Slow erosion or unleashing the beast?

Normalization and path-dependency effects after abolition of compulsory voting in Belgium (Flanders)

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The Social Study Kick-off conference 9 December 2025

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1. Abolition of Compulsory voting: Normalization or Path dependency?

- "Compulsory voting" (CV) system = exceptionally high turnout (Birch 2016)
- 2021 reform in Flanders introduces "optional voting" (OV) = rare opportunity to assess effects of abolition of CV (e.g. Chile 2017, Austrian Landers 1990s).

- **At the 2024 local elections (Flanders), two opposing expectations:**
  - "Normalization" thesis: sudden and significant drop of participation to reach turnout level as in other Western Democracies
  - "Civic culture" thesis: Belgian political culture of CV (since 1893) moderates increase of abstention, even after introduction of OV.

2. Explaining electoral participation & abstention - Four traditional models

1. **The resources model:** established tradition in political science establihing a correlation between abstentionism and voters' socio-economic status (SES) (Verba et al. 1995 ; Gallego 2007, 2010; Nevitte et al. 2009). ➔ **Citizens with disadvantaged SES = lower turnout**

2. **The cost-benefit model:** evaluations of costs (e.g. time resources to get information) and gains (e.g. vote influence on policy-making) ➔ **If costs > gains = lower turnout**

3. **The civic duty model:** benefits includes attitudes towards national sentiment and civic duty (Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Blais and Achen 2019; Bowler and Donovan 2013). ➔ **When voting is as an individual choice rather than a community duty = lower turnout**

4. **The social pressure model:** Voting is also a signal to others of being a "good citizen". Abstention might lead to reputational loss (Harbaugh 1996; Campbell 2010). ➔ **When social norms and peer pressure is limited = lower turnout**

3. Hypotheses about abstention after the abolition of CV

- **How are these four models activated when CV is abolished?**
- Few studies because reforms are rare. *Main insights*: turnout goes down quickly (Irwin 1974 on The Netherlands; Gaebler et al. 2020 on Austrian landers).

- **<u>In this wake, the « normalization » thesis expects large abstention under OV</u>**

  H1: When voting is no longer compulsory, the influence of citizens' political and socio-economic resources on abstention will be higher than under CV.

  H2: When voting is no longer compulsory, the influence of individual variations in the costs and benefits of voting on abstention will be higher than under CV.

3. Hypotheses about abstention after the abolition of CV

- Belgian CV = deeply rooted tradition (since 1893). Such civic duty is resilient and does not immediately fade away when CV is abolished (Feitosa *et al*. 2020).
- Besides, social pressures remain high in multiple social circles, even under OV.

- **<u>Accordingly, we expect moderated abstention due to path-dependency effects:</u>**

  H3: When voting is no longer compulsory, the influence of (internal and external) perception of voting as a desirable behaviour on abstention will be higher than under CV.

  H4: When voting is no longer compulsory, the influence of perception of voting as a duty on abstention will be higher than under CV.

  H5: The stronger effect of social pressure and civic duty after on abstention under OV will be stronger for the older generations of voters and weaker for the youngest generation of voters.

4. Methods & Data

- 2024 June & October elections : A perfect opportunity to test the impact of the reform
  - ➢Comparing turnout *within* Flanders *across* national/regional (CV) & local elections (OV)
  - ➢Comparing turnout at local lections *across* Flanders (OV) & Wallonia/Brussels (CV)

Election types	Flanders	Wallonia	Brussels	*Δ Flanders & Wallonia*	*Δ Flanders & Brussels*
National elections June 2024	***CV***	***CV***	***CV***		
Electoral turnout	90,4	85,7	85,0	*+5,3*	*+5,4*
Regional elections June 2024	***CV***	***CV***	***CV***		
Electoral turnout	93,5	86,8	83,9	*+6,7*	*+10,4*
Local elections Octobre 2024	***OV***	***CV***	***CV***		
Electoral turnout	63,6	85,2	79,6	*-21,6*	*-16,0*
Δ National & local elections	***-26,8***	***-0,5***	***-5,4***		
Δ Regional & local elections	***-29,9***	***-1,6***	***-5,4***		

Note: CV = Compulsory voting since 1892; OV = Optional voting since 2024.

