

## **Media Note**

Analysis of the NotLikeUs panel survey

UAntwerpen – ULB – UC Louvain – VUB – KU Leuven – UNamur – UGent

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# **Abstentionism in national and local elections in Belgium**

An analysis of the official electoral results and of individual survey data from the EOS NLU-Panel Voter survey

Media note Not Like Us-Consortium  
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## BELANGRIJKSTE BEVINDINGEN

- In deze nota voeren we analyses 1) over de opkomst bij de parlementsverkiezingen van juni, en 2) over de opkomst bij de lokale verkiezingen van oktober
- Deze nota maakt gebruik van twee soorten data: enerzijds officiële data over de verkiezingsuitslagen op kanton- en gemeenteniveau, anderzijds het verkiezingsonderzoek van het interuniversitair consortium EOS Not Like Us bij de parlementsverkiezingen van juni (derde golf van de panelbevraging). Voor de lokale verkiezingen gebruiken we een vraag uit de juni-bevraging over stemintentie (al dan niet van plan om te stemmen bij de lokale verkiezingen in oktober).
- Voor de parlementsverkiezingen van juni (met opkomstplicht) hebben de meeste burgers gestemd in Vlaanderen (93,6 %), waar de opkomst hoger ligt dan in Wallonië (86,8%) en in Brussel (83,9%).
- Er wordt voor de parlementsverkiezingen (met opkomstplicht) meer thuisgebleven door mannen, door ouderen en in gebieden waar de werkloosheid hoog ligt. Thuisblijvers halen vaak praktische redenen (afwezigheid, ziekte, ...) aan om niet te stemmen.
- Voor de lokale verkiezingen lag de opkomst lager in Vlaanderen (zonder opkomstplicht, 65,2 %) dan in Wallonië en Brussel (met opkomstplicht) (resp. 87,8 en 80,6 %)
- Het zijn vooral vrouwen, jongeren en lager opgeleiden die aangeven dat ze niet stemmen voor de lokale verkiezingen in Vlaanderen (zonder opkomstplicht). Dit profiel verschilt dus aanzienlijk van het profiel van de thuisblijvers in juni (met opkomstplicht) (mannen en ouderen)
- Vlaams Belang- en blanco-stemmers zijn het minst geneigd om te gaan stemmen voor de lokale verkiezingen, Groen-kiezers het meest (zonder opkomstplicht).
- Dit zou, evenwel, maar in beperkte mate de uitslag veranderen (verschuivingen van maximaal 2 a 3 procentpunt). Groen zou meest haar voordeel doen, Vlaams Belang zou een beetje nadeel ondervinden. Noch voor CD&V noch voor PVDA zou er veel verschil zijn, al werd daar wel druk over gespeculeerd na de verkiezingen.

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# I. Electoral turnout at the 2024 parliamentary elections in June

## Ia. Official data on turnout at the 2024 parliamentary elections

Electoral turnout has been declining in Belgium over time. While electoral participation reached 95.1% in the 1977 federal elections, it declines almost linearly until present days (with a few ups and downs, see Dodeigne & Renard 2024). In this regard, the 2024 federal, regional and European elections seem to be stabilizing just below 90% (see Figure 1). For the federal elections, the 2024 electoral turnout was of 88.4%, a percentage equal to the 2019 turnout. The 2024 Flemish regional elections presented the highest turnout with 93.5% (+1.3 points compared to 2019), while the 2024 Brussels regional elections displayed the lowest electoral turnout with 83.9% (+0.4 compared to 2019). Walloon regional elections (86.8%, +0.2%) and European elections (89%, +0.5%) present in between turnout.

In addition to electoral turnout, the political science literature often discusses the “effective” turnout. While electoral turnout is estimated as the percentage of voters who turn out to cast a ballot (divided by the total electorate), the effective turnout is estimated via the number of voters who turn out to cast a “valid” ballot (i.e. subtracting blank and null votes, while dividing by the total electorate). In other words, effective turnout is the percentage of “valid” electoral participation. This approach presents a more nuanced account of the reality of political participation at election time, considering the large number of invalid votes in Belgium (Reuchamps et al. 2018; Dodeigne & Renard 2024). In this respect, we observe that the effective electoral turnout is about 5 points lower across all elections. The lowest effective turnout is observed at the Brussels and Walloon regional elections (below 80 percent), while effective turnout is just below 90 percent in Flemish regional elections.

**Figure 1.** Comparison of 2019 and 2024 turnout across elections



Elections	EU 2019	EU 2024	CH 2019	CH 2024	VL 2019	VL 2024	PW 2019	PW 2024	BRU 2019	BRU 2024
Registered voters	8 122 985	8 537 902	8 167 709	8 368 029	4 838 566	4 913 718	2 563 033	2 604 084	588 203	597 149
Votes cast	7 186 677	7 599 758	7 218 633	7 401 483	4 459 064	4 595 561	2 220 443	2 260 689	490 917	500 759
Blank & null votes	454 520	465 974	438 095	416 577	220 790	216 121	185 630	191 923	32 643	30 619
Valid votes	6 732 157	7 133 784	6 780 538	6 984 906	4 238 274	4 379 440	2 034 813	2 068 766	458 274	470 140
% electoral turnout	88,5%	89,0%	88,4%	88,4%	92,2%	93,5%	86,6%	86,8%	83,5%	83,9%
% effective turnout	82,9%	83,6%	83,0%	83,5%	87,6%	89,1%	79,4%	79,4%	77,9%	78,7%
% Blank & null	5,6%	5,5%	5,4%	5,0%	4,6%	4,4%	7,2%	7,4%	5,5%	5,1%

We now move over to an analysis of the official data on the level of the canton.

