three times as likely to have turned out. The model further confirms the effects determined in the previous analyses, except for that of social ties, which has disappeared.

Lastly, Model 4 adds people's political preferences. This step slightly raises the model's predictive power to 31%. The effects of the factors included in the previous models remain consistent (except for involvement in national politics). Both ideology and party identification matter. Those positioning themselves on the left report having turned out more often. This is less the case for respondents not identifying with any party. As expected, party detachment or alienation thus dampens turnout. However, in contrast, also those identifying with a radical force in the partisan spectrum state that they have stayed at home more often. Here, pronounced preferences thus did not mobilise voters.

In sum, our analyses demonstrate turnout is affected by predictors of all types considered. Citizens with a privileged demographic profile, a favourable social standing, a positive personal involvement in politics, and more pronounced political preferences indeed appear more likely to turn out. At the same time, this fundamental decision often seems to be driven by specific factors within those broader categories. A favourable socioeconomic status, personal involvement in *local* politics, being older and being ideologically left increase the odds of turning out most. Being younger, having foreign roots, and having no party identification or identification with a radical party decrease them principally. Therefore, hypotheses 1, 2 and 4 can only be partly accepted. In turn, H3a must be refuted, and H3b accepted. The post-stratification check (correcting for gender, age, and education) and the

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sensitivity analysis (correcting for population and actual turnout percentage) did not substantively change these effects[7].

Step 2: Assessing the Motives for Turnout and Abstention

Having established voters' profiles through our explanatory analysis, we now turn to the motives people gave for voting or abstaining. Depending on their choice, respondents could select 12 turnout or 11 abstention motives, with other factors not included in the list entered in an open text field. From their list of relevant motivations ('present motivations'), respondents could then select the most important one ('prevailing motivations')[8].

Table 4 first shows the reasons citizens gave to vote in the 2024 election, despite it no longer being compulsory. Both in absolute and relative terms, our results suggest that normative considerations dominated in the ballot. More than half of the voters justify their choice by a deep sense of civic and historical duty. For over 40%, these normative considerations even prevailed in the decision to vote. The theoretical importance of this 'extended' form of rational choice voting is thus confirmed (Smets & van Ham, 2013), but more direct expressions were also significant. For example, nearly one in three voters was primarily motivated by a substantive reason to vote. Among these motives, the chance to support a particular party or candidate convinced about half of the voters to participate in the elections. Compared to this form of personal or party-based voting, the influence of issue voting or policy voting – whether to support the outgoing government or choose for change – was more limited. The most straightforward form of rational choice voting, however, involves strategic voting motives. As the table indicates, these motives played a role in the 2024 elections, but in a less decisive manner. This is especially true for motives related to the new institutional context of the election, in which the impact of voting and the influence of voters in choosing the mayor were enhanced. In contrast, preventing a disliked party from winning appears to have been the most relevant strategic motive, even ranking as the second most significant reason to get out and vote overall. Finally, the mobilisation model of voting, represented by situational voting motives, is at the bottom of our list. While habitual voting did influence

7 In the post-stratification check, radical party identification just failed to reach statistical significance at the .05 level. Other differences between the robustness checks were marginal (with some predictors becoming slightly more or less significant, respectively).

8 After manually recoding the open text answers of the category 'other', the number of remaining motives in this category was very small (and therefore not listed among the present motives). The original category 'other' was also not included in our calculation of the prevailing motives, as some specifications in the open text field contained multiple motives, of which some were assigned to one of the regular categories.

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behaviour, alongside other factors, socialisation has been less mentioned as the prevailing motive for turnout. Our two robustness checks (i.e. post-stratification and sensitivity analysis) did not produce fundamentally different results.

Table 4 Turnout motives: descriptives

Turnout motives	% present (N=1026-1029)	% prevailing (N=997)
Strategic	**68.1**	**21.5**
Vote impact	28.3	2.9
Electoral stakes (elect mayor)	33.8	4.1
Electoral stakes (prevent victory)	45.3	14.5
Substantive	**82.9**	**31.8**
Policy satisfaction	19.6	4.6
Policy dissatisfaction	16.3	4.8
Policy opinion	18.0	1.4
Support party	47.6	10.6
Support candidate(s)	48.9	10.4
Normative	**78.3**	**42.4**
Civic duty	64.3	28.3
Historical achievement	53.8	14.1
Situational	**50.0**	**4.3**
Personal habit	44.6	2.5
Social habit	13.0	1.8

In Table 5, we list the motives of the other group of respondents for abstaining from the election. Results suggest that different dynamics drive abstention compared to turnout. While among voters the most intrinsic motive (i.e. normative voting) exceeds the most extrinsic one (i.e. situational voting), abstention seems primarily influenced by situational motives[9]. For one third of the abstainers in our sample, being occupied was the main reason for not attending the ballot. Including the group of people who were not permitted to vote increases the prevalence of situational motives to nearly half of the non-voting population. These figures indicate that the

9 We need to bear in mind that social desirability might have played a role in answering the questions of the survey. That one third of our sample indicated situational factors were important for not voting could partly be explained by the fact that this was a 'safe' or acceptable reason for people, also considering that for most of them, casting a vote was (still) the social norm (see section on voting motives).