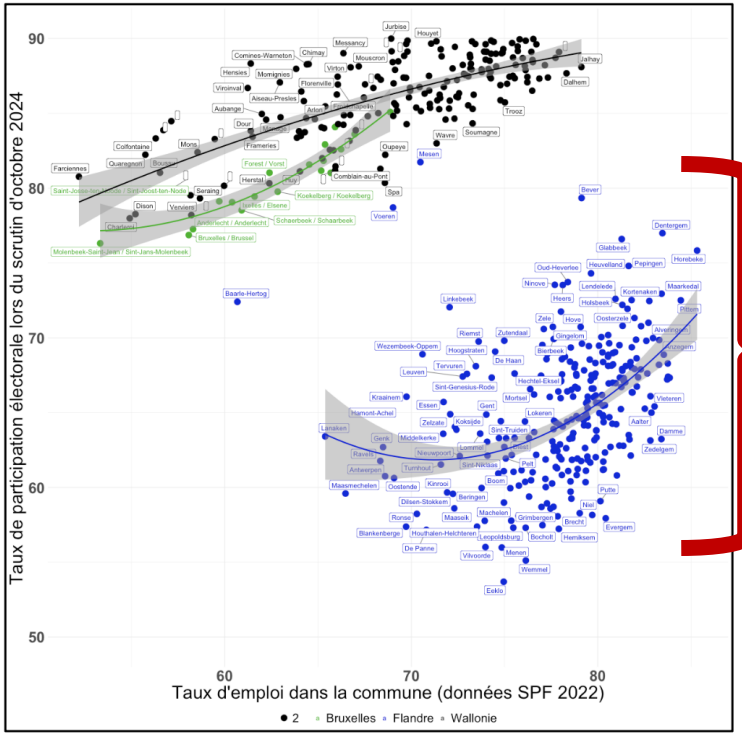
4. Methods & Data

- Electoral survey. TSS Panel (14/10/2024 – 20/12/2024), Belgium, N= 2.619
  - Flemish respondents, N =1.612
  - Walloon-Brussels respondents, N=1.007
- Representative of the Belgian population (albeit some under/overrepresentation)
- **Very good quality of data** **(for instance: Hooghe & Stiers 2025 have 19% of abstainers in their sample)**

	Flanders Optional voting (OV)		Wallonia & Brussels Compulsory voting (CV)	
Local elections (October 2024)	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Valid vote	1.030	74.5	728	86.3
Abstention/Blank/Null	362	25.5	116	13.7
Total*	1.392	100	844	100
*New abstainers (voted at national elections June 2024 but abstain October 2024)***	218	13.7	39	3.9

*Note: Amongst the 1.612 respondents Flanders, 220 respondents did not answer the question while 163 respondents in Wallonia-Brussels did not answer amongst the 1.007 respondents. **Percentages are based on the N of respondents for this ad hoc question.

5. Empirical results – Descriptive stats



Age, diploma, social position (p<.05), gender (NS)

A. New abstainers in Flanders between June & October 2024

Characteristic	NewAbstainers N = 218[1]	Others N = 1,376[1]	p-value[2]
Gender			0.7
Men	95 (46%)	612 (47%)	
Women	111 (54%)	677 (53%)	
Unknown	12	87	
Age_Cat			<0.001
18-24	50 (25%)	156 (12%)	
25-39	68 (33%)	252 (20%)	
40-54	38 (19%)	335 (26%)	
55-67	33 (16%)	323 (25%)	
68+	15 (7.4%)	203 (16%)	
Unknown	14	107	
Diploma			0.052
Lower secondary	35 (19%)	160 (13%)	
Secondary (Higher)	67 (36%)	408 (34%)	
Uni or College	84 (45%)	645 (53%)	
Unknown	32	163	
SocialPosition	6.24 ± 1.35	6.51 ± 1.38	0.012
Unknown	22	194	

[1] n (%); Mean ± SD
[2] Pearson's Chi-squared test; One-way analysis of means

B. Participants & abstainers in Flanders (October 2024)

Characteristic	ValidVote N = 1,030[1]	NotValidVote N = 362[1]	p-value[2]
Gender			0.3
Men	473 (47%)	150 (44%)	
Women	527 (53%)	190 (56%)	
Unknown	30	22	
Age_Cat			<0.001
18-24	96 (9.7%)	76 (23%)	
25-39	173 (17%)	99 (30%)	
40-54	267 (27%)	72 (22%)	
55-67	283 (29%)	54 (17%)	
68+	172 (17%)	26 (8.0%)	
Unknown	39	35	
Diploma			<0.001
Lower secondary	98 (10%)	69 (22%)	
Secondary (Higher)	294 (31%)	123 (39%)	
Uni or College	545 (58%)	124 (39%)	
Unknown	93	46	
SocialPosition	6.61 ± 1.31	6.14 ± 1.45	<0.001
Unknown	90	40	