Figure 2 presents the official electoral turnout for the 2024 federal elections by socio-economic status of the canton. On the Y-axis (vertical), we use the “effective electoral turnout” (in percentage). On the X-axis (horizontal), we use the employment rate in the canton (in percentage). We use the employment rate as indicator to capture the socio-economic situation of the canton and, therefore, socio-economic differences across cantons. In many democracies, it has been shown that abstention tends to be higher in more economically deprived areas. We test it here for Belgium. For this indicator, we use the most recent available data published by StatBel (2021). Flemish cantons are identified with blue dots, Walloon cantons are in black and Brussels cantons are in green

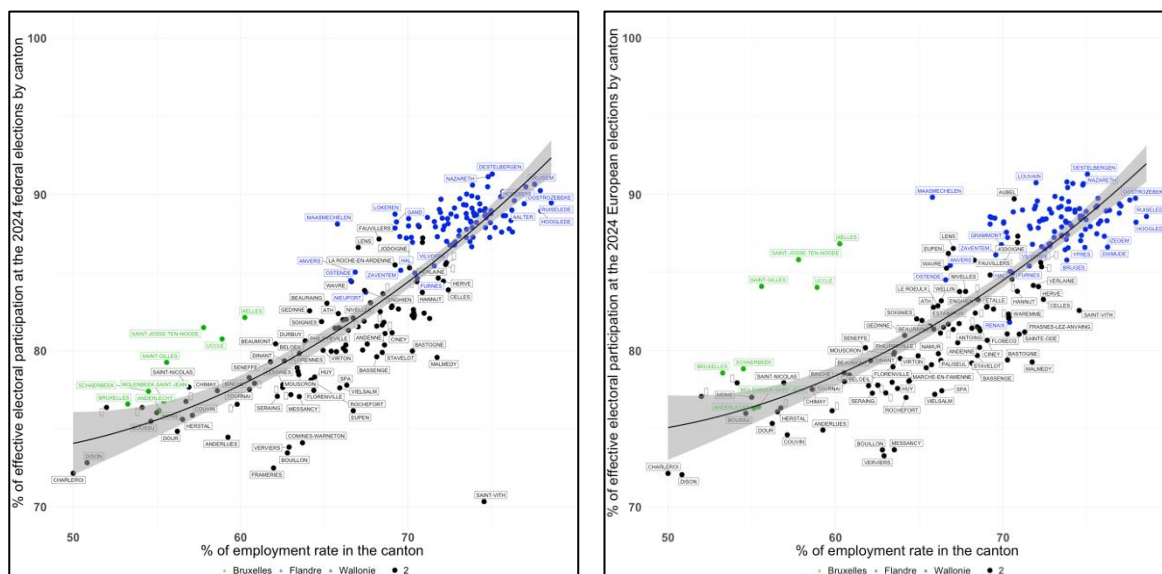
Figure 2 shows that federal turnout in a canton is positively correlated with higher employment rates ( $p < .001$ ). It means that the lower the unemployment rate in a canton, the higher the electoral participation (and the lower the abstention). These results confirm an established literature in political science, stating that socio-economic inequality largely shape electoral inequality in terms of turnout. The cantons of Charleroi and Saint-Vith present the lowest turnout (respectively, 70.3 and 72.0 percent), while the cantons of Destelbergen and Nazareth present the highest effective electoral turnout (respectively, 91.2 and 91.2 percent). In this regard, effective electoral turnout is the highest amongst the cantons where the socio-economic indicator is the strongest (most are Flemish cantons). Walloon and Brussels cantons, where socio-economic indicators are lower, present a difference up to 20 points with some Flemish cantons.

Regarding turnout for European elections (where the electorate is slightly different as Belgian citizens could vote from the age of 16 as well as citizens from other EU member states), we observe the same kind of correlation between electoral turnout and our socio-economic inequality indicator. Electoral participation is higher in cantons with lower unemployment level. The only exceptions are some Brussels cantons (Uccle, Saint-Gilles, Ixelles, Saint-Josse-Ten-Noode) that appear as outliers with a substantial larger turnout for European elections. This because those cantons are covering municipalities where the ratio of non-Belgian citizens with rights to vote at the European elections is high (this non-Belgian citizens include a large number of civil servants working in EU and international organizations).

**Figure 2.** Federal (left) and European (right) electoral turnout according to socio-economic inequality indicator of the canton<sup>1</sup> (official data)

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<sup>1</sup> Figures 2 does not present the canton outliers such as Fourons (where electoral participation is much lower due to the French-speaking minority right to vote in cantons of the electoral district of Liege).



## Ib. Socio-demographic profile of non-voters at the 2024 parliamentary elections

Next to those first findings based upon official electoral results per canton, our second goal will be to identify the profile of abstainers at the 2024 federal, regional and European elections. The third wave of panel survey data collected by the interuniversity consortium EOS Not Like Us provides an opportunity for such analyses as it proposes individual data on eligible voters with a representative sample of the Belgian population.<sup>2</sup> In total, 5,326 eligible voters responded to the question whether they did go to the polling station on June 9<sup>th</sup> 2024. From this post-election survey, it appears that 5,118 respondents (96.09%) reported casting a ballot, while 208 respondents (3.91%) indicated they abstained.

This section aims to analyze abstainers based on their reasons for abstaining and socio-demographic characteristics. It is important to note that the sample of non-voters (206 across Belgium, 65 in Flanders, 65 in Brussels and 78 in Wallonia) is relatively small, and caution should be exerted when linking these findings to the broader population.

<sup>2</sup> We leverage data of the NotLikeUs (NLU) survey, a 4-wave panel survey that surveyed the same sample of respondents multiple times over the duration of the 2024 election campaign. The survey relies on an online quota sample, which allows for relatively short field work periods. Wave 1 surveyed a large sample of 7507 respondents (February/March 2024); wave 2 surveyed 6733 respondents in the final weeks of the campaign (May/June 2024); wave 3 surveyed 5441 respondents after the elections (June 2024).