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sharp decline in turnout should not immediately be seen as a uniform sign of deep-rooted political malaise. Conversely, though, psychological explanations related to feelings of powerlessness and disengagement still account for an equal share of abstention. About 25% of abstainers reported that their decision was driven by feelings of powerlessness ('my vote does not matter', 'politics does not listen to or care about me'), while about 20% mainly attributed their decision to a lack of knowledge or interest. Contesting the outcome of the June 2024 national elections, or the perceived unimportance of local elections, was much less decisive. Finally, substantive reasons proved the least significant factor for staying home, even though the absence of a suitable party or candidate to vote for was more frequently cited by non-voters.

In both the post-stratification check and the sensitivity analysis, we noticed some variation in response. More specifically, the presence of situational motives declined (from 54.6% to 48.9% in the sensitivity analysis), while feelings of powerlessness increased in importance (from being mentioned by 41.1% of abstainers to 48.4%). This might indicate a degree of sampling and/or non-response bias.

Table 5 Abstention motives: descriptives

Abstention motives	% present (N=348-349)	% prevailing (N=245)
Disengagement	**46.1**	**20.4**
Lack of knowledge	21.8	9.4
Lack of interest	25.5	9.4
Lower stakes	8.9	1.6
Substantive	**29.6**	**10.1**
Policy satisfaction	6.9	2.0
Policy dissatisfaction	4.3	0.4
Unsuitable electoral offer	20.9	7.7
Powerlessness	**41.1**	**25.0**
Lack of political efficacy (vote does not matter)	28.1	9.4
Lack of political efficacy (politics does not listen/care)	23.6	12.7
Protest	8.6	2.9
Situational	**54.6**	**44.5**
Personal circumstances (occupied)	41.4	33.1
Practical considerations (not allowed)	13.5	11.4

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Step 3: Who Voted or Abstained for What Reason? Linking Predictors to Motives

In the final stage of our analysis, we connect our selection of voting determinants to the reasons people provided for turning out or abstaining. Simply put, which groups of citizens chose to vote or abstain for what reasons? Tables 6 and 7 present the results of the general multiple logistic regression analyses examining the odds of the voting determinants predicting the presence of the four basic (clustered) types of motives to vote and abstain, respectively.[10] Since the explanatory analysis of turnout indicated that age has a linear rather than a curvilinear effect, we replaced the age categories with age as a continuous (standardised) variable. To control for density in the multiple-response question capturing the motives, the models also include a control variable counting the total number of other individual motives mentioned by respondents to vote or abstain. Overall, the analyses yield significant findings but explain only a small part of the overall variation in the presence of the clustered voting motives (7–11%). For abstention motives, the predictive value is significantly higher (ranging from 15 to 56%). This is partly due to the highly significant negative odds ratios of the control variables, which suggest that the clusters of abstention motives are negatively correlated and thus capture a more distinctive rationale for abstention than for turnout.[11] However, because of the smaller sample size (N=246) in the analysis of abstention motives, and the low event rate for some motives (see Table 5), some odds ratios also indicate a substantial effect that does not reach statistical significance. Results should therefore be interpreted with caution.[12] To provide additional insights and interpretations, we complement these findings with the granular regression results from each individual motive, as displayed in Appendices 5 and 6.

The results show that among citizens' demographic profiles, age has the most predictive power, reflecting a deeper-rooted process of political socialisation. On the one hand, age is negatively associated with strategic and situational motives to vote. A deeper look into individual voting motives reveals that as age increases, voting out of social habit (more often cited by younger voters) gradually shifts to voting out of personal habit, historical appraisal, and connections with local candidates. This finding aligns with the 2022 Dutch local elections study, which reported that many

10 Due to the smaller number of observations and events in some cases, we also report significant results at the level p<.10.

11 Situational motives are negatively correlated with powerlessness (Peason's r =-.505, p<.001), the substantive motive (Pearson's r =-.180, p<.001), and disengagement (Pearson's r =-.155, p=.004). Likewise, powerlessness is negatively correlated with the substantive motive (Pearson's r =-.282, p<.001).

12 In the regression models for 'Lower stakes' and 'Policy satisfaction', two coefficient estimates are imprecise (Exp(B)=.000) due to the very low number of positive outcomes in this category.

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young people seem to become interested in national politics first, while interest in local politics develops at a later age (Vollaard et al., 2022, pp. 43–44). At the same time, younger voters are more likely to cite strategic reasons such as preventing the victory of a disliked party or the opportunity to have more impact with a vote in the new electoral setting, as well as policy-oriented motives like expressing oneself on a specific policy issue or supporting a new list to change local policy. On the other hand, age is also negatively associated with disengagement as a clustered motive to abstain. The detailed figures show that younger people who stayed at home are more likely to attribute this choice to a lack of knowledge and lower stakes in the election, but also not being allowed to vote. Since our survey sample includes only citizens aged 18 and over, the latter finding might relate to work or students living away from home.

