

## Research note

# Individual Electoral Competitiveness: Undecided voters, complex choice environments and lower turnout

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## ABSTRACT

The number of citizens that are undecided in their vote choice has risen in Western democracies. Polling in Britain shows that a significant proportion of the population do not know who they will vote for. Against a backdrop of partisan dealignment and party system fragmentation, there are more parties on the ballot and more citizens 'free to choose'. Partisanship continues to be important for voting and lacking an identity is a predictor of aggregate voter volatility. A growing literature conceptualises this availability of voters as individual-level electoral competitiveness, stating that undecided citizens are subject to high levels of competition for their vote. I use this framework and apply theory from the decisionmaking literature to offer why these conditions may depress turnout. I construct a measure of undecided voters who are 'in competition' and show that this accounts for 40% of the *British Election Study Internet Panel* respondents. I demonstrate that those who are in competition are less likely to vote. They are more often those without a partisan identity and those who pay less attention to politics, but being in competition is not related to constituency marginality. The results help explain a key determinant of abstention in British elections and suggest low levels of participation may be due to complex choice environments and citizen indecision. However, they provide a positive outlook for pluralistic democracy as voters do deliberate between the party perspectives on offer.

## 1. Introduction

The number of citizens that are undecided in their vote choice has risen in Western democracies over the last 50 years (see, for example, [Box-Steffensmeier et al. \(2015\)](#)). This is due to contextual factors such as the increasing number of parties, changes in political attitudes like partisan identification and political sophistication, and generational differences in the electorate ([Willcoq, 2019](#)). There have been broad declines in partisanship, and widening gaps in political sophistication whereby those who are older and higher educated are more likely to be engaged and strategic in their voting behaviour ([Willcoq, 2019](#); [Orriols and Martínez, 2014](#); [SurrIDGE and Stowers, 2024](#)). While much of the literature aims to explain why these people are undecided, and when they decide, a developing scholarship looks at the consequences of indecision. It characterises these voters as experiencing competition between parties and shows that it leads to electoral volatility (see, for example, [Wagner and Krause \(2023\)](#)). In this paper, I advance these understandings by analysing the effects of individual competitiveness on turnout in Britain. In so doing, I am able to demonstrate how indecision between party preferences can impact the decision of whether to vote at all.

Electoral volatility and turnout are both topics of interest for students of voter behaviour, particularly as these factors become salient

drivers of election results. Numerous works have considered the effects of volatility, how it relates to partisanship, and the determinants of turnout at the aggregate level (see, for example, [Rose and McAllister \(1986\)](#), [Fieldhouse et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Frank and Martínez i Coma \(2023\)](#)). I turn to the lesser examined individual level using the British case. The fragmented party system and majoritarian voting rules provide the context for indecision to negatively impact turnout. I combine the framework of individual electoral competitiveness with theory from the decisionmaking literature to argue that contemporary Britain has conditions that foster abstention from voting. I construct a new measure of undecided voters who are 'in competition' and show that this accounts for roughly half of the *British Election Study Internet Panel* (BESIP) [BESIP \(2024\)](#) respondents. I demonstrate that those who are in competition are indeed less likely to vote. They are more often those without a partisan identity and those who pay less attention to politics, but being in competition is not related to constituency marginality. The results help explain a key determinant of abstention in British elections and suggests that low levels of participation may be due to complex choice environments and citizen indecision. Yet they provide a positive outlook for pluralistic democracy as voters do deliberate between the party perspectives on offer.

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## 2. Individual competitiveness as a development in British politics

At the most recent general election in 2024, polling showed a significant proportion of the British population expressed that they did not know who they would vote for. Reputable polling companies such as YouGov and Survation reported roughly 17% of respondents answering ‘Don’t know’ or ‘Undecided’ when asked for their voting intention during February and March 2024. Just two days before polls opened, The Guardian (Neate, 2024) reported that 12% of people were still undecided. MORI (2024) demonstrate that, of those who did express an intention (that is, discounting ‘Don’t know’ responses), 45% of people said they might change their mind before polling day. In their comparison over time, this has been consistent since 2010 but reduces to a fifth of people immediately before an election date. It is therefore plausible to assume that at a sizeable proportion of the British electorate experience some indecision in their vote choice, especially before a campaign has started. Turnout at the 2024 general election was the lowest since the 59% in 2001, and only marginally higher at 60%.

This uncertainty was not always the case, as the infamous quotes on class-based voting attest, and marks the decline in party identification which subsequently leads to a greater likelihood of indecision. In the 1960s, 90% of those surveyed in Britain expressed a party identity, usually either Conservative or Labour (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Crewe et al., 1977). Yet recent studies show the extent of change. While the exact figure varies, since 2010 the proportion with no party identity at all has been recorded at 45% (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020), 34% (Hobolt et al., 2021) and 21.5% (Evans and Schaffner, 2019). The question of who to vote for is no longer “automatic” and citizens now have “a decision to make” (Denver and Johns, 2022:68) at each contest.

While party identity and indecision are not the same, they are likely to be related. A strong partisan identity would lead to a decrease in likelihood of being undecided, as a person already knows their voting loyalties. As partisanship declines, along with the overall strength of relationships between people and parties, there is more scope for indecision. In this way, the causal path between partisanship and vote choice is clear and direct. For partisans, whether or not to vote becomes about measures already exhausted in the literature such as constituency competitiveness, being contacted during a campaign, or the importance of the election. However, once party identity weakens, these factors become supplemented by an indecision over vote choice, which can then elicit psychological responses in selecting a choice and therefore casting a ballot. These can only be considered at the individual level. To preview the results of this paper, partisans are indeed less likely to express indecision but still have a 30% predicted probability of being undecided in their vote choice, evidencing that these are two distinct, yet related, concepts.

