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Social Influence, Voter Turnout and Mobilization

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Social Influence, Voter Turnout and Mobilization

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Summary

Citizens' act of voting in elections is essential for the functioning of representative democracy. By voting, citizens give legitimacy to the representative democratic political system, they hold politicians accountable, and they deliver input regarding the direction in which they wish society to move. Although turnout levels vary, a substantial share of citizens fail to vote in elections across the world, and the participation trend has been declining in most European countries over the last 25 years. Furthermore, there are substantial inequalities in turnout across sociodemographic groups. In this dissertation, I investigate two interrelated questions about citizens' turnout behavior. First, I ask whether individuals' social environment affects their turnout behavior. Second, I ask what effect Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaigns have on turnout. By answering these questions, I argue that we gain a better understanding of the causes of voter turnout and are therefore better able to tackle the challenges surrounding voter turnout.

Although early scholars suggested that the social environment could be an important factor in explaining individuals' turnout behavior, they had problems with empirically investigating whether this was the case. In recent years, the social aspects of voting have gained renewed attention. In line with recent empirical research, I argue that voting is essentially a social act. Individuals' turnout behavior is to a substantial degree affected by the behavior of their close social ties – spouse, family and close friends – and how they believe that their social ties will update their opinion about them, conditional on whether they vote or not. In other words, social influence is an important aspect of turnout behavior.

A central challenge for an empirical analysis of social influence is to move from correlations to causal effects. Although establishing that close peers often behave in similar ways is relatively straightforward, this could be explained by the tendency of individuals to associate with similar others, a phenomenon that is also known as homophily. The combination of high-quality Danish register data and validated turnout information for millions of Danish citizens has allowed me to address this challenge with a variety of research designs.

To highlight some empirical findings from the dissertation, I show that, for couples, cohabitation instantly causes concordance in turnout behavior and increases turnout. Furthermore, I show that the disruption of social ties is a central reason why individuals who change residence vote less than individuals who remain in the same place. Finally, I estimate that approximately 30 percent of the effect of a mobilization message to young citizens spills over to their co-residents. With strong

research designs and high-quality data, these results add to the increasing amount of evidence on the importance of the social environment for understanding citizens' turnout behavior.

The second question of the dissertation concerns the effects of GOTV campaigns on turnout. Across the world, organizations employ GOTV campaigns to mobilize citizens to use their vote. Evaluating the effect of such campaigns can be tricky for a number of reasons. For instance, individuals overreport their turnout and have a difficult time remembering the contact that they had with campaigns, which makes traditional survey approaches highly problematic. Instead, randomized controlled field experiments can be used to obtain the best possible effect estimate of GOTV campaigns. Over the last twenty years, a vast number of such experiments have been conducted, and they have taught us much. However, almost all of the published studies have been conducted in low-medium turnout elections in the United States.

In this dissertation, I present the results from eight GOTV experiments conducted in relation to the most recent local and European elections in Denmark. The results show that, in most cases, the GOTV campaign tactics studied in the United States also increase turnout in Danish local and European elections. In particular, as in the United States, the effects of nonpartisan letters have a small positive effect on turnout in Denmark. Furthermore, text messages increase turnout by remarkable figures in light of how inexpensive they are to distribute. On the other hand, the dissertation shows that the effect of door-to-door canvassing is substantially smaller in Europe than it is in the United States. Together, the findings indicate that lessons from the United States are useful for European GOTV campaigns, but they also highlight the importance of testing whether GOTV techniques work in different contexts.

All in all, the dissertation documents that the social environment plays a central role in explaining citizens' turnout behavior. Among close social ties, much communication – both verbal and nonverbal – occurs in the frequent interactions between individuals, which has a substantial causal effect on the choice to vote or abstain from voting. Furthermore, the dissertation shows that GOTV campaigns can be useful to mobilize citizens to use their vote in a high-turnout European country such as Denmark. Although the effect of such campaigns are often small, we should also remember that they are a low-intensity type of communication that comes from a sender with whom the individual have no or little relationship to. Viewed in this light, one can indeed argue that it is quite impressive that there is an effect from such campaigns at all.

Dansksporet resume

Det repræsentative demokratis funktionsevne afhænger af, at borgerne stemmer ved valg. Ved at stemme giver borgerne legitimitet til det repræsentative demokratiske politiske system. De holder politikerne ansvarlige for den første politik. Og de leverer deres bidrag til, hvilken retning de ønsker samfundet skal bevæge sig i. Valgdeltagelse er derfor en af demokratiets væsentligste sundhedsindikatorer.

I stort set alle demokratier i den vestlige del af verden er der en substancial andel af borgerne, der ikke stemmer til valg. Fokuserer vi på Europa, har valgdeltagelsen været faldende i næsten alle europæiske lande over de seneste 25 år. Samtidig er der betydelige uligheder i valgdeltagelse, idet valgdeltagelsen for nogle befolkningsgrupper – eksempelvis unge, kortuddannede og borgere med ikke-vestlig baggrund – er markant lavere end gennemsnittet.

Vigtigheden af valgdeltagelse for demokratiets funktionsevne samt de udfordringer, der er i forhold til borgernes faktiske valgdeltagelse i disse år, udgør den centrale motivation for denne afhandling. Konkret undersøger jeg to relaterede spørgsmål: Hvilken rolle spiller individens sociale relationer for deres valgdeltagelse? Og hvilken effekt har mobiliseringskamper på valgdeltagelsen? Ved at svare på disse spørgsmål opnår vi en bedre forståelse af årsagerne til borgernes valgdeltagelse. Og vi er dermed bedre i stand til at løse de problemer med faldende og ulige valgdeltagelse, som mange demokratier står overfor.

Afhandlingenens første del fokuserer på, hvilken rolle sociale relationer har i at forklare individens valgdeltagelse. Ideen om at opfatte valgdeltagelse som et socialt fænomen har eksisteret i lang tid og har i de seneste år fået øget opmærksomhed med en række nye empiriske studier af fænomenet. I tråd med denne udvikling argumenterer jeg i denne afhandling for, at det er en social handling at stemme. Individens valgdeltagelse er i betydelig grad påvirket af deres tætte sociale relationers – deres ægtefælle, familie og tætte venners – adfærd, samt af hvordan individerne tror, deres sociale relationer vil se på dem, afhængigt af om de stemmer eller ej. Social indflydelse er således et vigtigt aspekt i at forstå individens valgdeltagelse.