[1] n (%); Mean ± SD
[2] Pearson's Chi-squared test; One-way analysis of means

6. Empirical results – Multivariate models

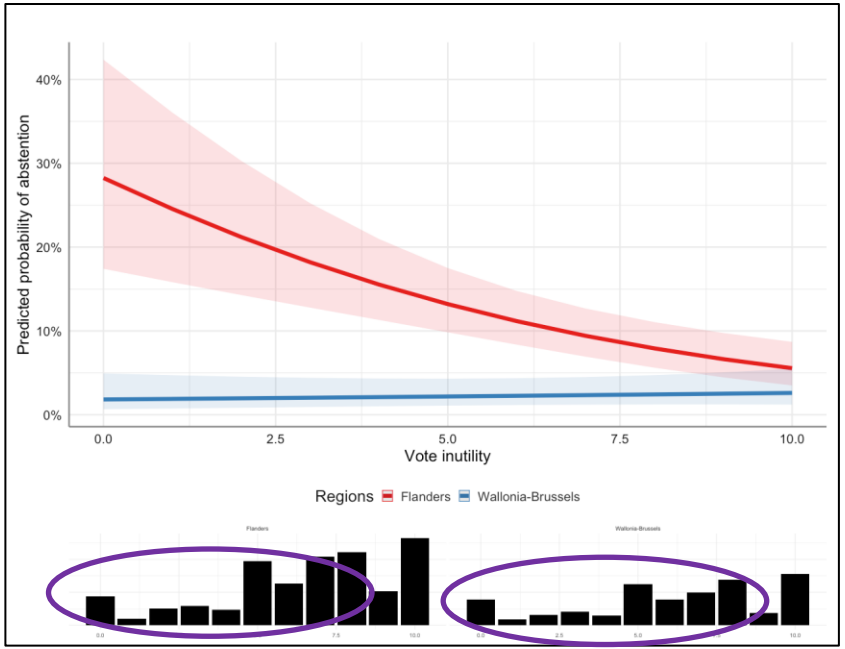
$$Logit\ (Abstention)_{ij} = a\ Resources_{ij} * Regions_j + \beta\ Cost\text{-}benefit_{ij} * Regions_j + \delta\ Social\ norms_{ij} * Regions_j + \tau\ Civic\ Duty_{ij} * Regions_j + a_i + \tau_j$$

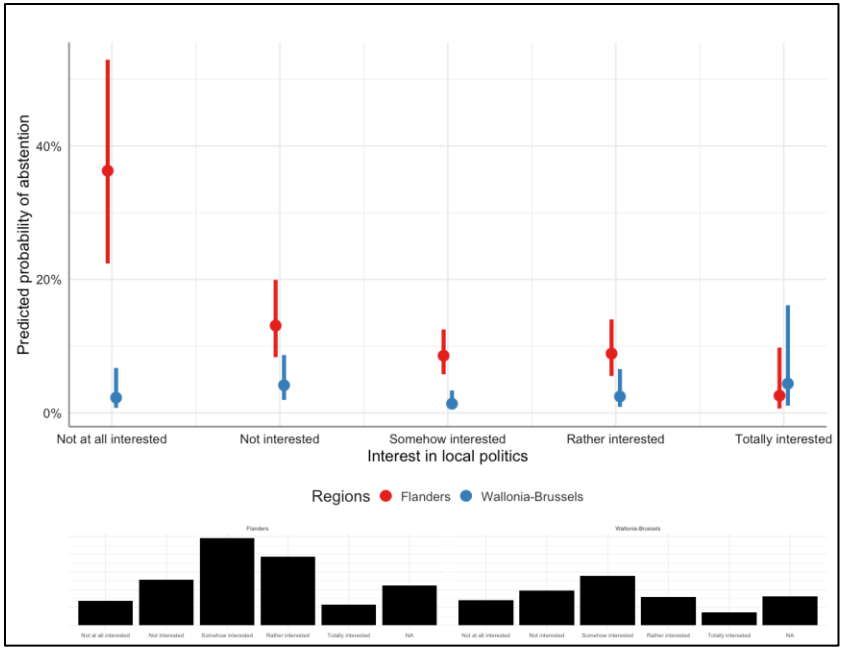
- $Resources_{ij}$ includes vectors of respondents' attitudes ($Gender_{ij}$, $Diploma_{ij,}$, $Social\ Position_{ij}$)
- $Cost\text{-}Benefit_{ij}$ includes vectors of respondents' attitudes ($Vote\ utility_{ij}$, $Political\ interest_{ij}$, SWD_{ij})
- $Social\ norms_{ij}$ includes vectors of respondents' attitudes ($Peers\ pressure_{ij}$, $Peers\ support_{ij}$, $Guilty_{ij}$)
- $Civic\ Duty_{ij}$ includes vectors of respondents' attitudes' (Age_{ij}, $Vote\_2018_{ij}$, $Duty_{ij}$, $Voting\ habit_{ij}$)
- $Regions_{ij}$ is a dummy variable distinguishing Flanders with OV and Wallonia-Brussels with CV.
- $a + \beta + \delta + \tau$ are the vectors of coefficients of $Resources_{ij}$, $Cost\text{-}Benefit_{ij}$, $Social\ norms_{ij}$ & $Civic\ Duty_{ij}$
- $a_i + \tau_j$ are respectively intercepts for the levels of respondents and municipalities.