The predictive power of gender and foreign roots is less systematic and less strong. For gender, we only find a significant association with individual motives: a negative one between men and the historical achievement motive (for turnout) and a lack of knowledge (for abstention); and a positive one between men and a lack of political efficacy ('politics does not listen or care', for abstention). The general trend among individuals with foreign roots to abstain more frequently cannot be accounted for by the clustered motives either,[13] even though this group displays a lower likelihood of abstaining for substantive reasons. The analysis of the individual motivations reveals that a clear and significant reason for abstention among this group is not being allowed to vote. Further research is needed to explore potential causes of this motive, such as legal ineligibility, lack of awareness of voting rights, work commitments, or personal circumstances. Conversely, motives less frequently cited by citizens with foreign roots to abstain include having no preference, being engaged otherwise, and considering local elections unimportant.

In terms of social standing, the effect of higher socioeconomic status suggests a pattern of political sophistication. In fact, this predictor increases the likelihood of voting for substantive reasons and reduces that for situational reasons. Detailed figures show that such political sophistication mainly relates to 'positive voting' in support of a specific party or satisfaction with the incumbent government's policy, as well as a negative association with voting incentivised by friends and family (social habit). If this group stays at home after all, it is more likely because of a sense of disengagement (feeling local elections are not that important) and situational motives (being occupied). Having stronger social ties within the local community, on the other hand, relates more to a sense of socialisation in the community. It

13 To some extent, this is also because the group only represents a small sub-population in our dataset (N=85).

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increases the likelihood of normative considerations to vote, but also the individual motive to support specific candidates. Abstainers with stronger social ties, in turn, have no greater odds of reporting a clustered motive to reason their decision. On a more detailed level, however, we see that they are more likely to mention policy dissatisfaction and protest against the political situation after the preceding national elections as reasons to abstain.

People's personal engagement with politics also significantly correlates with certain reasons cited for voting and abstaining, and the way in which it does so underlines the relevance of the specific character of local elections as place-bound expressions of political life. Both greater involvement in national and local politics are positively associated with the substantive and normative motives to vote. Substantively, however, engagement with national politics is rather associated with party politics, while greater engagement with local politics increases the odds of voting to support a candidate and to reward the incumbent government. It is also positively associated with the motive to elect the mayor, and negatively with policy dissatisfaction. These results indicate that 'good governance' plays a role in citizens' considerations to go out to vote in local elections. Mirroring this substantive logic, we also see that voters with higher political engagement tend to invoke individual situational motives less (except for personal habit among voters with strong involvement in local politics). And normatively, the only individual significant association is the one between personal involvement with national politics and the general civic duty motive. Abstainers with a higher involvement in national politics, then, justify their abstention less often by citing feelings of powerlessness and disengagement. Instead, the perceived lower stakes of the local elections on one hand and satisfaction with local policy on the other are substantive motives more likely to be raised by this group. For non-voters who show particular interest in local politics, the likelihood of reporting situational motives is more than twice as high, while their odds of citing other motives are lower (except for 'policy satisfaction'). This result reiterates the finding that abstention may, at least in part, also be a matter of conflicting priorities and activities, rather than a sign of a deep-rooted democratic malaise.

Lastly, we observe additional significant effects of voters' partisan preferences. These effects mainly reflect a personal political logic in the local vote. For ideology, the clustered analysis of turnout motives shows only one significant result: left-leaning voters are less likely to cite situational factors (personal and social habit) than centrists. Yet, the granular regressions complement this picture again, exposing an additional partisan (or ideological) logic for left-wing voters. Compared to voters in the centre, leftists are more likely to be motivated to support a political party and

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to vocalise an opinion on a particular policy issue.[14] For them, voting in support of individual candidates or the mayor is less likely. Table 7 shows no significant associations between ideology and the clustered abstention motives either. Yet, the detailed figures indicate that political protest, being occupied, and having lower stakes in local elections are mentioned more frequently among right-wing abstainers than centrists.