En central udfordring for empiriske analyser af social indflydelse er at gå fra sammenhænge til årsagssammenhænge. Selvom det er relativt ligetil at fastslå, at tæknnyttede personer ofte opfører sig ens, kan dette potentielt forklares ved vores tendens til at gruppere os med andre, der minder om os selv. Kombinationen af data af høj kvalitet fra danske registre og valideret valgdeltagelse fra officielle valglister for flere millioner danske borgere giver mulighed for at håndtere denne

udfordring ved brug af forskellige forskningsdesigns. For eksempel dokumenterer jeg i afhandlingen, at der er en kausal effekt på borgernes valgdeltagelse af at bo sammen. Partnere, der flytter sammen lige før valgdagen, gør i markant højere grad det samme på valgdagen end partnere, der flytter sammen lige efter valgdagen. Ydermere viser jeg, at opbrud i sociale relationer er en central årsag til, hvorfor personer, der skifter bopæl mellem to valg, har lavere valgdeltagelse end personer, der bliver boende det samme sted. Derudover estimerer jeg, at 30 procent af effekten af en SMS-besked til unge smitter af på ældre medbeboere (typisk deres forældre). Med stærke forskningsdesigns og højkvalitetsdata bidrager disse resultater til den stigende dokumentation for, at sociale relationer er en vigtig faktor til at forklare individens valgdeltagelse.

Afhandlingens anden del fokuserer på mobiliseringskampagners effekt på valgdeltagelsen. Over hele verden anvender organisationer kampagner til at mobilisere borgere til at stemme. Effektevalueringer af sådanne kampagner er vanskelige af en række årsager. For eksempel er traditionelle spørgeskemabaserede undersøgelser yderst problematiske, idet respondenter ofte overrapporterer deres valgdeltagelse og har vanskeligt ved at huske, hvilken kontakt de har haft med kampagnerne. For at opnå det bedst mulige effektestimat af mobiliseringskampagner kan man i stedet gennemføre randomiserede kontrollerede feltekspimenter. I de seneste tyve år er der blevet gennemført mere end 150 af sådanne feltekspimenter, hvilket har bidraget med en stor mængde ny viden. En væsentlig begrænsning er dog, at næsten alle af de offentligjorte studier stammer fra amerikanske valg med lav eller middelhøj valgdeltagelse.

I afhandlingen præsenterer jeg resultaterne fra otte mobiliseringsekspimenter gennemført i forbindelse med de seneste kommunalvalg og Europaparlamentsvalg i Danmark. Resultaterne viser på den ene side, at de mobiliseringsværktøjer, som de amerikanske studier har undersøgt, for det meste også virker til at øge valgdeltagelsen i Danmark. Konkret finder jeg, at partineutrale breve – ligesom i USA – har en lille, positiv effekt på valgdeltagelsen. Ydermere dokumenterer jeg, at SMS-beskeder øger valgdeltagelsen bemærkelsesværdigt meget i betragtning af, hvor billige de er at udsende, og hvor simpelt det er at opskalere sådanne kampagner. På den anden side viser jeg, at effekten af dør-til-dør-kampagner er betydelig mindre i Europa, end den er i USA. Samlet set indikerer resultaterne, at de amerikanske erfaringer er brugbare for europæiske mobiliseringskampagner, men resultaterne understreger samtidig vigtigheden af at teste, hvorvidt mobiliseringstiltag virker i forskellige kontekster.

Samlet set dokumenterer afhandlingen, at de sociale relationer spiller en central rolle i at forklare individers valgdeltagelse. Den hyppige interaktion mellem individer med tætte sociale relationer indebærer en stor mængde verbal og nonverbal kommunikation imellem dem, hvilket har en substansiel kausaleffekt på deres beslutning om at stemme eller undlade at stemme. Derudover viser afhandlingen, at kampagner kan være brugbare til at mobilisere borgere til at bruge deres stemme i en kontekst med høj valgdeltagelse som i Danmark. Selvom effekten af sådanne mobiliseringskampagner ofte er lille, er det værd at huske på, at mobiliseringskampagnerne typisk anvender en kommunikationsform af lav intensitet, samt at modtageren ingen eller lille relation har til afsenderen. Netop forskellen i intensitet og relation mellem modtager og afsender af mobiliseringsbudskabet kan være nøglen til at forstå, hvorfor effekten af det sociale miljø er betydeligt større end effekten af mobiliseringskampagner.

1 Introduction

Across the globe, millions of citizens take part in democracy by voting in elections each year. For a representative democracy to function, these citizens' voting is essential. If there are no voters, there is no democracy. However, a large number of citizens abstain from voting in all or some elections. This dissertation focuses on the causes of citizens' turnout.

There are at least three central motivations for caring about whether individuals vote in elections. In representative democracies, voting is a source of *legitimacy* for the political system as such. It is a way for citizens to hold politicians *accountable*. Additionally, it serves an *input* function for the participating citizens, as they voice their opinion about the direction in which they prefer society to move.

To expand upon these motivations, the first point relates to how voting is a source of legitimacy. By voting in elections, citizens provide legitimacy to the representative democratic way of organizing the political system. The delegation of power from the people to elected representatives is a cornerstone of representative democracy, and this function can only be fulfilled by the active participation of citizens. As Tingsten noted, "*When a great number of electors abstain from voting, parliament cannot perform its function of giving expression to different opinions among the people; the parliamentary system as a whole is in a precarious position as long as a great proportion of the electoral body forms an unknown and incalculable political factor*" (Tingsten 1937: 184). By voting, people renew the social contract of democracy and express their support of the representative democratic system (Rousseau 1762; Riley 2005). If voter turnout is too low, the idea of a legitimate and well-functioning representative democracy can be questioned (Connelly & Field 1944; Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980: 104; Blondel et al. 1998: 2; Rogers et al. 2012).