To gain deeper insight into why people chose not to vote, an open-ended question was posed to respondents who indicated they abstained. The responses were manually reviewed and recoded into a distinct set of categories for the purpose of this analysis. Without being too restrictive, the answers were narrowed down into 9 categories which are to be found in the table below.

**Table 1**  
Reasons to not vote among non-voters.

Categories	Percentage
Abroad/absent	41,75%
Dissatisfied with the system	24,76%
Illness	15,05%
Unwilling to vote	7,28%
NA	2,91%
Too far/too long to wait	2,43%
Voted invalid	1,94%
Did not receive an invitation	1,94%
Work	1,94%
Total	100%

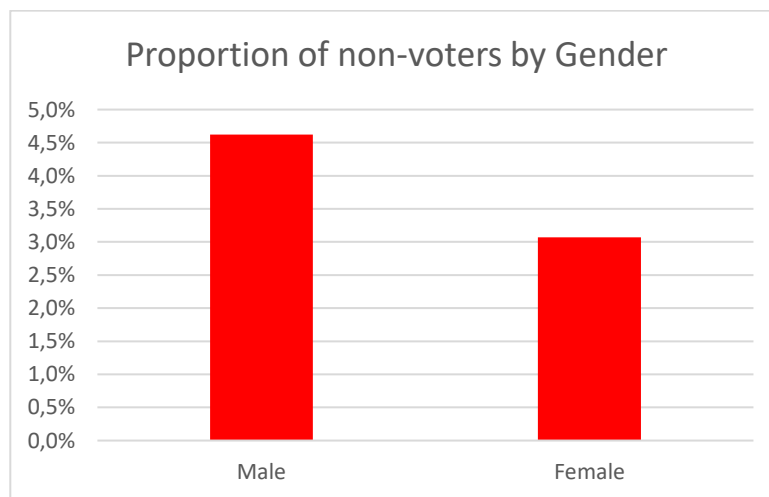
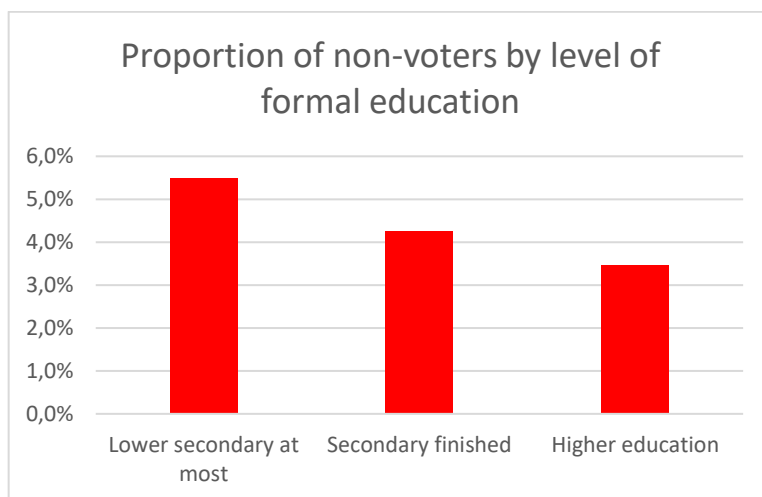
The analysis of why people chose not to vote yields less pessimistic results than expected. The primary reason cited by non-voters was being outside Belgium during the election, whether for holidays, work, or living abroad (41,75%). Additionally, a significant proportion of respondents reported illness (15,05%) as the reason they could not vote, either due to long-term conditions or being unwell on election day. A smaller group of non-voters faced practical obstacles, such as polling stations being too far away, long queues, or not receiving their voting invitation. However, on a more concerning note, 7,28% of respondents exhibited apathy, indicating a lack of willingness to vote. Furthermore, nearly a quarter (24,76%) of non-voters abstained due to dissatisfaction with the political system, citing reasons such as distrust in political elites, frustration with the government coalition system, or a belief that voting is useless. Overall, the findings suggest that most non-voters in our survey abstained due to practical reasons rather than a fundamental disillusionment with the political system. Nonetheless, such results need to be interpreted with caution as there might be a social desirability bias as voting is mandatory in Belgium and could lead to sanctions.

Finally, the last part of this section explores the socio-demographic characteristics of non-voters. Figure 4 shows that individuals with higher education degrees (both university and non-university) were more likely to vote in the parliamentary elections of June. Additionally, women are less likely to abstain, while citizens over the age of 60 are more likely to abstain from voting probably due to