Party identification matters more. With regard to the clustered voting motives, Table 6 shows that citizens who do not identify with a specific party and still vote are more likely to mention normative reasons to do so compared to voters who identify with a 'traditional' party. In the opposite direction, they are significantly less likely to cite strategic reasons (with additional negative associations for substantive and situational motives not reaching statistical significance). The effects of identification with a radical party are not significant. However, individually, a positive association is found with the motive 'supporting a party', while social habit and supporting candidates are mentioned less often by voters of this group. Party identification also plays a role in identifying the odds of abstention motives. Individuals who are not attached to a specific party explain their abstention more often as driven by feelings of powerlessness and disengagement (as well as not being allowed to vote). For supporters of radical left-wing (PVDA) and right-wing (Vlaams Belang) parties, staying at home appears mainly motivated by a sense of powerlessness. Compared to abstainers without party identification (and also citizens identifying with a traditional party), supporters of radical parties are less likely to stay at home because of a lack of knowledge, interest, or preference. Rather, they stay at home because they feel politics does not listen or care, the electoral stakes are low, and they are dissatisfied with local policy and protest against the political situation after the national elections of June 2024. While not all of these associations reach statistical significance, they seem to reflect a feeling of disenchantment rather than intrinsic apathy, which could stem from the informal political agreement in Flanders to exclude radical parties from government coalitions, known as the 'cordon sanitaire'.

14 Along the same lines, these voters are more likely to mention the motive to bring about policy change and to prevent the victory of a disliked party – although these associations do not reach statistical significance. No significant results for right-wing voters are observed either, except for the negative correlation with social habit.

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Table 6 Explaining clustered turnout motives. Binary logistic regression analysis

	Strategic *(N = 834)*	**Substantive** *(N = 834)*	**Normative** *(N = 834)*	**Situational** *(N = 834)*
Demographic profile				
Gender (Ref. = female)				
Male	.829	1.177	.789	.868
Age	.814*	1.154	.985	.837*
Roots (Ref. = domestic)				
Foreign	.893	.867	.955	1.012
Social standing				
Socioeconomic status	1.026	1.450***	1.069	.828**
Social ties	.953	1.138	1.378*	1.073
Personal involvement				
National politics	.891	1.399°	1.790***	.736*
Local politics	1.042	1.363*	1.296°	1.107
Partisan preferences				
Ideology (Ref. = centre)				
Left	.796	1.299	1.269	.564**
Right	.790	1.336	.888	1.024
Party identification (Ref. = other)				
None	.507**	.682	1.985*	.788
Radical	.763	1.499	.940	.973
Other turnout motives	1.229***	1.036	1.103°	1.206***
Nagelkerke R^2	**.065*** **	**.106*** **	**.095*** **	**.088*** **

°p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

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Table 7 Explaining clustered abstention motives. Binary logistic regression analysis

	Disengagement *(N = 246)*	**Substantive** *(N = 246)*	**Powerlessness** *(N = 246)*	**Situational** *(N = 246)*
Demographic profile				
Gender (Ref. = female)				
Male	.868	1.452	1.033	.646
Age	.626**	1.053	.898	.736
Roots (Ref. = domestic)				
Foreign	.791	.504°	.724	.764
Social standing				
Socioeconomic status	1.438*	1.147	.941	1.472*
Social ties	.736	.906	1.308	1.159
Personal involvement				
National politics	.575°	1.239	.372**	.600
Local politics	.846	.736	.769	2.370**
Partisan preferences				
Ideology (Ref. = centre)				
Left	.521	1.444	1.016	1.784
Right	1.180	.854	1.026	1.995
Party identification (Ref. = other)				
None	2.498*	.767	2.349*	1.211
Radical	1.105	.563	2.512*	.779
Other abstention motives	.248***	.583**	.479***	.163***
Nagelkerke R^2	**.339*** **	**.149****	**.277*** **	**.557*** **

°p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Our final post-stratification check and sensitivity analysis yield results that are largely consistent with the general findings of the main analyses (i.e. in some cases crossing the significance thresholds of p <.10 or p <.05, while the direction of the estimated effects remained unchanged).[15] In Appendix 7, the changed effects of the sensitivity analysis are listed.

15 For example, in the clustered analyses, age turns significant for the substantive turnout motive and the situational abstention motive, but loses significance for the strategic and situational turnout motives. Individually, the significant effects on the turnout motives 'vote impact', 'policy dissatisfaction', and 'historical achievement' lose significance, while the effects on the abstention motives 'policy dissatisfaction' and 'unsuitable electoral offer' turn significant. All in all, this does not alter the sugges-

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Discussion and Conclusion

Belgium has long been one of the few countries upholding compulsory voting in all electoral arenas. In 2024, however, citizens in the Flemish region were no longer required to vote in the local elections, leading to a drastic drop in turnout. Our study took the unique opportunity of this abolition of compulsory voting to answer two research questions: (1) who went out to vote and who stayed at home, and (2) what reasons did people give for doing so? As political systems rarely change such a fundamental electoral rule, our context offers a distinctive setting for turnout research. Examining the determinants and motives of individual-level voting is especially relevant at the local level. This level remains an understudied layer characterised by comparatively lower turnout. Furthermore, insights into the profile of (non-)voters can fuel the debate on the sudden decrease in turnout. Our contribution draws on survey data from the Belgian Local Elections Studies 2024, collected immediately after the local elections among a representative citizen panel. The focus on Flanders keeps the macro-level constant, allowing for explanations at the individual voter level. The analytical strategy to answer our research questions consisted of three interconnected steps. We summarise their main findings and discuss the implications.