The second motivation relates to how voting serves an accountability function in a representative democracy. Elections are the opportunity for citizens to tell their representatives "*where the shoe pinches*" (Lindsay 1943: 272), as well as send a signal about the problems that they find to be most important to address in the next period and whom they believe will most competently address the problems (Ashworth 2012; Fearon 1999). In elections, politicians and parties outline alternatives in a way that allows individuals to participate in the decision-making process by voting for their preferred alternative (Schattschneider 1960; Schumpeter 1942). Furthermore, they can directly express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with politicians, thereby holding them accountable for

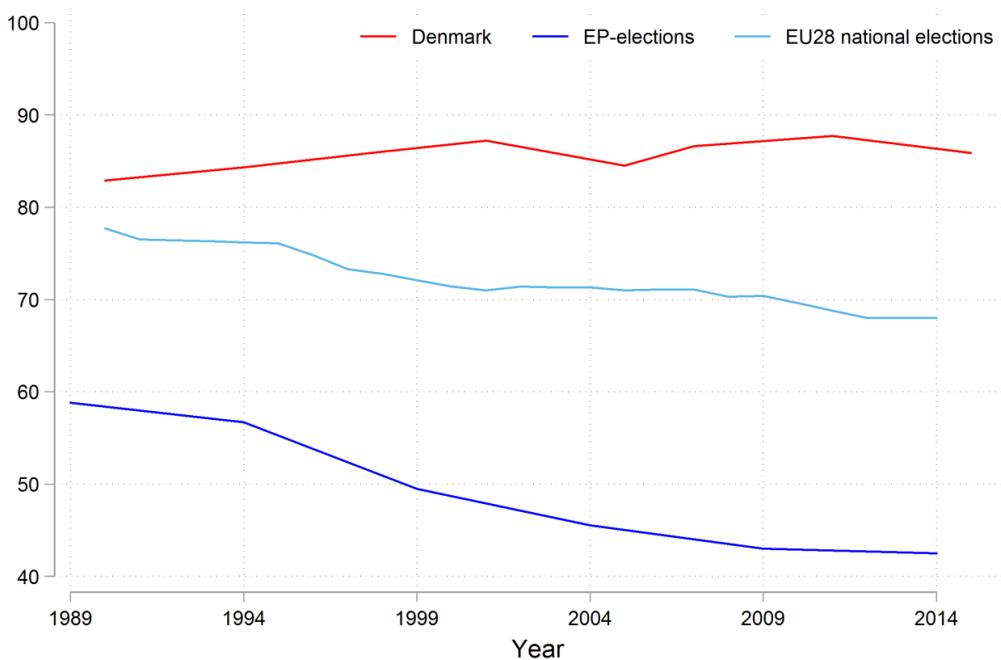
their actions during the previous electoral term (Manin 1997: 234; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier 2000; Healy & Malhotra 2013).

The third motivation relates to the input function that voting serves in democracies. Even though there are numerous forms of political participation other than voting, many people do not participate in those other ways (Burns et al. 1997; Lijphart 1997). In practice, thus, voting for many individuals is the way in which they deliver their input regarding the development of society. By voting, citizens deliver their input to the political system by expressing who they want to represent them in the government for the upcoming period (Easton 1957). Even if many citizens vote, a well-functioning representative democracy might still be threatened by inequalities in participation. Nonparticipating groups of citizens might believe that their vote is of little value and, consequentially, abstain from giving their input regarding in which direction they prefer society to move, despite their clear interest in delivering this input (Schattschneider 1960; Solt 2010; Solt 2008). Indeed, for under-represented groups, nonparticipation might lead to a lack of consideration of their interests by politicians (Key Jr 1949; Griffin & Newman 2005; Leighley & Nagler 2013; Martin 2003). For these reasons, turnout can be viewed as one of the key health indicators of a democracy (Dahl 1989: 109; Beetham 1991: 93; Franklin 2004: 4).

1.1 Turnout Problems in Western Democracies

Whereas many people agree on the essential role of voter turnout in democracies, two empirical observations relating to voter turnout cause concern. First, many Western democracies struggle with low or declining voter turnout (Blais & Dobrzynska 2009; Siaroff 2009; Blais & Rubenson 2013; Vowles 2017). This is also the case in Europe, as is illustrated in figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1: Turnout trend in the current 28 EU member states



Note: Data from International IDEA (2016) and Eurostat (2016). The EU28 national elections show the turnout rate for all 28 current EU members over time. The EP-elections show the turnout in the EP-elections at any given time. Thus, these two lines does only contain the same 28 countries in 2014, while the EP-election contains turnout from 27 countries in 2009, 25 countries in 2004, 15 countries in 1999 and 12 countries in 1994 and 1989.

During the last 25 years, turnout in national elections in the current 28 EU member states has declined by an average 9.7 percentage points. In 24 of the 28 EU-countries turnout was lower in the latest national election compared to 1990 (own calculations based on International IDEA 2016). Whereas many Europeans still participate in national elections, this development is concerning. Furthermore, substantially fewer voters participate in local and European elections. For instance, turnout has declined in each consecutive election for the European Parliament since the introduction of the elections in 1979, with turnout hitting a record low 42.5 percent in 2014. In European elections, the current norm is to abstain from voting.

The second observation that causes concern is the existence of substantial inequalities with regard to who votes in many democracies, including those that enjoy high aggregate turnout. On Election

Day, individuals who are young, have a low level of education, are unemployed or are first- or second-generation immigrants are less likely to vote than individuals with the opposite characteristics. This is problematic for a representative democracy, as the inputs from these groups and their support of the representative democratic organization of society are missing. Furthermore, underrepresented groups do not pursue their potential to affect society in their preferred directions by voting. Given that many nonvoters are likely to be even more marginalized in the context of other types of political participation, it is quite problematic if they do not even manage to vote in elections.

1.2 Why Studying Turnout in Denmark Is Interesting and Attractive

As figure 1 shows, turnout in Danish national elections is high and has not shown the same downward trend as elections in most other European countries have. Furthermore, Denmark has enjoyed the second highest turnout rate among EU countries without compulsory voting since 1995. For these reasons, Denmark is sometimes portrayed as a turnout wonderland (Elklit & Togby 2009). As Denmark is the empirical context of this dissertation, it might be questionable what can be learned about turnout behavior in other countries by studying turnout in a context such as Denmark. This question will briefly be addressed from two different perspectives here, whereas additional details about Denmark as the context of the study will be provided in chapter 2.