This trend of partisan dealignment has been accompanied by fragmentation of the British party system, that is the increase in the number of affective political parties (Sartori, 2005). Once a two-and-a-half party system, comprised of Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, there are now numerous parties in the common political lexicon. As a demonstration of this, when the *British Election Study* (BES) began in 1964 it only asked about those three parties, but this had risen to six by 1979 and has now increased to nine named parties plus an ‘Other’ option, as displayed in Table 1.

Another related development in British politics is the rise in electoral volatility. That is, the number of voters that switch the party they vote for between elections and the resulting change in party vote shares (Pedersen, 1979). In a comparison of the 1964 and 1966 elections, 12.5% of people voted for different parties (Butler and Stokes, 1974). This had doubled by 2001, and since 2010 has been greater than 30% of the voting electorate (Fieldhouse et al., 2019). Opinion polls in the 2024 general election suggested the highest ever numbers of switchers, and therefore the greatest electoral volatility. This is, at least in part,

due to declines in partisanship (Pedersen, 1983). Those without a partisan identity are the most likely to be volatile (Fieldhouse et al., 2019). They do not have the strong attachments to a representative political force and therefore are more ‘free to choose’ (Rose and McAllister, 1986) between the parties on offer.

A growing literature conceptualises this availability of voters as individual-level electoral competitiveness (van der Eijk and Oppenhuis, 1991; Marsh, 2006; Kroh et al., 2007; Wagner, 2017; Cunow et al., 2021; Wagner and Krause, 2023). It argues that simply using the final results of an election to estimate competitiveness ignores the competition that voters themselves face. A party’s election campaign exists to persuade citizens to vote for them, which therefore assumes that at least some voters are available to be persuaded – that is, they have not already made up their minds on who they will vote for – and without this there is no competition at all (Bartolini, 1999, 2000). Voters that have decided are not subject to competition: there are no parties competing for their vote because one party already has it. In contrast, those who are undecided experience high levels of competition while parties compete, however fiercely, for their cross on the ballot paper. A citizen is ‘in competition’ when they are available to two or more parties (Marsh, 2006; Kroh et al., 2007). In the next sections of this paper, I extend this approach to the British case by considering turnout.

## 3. How individual competitiveness could negatively impact turnout

Aggregate level turnout in Britain has consistently been linked to constituency competitiveness (see, for example, Bealey et al. (1965), Denver and Hands (1974), Denver and Halfacree (1992), Denver et al. (2003), Flickinger and Studlar (1992), Pattie and Johnston (1998), Whiteley et al. (2001) and Vowles et al. (2017)). Meta-analyses show that the closeness of an election has a positive relationship with turnout in 57%–63% of tests (Cancela and Geys, 2016; Geys, 2006). This is explained, in most cases, using rational choice terms whereby a close election increases the (potential) benefits of voting Riker and Ordeshook (1968).

Yet at the individual level, this is less frequently tested and where it is, there is no evidence for its positive impact (Smets and van Ham, 2013). More recently, Frank and Martínez i Coma Frank and Martínez i Coma (2023) used extreme bounds analysis to find 43% of papers report a positive relationship between competitiveness and turnout but the findings held in just 15% of individual level tests. A different perspective offers that electoral competitiveness happens at the individual level by parties competing for citizens’ votes. People that have not made up their minds on who they will vote for experience campaigns differently to those that have decided on a single party. As they deliberate between the choices on offer, parties compete for their vote, which becomes the determinant of electoral competitiveness. As Van der Eijk and Oppenhuis summarise: “Electoral competition then exists to the degree that voters are willing to consider more than just a single party as an acceptable choice” (1991:56).

Therefore, if more voters are undecided, there is more competitiveness at an election. The trend of declining partisanship means that more of the electorate are switching their vote choices (Fieldhouse et al., 2019) which implies that they deliberate between more than one party. Indeed when using the *European Social Survey*, Wagner and Krause (2023) demonstrate voter availability as a necessary but not sufficient condition of both party switching and electoral volatility. As there are more undecided voters, so are there more incidences of voters switching parties. A lack of partisanship has also been shown to lead to late decisionmaking at an election (Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller, 2012).

The rising number of parties means there are more political forces competing for available votes. Though not all voters are available to all parties, changes in the party system also see citizens become

**Table 1**  
BES partisanship survey question over time.

Year	Total options	Response options
1964	5	3 parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat) None and Don't know
1974	7	4 parties (introduction of Nationalist option as SNP or PC) Other, None and Don't know
1979	9	6 parties (introduction of Social Democrat and Alliance) Other, None and Don't know
1983	10	7 parties (introduction of Green party) Other, None and Don't know
1992	8	5 parties (removal of Social Democrat and Alliance) Other, None and Don't know
2005	10	7 parties (introduction of UKIP and BNP) Other, None and Don't know
2014–2023 BESIP	12	Maximum of 9 parties (options of UKIP, Brexit, Reform, BNP and Change UK vary depending on wave) Other, None and Don't know

Note: Year represents the first year where a change in response options occurred.

cross-pressured (Gidron, 2022), often by economically left-wing values combined with social conservatism (Turner et al., 2018). This means that voter preferences can cross traditional spatial lines. Not only are there more parties, but the ideological dimensions of British politics have also expanded.