In the first step, we estimated the likelihood of electoral participation based on four clusters of determinants. This reveals that turnout is affected by different social and political features, even if the decision to vote seems driven by specific factors. A favourable socioeconomic status, personal involvement in local politics, being older or being ideologically left increases the odds of turning out the most. Being younger, having foreign roots or having no party identification decreases them the most. These findings confirm the importance of designated features found elsewhere, reflecting demographic privilege, favourable social standing, positive involvement or pronounced party preferences (den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022; Hennau & Ackaert, 2022; Smets & van Ham, 2013). This holds even in the specific context of these elections immediately after the abolishment of compulsory voting. However, contrary to other research, we found no significant effect of gender and social ties. Moreover, our findings on the determinants of voting mitigate existing research, as turnout appears to be less due to cognition of and confidence in national politics. It

tion that the older voters' choice is more incentivised by a sense of familiarity with local politics acquired over time. For women, the situational abstention motive ('being occupied') becomes significant. People with stronger social ties, in turn, are more likely to vote out of social habit or abstain because they were not allowed to vote. The role of ideology is slightly reinforced too. Leftists who stay at home are inspired more by situational motives ('being occupied') and less by disengagement ('lack of knowledge'). Rightists also vote more to express a policy opinion (compared to centrists), and when they abstain, a lack of interest and efficacy is more decisive.

may instead relate to interest in and satisfaction with local politics, as citizens with greater personal involvement in local politics are almost three times as likely to have turned out. In line with the second-tier model of local voting (Gendzwill et al., 2022), it seems that a mix of place-bound and general characteristics drove turnout also in this instance. Interestingly, and in contrast to the findings relating to pronounced political preferences, identification with a radical party significantly decreases the odds of turning out.

The second step of the analysis examined citizens' motives for voting or abstaining, each captured by four types of justifications. Results demonstrate that normative considerations like civic duty dominate among voters, followed by substantive and strategic reasons (respectively supporting a party or candidate or rather preventing a party from winning). Situational motives, such as being elsewhere engaged, prevail among non-voters, ahead of feelings of powerlessness and disengagement. While the sensitivity analysis balanced situational motives and feelings of powerlessness, the overall picture of the motives for turnout and abstention indicates that when formal obligations disappear, informal conventions come to the fore as rationales for electoral participation next to more foundational concerns (Bali et al., 2020; den Ridder & Vollaard, 2022; Hennau & Ackaert, 2022). Furthermore, it suggests the sharp decline in turnout cannot be seen as a uniform sign of a deep-rooted representative malaise, even if this element figures among a substantial part of abstainers (i.e. feeling less efficacious). More mundane personal circumstances or practical hurdles also matter (Krouwel et al., 2018). This adds to existing findings displaying a differentiated and multifaceted picture of abstention (Van Bockhove & Moors, 2022). Our findings finally highlight a less influential role of second-order justifications in whether to turn out (i.e. contesting the outcome of national elections or perceiving the local counterparts as unimportant; Gendzwill et al., 2022).

The third and final step connected crucial determinants to the specific motives for voting and non-voting. This links (more or less likely) voter groups to their rationales for (not) participating. To provide a nuanced picture, we complemented our analyses of clustered motives (to vote or abstain) with the fine-grained regression results for each individual motive. Our findings reflect a number of profound underlying patterns, such as political socialisation (being mainly associated with age), political sophistication (related to the effect of higher socioeconomic status), the relevance of the specific character of local elections as place-bound expressions of political life (as expressed by the effect of personal engagement with politics), and voters' partisan preferences (associated with political ideology and party identification). The latter probably relates to the informal political agreement in Flanders to exclude radical parties from government coalitions, known as the 'cordon sanitaire'.

Our study evidently comes with limitations, opening avenues for future studies. For one thing, it is limited to a single (albeit foundational) election. Future research

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could scrutinise whether determinants and motives for (non-)voting remain stable in the long term (provided the current rules are maintained). For example, the degree of abstention among the young can be noted. Studies could verify whether this turns into a habit of its own or gets overwritten by a process of political socialisation. This is especially relevant since some case studies from the Netherlands (van Bochove et al., 2023) seem to demonstrate that limited interest in local politics is structural in nature. For another, we note that some determinants can be better linked to certain motives than others. Overall, there appears to be more correspondence for abstaining than for voting. Due to the small sample size for abstainers, however, the statistical power of the analysis was less strong, and our results warrant caution; follow-up research with a larger sample size could provide a solution. The connection between both key aspects of the decision to (not) vote should thus be subject to further enquiry, whereby also qualitative in-depth (case) studies (see e.g. Boogers et al., 2023) could deepen our insights into why some people abstain while others keep on voting.