From one perspective, the Danish case is not that different from many other countries. For instance, turnout is substantially lower in local and European elections than in national elections. Turnout fluctuates from approximately 70 percent in local elections to approximately 50 percent in European elections, making the room for improvement substantially larger in these elections (Bhatti et al. 2014c; Bhatti et al. 2014b). Furthermore, substantial inequalities in turnout are also present in a high turnout context such as Denmark. These patterns resemble what many other countries experience. Therefore, there is little reason to be skeptical about inferences that are drawn in studies of individual turnout behavior in Denmark to individual turnout behavior in other countries.

From another perspective, Denmark can in some ways be seen as a crucial or critical case (Gerring 2007; Gerring 2004). This is particularly relevant to the mobilization studies that are presented in this dissertation. The relatively high turnout could arguably make it a hard test for mobilization interventions. At least in statistical terms, there are fewer nonvoters to mobilize. Therefore, the Danish case could be used to make a “Sinatra inference” (i.e., if it can make it here, it can make it

anywhere) (Levy 2002: 442; Gerring 2007). However, one might also argue that the marginal nonvoter – the citizen who did not vote but was very close to doing so – could be just as easy or even easier to mobilize in a context with higher turnout. In high-turnout elections, more political communication flows to which a mobilization campaign can add. Whereas we cannot say which argument is correct, there have not been empirical studies on the effect of get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaigns in high-turnout European countries. It will be useful to learn about the effect of such campaigns in a Danish context, as it can provide information about the usefulness of this type of mobilization efforts in a new context.

Both these perspectives make studies of individual turnout behavior interesting from a broader perspective. In addition, the high-quality register data that are available for the entire Danish population make Denmark an attractive place to study turnout behavior. The registers contain a large amount of highly reliable information about individuals' characteristics and life situations over their lifetime. In particular, the ability to identify individuals' household and family members – their social networks – in the registers is a major advantage when studying social influence.

Overall, whereas the first view in Denmark in figure 1.1 indicated that it is a democracy that is in good shape in terms of turnout, there are problems underneath the surface. Furthermore, until recently, we did not know much about who votes in Denmark. The knowledge obtained from the dissertation, however, is not only relevant to our understanding of turnout behavior in Denmark or in high-turnout European countries. Indeed, the research presented here can also be useful in improving our general understanding of individual turnout behavior in Western democracies.

1.3 One Dissertation, Two Interrelated Research Questions

On top of the two empirical turnout problems that were introduced earlier, specifically declining turnout and inequalities in participation, a theoretical problem also exists. The theoretical account of why people vote or abstain from voting is insufficient in terms of understanding real-world behavior. For instance, in the classic calculus of voting framework, an individuals' turnout decision is a result of the probability of casting the decisive vote, the potential benefits if one's preferred candidate wins the election, the costs of voting (Downs 1957) and the sense of duty associated with voting (Riker & Ordeshook 1968). Whereas this often-applied rational choice-inspired model has delivered important insights and is helpful in structuring reasons regarding why individuals vote, it overlooks the social environment as a key explanation for why individuals participate in elections

(Rolle 2012; Sinclair 2012). Although a number of studies have suggested that individuals' social environment, including their family members, co-residents, and classmates, affects their turnout behavior (Lane 1959; Campbell et al. 1960; Stoker & Jennings 1995), researchers have been challenged in terms of documenting the causal effects of the social environment on turnout. This dissertation places the social environment at the center of our understanding of why people participate in elections, thereby enabling theories to explain voter turnout more effectively. Correspondingly, the first research question of the dissertation is:

RQ1: To what degree does individuals' social environment affect their turnout behavior?

The second problem that is addressed by the dissertation relates to what type of campaigns can be used to change nonvoters to voters. In the period preceding an election, a great deal of political communication occurs. This is especially the case in a context such as Denmark, where election campaigns are relatively short and highly intensive (Kosiara-Pedersen 2016). At election time, citizens' are exposed to election posters all over the city, politicians talk to potential voters on the streets and the media covers the election thoroughly. In addition, political communication also occurs within the closer social environment. Individuals communicate about the election and society with their friends, and the communication about the election from the media and politicians might trigger even more talk about politics among friends, family members and colleagues than usual. Taken together, most citizens find themselves in a context with a high level of political communication at election time. As a consequence, even persons with a low interest in politics have a difficult time avoiding noticing that an election is upcoming.

However, despite the large amount of political communication that is occurring, a great number of citizens abstain from voting. To change this, GOTV campaigns are being applied by a number of organizations. These campaigns are a specific type of political communication that aims to mobilize citizens to vote. As such, they can be seen as one among many types of political communication that take place around elections. Whereas a large number of researchers have studied the effectiveness of such campaigns in the United States, little is known about whether they work in high-turnout European contexts. This leads to the second research question of the dissertation:

RQ 2: What is the effect of GOTV campaigns on voter turnout?

The two research questions are interrelated in three ways. First, the empirical motivation for both of them is concerns about voter turnout, which plays a central role in representative democracies. Second and relatedly, both questions aim to enhance our understanding of the causes of voter

turnout. Third, both questions focus on how political communication can influence turnout. In question 1, political communication is informal and continuously goes back and forth between individuals within social networks. In question 2, the political communication flows from campaigns to individuals up to the election.

The two research questions are answered via the overview given in the dissertation framework along with the seven individual papers that relate to one or both research questions. A short description of the individual papers and how they relate to the research questions is provided at the end of this chapter. Before that description, three central contributions of the dissertation are presented in the next section.

1.4 The Dissertation's Three Central Contributions

The research that is presented in this dissertation makes three large contributions to the knowledge about voter turnout. First, the dissertation details who votes in Denmark, a high-turnout European context. Although we know a great deal about who votes in the United States (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980; Leighley & Nagler 2013), the picture is less clear in a European context. Surely, this topic has been studied previously. However, many of the existing studies suffer from data problems, including small sample sizes, self-reported turnout and self-reported explanatory variables (Smets & Van Ham 2013; Bhatti et al. 2017c). Using validated voter turnout data and high-quality information from Danish public registers about individuals' characteristics, this dissertation offers a precise and detailed illustration of voter turnout. Even in a country with high turnout in national elections and strong duty norms related to voting (Elklit & Togeby 2009), substantial inequalities in turnout exist. For instance, individuals with a non-Western ethnic background and lower educational attainment vote at a substantially lower rate than ethnic Danes who have completed a higher level of education. Furthermore, across the three types of elections – local, national and European – nine percent of voters fail to vote in all three elections, with permanent nonvoters being characterized by an overrepresentation of individuals with a non-Western ethnic background and low level of education (Bhatti et al. 2017c).