➔ **Civic Model = best model fit (Acc, ROC)**
= most explanatory of all four models

6. Empirical results – Multivariate models

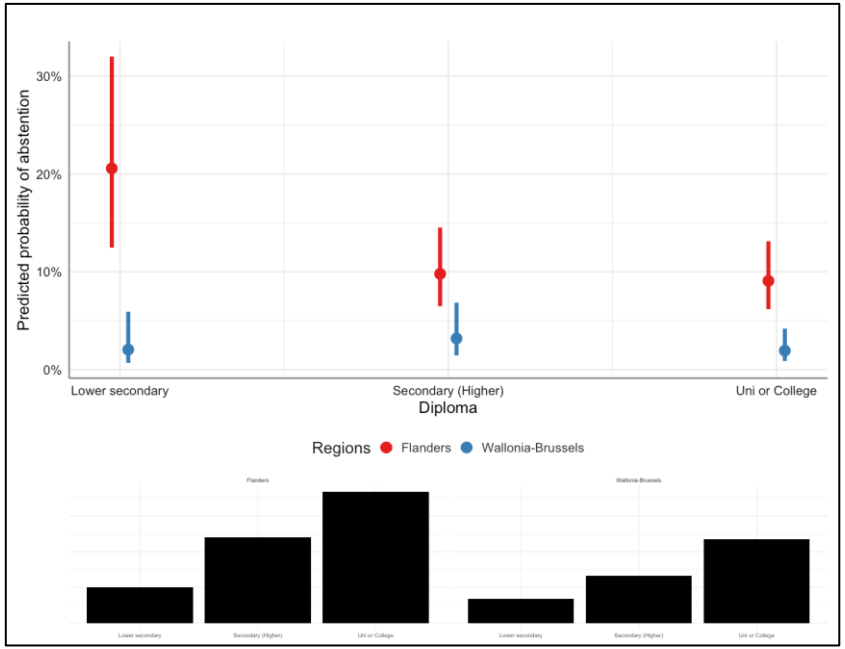
Utility model – H1 verified

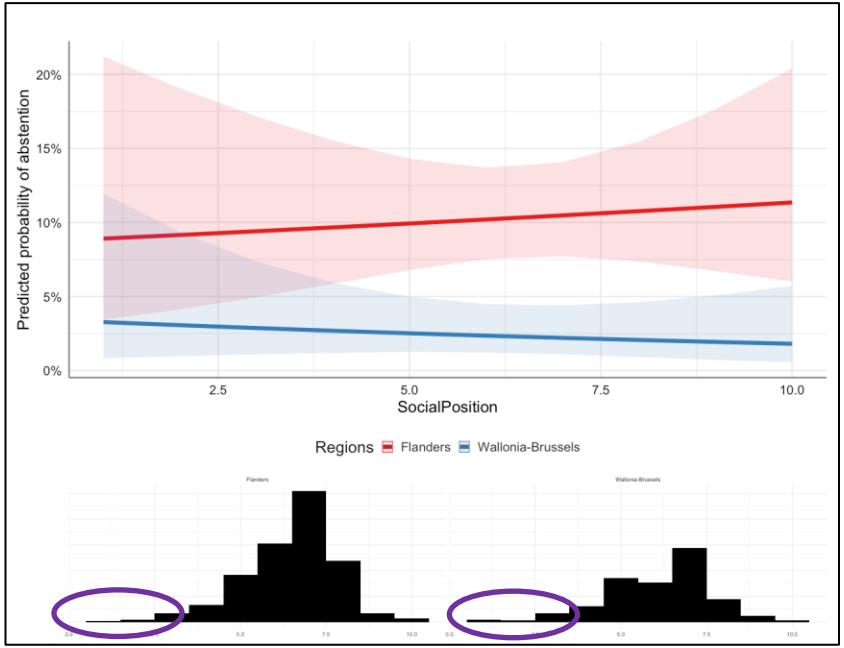




6. Empirical results – Multivariate models

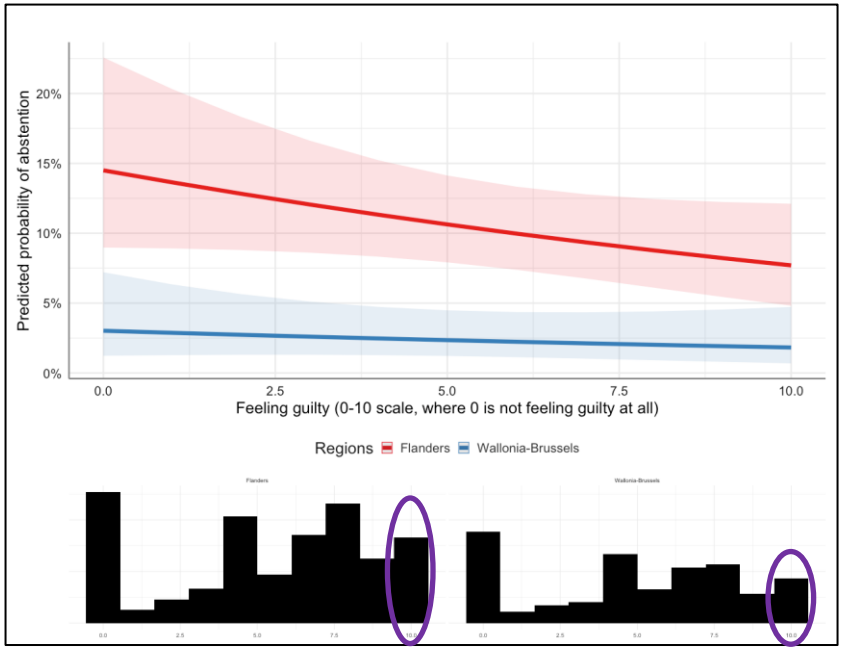
Resources model – H2 verified

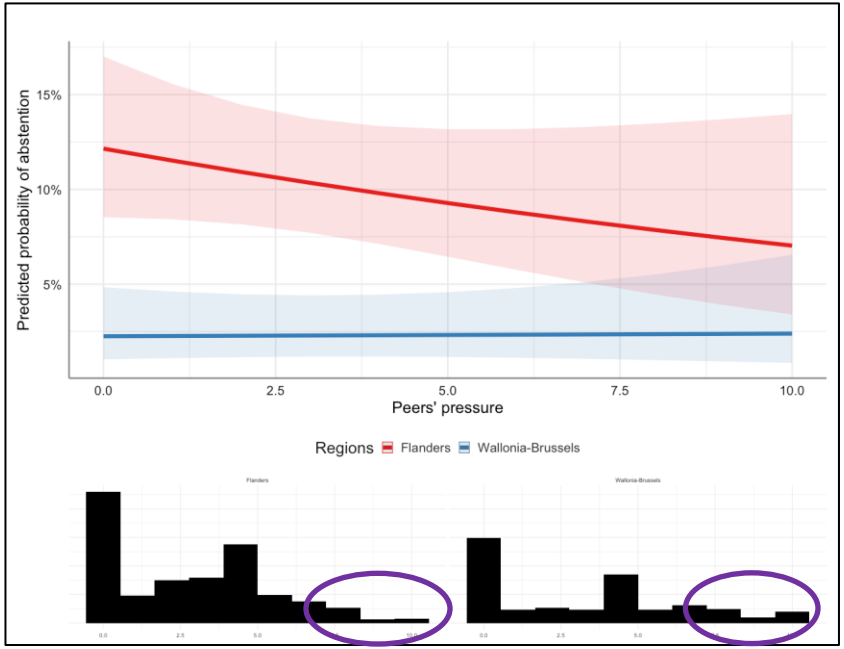




6. Empirical results – Multivariate models