The paper also offers valuable lessons for policymakers tapping into normative debates on the state and shape of local democracy. For a Flemish government concerned with the drop in turnout, two policy directions appear. The first aims at increasing overall turnout. It concerns the quantity of the vote. With elections remaining central amidst alternatives of democratic engagement (Hendriks, 2023), high participation likely contributes to the legitimacy and accountability of the representatives. In turn, low turnout hampers the potential to reward allegedly good or punish bad policy. It may also signal reduced trust in representative institutions and actors. This is relevant against the objective of the broader electoral reforms to boost local democracy by amplifying the voice of the voter (Steyvers, 2020). The second direction intends to enhance the participation of certain groups of voters, such as young people, the less educated or those with foreign roots. This attention to the quality of the vote may subsequently achieve a more balanced representation of policy preferences (Vollaard, 2022).

Thereby, some strategies might be more effective than others. The literature highlights that focusing on removing practical barriers rarely increases turnout significantly (van Ostaaijen, 2019; 2022). A structural approach appears more impactful, particularly when tailored to the motives of non-voters. This approach implies improving the relationship between politicians and voters to achieve greater involvement in local democracy (Boogers et al., 2023; van Bochove et al., 2023). It can be achieved, among others, by developing democratic values and norms through participation in training grounds such as schools or the workplace (Hoek et al., 2024; Jirjahn, 2024). These apprenticeships might then spill over to the electoral realm, further celebrating the proverbial high mass of representative local democracy.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Operationalisation of the independent variables of citizens' social profile

Label	Operationalisation	N
Demographic profile		
Gender	Gender identity, dichotomised (male: 46.3%; female: 53.7%)	1,458
Age	Age (x=48.02; s=17.756), recoded into three categories for the first regression analysis: younger (i.e., 18-34; 26.3%), middle-aged (i.e., 35-54; 33.6%), older (i.e., 55+; 40.1%); and standardised for the other regression analyses	1,365
Foreign roots	Dummy variable, computed based on the respondent being born in Belgium and the nationality of the father, mother, and grandparents (1= at least one of these relatives holds a non-Belgian nationality; 19.3%)	1,288
Socioeconomic status		
Education	Highest diploma obtained, dichotomised (1=higher education; 49.6%)	1,489
Occupation	'Have you ever worked professionally', dichotomised (1=Yes, I currently have a job; 61.7%)	1,357
Income	Description of current economic situation on a 1-5 scale (very difficult to make ends meet – very comfortable living with current income), dichotomised (1=score 4-5; 52.9%)	1,353
Social position	Self-placement on a social ladder scaled 1-10, dichotomised (1=score 8-10; 20.2%)	1,361
Social ties		
Identification with inhabitants	'To what extent do you identify with the residents of your municipality?' Scaled 1-11 (x=7.39; s=2.464), standardised	1,338
Social connectedness	Agreement with statement 'I feel closely connected to other people who are important to me', scaled 1-5 (x=4.07; s=0.724), standardised	1,355
Social contacts	'How often do you meet friends, family or colleagues outside of work?' Scaled 1-7 (x=4.55; s=1.354), standardised	1,361
Social participation	'How often do you participate in social activities compared to other people of your age?' Scaled 1-5 (x=2.72; s=0.996), standardised	1,353

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Appendix 2. Operationalisation of the independent variables of citizens' political profile

Label	Operationalisation	N
Personal involvement in national politics		
General political interest	'To what extent are you interested in politics in general?' Scaled 1-5 (x=2.96; s=1.186), standardised	1,366
Political understanding	'How often do you find politics so complicated that you don't understand what it's all about?' Scaled 1 (never or almost never) - 4 (often) (x=2.83; s=0.859), reverse-coded and standardised	1,363
Trust in political parties	'To what extent do you trust political parties?' Scaled 1-5 (x=2.40; s=.783), standardised	1,361
Satisfaction with democracy	'Overall, how satisfied are you with the functioning of democracy in Belgium?' Scaled 1-5 (x=2.85; s=0.921), standardised	1,362
Political cynicism	Composite variable, based on the agreement with four statements (scaled 1-5): 'Political parties are only interested in my vote and not in my opinion'; 'Politicians talk a lot, but don't address the real issues'; 'Once they are elected, many politicians feel superior to people like me'; 'Most politicians are competent people who know what they are doing' (reversed-coded). The items were summed into an index scaled 4-20 (x=13.55; s=2.936), then reverse-coded (for directional alignment with the other variables of the index) and standardised	1,358
Personal involvement in local politics		
Interest in local politics	'How interested are you in local politics in your municipality?' Scaled 1-5 (x=3.06; s=1.093), standardised	1,374
Satisfaction with local democracy	'How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your municipality?' Scaled 1-5 (x=3.32; s=0.897), standardised	1,366
Partisan preferences		
Political ideology	Political orientation scaled 1 (left) – 11 (right), recoded into three categories: left (i.e., 1-4; 22.3%), centre (i.e., 5-7, 44.9%), right (i.e.,8-11; 32.7%)	1,338
Party identification	'Which political party do you feel closest to?' Recoded into three categories: none (19.9%), radical (i.e., Vlaams Belang or PVDA; 14.3%), other party (65.8%)	1,361