Second, utilizing the Danish register data and validated turnout data, this dissertation employ strong research designs that document a substantial causal effect of the close social environment on turnout behavior. Whereas classic studies of political participation have noted that interpersonal relationships play an important role in the act of voting (e.g., Lane 1959; Berelson et al. 1954;

Tingsten 1937; Campbell et al. 1960: 109; Lazarsfeld et al. 1968: 137), little data were available at the time at which they were written, making it difficult to establish correlations and impossible to investigate whether there was a causal relationship. In recent years, the social logic of political participation has received renewed attention (e.g., Zuckerman 2005a; Rolfe 2012; Sinclair 2012). For example, recent studies have suggested that citizens' turnout behavior is influenced by their household members (Nickerson 2008; Fieldhouse & Cutts 2012; Sinclair et al. 2012; Fieldhouse & Cutts 2016), family members (Jennings et al. 2009) and close friends (Klofstad 2007; Bond et al. 2012). This dissertation adds to these studies and advance a theory regarding the social act of voting. Specifically, it is based on the argument that social norms and norm enforcement play a central role in explaining turnout behavior.

Third, this dissertation expands the use of experiments to investigate what GOTV initiatives affect turnout in a high-turnout European context. The research on GOTV campaign effects using field experiments has been advanced tremendously within the last 15 years (cf. Gerber & Green 2000; Green et al. 2013; Michelson & Nickerson 2011; Bedolla & Michelson 2012; Green & Gerber 2015; Gerber & Green 2016). With each new study, a new piece of knowledge has been added to the literature, making the field experimental research on GOTV campaign effects one of the best examples of cumulative scientific practice within the social sciences in these years. However, substantial pieces are missing. Almost all the existing studies have been conducted in the United States, and no field experimental evidence from high-turnout North European countries exists. On the one hand, the dissertation shows that most of the GOTV effects that are documented in the U.S. seem to work as well in the Danish context. For instance, letters and text messages without social pressure arguments work as well in Denmark. On the other hand, the dissertation shows that the effect of door-to-door canvassing is substantially lower in Europe than in the United States. In addition, the dissertation adds new insights regarding the relevance of the timing and content of GOTV appeals. At a more general level, the dissertation highlights the importance of continuously evaluating the effect of campaigns and testing theories in different contexts if we want to be able to handle the problems of large inequalities and decreasing turnout levels around the world more effectively.

1.5 Overview of the Seven Papers in the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of the five chapters in the frame and the seven papers listed in table 1.

Table 1.1: Papers in the dissertation

| Title | Shorthand | Publication status | RQ in focus |
|--|----------------------|---|--------------------|
| 1 Residential Mobility and Turnout: The Relevance of Social Costs, Timing and Education | Residential Mobility | <i>Political Behavior</i> (Hansen 2016) | 1 |
| 2 Living Together, Voting Together: Cohabitation Instantly Causes Concordance in Turnout Behavior and Increases Turnout* | Cohabitation | Working Paper | 1 |
| 3 How Voter Mobilization from Short Text Messages Travels Within Households and Families: Evidence from two Nationwide Field Experiments* | Spillover | In review, <i>Electoral Studies</i> | 1 |
| 4 Getting Out the Vote With Evaluative Thinking* | Cartoon and Letter | <i>American Journal of Evaluation</i> (Bhatti et al. 2015b) | 2 |
| 5 Can Governments Use Get Out The Vote Letters to Solve Europe's Turnout Crisis? Evidence from a Field Experiment* | Letters | Revise and resubmit, <i>West European Politics</i> | 2 |
| 6 Is Door-to-Door Canvassing Effective in Europe? Evidence from a Meta-Study across Six European Countries* | Door-to-door | <i>British Journal of Political Science</i> (Bhatti et al. 2016a) | 2 |
| 7 Moving the Campaign from the Front Door to the Front Pocket: Field Experimental Evidence on the Effect of Phrasing and Timing of Text Messages on Voter Turnout* | Text Messages | <i>Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties</i> (Bhatti et al. 2017d) | 2 |

Note: *Coauthored with Yosef Bhatti, Jens Olav Dahlgaard and Kasper M. Hansen.

From different angles, the seven papers relate to one or both of the research questions. In the table's rightmost column is the research question that receives the greatest focus in each of the papers. The primary contributions of each of the papers are briefly described in the next section.

1.5.1 Three Papers on the Effect of the Social Environment on Individuals' Turnout

The right-most column in Table 1.1 shows that three of the papers focus' on the first research question by investigating the importance of the social environment on individuals' turnout behavior. This task is achieved using three different research designs – a panel data approach with a difference-in-difference logic (Residential Mobility), an observational approach with a regression discontinuity logic (Cohabitation), and a field experimental approach (Spillover). The central

contributions of the three papers that are directly related to the question about the effect of the social environment on individuals' turnout behavior are described below.

Residential Mobility. This article makes three central contributions. First, based on a panel data approach with precise information about residential patterns, the article empirically shows that residential mobility depresses turnout, primarily through the disruption of social ties. Second, it shows that the effect of moving is particularly large when the move occurs shortly before the election. Third, it shows that residential mobility primarily affects the turnout of less educated citizens and, therefore, increases the inequalities in voter participation.

Cohabitation. This paper makes two central contributions. First, by arguing that it is as-if random whether couples take up cohabitation just before or after an election, the paper presents a research design that allows for the estimation of the causal effect of living together on turnout and overcomes the challenges of homophily with which existing research struggles. The paper documents a substantial positive causal effect on concordance in turnout behavior of living together of approximately 12-17 percentage points, which is arguably due to an instantaneous effect of sharing a household that cannot be explained by self-selection or long-term socialization. Second, the paper shows that cohabitation increases turnout by 8-15 percentage points for couples who move in together shortly before the election. There is a positive turnout effect for all types of couples, including those in which both individuals failed to vote in the last election.

Spillover. This paper contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it uses text messages as a campaign tactic, which are unlikely to be observed by other persons than the treated individual, thereby allowing for greater certainty in the claim that a potential spillover effect is due to a social process. Second, the paper estimates that approximately 30 percent of the direct effect spills over to other household members. Third, the analysis shows that sharing a household is more important than family ties for turnout contagion, as there is no spillover effect for parents who are residing in another household when a young voter is receiving the text message.