It was first thought that these 'choice rich environments' which covered a breadth of ideological space increased participation because it provided more benefits to voting (Brockington, 2009). However causal evidence shows that this is not the case. In fact, a greater number of candidates means people are more likely to abstain from voting (Cunow, 2014; Ellenbroek, 2024). The greater cognitive burden also results in those that do vote paying less attention and making more errors (Cunow et al., 2021). When looking at Spain using survey data, Orriols and Martínez (2014) find that a greater number of effective parties results in more undecided voters. Vassil et al. (2016) use the *European Social Survey* to distinguish between more options and greater ideological diversity, finding that the former can positively impact turnout but the latter depresses participation.

This aligns with established findings in the decisionmaking literature. The mechanism is that more alternatives alongside uncertainty over preferences creates a complex choice environment. This complexity increases the likelihood of making no choice at all (Iyengar and Lepper, 2000; Choi et al., 2006; Kida et al., 2010). It is thought that this abstention is defensive because people favour the consequences of inaction over action: if there is an undesirable outcome, they are without responsibility; if the outcome is positive, they have lost nothing (Dhar, 1997; Baron and Ritov, 1994; Ritov and Baron, 1990; Spranca et al., 1991). This lack of participation is particularly prevalent when people are forced to choose only one alternative (Dhar, 1997; Dhar and Nowlis, 1999; Greenleaf and Lehmann, 1995), instead of being able to choose two or more to spread their risk and voice more than one preference. Ultimately, this "defensive avoidance is a likely response to difficult choices" without the prospect of choice deferral (Dhar, 1997:216; see also Beattie and Barlas (2001), Janis and Mann (1977) and Festinger (1964)), that is being able to choose later.

It follows then that Britain's electoral environment might provide the exact conditions that foster abstention. Multiple parties, cross-pressured and dealigned voters, combined with a majoritarian system that forces a single choice with a deadline of polling day. Undecided (potential) voters may therefore avoid making a choice and not vote at all. A high number of undecided citizens may thus result in low turnout rates. I test this expectation in the following sections of this paper. I first create a measurement of individual electoral competitiveness and predict which factors make a person more likely to experience it. I then use this measure to predict individuals' likelihood of voting and switching their vote choice.

#### 4. Measuring individual competitiveness

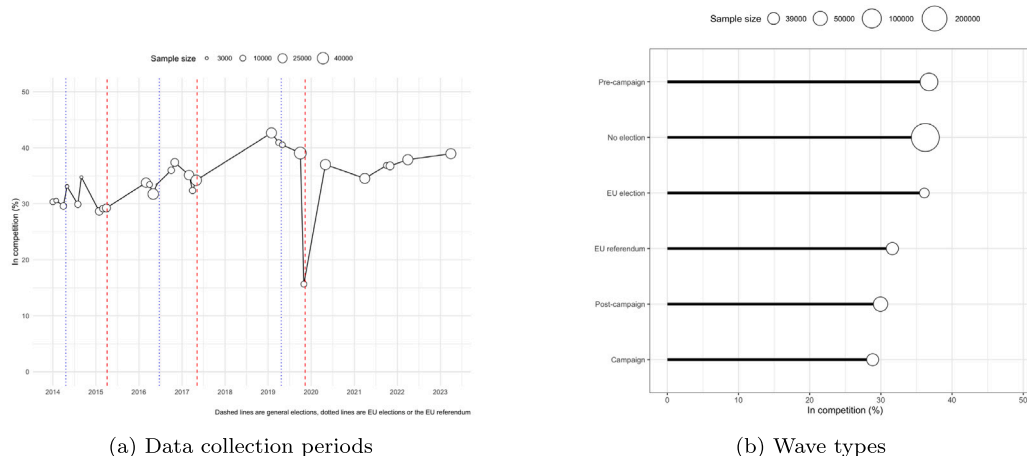
Studies of individual level electoral competitiveness use 'propensity to vote' scores (PTV) to determine voter availability (van der Eijk and Oppenhuis, 1991; Marsh, 2006; Kroh et al., 2007; Wagner, 2017; Wagner and Krause, 2023). These questions are often asked in national election studies, making them readily available for researchers, and they have been used to examine a wide range of political attitudes and vote choice in the US context including as an alternative measure of partisanship (Paparo and Sio, 2017; Paparo et al., 2020; van der Eijk, 2011; see Paparo and Sio (2017) for a wider discussion on the usefulness of PTV measures for research). As a measure of individual competitiveness, previous works have used these questions to estimate how well parties capitalised on their potential voter base (van der Eijk and Oppenhuis, 1991) and to correct errors in estimating overall levels of competition in an election (Wagner and Krause, 2023), among other uses.

In applying this to turnout, I create a new measure. This is necessary because existing measures created from PTV scores are not applicable to turnout because their operationalisation treats higher rated parties with greater weight, which is likely to also be an indication of turnout intention. For some studies voters are separated into categories that represent high, medium and low availability (van der Eijk and Oppenhuis, 1991). In others they are assigned a constructed continuous measure based on the distance between the most highly rated party ( $PTV_1$ ) and the second highest rated ( $PTV_2$ ), for instance where "the higher the respective PTVs, the higher the individual's availability (if  $PTV_1 = 1$  and  $PTV_2 = 0.9$  the availability score should be higher than if  $PTV_1 = 0.5$  and  $PTV_2 = 0.4$ )" (Wagner and Krause, 2023:214). Stronger scores indicate greater individual competitiveness. Yet this is not applicable to investigations of turnout because the strength of likelihood may be indicative of the likelihood to vote *at all*, particularly when considering the wording of the question. For instance, somebody whose highest rated party is 9 may be reporting that they are more likely to vote than somebody whose highest rated party is 5, who again may be more likely to vote than a person whose highest given score was 2. When using this measure to investigate the effects of being in competition on turnout, it is problematic to have variance in likelihood to vote built into the variable that is aiming to explain that variance.