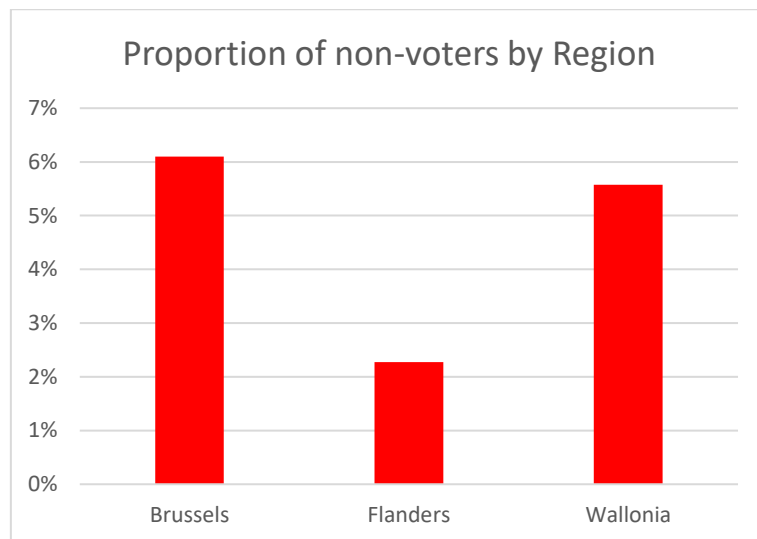
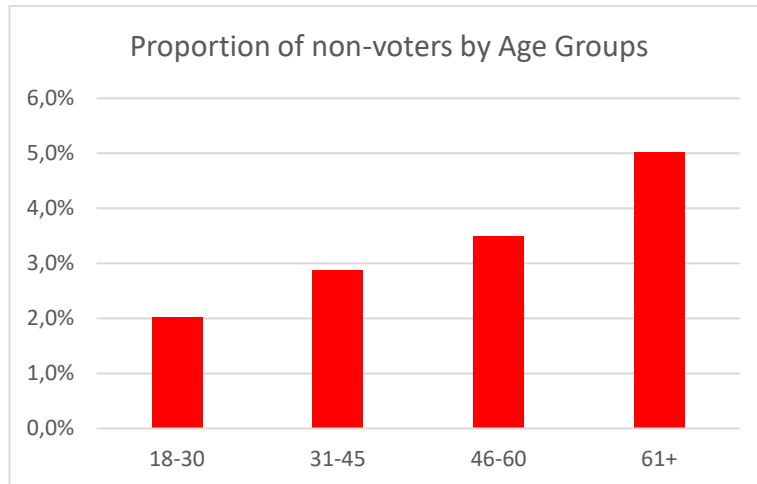
health issues (as already became clear in Table 1). Further statistical tests ( $\chi^2$ ) reveal significant associations between turnout and gender ( $\chi^2 (1) = 8.415 p=0.004$ ) as well as between turnout and age groups ( $\chi^2 (3) = 15.205 p=0.003$ ). The link between turnout and level of formal education, is, however, not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 (2) = 5.293 p= 0.071$ ).

**Figure 4.**

Non-voters for federal elections according to level of education, gender, age group and region (Not Like Us-voter survey, wave 3)







In order to assess the robustness of the bivariate results while accounting for multiple socio-demographic variables at the same time, we conducted two multivariate logistic regressions. When we account for age groups, education and gender simultaneously, we continue to find a significant effect for age (the group of 61+ years old more likely to abstain from voting) and gender (men are more likely to abstain), and not for level of education.

Adding region as a control variable confirmed that women are less likely to abstain, that older citizens are more likely to abstain, and revealed that citizens with higher level of formal education are less likely to abstain. Additionally, compared to residents of Brussels and Wallonia, those living in Flanders exhibit a much higher likelihood of voting, as became already clear from the analyses above (on the official data).

To conclude this subsection, we note the following key observations on abstention in the parliamentary elections of June<sup>3</sup>: voting remains the predominant behavior among citizens with only a small proportion choosing not to vote. Among non-voters, over two-thirds abstained due to personal circumstances, while a notable minority (around 30%) expressed either apathy or dissatisfaction with the political system. Men are more likely to abstain from voting compared to women. Older citizens are more likely to abstain from voting, possibly due to health issues.

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<sup>3</sup> The results and key findings needs to be interpreted with caution, given the limited number of survey respondents and a potential social desirability bias.

## II. A first look at the turnout at the 2024 local elections in October

In the second part of this media report, we also present first empirical insights about the electoral turnout at the local elections that took place on 13 October 2024. We first compare official turnout figures in Flemish municipalities (non-compulsory voting) with turnout in Walloon and Brussels municipalities (compulsory voting). Then we seek to present the socio-demographic factors determining electoral turnout for the local elections in Flanders (without compulsory voting), based on a question in the election survey of June about prospective turnout behaviour for the local elections in October. We end by estimating which parties have benefitted from the abolition of compulsory voting (based on the same question about prospective turnout behaviour)

### Ia. Official data on turnout at the 2024 local elections

We start with reporting some first insights into the effective electoral turnout at the local elections of 13 October 2024. In Flanders, the end of compulsory voting led to a very low electoral participation (65.2 percent, i.e. minus 25 points vis-à-vis the 2018 elections). The effective participation (estimating participation based on valid votes only) is almost perfectly identical (64.3), which indicates that voters who turn out decided to cast a valid vote. By contrast, turnout in Wallonia and Brussels remains substantially higher under compulsory voting (respectively, 87.8 and 80.6 percent). Yet, effective turnout (without considering blank and null ballots) is about 5 points lower (respectively, 82.3 percent and 75.6). Overall, this number suggests that the end of compulsory voting did not simply discourage typical protest voters who used to cast blank or null votes to turn out, they also had an effect on a broader set of voters in Flanders.

On this account, Figure 6 presenting a similar analysis as in Figure 2 for the parliamentary elections, confirms that local turnout remains positively correlated with employment rates per municipality. Yet, our statistical analysis shows that the socio-economic index becomes a weaker predictor of turnout in Flanders, while it continues to be strongly correlated with valid voting in both Wallonia and Brussels. Indeed, Figure 4 shows a dispersed cloud along the regression line for Flemish municipalities (rather suggesting an inverse curvilinear pattern), while Walloon and Brussels municipalities follow closely the regression lines along the socio-economic index. Our statistical analysis reveals that the socio-economic index hardly explains 20% of the differences in local turnout observed in Flanders.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, under compulsory voting, our socio-economic index explains up to 45% in Wallonia and 79% in Brussels of the differences observed. Our analysis suggests that other political and institutional factors matter to explain local turnout in Flanders. In this respect, our preliminary findings suggest that smaller rural municipalities present higher

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<sup>4</sup> And this variance even drops to hardly 10% when including outlier municipalities.