1.5.2 Four Papers on the Effect of GOTV Campaigns on Turnout

Four papers based on field experiments were conducted on Danish local or European elections to investigate the second research question regarding the effect of different GOTV campaigns on

turnout. One of these articles (Text Messages) is directly linked to the Spillover paper, as it lays the foundation for investigating the spillover effects of the campaigns. The central contributions from the four papers are described below.

Letter and Cartoon. This article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, we show that letters and cartoons sent by the Danish Parliament had a positive effect on turnout among young first-time voters. Second, the turnout effect was largest for citizens with a low propensity to vote. Third, by using a wait-list design, an important obstacle to designing a field experiment was removed, and the organization implemented long-term evaluative thinking in its campaign practices.

Letters. This paper contributes to the literature in two ways. First, with inspiration from the calculus of voting and prospect theory, eight different types of arguments are tested in a field experiment. The experiment shows a small positive effect of receiving the letter, with limited differences across the letters. Second, the letters primarily mobilized low-propensity voters, thereby contributing to a more equal electorate.

Door-to-door. This article makes two main contributions. First, it combines the existing European studies and adds two new Danish studies to show that the effect of door-to-door canvassing on turnout is substantially smaller in Europe than what has been found in the United States. Second, it rules out the notion that the turnout rates in the existing studies – a suspected explanation for the differences in the effect – can explain the differences in the effect sizes. The finding highlights the importance of testing GOTV campaigns instead of simply assuming that what works in one context also works in another.

Text Messages. This article makes three main contributions. First, it presents the first non-U.S. text message studies by analyzing four experiments that were conducted in Denmark and finds that text messages have positive effects on turnout that are quite similar to those that are reported in the two existing U.S. studies. Second, it investigates the relevance of timing and shows that GOTV appeals are less effective when they are delivered on Election Day than when they are delivered before Election Day, whereas there are no additional effects of delivering multiple messages. Third, the paper finds no significant differences associated with sending messages across varying content, although it does seem unwise to include links in the messages.

In addition, it is noted that three of the papers (*Residential Mobility*, *Letters* and *Letter & Cartoon*) from different perspectives address inequalities in turnout, one of the main motivations to conduct

this dissertation research. Whereas the seven papers vary in terms of their research designs, their empirical foundations are validated voter turnout and highly reliable data from the Danish registers. Together, the papers contributes to the pool of knowledge on the causes of voter turnout as well as the effect of GOTV campaigns.

1.6 Structure of the Rest of the Dissertation Frame

In chapter 2, the data and context of the studies are introduced in greater detail. The chapter also presents facts about who votes in Danish elections and documents the sociodemographic inequalities in voter turnout in this context.

The next two chapters provide a relatively brief introduction to the existing research with which the dissertation engages. Chapter 3 focuses on individual voter turnout, with an emphasis on the role of social surroundings. A key point from the chapter is that, although the idea that citizens' social surroundings play an important role in explaining their participation in elections is not new, it is only recently that studies have been able to document the causal effects of individuals' social environment on their political behavior empirically in a convincing manner. The last part of the chapter describes three types of research designs that allow for this type of causal inference and present three examples from the papers in the dissertation that speaks in favor of the importance of the social influence for understanding individuals' turnout.

Chapter 4 is about the effect of voter mobilization campaigns. It begins with a focus on the difficulty associated with measuring the effect of such campaigns using traditional social science tools such as survey studies or laboratory experiments. Then, the chapter introduces the field experimental literature that boomed after Gerber and Green's (2000) mobilization experiments in New Haven in 1998. Finally, the chapter identifies some important research frontiers and gives some examples of the contributions of the dissertation.

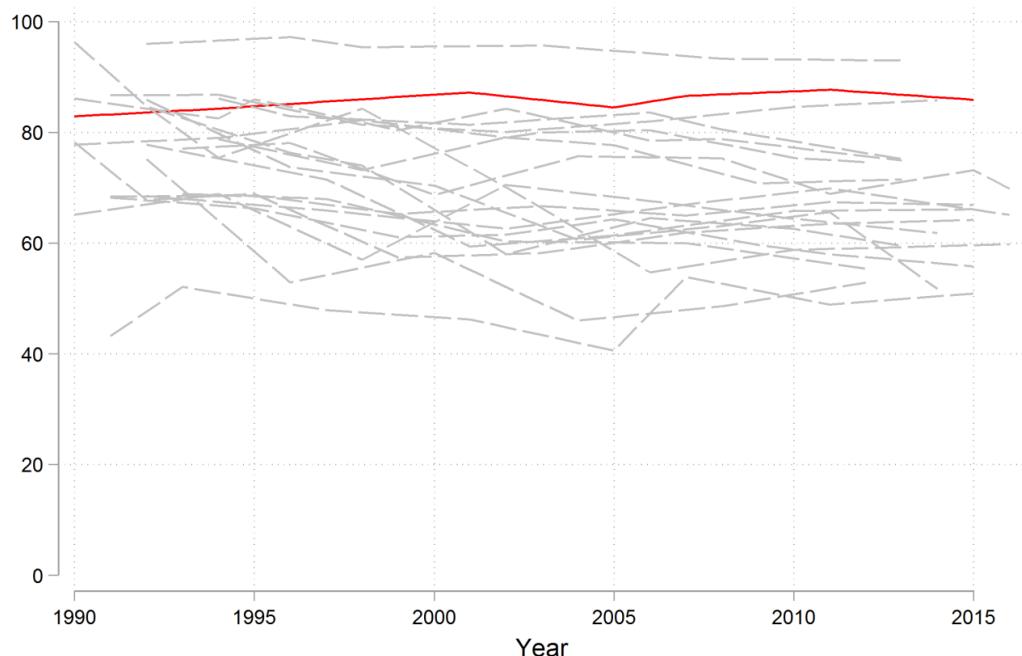
Finally, chapter 5 summarizes several central conclusions from the research project and points towards avenues for future research. Furthermore, the chapter describes implications that practitioners, especially those who are working with campaigns aimed at affecting citizens' behavior, might find to be useful.

2 Contextual, Empirical and Methodological Considerations

Most of the studies in this dissertation center on the Danish local elections in 2013 and 2014, whereas some studies were also conducted on the European Parliamentary election in Denmark in 2014. The analyses are based on validated turnout and high-quality register data from all or most voters in the mentioned elections. This chapter introduces the Danish case and the data in greater detail than is allowed for due to space constraints in the individual papers in the dissertation.