I construct a measure from the BESIP where the wording of the PTV question is *How likely is it that you would ever vote for each of the following parties?* and responses are given on a 0–10 scale, where 0 is 'very unlikely' and 10 is 'very likely', with a 'Don't know' option. I take the number of parties rated similarly to quantify whether a person has just one clearly preferred party or two or more similarly preferred parties. Parties rated within two points of each other on the 0–10 scale are considered similar, meaning a gap greater than 2 is taken as an expression of real difference in likelihood to vote, in line with

**Table 2**  
Example PTV scores and in competition measure.

Person	Highest party rating	Next highest party rating	In competition measure
1	10	7	0
2	10	9	1
3	8	6	0
4	4	4	1



**Fig. 1.** The proportion of respondents in competition in the BESIP.

Paparo and Sio (2017) who find this distance to be the optimal cut-off. I incorporate the order of preferences so that the highest rated parties take precedence. If a person has rated any party in the two highest points (10 or 9), lower preferences are discounted. In the case that no parties have been rated highly, each pair of scores are examined (8 or 7, then 6 or 5, and so on). The ‘Don’t know’ responses to PTV questions are treated as 5 on the scale, in line with the theoretical reasoning that it indicates a person has equal likelihood of voting or not voting for that party. If there are no parties rated two points higher than another, the person is considered ‘in competition’ between parties. For the primary analysis in this paper, I create a binary measure where those who have one clearly preferred party are not in competition and those who rate two or more parties similarly are in competition. Other forms of this measure are tested in the Appendix as robustness. Table 2 illustrates examples of the assigned scores.

The final dataset contains 524,651 person-year cases across the 25 waves of the BESIP 2014–2023. Fig. 1(a) shows the proportion of respondents that are in competition across the BESIP data collection period with indicators of sample size. Outside of an election period, in early 2019 more than 40% of respondents were in competition between parties but this declined close to polling day. The latest wave sees this return to around 2 in 5 people deliberating between similarly rated parties.

Fig. 1(b) displays the proportions by wave type. Overall more people are in competition when there is no election<sup>1</sup> and figures are lowest during a campaign, in line with findings from MORI (2024). In pre-campaign waves, 36.8% of respondents are in competition, but during the campaign this declines to 28.8% albeit with smaller sample sizes. The PTV questions were shown to smaller subsets of respondents in waves 14, 19 and 24 therefore they are removed from subsequent analyses.

### 5. Predicting individual competitiveness

In a review of the literature on undecided voters, Willocq (2019) finds six themes of findings in the extant scholarship. This includes

<sup>1</sup> Wave type considers only nationwide elections, therefore does not include devolved or local elections.

that being older and having a partisan identity is associated with lower levels of indecision, and that political sophistication may be related to the timing of decision, either ‘pessimistically’ because those with low engagement find it more difficult to decide or ‘optimistically’ because high engagement leads to deliberation. Factors such as the closeness of the election and gender have mixed results. Therefore this first section of analysis seeks to test these findings with my measure, by using them as predictors of individual competitiveness. This also responds to Wagner’s assertion that “we should ask where differences in the levels of electoral availability come from” (2017:518).

Fig. 2 shows results from a GLM logistic regression that predicts the binary measure of individual competitiveness. The model includes a binary indicator for partisan identity (Has party ID), whereby anyone who named a party when asked *Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or what?* is considered as having a party identity. It also includes a continuous measure of political attention as an indicator for engagement, taken from 0–10 responses to the question *How much attention do you generally pay to politics?*, and the marginality of the respondent’s constituency at the previous election. Demographic variables for binary sex, age in years, holding a university degree, and categories of housing tenure (Owns, Rents, Other) are included. I also include a categorical measure for country, which compares whether the respondent lives in Wales or Scotland to those in England, to account for the additional parties that compete there. Full details of the models are provided in Appendix.

Having a party identity significantly decreases the likelihood of being in competition. This is in line with expectations that partisan loyalties limit the scope for deliberation between parties as those having an identity already hold a clear preference. Fig. 3(a) shows the difference in predicted probabilities of being in competition for those with and without a party identity. Partisans have a 28.9% probability of being in competition, whereas non-partisans have a 54.3% probability, an increase of 25 points.