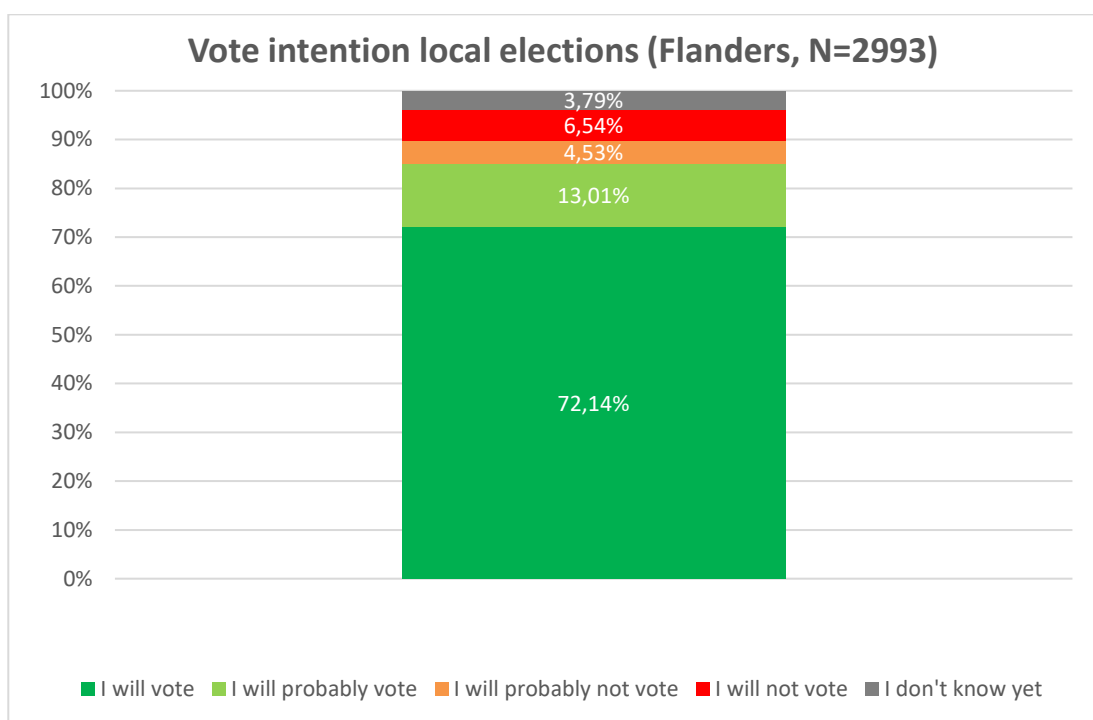


## I**lb**. Socio-demographic profile of prospective non-voters at the 2024 local elections

Similar to what we have done for the parliamentary elections (see subsection Ia), we now turn to the analysis of individual determinants of willingness to vote, as reported in the EOS Not Like Us electoral survey (third wave). More specifically, we analyse a question about prospective turnout behavior at the local elections in Flanders, which were the first without compulsory voting. In addition, we compare the results with the above analysis on actual turnout in the parliamentary elections in order to see whether abstainers in federal elections under compulsory voting resemble those not eager to vote in Flemish municipalities under the system of non-compulsory voting.

**Figure 7**

Intention to cast a vote in the local elections ((Not Like Us-voter survey, wave 3)



We first look at the intention to cast a vote at the local elections in Flanders (as expressed in the third wave of the Not Like Us-voter survey in June). Turnout intentions are remarkably high with 72,14% of all respondents in Flanders (N=2,993) indicating that they would definitely cast a vote, and another 13,01% who would probably do so.<sup>6</sup> As became already clear above, this is a large

<sup>6</sup> The intention to vote was at the highest level for the local elections. For each of the parliamentary elections in June (European, federal and regional elections) we asked a hypothetical question about casting a vote without compulsory voting and percentages of voters that they would always vote are a bit lower (66,4% for regional elections and 65,3%

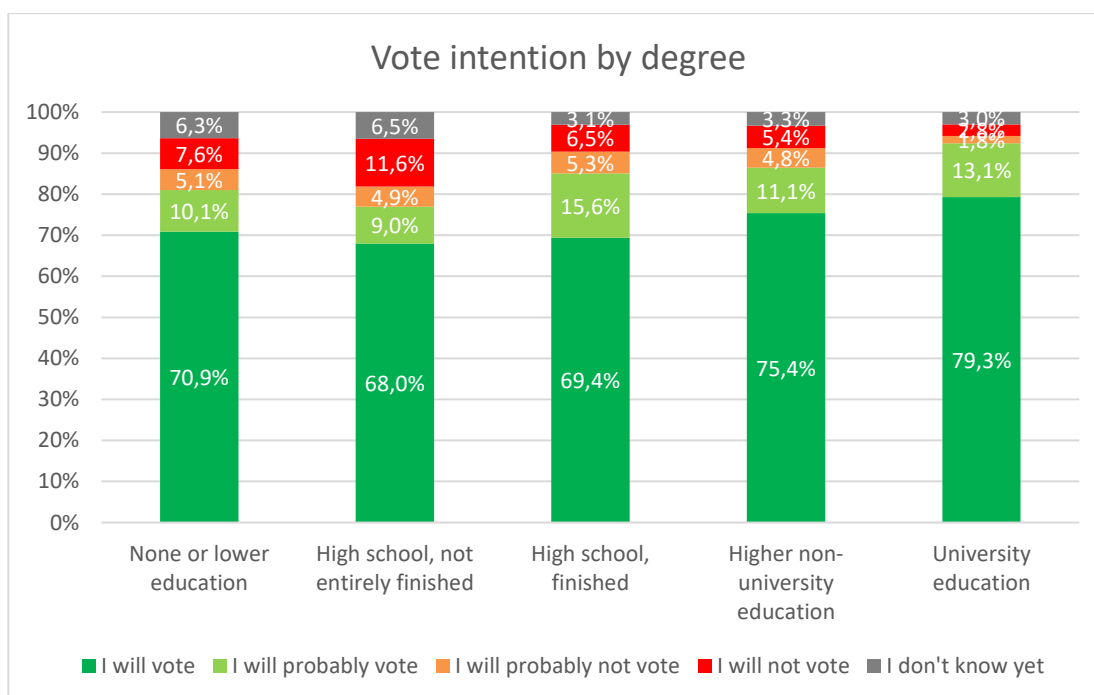
over-estimation of the official turnout figures which are about 10 percentage points lower. This probably has to do with social desirability.