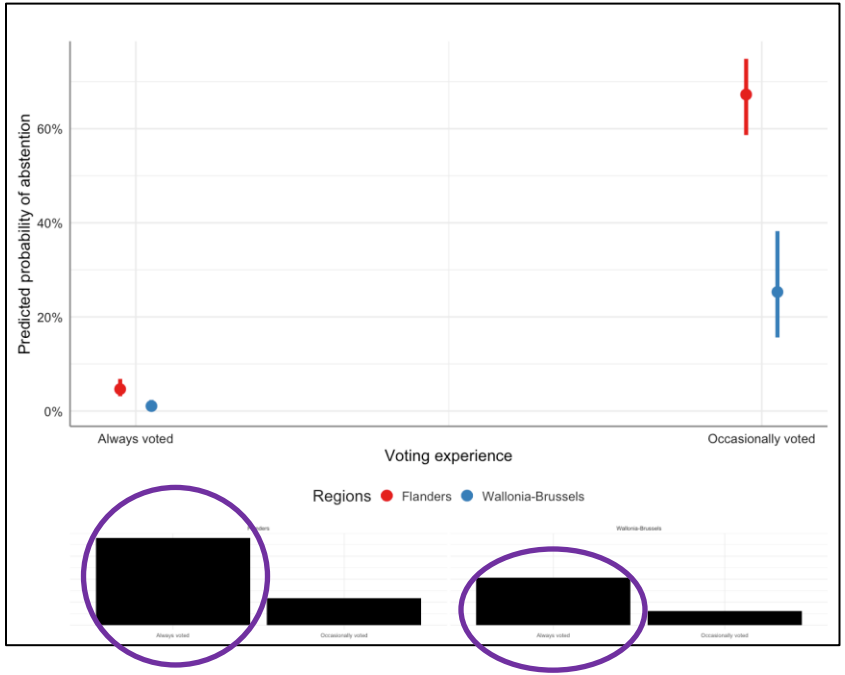
Peer pressure model - H3 rejected

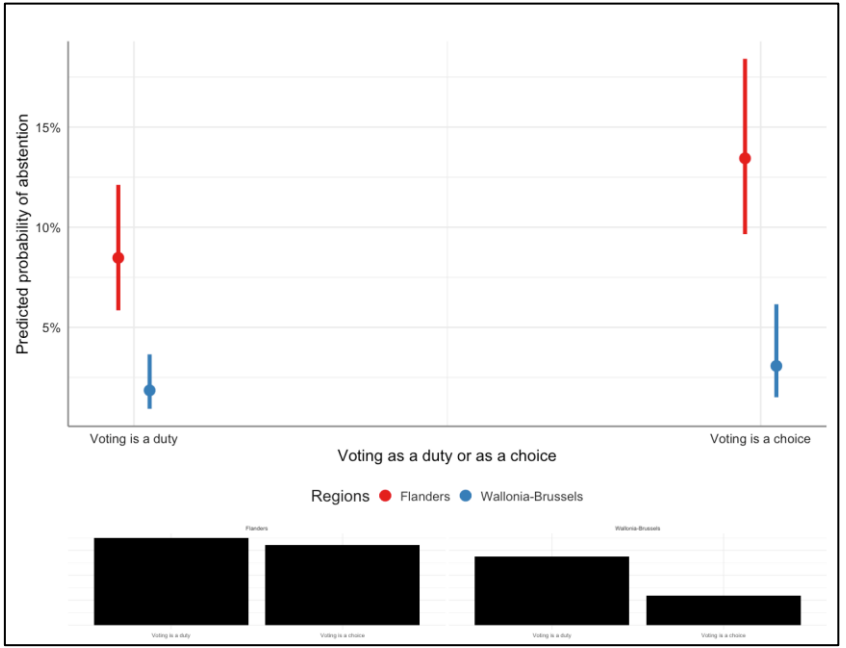




6. Empirical results – Multivariate models

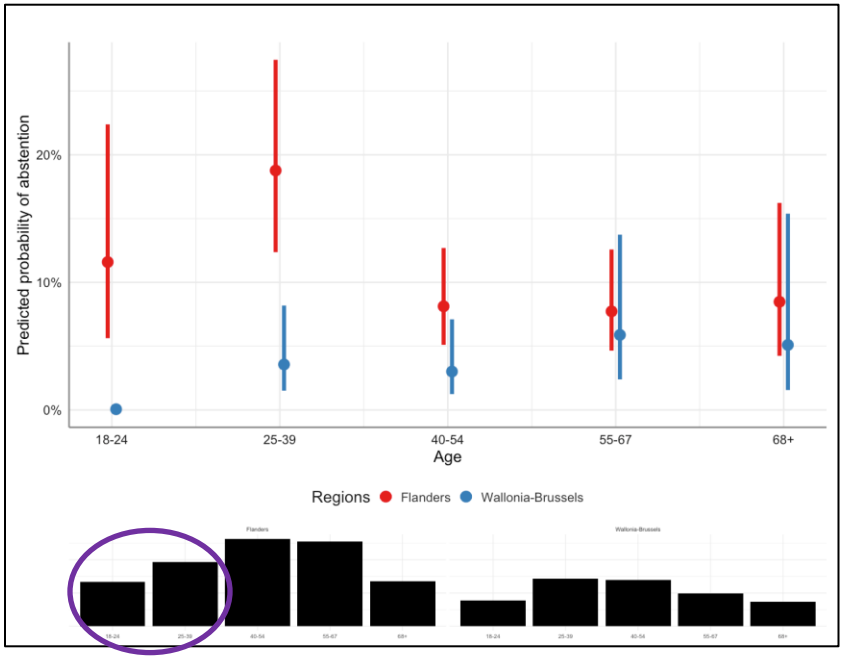
Civic Duty model – H4 partly verified

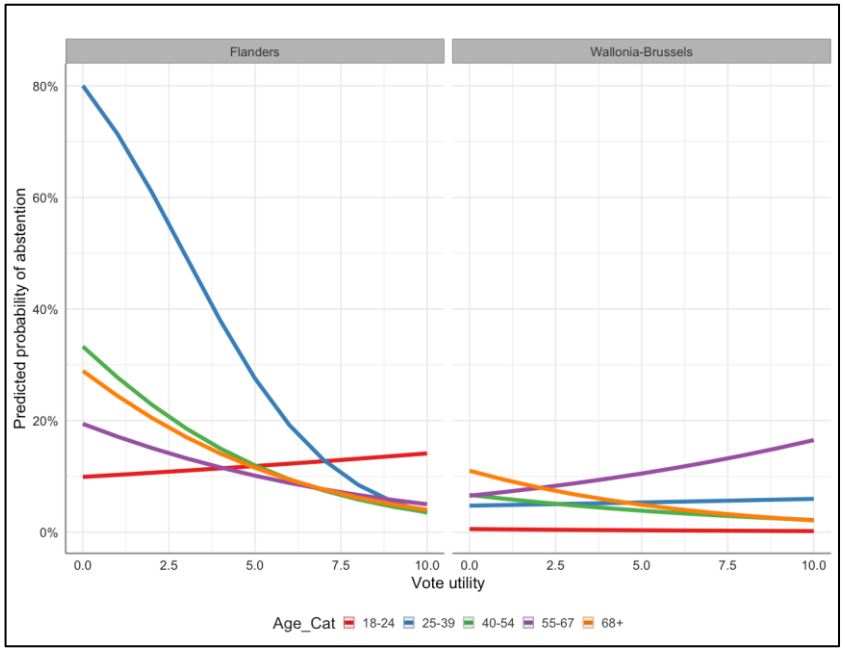




6. Empirical results – Multivariate models

Generational effect of Civic duty – H5 verified





Take-home messages

- **Sharp decline of turnout** at the 2024 Flemish local elections = largely a **"normalization" effect**
  - Sudden and rapid decrease as voters with lower resources and/or limited interest in the electoral process are (much) more likely to abstain when OV is introduced
  - Local turnout in Flanders is now in line with many other Western democracies

- **Civic duty culture as a moderating effect, but this is mostly a** generational effect
  - Voters who always voted are not more likely to abstain (similar % as in Wall.-Brussels)
  - Younger voters (18-24 & 25-39-year-old) without any or limited electoral experience are much more likely to abstain under OV. By contrast, experienced voters (40+) are not significantly more likely to abstain in Flanders than Wall.-Brussels

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THANKS FOR YOUR ATTENTION !

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