Attention paid to politics has a smaller but substantial impact on likelihood of being in competition. As shown in Fig. 3(b), those who pay the least attention are 15 points more likely to be in competition than those who pay the greatest amount of attention. Other variables in the model displayed in Fig. 2 shows that men are less likely to be in competition, as are older citizens, however degree education does

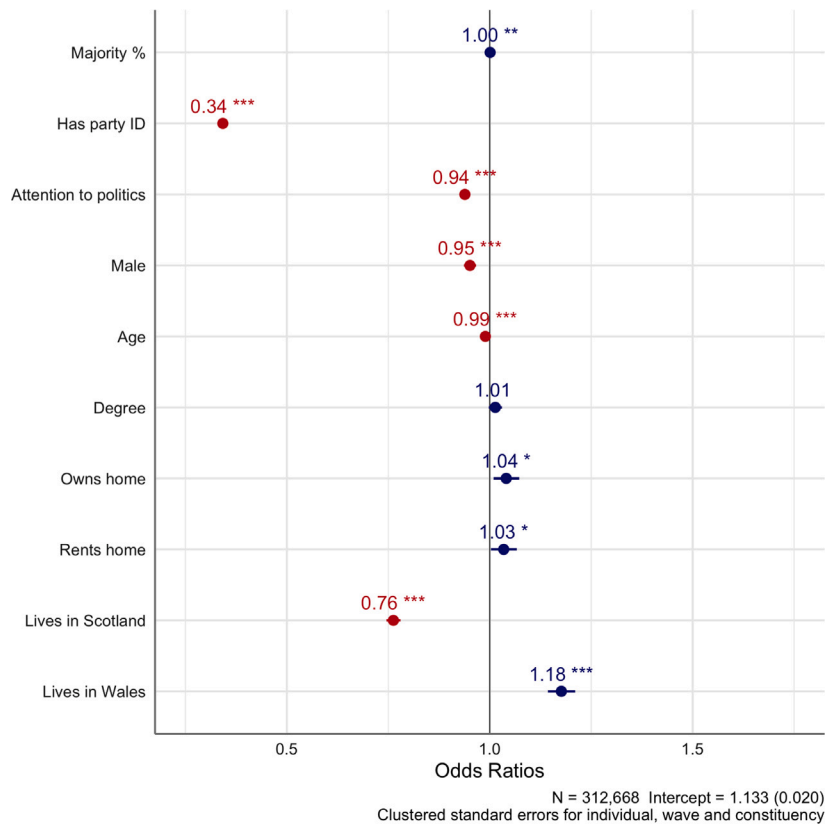


Fig. 2. Results from the logistic model predicting in competition.

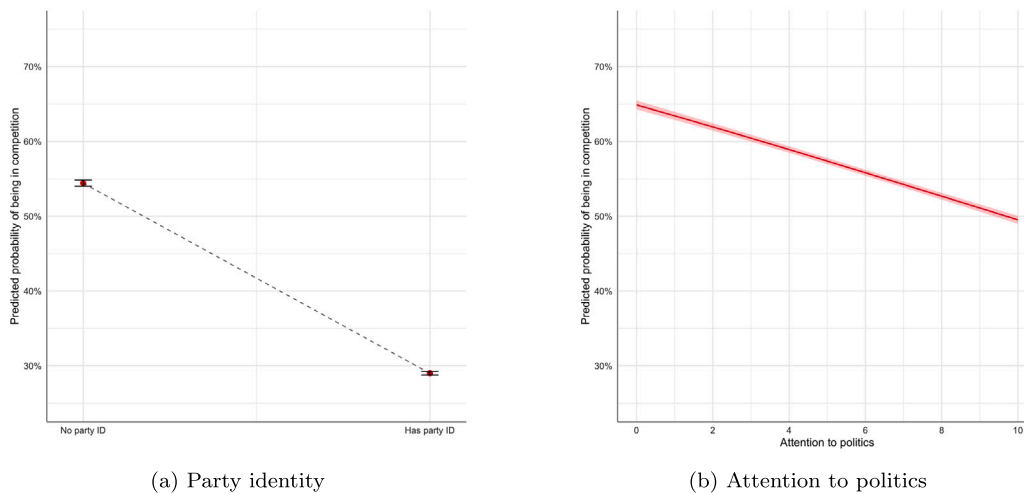


Fig. 3. Predicted probabilities of being in competition.

not reach traditional thresholds of significance. Owning or renting a home means a person is more likely when compared to other ways of living. Marginality has no effect in the model but Scottish residents are less likely to be in competition while those living in Wales are more likely, compared to English residents. Taken together, this suggests that individual competitiveness is driven by dealignment and low political engagement, alongside age and gender. However it is not related to aggregate levels of electoral competitiveness.

## 6. Predicting turnout

The final analyses use the in competition measure to predict intended turnout. Turnout is a binary measure taken from various wordings of the 'turnoutUKGeneral' variable in the BESIP. It asks *How likely is it that you will vote?* and responses are given on a five point likert scale. The 'Very likely that I would vote' and 'Fairly likely' responses become 1 and other answers are 0. While turnout can be