We turn now to the the impact of socio-demographic factors (education level, gender and age), on the willingness to vote for local elections in Flanders.

We start with the **level of education**: we find a small significant association<sup>7</sup> between level of education and turnout at the local elections ( $\text{Chi}^2=187,744$ ). This means that voters with a higher education degree are a bit more likely to go the polls at the local elections in Flanders. The rather small differences are presented in Figure 8 with voters with 79,3% of voters with a university degree indicating that they would certainly vote compared to only 70.9% of voters without any degree. The percentages for voters without any degree do not differ much from the percentages of voters with other degrees except those with a degree of higher education. The main delineation runs between people with degrees of higher and non-higher education. A similar pattern was found for the parliamentary elections (see above), although differences were smaller and not always significant.

**Figure 8**

Intention to cast a vote in the local elections, by level of education ((Not Like Us-voter survey, wave 3)



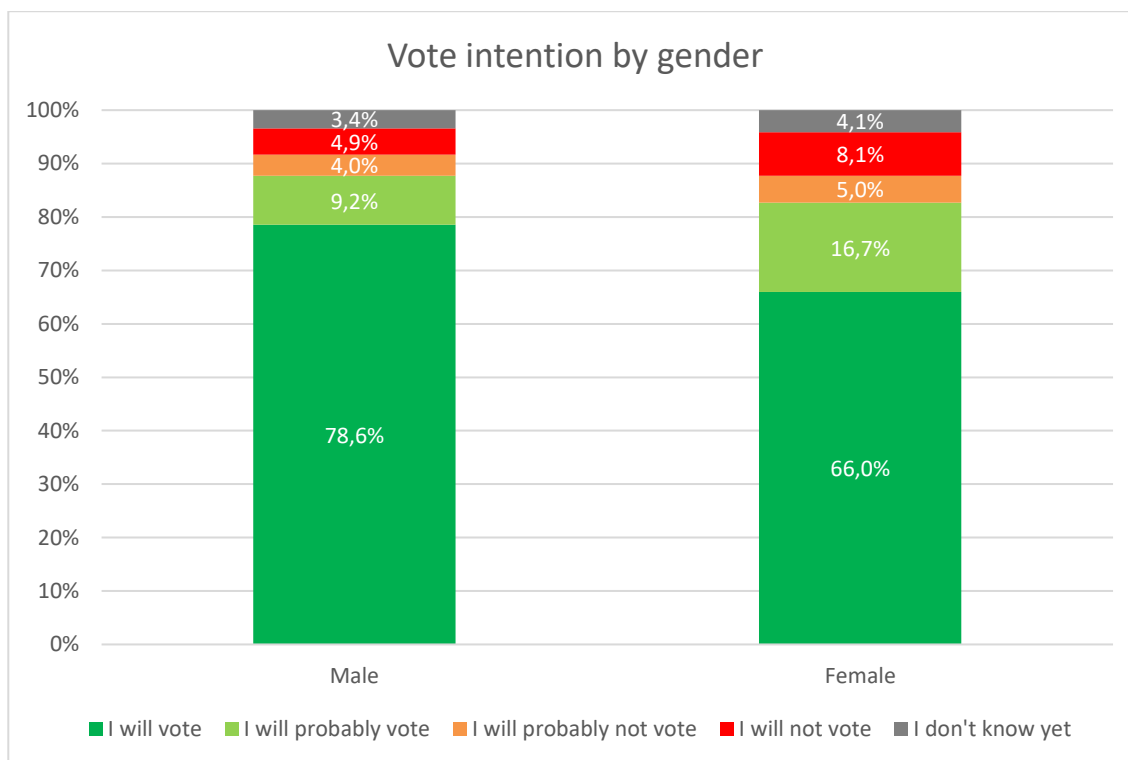
for federal elections) or much lower (59.8%). The observation that voters are more motivated to vote for local elections than for other elections applies only to Flanders (as both in Wallonia and Brussels, this is not the case).

<sup>7</sup> n=2132, p<.001

We now dig deeper in the difference between **men and women's** intention to vote locally after the abolition of compulsory voting. Women have significantly ( $\text{Chi}^2=9.147$ ) lower voting intentions than men.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, 66% of women indicate that they will vote, compared to 78.6% of men. They are also more likely to express the intention not to vote (8.1% of women vs. 4.9% of men). This is remarkable for two reasons. First, most recent cross-country research no longer finds a gender gap in turnout behavior.<sup>9</sup> Second, we showed above that in federal elections (under compulsory voting), it is primarily men who tend not to vote. Apparently, the abolition of compulsory voting has switched the gender gap in voting in an opposite direction. Women are more likely to comply with the formal rules, but once these formal rules are removed, they are more likely to abstain.