The empirical portion of this dissertation analyzes individual turnout behavior in different Danish elections. As figure 2.1 illustrates, Denmark has high turnout rates compared to other European countries without compulsory voting.

Figure 2.1: Turnout rates in National elections in 24 EU-countries without compulsory voting



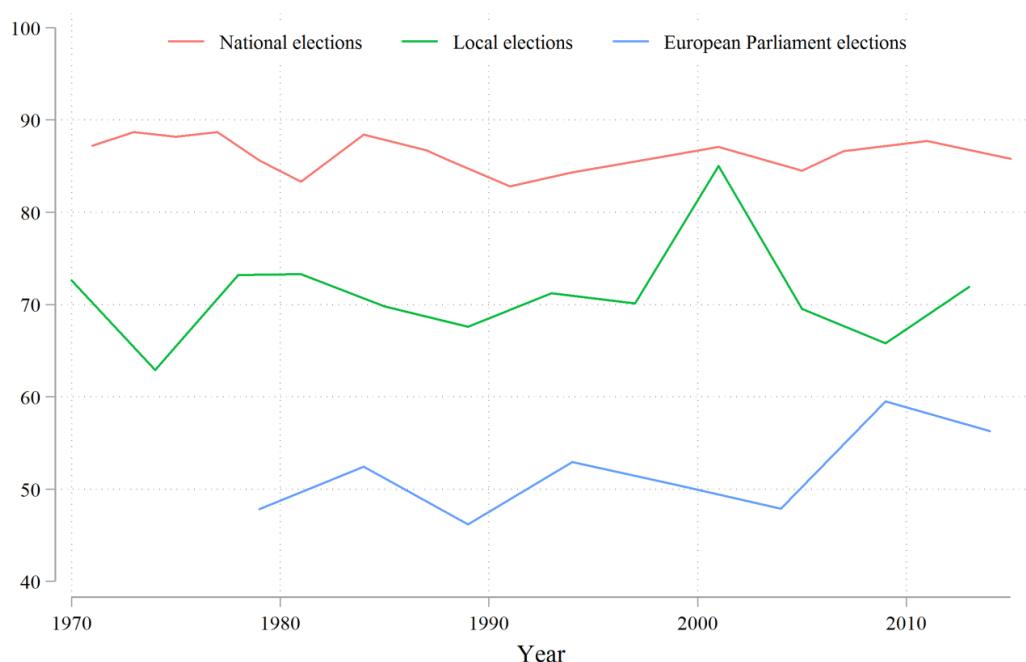
Note: Turnout in national parliamentary elections in Denmark (red line) and for 23 EU-countries without compulsory voting (gray lines) (International IDEA 2016). Greece, Belgium, Luxembourg and Cyprus have different compulsory voting measures in place and are therefore excluded from the graph.

Contrary to the declining trend in turnout in many Western countries, Danish turnout rates remained quite stable. Since the mid-1990s, Denmark has enjoyed the second highest turnout rate among the EU countries without compulsory voting, with the small island state of Malta being the only country that has had a higher turnout (Hirczy 1995). Based on this single indicator, the Danish participation norm appears to be strong and healthy. Indeed, a skeptic might ask why we should care about turnout in Denmark at all, given such high and stable turnout rates. However, when we examine the context more closely, the image of Denmark as a turnout wonderland becomes more nuanced.

2.1 Turnout in Danish Local, Parliamentary and European Elections

To begin, we can include two other types of elections to obtain a more complete picture of the turnout patterns in Denmark (see figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2: Turnout in Danish elections since 1970



As figure 2.2 shows, the turnout rates are substantially lower in local and European elections than in national elections.¹ The figure also illustrates that turnout within the same type of elections has been quite stable over time, with turnout rates fluctuating by approximately 86 percent in the Danish national elections (*Folketingsvalg*), 70 percent in the local elections and approximately 50 percent in the European elections. Whereas the aggregate turnout is high, it is noteworthy that the participation ratio between the Danish national election and the European Parliamentary election of 1.5 is similar to the average participation ratio for the countries in the European Union (Bhatti et al. 2017c). The large deviations in turnout are due to simultaneously held elections. For instance, the local elections in 2001 were held on the same day as the national election and the European Parliamentary elections in 2009 and 2014 were held on the same day as voting on referendums that likely drew additional voters to the polls (Bhatti et al. 2014c; Bhatti et al. 2014b). Overall, even though turnout is comparatively high, there are substantial turnout variations between different types of Danish elections that make the image of a high-turnout country more nuanced (Bhatti et al. 2016b; Bhatti et al. 2014c; Bhatti et al. 2014b; Bhatti et al. 2017c).

Turning to the individual level, more scratches in the image appear. Table 2.1 shows the participation patterns of the three latest Danish elections.

Table 2.1: Voting patterns in three Danish elections

| Voter type | Local 2013 | European 2014 | National 2015 | Pct. | N |
|---------------------------|---------------|------------------|------------------|------|-----------|
| Abstainers | Did not vote | Did not vote | Did not vote | 9.3 | 194,484 |
| | Voted | Did not vote | Did not vote | 2.7 | 55,528 |
| Peripheral (1/3 votes) | Did not vote | Voted | Did not vote | 0.6 | 12,168 |
| | Did not vote | Did not vote | Voted | 10.8 | 226,112 |
| | Voted | Voted | Did not vote | 1.2 | 25,197 |
| Peripheral (2/3 votes) | Voted | Did not vote | Voted | 19.7 | 413,445 |
| | Did not vote | Voted | Voted | 4.6 | 95,567 |
| Core | Voted | Voted | Voted | 51.2 | 1,071,295 |
| Total | | | | 100 | 2,093,796 |

¹ Local elections show turnout in the Municipality elections, which are held in connection with the Regional elections. Voters receive a ballot for both elections at the same time when they go to cast their votes. There are a negligible amount of citizens, who are eligible to vote in the Regional elections and not in the Municipality elections (cf. Bhatti et al. 2014c: 16-17). Turnout are therefore basically the same for the two elections. For practical reasons, I use the term local elections in the figure as well as in the rest of the dissertation.

Note: Table adapted from Bhatti et al. (2017c). Only citizens who are present in the dataset in all three elections.