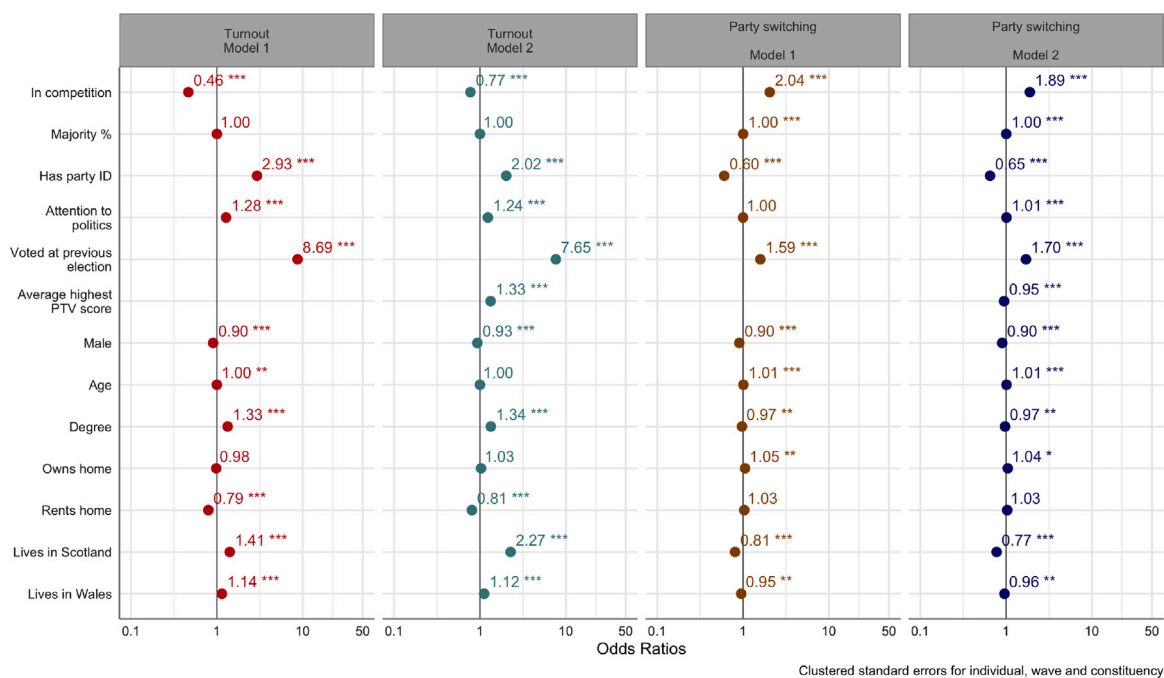


Fig. 4. Results from the logistic models predicting turnout and party switching.

overreported in surveys (Quinlan and McAllister, 2019) using these intention questions, just 3.9% of respondents in the BESIP said they intended to vote yet said they did not when asked after the election, and the notion of self-prophecy has been shown to increase the likelihood of accurate reporting (McDonald et al., 2017). Therefore, as a first step in investigating the relationship between individual competitiveness and turnout these questions are appropriate. I also model party switching to corroborate the findings of Wagner and Krause (2023) at the individual level with the updated measure. Party switching is binary and computed from the ‘generalElectionVote’ variable. If a person’s response to that question changes between waves, they are given a score of 1, whereas if it stays the same their value is 0. An indicator for whether the respondent voted at the previous election is added as a predictor. Full survey question wordings are detailed in Appendix. I also run an additional model for each dependent variable that includes an average of the highest rated party for each respondent to test, and control for, the assumption that strength of PTV scores are indicative of likelihood to vote.

Results of the four logistic models are presented in Fig. 4. First considering the corroboration tests on party switching, it is already established that those without a party identity are more likely to vote for different parties between elections (Fieldhouse et al., 2019) and that other operationalisations have shown that higher degrees of individual-level competition lead to electoral volatility (Wagner and Krause, 2023). This is replicated with the new measure here. In addition, living in a more marginal constituency is significant but not substantive. Paying more attention to politics results in an increased likelihood of switching parties. This may be indicative of tactical voting as those with greater political attention could be more privy to the benefits of party switching, however investigating this with depth is beyond the scope of my study.

In a new test of individual electoral competitiveness on turnout, those in competition are less likely to vote. Other than whether somebody voted at the previous election, it is the strongest predictor of turnout intention. Fig. 5 visualises the predicted probabilities from Turnout Model 1 and shows that those in competition have a ten point lower likelihood of voting than those with a clear preference. The probability of voting declines from 89.1% to 79.2% when respondents are deliberating between two or more parties. This negative relationship

holds even when the average highest PTV score is added in Turnout Model 2. It is the case that stronger PTV ratings result in a greater likelihood of voting compared to those with weaker overall ratings, supporting the argument that a measure which adds more weight to higher scores is not applicable to investigations of turnout.

Marginality is not associated with intention to vote at this individual level, in line with Smets and van Ham (2013), yet having a party identity results in a higher likelihood of voting. Demographic variables broadly support extant voting behaviour literature, however age is not substantively significant, and living in both Scotland and Wales is estimated to be positively related to voting, compared to living in England.

## 7. Conclusion

Citizens have two decisions to make at an election: whether to vote, and who to vote for. They are faced with a set of alternatives to choose from. In the context of dealignment at the individual level, and fragmentation at the system level, the choice environment in British politics has become more complex. We know that voters are “more indecisive about which party to vote for, more likely to switch parties, and generally more volatile and unpredictable in their behaviour” (Denver and Johns, 2022:86). This paper takes this competitive atmosphere and considers its impact on turnout.

While most studies of competitiveness on turnout look at the effect of the closeness of results on aggregate voting, in this paper I focus on individual electoral competitiveness. That is, whether a person is in competition between two or more parties when deciding to vote. The latest wave of the BESIP has around 40% of respondents without a clear first preference for a party. My analysis shows that they are less likely to have an intention of voting.