**Figure 9**

Intention to cast a vote in the local elections, by gender ((Not Like Us-voter survey, wave 3)



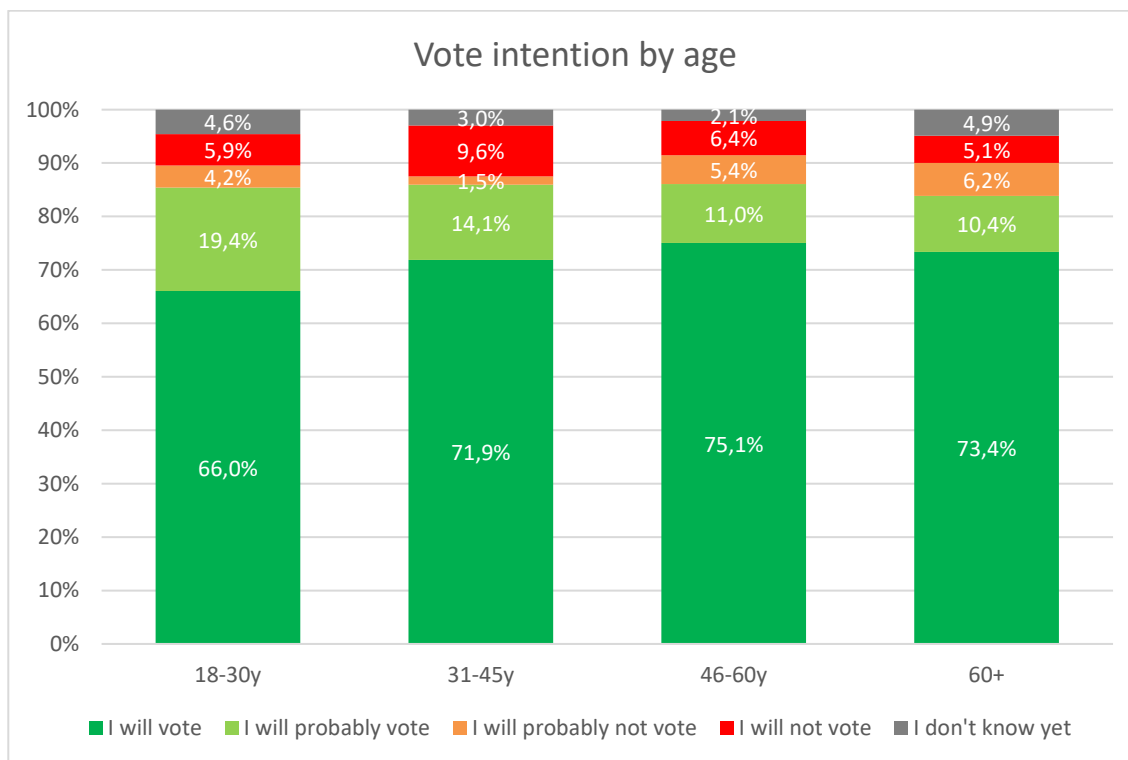
<sup>8</sup> n=2131, p<.027

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Stockemer, D., & Sundstrom, A. (2023). The gender gap in voter turnout: An artefact of men's over-reporting in survey research? *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 25(1), 21-41 and Carreras, M. (2018). Why no gender gap in electoral participation? A civic duty explanation *Electoral Studies* 52, 36-45.

Next, we examine how voting intentions differ according to **the age** of the eligible voters. The statistical test shows that there is a very weak positive correlation between age groups and turnout intentions ( $\text{Chi}^2=73.860$ ).<sup>10</sup> This correlation indicates a very small difference in turnout intentions between age groups. Figure 10 shows that young people lag behind, with only 66% intending to vote locally, whereas in other age groups this percentage fluctuates between 71.9% and 75.1%. On the other hand, most of those opting out are not among the young (5.9%) but among those aged 31-45 (9.6%). Young people appear to be the most volatile group of voters in local elections, as they include the largest groups of voters who are probably (but not sure) to vote (19.4%). While for federal elections it was mainly the 60+ age group that opted out, we do not see this pattern return in local elections.

**Figure 10**

Intention to cast a vote in the local elections, by age group ((Not Like Us-voter survey, wave 3)



The effects for age groups, gender and level of education are confirmed when running a multivariate analysis (controlling for the effects of all variables simultaneously). We have also investigated the effects of these socio-demographical variables for turnout intentions for other

<sup>10</sup> n=2132, p<0.001



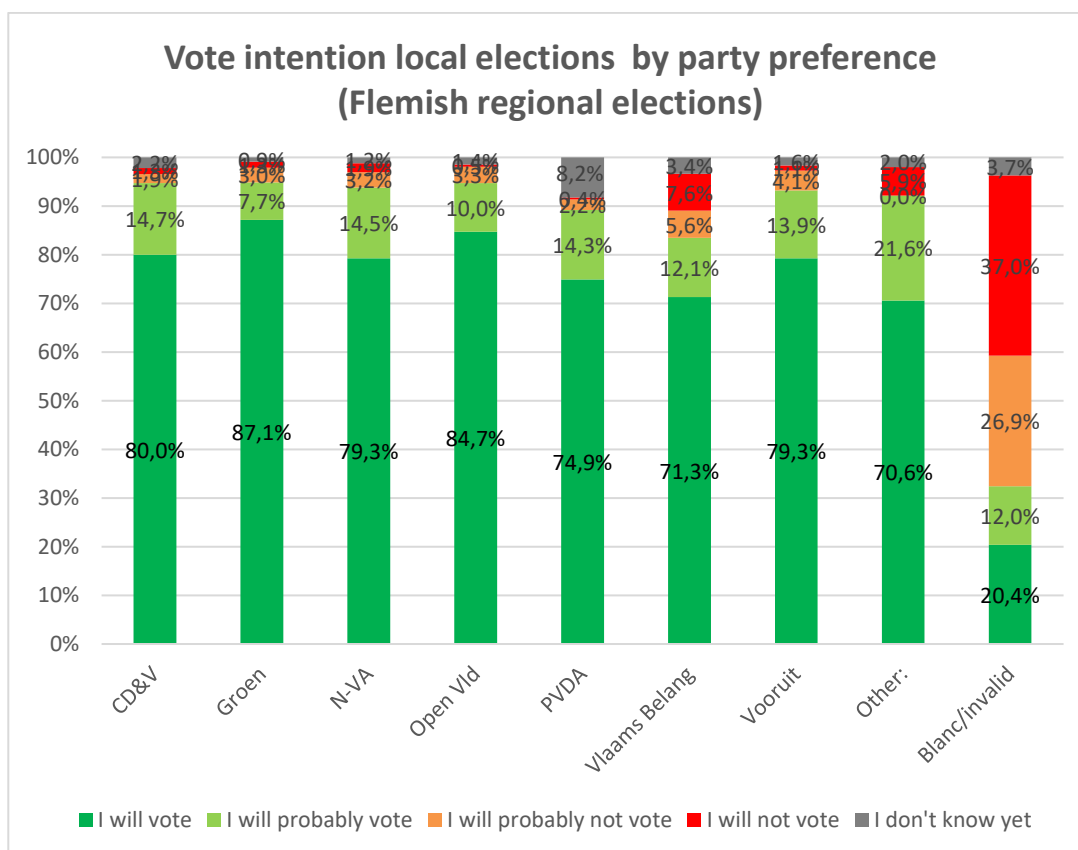
elections (in the hypothetical situation that compulsory voting would be lifted there) and became similar results.