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Appendix 3. Operationalisation of turnout motives

Label	Operationalisation: 'Among the following propositions, for which reasons did you decide to vote? '	N
Strategic		
Vote impact	My vote can have more impact, as many people do not go to vote	1,026
Electoral stakes (mayor)	I wanted to vote for the future mayor	1,029
Electoral stakes (prevent victory)	I wanted to prevent the possible victory of a party I don't like	1,029
Substantive		
Policy satisfaction	I wanted to express my satisfaction with the policy of the previous local government	1,029
Policy dissatisfaction	I wanted to support a new list/change the existing policy	1,029
Policy opinion	To express my opinion on a specific policy issue	1,029
Support party	I wanted to support (the ideas/policy proposals of) a political party	1,029
Support candidate(s)	I wanted to support a particular/several candidate(s)	1,029
Normative		
Civic duty	I see voting as a civic duty	1,029
Historical achievement	Our ancestors fought for voting rights	1,029
Situational		
Personal habit	I always voted in past elections	1,029
Social habit	Most of my family members and friends went out to vote	1,029
Other turnout motives	Sum of the scores (0: no; 1: yes) for the turnout motives not included in the specific clustered motives	1,026

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Appendix 4. Operationalisation of abstention motives

Label	Operationalisation: 'Among the following propositions, for which reasons did you decide not to vote?'	N
Disengagement		
Lack of knowledge	I know too little about politics to vote	372
Lack of interest	I'm not interested in politics	372
Lower stakes	I didn't think local elections were important	372
Substantive		
Policy satisfaction	I am satisfied with the current policy, so there was no need for me to vote	372
Policy dissatisfaction	I was dissatisfied with the policy of the previous government	371
Unsuitable electoral offer	I don't know a suitable candidate or party that matches what I want	372
Powerlessness		
Lack of political efficacy	My vote doesn't matter anyway	372
Lack of political efficacy	Politics doesn't listen and care about me	371
Protest	I wanted to protest against the political situation after the elections in June	371
Situational		
Personal circumstances	I could not go out to vote because I was ill, on vacation, busy with work, or unavailable due to another personal reason	371
Practical considerations	I was not allowed to vote	371
Other abstention motives	Sum of the scores (0: no; 1: yes) for the abstention motives not included in the specific clustered motives	348

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Appendix 5. Explaining individual turnout motives. Binary logistic regression analysis

	Vote impact *(N = 834)*	**Elect mayor** *(N = 834)*	**Prevent victory** *(N = 834)*	**Policy satisfaction** *(N = 834)*	**Policy dissatisfaction** *(N = 834)*	**Policy opinion** *(N = 834)*
Demographic profile						
Gender (Ref. = female)						
Male	.956	.959	.817	1.357	1.136	1.038
Age	.828*	.996	.804**	.948	.832°	.813°
Roots (Ref. = domestic)						
Foreign	1.012	1.033	.816	.900	.979	.996
Social standing						
Socioeconomic status	.917	1.046	1.034	1.225*	.986	1.107
Social ties	.884	.934	1.040	.922	1.042	1.046
Personal involvement						
National politics	.917	.811	.816	.853	1.147	1.068
Local politics	1.016	1.227°	.867	2.593***	.582***	1.101
Partisan preferences						
Ideology (Ref. = centre)						
Left	1.008	.619*	1.306	.755	1.363	1.540°
Right	.821	1.267	.818	.783	1.220	1.350
Party identification (Ref. = other)						
None	.637°	.669°	.732	.802	1.103	.657
Radical	.886	.792	.903	.527	1.193	1.218
Other turnout motives	1.407***	1.338***	1.190***	1.064	1.075	1.308***
Nagelkerke R^2	**.130*** **	**.122*** **	**.076*** **	**.133*** **	**.042*** **	**.103*** **

°p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

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Appendix 5 (continued). Explaining individual turnout motives. Binary logistic regression analysis

	Support party *(N = 834)*	**Support candidates** *(N = 834)*	**Civic duty** *(N = 834)*	**Historical achievement** *(N = 834)*	**Personal habit** *(N = 834)*	**Social habit** *(N = .834)*
Demographic profile						
Gender (Ref. = female)						
Male	.974	1.285	1.137	.455***	.786	1.086
Age	1.080	1.204*	.996	1.197*	1.283**	.415***
Roots (Ref. = domestic)						
Foreign	.787	.739	1.034	.858	1.041	1.083
Social standing						
Socioeconomic status	1.194**	1.006	1.101	.951	.969	.716**
Social ties	1.081	1.465**	1.213	1.048	.987	1.341
Personal involvement						
National politics	1.249°	1.134	1.952***	1.148	.743*	.695°
Local politics	.899	1.404**	1.153	1.130	1.160	.683*
Partisan preferences						
Ideology (Ref. = centre)						
Left	1.704**	.673*	1.193	1.076	.694°	.378**
Right	1.194	.901	.825	.951	1.073	.586°
Party identification (Ref. = other)						
None	.755	.837	1.253	1.355	.825	.883
Radical	1.715*	.648°	.972	1.226	1.127	.438°
Other turnout motives	1.213***	1.140***	1.250***	1.331***	1.287***	1.244***
Nagelkerke R^2	**.096*** **	**.117*** **	**.137*** **	**.129*** **	**.099*** **	**.202*** **