These negative associations between being in competition and turnout may be mitigated by having a partisan identity and paying greater attention to politics, as these were both associated with a single preference rather than indecision. If widespread voting is a normative concern, my analysis suggests targeting these two factors could improve participation. In this way, while the results are pessimistic for voting, they provide a positive outlook for pluralistic democracy. Citizens do seem to deliberate between the party perspectives on offer as a

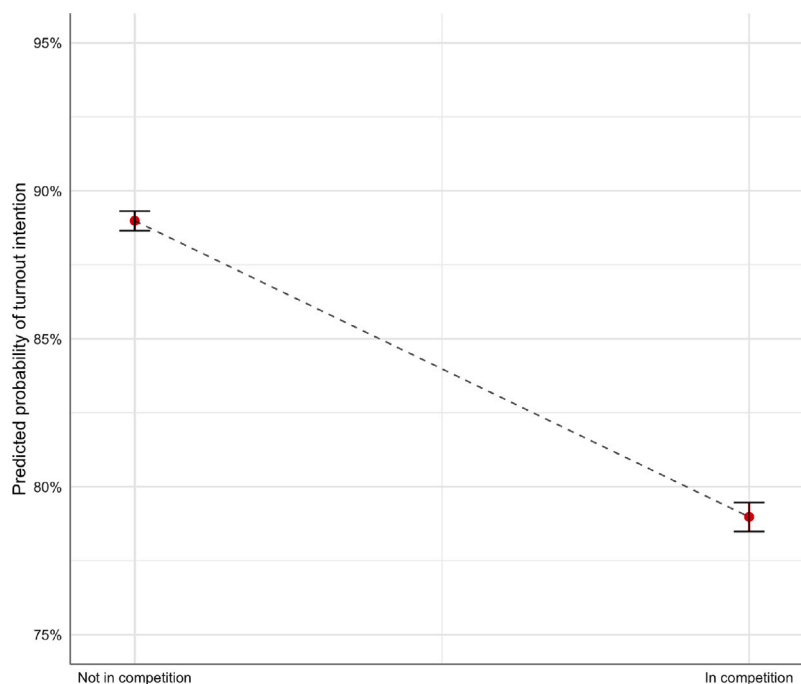


Fig. 5. Predicted probabilities of turnout intention for those not and in competition from Turnout Model 1.

condition for competitive elections (Bartolini, 1999, 2000). Though perhaps in tension with one another, the expansion of choice can promote democracy if parties convince citizens of their offer before election day.

The findings of this paper deepen understandings of voter behaviour. While some results corroborate previous findings, such as constituency marginality not being substantially related to turnout at the individual level (Smets and van Ham, 2013; Frank and Martínez i Coma, 2023) and partisanship being an important predictor of voting, others deviate from extant work. Those who are higher educated and older are not more likely to be in competition, in contrast to Surridge and Stowers (Surridge and Stowers, 2024).

The measure of individual competition provided here can be applied to other contexts. An extension of my analysis that looked at which parties people were in competition between, and which they eventually voted for (if any), could answer interesting questions on the structure of preferences. Moreover, political parties and opinion pollsters may wish to add more measures of uncertainty when predicting election outcomes. One limitation of the analysis in this paper is the necessitated use of turnout intention, future studies could also apply the measure to data that contains validated vote information. To consider turnout, the results indicate that the strength of the highest rated party should be treated only as important when a single party outperforms others in voter preferences, because it is indicative of the likelihood to vote at all.

Nevertheless, this study contributes to the literature by providing a mechanism by which some types of competitiveness foster abstention rather than voting. Complex choice environments are created when multiple parties compete in an election, which leaves citizens with a challenging decision, particularly without partisan loyalties to rely on for vote choice. Majoritarian contests force a single choice with a deadline of polling day, and having two or more parties competing for a citizen's vote means they are less likely to cast one. This paper therefore also highlights the importance of the voter's perspective ahead of an election, in addition to the aggregate trends that are identified after a result is announced. Competitiveness is not always positively related to turnout.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Hannah Bunting:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The author declares none.

#### Data availability

The research uses British Election Study data that is already available.

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#### Appendix

##### A.1. Variable details

See Table A.3.

##### A.2. Full models as tables

See Tables A.4 and A.5.

**Table A.3**  
Details of the variables used in analysis.

Variable	BESIP name	BESIP question(s)	Manipulation
In competition	ptvGrid	How likely is it that you would ever vote for each of the following parties? 0–10 scale plus Don't know	As described in main text.
Has party ID	partyID	Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or what? 1–12: Named parties 9: Other 10: No - none 9999: Don't know	1 = Any party 0 = None and Don't know
Attention to politics	polAttention	How much attention do you generally pay to politics? 0–10 scale plus Don't know	–
Turnout	turnoutUKGeneral	Many people don't vote in elections these days. If there were a UK General Election tomorrow, how likely is it that you would vote? (W1W2W3W4W10)  Many people don't vote in elections these days. The UK General Election is being held on May 7th. How likely is it that you will vote? (W5)  Now thinking about UK General Elections. If there were a UK General Election tomorrow, how likely is it that you would vote? (W15W16W20W21W22W23W25)  Many people don't vote in elections these days. The UK General Election is being held on December 12th. How likely is it that you will vote? (W17W18)  5: Very likely that I would vote 4: Fairly likely 3: Neither likely nor unlikely 2: Fairly unlikely 1: Very unlikely that I would vote 9999: Don't know	1 = responses 4 and 5 0 = responses 1–3 and Don't know
Party switching	generalElectionVote	And if there were a UK General Election tomorrow, which party would you vote for? (W1W2W3W4W15W16W20W21W22W23W25)  If there were a UK General Election tomorrow, which party would you vote for? (W24)  Which party is that? (W5W17W18)  Which party did you vote for? (W6W19)  0: I would not vote 1–8 and 10–13: Named parties 9: Other 9999: Don't know	1 = change in response between waves 0 = no change in response between waves
Degree	p_education	What is the highest educational or work-related qualification you have?  1: No formal qualifications 2–14: Qualifications below degree level 15–18: Qualifications at degree level or above 19: Don't know 20: Prefer not to say	1 = responses 15–18 0 = responses 1–14 NA = responses 19–20
Male	p_gender	Are you...?  1: Male 2: Female	1 = Male 0 = Female
Age	age	Respondent age in years.	–
Owns home, Rents home	p_housing	Do you own or rent the home in which you live?  1–3: Owns 4–6: Rents 7–9: Neither or other	Owns home = responses 1–3 Rents home = responses 4–6 Other = responses 7–9
Majority %	–	–	Distance between the best placed party and the second placed party in the respondent's constituency at the last election.
Lives in Scotland, Lives in Wales (Lives in England as reference category)	pano	–	Computed from constituency identifier.