## IIC. Which parties benefit from non-compulsory voting in the local elections?

In the final part of this media note, we investigate patterns in turnout intentions for the local elections in Flanders (without compulsory voting) among party supporters. This allows us to estimate which parties could have benefited from the abolition of compulsory voting.

**Figure 11**

Intention to cast a vote in the local elections, by party voted for in the June regional parliamentary elections ((Not Like Us-voter survey, wave 3)



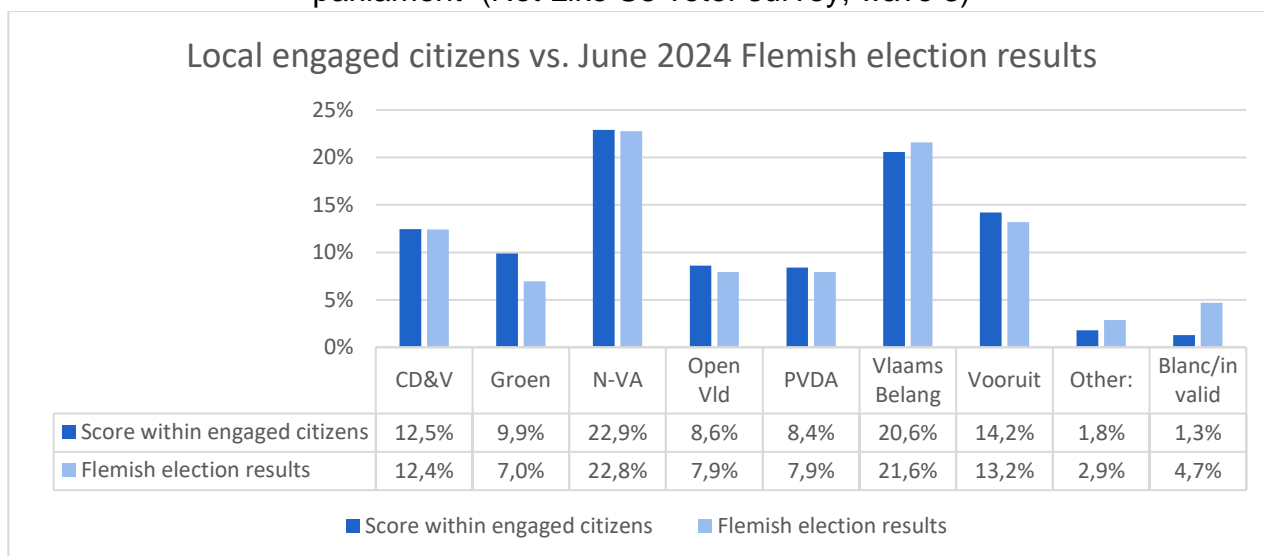
It comes as no big surprise that the group of voters who casted a blank or invalid vote is the group that is least likely to turnout in the local elections (with still about 20% of those voters indicating that they would vote in local elections without compulsory voting). For the rest, we see that Vlaams Belang voters (together with the small group of voters who voted for other parties) are

less likely to indicate that they would vote in local elections than voters for other parties: 71,3 % of Vlaams Belang voters would no longer vote, which is much lower than most other parties where about 80% or more of the voters indicate that they would vote in the local elections. PVDA takes an intermediate position with about 75% of their voters expressing their intention to vote at the local elections. Groen voters, on the contrary, are most likely to vote with 87%.

We end by comparing the party preference for the Flemish elections of voters who indicate that they would vote in local elections (i.e. without those who are only likely to vote or who are likely or certain not to vote) with the official election results for the Flemish Parliament on June 9.<sup>11</sup> The analyses show that the abolition of compulsory voting does not have a large effect on the strength of the parties. The differences between official election results (taking into account blanc and invalid votes) and party preferences of voters indicating that they would definitely vote in the local elections are never larger than about 2 or 3 percent points.<sup>12</sup> For instance, the party preference of the voters indicating they would vote in October shows an increase for Groen from 7.0% to 9.9%, while for Vlaams Belang, it shows a slight decrease from 21.6% to 20.6%. In contrast to what has often been assumed in the media, no marked advantages or disadvantages could be found in our data for CD&V and PVDA.

**Figure 11**

Intention to cast a vote in the local elections, by party voted for in the June regional parliamentary elections, compared with the real election results for the Flemish parliament (Not Like Us-voter survey, wave 3)



<sup>11</sup> Note that the sample of the Not Like Us-survey was weighted according to voting behavior, making that the voting behavior of the total sample perfectly matches the official results.

<sup>12</sup> This is perfectly in line with previous research, see a.o.: Dassonneville, R., Barbosa, T., Blais, A., McAllister, I., Turgeon, M. (eds). *Citizens under compulsory voting: a three-country study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.