°p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

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Appendix 6. Explaining individual abstention motives. Binary logistic regression analysis

	Lack of knowledge *(N = 246)*	Lack of interest *(N = 246)*	Lower stakes *(N = 246)*	Policy satisfaction *(N =246)*	Policy dissatisfaction *(N = 246)*	Unsuitable electoral offer *(N = 246)*
Demographic profile						
Gender (Ref. = female)						
Male	.381*	1.481	1.250	.903	1.489	1.490
Age	.533**	.836	.492*	.801	1.575	1.147
Roots (Ref. = domestic)						
Foreign	1.031	.910	.190*	2.978	.795	.294**
Social standing						
Socioeconomic status	1.060	1.203	2.108**	1.123	.889	1.141
Social ties	.817	.821	.642	.936	2.714°	.924
Personal involvement						
National politics	.832	.401**	2.697°	3.579*	.339	1.148
Local politics	.886	.827	.728	2.316	.529	.662°
Partisan preferences						
Ideology (Ref. = centre)						
Left	.460	.961	.000	3.526	1.314	1.426
Right	1.022	.604	3.209*	2.409	.625	.663
Party identification (Ref. = other)						
None	1.370	1.662	1.445	.209	.504	.891
Radical	.596	.769	3.079	.000	1.811	.582
Other abstention motives	.682°	.677*	.597	.461	1.470	.611*
Nagelkerke R^2	**.170****	**.163****	**.360*****	**.387*****	**.176**	**.176****

°p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

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Appendix 6 (continued). Explaining individual abstention motives. Binary logistic regression analysis

	Vote does not matter *(N = 246)*	**Politics does not listen/care** *(N = 246)*	**Protest** *(N = 246)*	**Occupied** *(N = 246)*	**Not allowed** *(N = 246)*
Demographic profile					
Gender (Ref. = female)					
Male	.757	1.895°	1.306	.607	1.014
Age	.890	1.080	.730	1.015	.493*
Roots (Ref. = domestic)					
Foreign	.933	1.291	.182	.419*	4.916**
Social standing					
Socioeconomic status	.908	1.000	.851	1.560**	.857
Social ties	1.133	1.011	2.599°	1.117	1.677
Personal involvement					
National politics	.457*	.396**	.158*	.566°	.973
Local politics	.841	.871	.450°	1.563°	1.640
Partisan preferences					
Ideology (Ref. = centre)					
Left	.972	1.302	.547	1.908	1.088
Right	1.816	.669	3.234°	2.331*	1.262
Party identification (Ref. = other)					
None	2.385*	1.458	.631	.950	3.446°
Radical	3.354**	3.111**	1.832	.752	1.490
Other abstention motives	.943	1.062	1.035	.187***	.090***
Nagelkerke R^2	**.204*** **	**.159** **	**.377*** **	**.496*** **	**.536*** **

°p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

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Appendix 7. Results of the sensitivity analysis

Model	Lost significance	Became significant
Clustered turnout motives		
Strategic	Age	/
Substantive	National politics	Age*
Normative	Social ties, local politics	/
Situational	Age	/
Clustered abstention motives		
Disengagement	Socioeconomic status, national politics	Social ties°, left*
Substantive	/	National politics*, local politics°, radical party*
Powerlessness	/	Local politics*
Situational	/	Male*, age°, foreign°, left°, right*
Individual turnout motives		
Vote impact	Age, no party	/
Elect mayor	Left, no party	/
Prevent victory	/	National politics°
Policy satisfaction	/	Control*
Policy dissatisfaction	Age, Full model	/
Policy opinion	/	Right°
Support party	National politics	/
Support candidates	Radical party	Male*, foreign*
Civic duty	/	/
Historical achievement	Age	/
Personal habit	Left	/
Social habit	/	Social ties**

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Model	Lost significance	Became significant
Individual abstention motives		
Lack of knowledge	Control	Left**
Lack of interest	/	Right*
Lower stakes	/	Control°
Policy satisfaction	/	Local politics*, control**
Policy dissatisfaction	/	Age°, local politics*
Unsuitable electoral offer	/	Age°
Vote does not matter	/	Right*
Politics does not listen/care	/	/
Protest	/	Radical party°
Occupied	National politics	Male*, left*
Not allowed	No party	Social ties*

°p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

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