**Table A.4**  
Predicting individual competitiveness.

	(1)
Majority %	0.001** (0.000)
Has party ID	-1.073*** (0.009)
Attention to politics	-0.063*** (0.002)
Male	-0.050*** (0.008)
Age	-0.011*** (0.000)
Degree	0.014+ (0.008)
Owns home	0.040* (0.015)
Rents home	0.034* (0.016)
Lives in Scotland	-0.271*** (0.012)
Lives in Wales	0.162*** (0.015)
Num.Obs.	308 345
RMSE	0.46

\*\*\* p < 0.001, \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05, + p < 0.1.  
Clustered standard errors for individual, wave and constituency.

**Table A.5**  
Predicting turnout and party switching.

	Turnout (1)	Turnout (2)	Party switching (3)	Party switching (4)
In competition	-0.767*** (0.015)	-0.258*** (0.017)	0.718*** (0.009)	0.636*** (0.010)
Majority %	0.000 (0.000)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.002*** (0.000)	0.002*** (0.000)
Has party ID	1.077*** (0.015)	0.705*** (0.016)	-0.506*** (0.011)	-0.430*** (0.011)
Attention to politics	0.243*** (0.003)	0.210*** (0.003)	0.000 (0.002)	0.009*** (0.002)
Voted at previous election	2.162*** (0.017)	2.034*** (0.017)	0.460*** (0.016)	0.531*** (0.017)
Male	-0.099*** (0.015)	-0.069*** (0.016)	-0.099*** (0.009)	-0.106*** (0.009)
Age	-0.002** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.009*** (0.000)	0.009*** (0.000)
Degree	0.287*** (0.015)	0.289*** (0.016)	-0.027** (0.009)	-0.026** (0.009)
Owns home	-0.019 (0.027)	0.027 (0.028)	0.053** (0.018)	0.043* (0.018)
Rents home	-0.230*** (0.026)	-0.217*** (0.027)	0.033+ (0.019)	0.029 (0.019)
Lives in Scotland	0.346*** (0.023)	0.826*** (0.026)	-0.223*** (0.013)	-0.265*** (0.013)
Lives in Wales	0.133*** (0.028)	0.111*** (0.029)	-0.051** (0.016)	-0.044** (0.016)
Average highest PTV score		0.286*** (0.003)		-0.056*** (0.002)
Num.Obs.	263 847	263 847	304 885	304 885
RMSE	0.27	0.26	0.41	0.41

\*\*\* p < 0.001, \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05, + p < 0.1.  
Clustered standard errors for individual, wave and constituency.

**A.3. Robustness tests**

As robustness tests of the operationalisation of the in competition measure, two additional GLM regression models with turnout as the dependent variable are displayed in Table A.6. Model 2 uses a continuous measure which is the number of parties rated within two points of each other, ranging from 1 party (a clear preference and therefore

not in competition) to 9 parties. Model 3 uses a categorical measure whereby a single party preference (not in competition) is the reference category and two, three and four or more parties are the remaining categories. Both measures show the negative relationship between individual competitiveness and turnout holds. Model 1 controls for BESIP wave type and does not alter the findings in the body of the paper.

**Table A.6**  
Predicting turnout with wave type and different versions of the in competition measure.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
In competition (original)	-0.768*** (0.015)		
Number of parties in competition between (continuous)		-0.348*** (0.004)	
In competition (categorical): Two parties			-1.099*** (0.015)
In competition (categorical): Three parties			-0.405*** (0.018)
In competition (categorical): Four or more parties			-0.135*** (0.021)
Majority %	-0.001 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Has party ID	1.083*** (0.015)	0.890*** (0.016)	0.906*** (0.016)
Attention to politics	0.244*** (0.003)	0.215*** (0.003)	0.217*** (0.003)
Voted at previous election	2.170*** (0.017)	2.122*** (0.017)	2.124*** (0.017)
Wave type: EU election	-0.191*** (0.050)		
Wave type: EU referendum	0.070 (0.053)		
Wave type: No election	-0.166*** (0.047)		
Wave type: Pre-campaign	0.158** (0.048)		
Male	-0.097*** (0.015)	-0.124*** (0.015)	-0.127*** (0.015)
Age	-0.002*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)
Degree	0.287*** (0.016)	0.240*** (0.016)	0.244*** (0.016)
Owens home	-0.018 (0.027)	-0.009 (0.028)	-0.007 (0.028)
Rents home	-0.230*** (0.027)	-0.215*** (0.027)	-0.215*** (0.027)
Lives in Scotland	0.362*** (0.023)	0.379*** (0.024)	0.338*** (0.024)
Lives in Wales	0.148*** (0.028)	0.191*** (0.029)	0.150*** (0.029)
Num.Obs.	263 847	263 847	263 847
RMSE	0.27	0.26	0.26

\*\*\* p < 0.001, \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05, + p < 0.1.  
Clustered standard errors for individual, wave and constituency.

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