As table 2.1 shows, whereas turnout varied across elections, nine percent of the citizens abstained from voting in all three elections from 2013-2015. Forty percent of the voters could be characterized as so-called peripheral voters, i.e., they enter and exit the electorate over the course of multiple elections (Campbell 1987; Ansolabehere & Schaffner 2015), whereas 51 percent voted in all three elections. Therefore, although turnout was high, a substantial share of the citizens permanently abstained from voting. In addition, inequalities in turnout are substantial in Denmark, both across multiple elections and within each type of election. Table 2.2 displays the demographic characteristics of the different types of voters.

Table 2.2: Demographic characteristics of abstainers, peripheral and core voters

| | Female (pct.) | Age (mean) | Non- Western background (pct.) | Higher education (pct.) | Yearly income (DKK) | N |
|------------------|------------------|---------------|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------|
| Abstainer (0/3) | 46.6 | 47.5 | 12.4 | 11.1 | 236,215 | 194,484 |
| Peripheral (1/3) | 49.7 | 44.5 | 7.4 | 19.4 | 284,654 | 293,808 |
| Peripheral (2/3) | 52.2 | 48.0 | 3.7 | 26.9 | 319,618 | 534,209 |
| Core voter (3/3) | 52.1 | 53.2 | 1.3 | 39.4 | 359,131 | 1,071,295 |
| Total | 51.3 | 50.1 | 3.8 | 30.8 | 327,182 | 2,093,796 |

Notes: Table adapted from Bhatti et al. (2017c). Non-Western background refers to immigrants and descendants from non-Western countries, a category defined by the Statistics Denmark.² Higher education consists of citizens who have completed either an higher education (e.g., school teachers) or a college education. The large sample size implies that even very small differences are statistically significant.

As shown in table 2.2, on average, core voters have completed more education, are more likely to have a Danish ethnic background, are older and have a higher income. At the other end of the spectrum, the group of abstainers have a substantial share of non-Western immigrants and

² Individuals are classified as native Danes if at least one parent was born in Denmark and holds Danish citizenship, irrespective of whether the individuals were born in Denmark and/or hold Danish citizenship themselves. Individuals who do not meet these criteria are following Statistics Denmark considered either immigrants (if they were born outside Denmark) or descendants (if their parents were born outside Denmark).

descendants, have completed less education, are younger and are less wealthy. The picture does not change when including the variables with a range of control variables in a regression model. Overall, across three elections, substantial inequalities exist with regard to who always votes and who always abstains from voting.

Finally, substantial inequalities in turnout are present when looking at individual Danish elections. For instance, although 85.9 percent of citizens voted in the 2015 parliamentary election, turnout for citizens with higher education was 95.4 percent, whereas only 76.7 percent of the voters with an elementary education turned out to vote. Furthermore, 53.4 percent of the citizens with a non-Western ethnic background voted in the 2015 election, whereas the turnout for citizens with a Danish ethnic background was 87 percent (Bhatti et al. 2016b). As suggested by Tingsten's law of dispersion (Tingsten 1937; Persson et al. 2013), inequalities in turnout are even greater in the lower-turnout local and European elections (Bhatti et al. 2017c). Overall, although outsiders might envy the turnout rates in Danish parliamentary elections, it is evident that there are also challenges with turnout in Denmark that influence the need to gain a better understanding of turnout in this context. More importantly, substantial variation allows for useful empirical studies, and the inequalities in turnout that motivate much of the turnout research in political science (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980; Leighley & Nagler 2013; Lijphart 1997) are also present in this context.

2.2 Similarities and Differences Between the Three Types of Danish Elections

There are several similarities among the three types of Danish elections. First, all the eligible voters are automatically registered to vote and receive a voting card approximately 10 days before the election. The exact address of the polling station is printed on the polling card, which they should bring to the polling station. If citizens cannot make it to the polling station on Election Day, they can cast an early vote at different public institutions such as city hall, libraries and elderly homes. Additionally, in recent years, local authorities have set up early voting places at train stations, shopping malls and educational institutions. Between four and ten percent of the voters voted early in the last three elections, which is a relatively low rate compared to other Nordic countries and the United States (Bhatti et al. 2016c). If voters are physically unable to go to a polling station or an early voting place, they can order their vote to be picked up at their home address by an election official. Together, the logistical barriers to voting in Denmark are quite low.

In all elections, citizens must be 18 years old on Election Day and not under guardianship to vote. Furthermore, in parliamentary elections, individuals must have Danish citizenship and be a permanent resident in the realm to vote. EU citizens as well as citizens of Norway and Iceland who have registered their address and have stayed in Denmark for the previous three weeks without interruption can vote in local elections. The same applies to non-EU citizens who have had permanent residency for at least three consecutive years prior to the election. In European elections, citizens from EU countries with a permanent address in Denmark can vote.

All three elections follow the principles of proportional representation. Voters have the opportunity to vote for multiple different parties and, if they prefer, for a specific candidate who, in almost all cases, is part of one of the parties. The large national parties are on the ballot in all three elections, whereas some of the parties do not run in all the municipalities or in the European Parliamentary election.

Focusing on the different elections, ten parties competed in the 2015 national election, and nine parties received more than the required two percent of the votes to pass the threshold and gain representation. The national elections are called by the prime minister within four years of the last election. Usually, the election is called approximately three weeks before Election Day. The national elections involve wall-to-wall coverage in the media, and the campaigns are visible all over the streets.

European Parliamentary elections are held every fifth year in concurrence with elections in the rest of the EU member states. In the last election, seven of the parties that were also represented in the Danish Parliament were on the ballot in the European Parliament election. In addition, an EU-skeptic left-wing list competed and gained representation. Like in other countries, European elections receive less attention and can be perceived as second-order elections (Schmitt 2005; Reif & Schmitt 1980). Whereas the campaign is covered quite a bit in the broadsheet newspapers and the national digital media, the campaign does not take up much space in other tabloid media outlets.

The local elections occur simultaneously on a fixed date, which is the third Tuesday in November every four years across all the 98 different Danish municipalities. The local elections consist of elections in 98 municipalities and five regional bodies. The local elections receive less attention than Parliament elections but more attention than European elections. The election campaigns are highly visible in the streets and media outlets up to the elections, and the national politicians and media play a highly active role in the campaigns. In most municipalities, the national parties