



The impact of incumbency on turnout. Evidence from Italian municipalities



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 March 2015

Received in revised form

23 June 2016

Accepted 23 June 2016

Available online 12 August 2016

JEL classification:

D72

D78

J71

J16

Keywords:

Incumbency

Political participation

Electoral turnout

Social capital

ABSTRACT

We analyse how the presence of an incumbent among candidates at an election affects electoral turnout. We use a rich data set which provides information on the results of Italian municipal elections over the period 1993–2011. We find that the impact of incumbency is heterogeneous across geographical areas: incumbency produces a positive effect on turnout in the South of Italy, whereas we find a negative and statistically significant effect in the North. We speculate that the north-south divergence is related to differences in social capital and in clientelistic relationships established by incumbent politicians. Our conjecture finds support when we look separately at municipalities in the lower and upper quartile of the social capital distribution and at municipalities with high or low densities of organised crime.

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1. Introduction

While a large amount of literature has investigated the effect of incumbency status on the probability that a candidate will win an electoral competition, little is known on how incumbency affects turnout.

In this paper, we study the relationship between incumbency and turnout, and whether it is affected by social capital, using data from Italian municipal elections and exploiting the fact that Italy is very heterogeneous in terms of social capital (higher in the North and lower in the South, but also with some variation within each area).¹ Incumbent politicians are able to use their power and resources to obtain “exchange votes”, so leading to an increase in

political participation.² However, this is more likely to happen in areas where there are poor economic conditions and weak social capital (Putnam, 1993). In these areas there is both a higher probability of having incumbents who establish clientelistic relationships, and a stronger tendency to free ride among citizens who do not protest against government malfeasance. Furthermore, even though problems relating to clientelism at municipal level are mitigated by the fact that citizens are able to monitor local administrations better than they are by a distant central authority, when social capital is low, citizens tend to free ride and protest less against government malfeasance, and public officials can easily

² Even though incumbent politicians are no more likely, in se, than entrants to be corrupt, since they have spent more time in office, they have a better chance of diverting public resources and using both “red-tape procedures” and private information in order to obtain exchange votes. In other words, even though incumbents and freshmen politicians have ex-ante the same characteristics, time spent in office might render corrupt behaviour easier.

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¹ See for instance Guiso et al., 2004.

indulge in inefficient policies which are aimed at increasing electoral support (Jimenez and Sawada, 1999; Mookherjee, 2001; Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2005). Instead, in areas with a high level of social capital, clientelistic relationships are less frequent, weakening efforts made by the incumbent to boost turnout (the expected returns on winning an election are lower as they do not include the personal gains deriving from corruption), while citizens are more likely to punish badly performing incumbents by giving support to challengers, and this might lead to an increase in turnout. Clientelistic relationships and citizens' desire to discipline candidates who badly performed in the past work in opposite directions. Depending on which one prevails, the effect of incumbency on turnout may be positive or negative (or null since the two effects could offset each other).

As far as the empirical methodology is concerned, we implement an instrumental variable strategy to handle problems deriving from the fact that the incumbent's decision to run for election is endogenous and may be affected by unobservable and time variant variables that also affect turnout (for instance some unobservable skills of the incumbent may affect his/her decision to run for election and voters' decisions to cast their vote). We use the mayoral term-limit imposed by Italian law as an instrument for the presence of an incumbent among candidates. This instrument clearly affects the probability of having an incumbent among candidates, but it is unlikely to affect turnout directly.

Two-Stage-Least-Square results show a negative, but not statistically significant effect on turnout of there being an incumbent among candidates. However, when we consider separately municipalities located in the Centre-South and in the northern part of Italy, this negative effect persists only for municipalities located in the North, while the effect is positive for the Centre-South. This heterogeneous effect might depend on differences in social capital. Therefore, in order to understand better whether the effect of incumbency is related to this factor, we measure social capital by considering voter turnout in referenda and we split our sample to look separately at provinces below the 25th and above the 75th percentile. We find that the positive relationship between turnout and incumbency holds true only in municipalities where there are low levels of social capital.

We have further investigated this question by looking separately at the subsample of Italian regions with a high density of organised crime (above the 75th percentile) and at the subsample of regions with very low density of organised crime (below the 25th percentile). Again, we find that incumbency has a positive impact on turnout in the regions with a high density of organised crime, while the relationship is negative for the other regions.

The effects we find are small (based on the largest estimates, a positive impact of about 0.62 percentage points emerges in the South), but in line with those found in the literature on turnout. In a well-known paper, Matsusaka and Palda (1999) conclude that very little of the variation in voter turnout can be explained by most of the "standard" independent variables (such as age, education, electoral competition), meaning that much of the observed variation is due to unobservable factors.

We believe that understanding whether incumbency affects electoral turnout is relevant since turnout is often considered a crucial indicator of democracy (Sartori, 1987; Przeworski et al., 2000; Clark et al., 2009). From a theoretical point of view, the presence of an incumbent among candidates might either increase or decrease turnout and, so, providing empirical evidence on this relationship is particularly important. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first work to focus on this issue and the heterogeneous effects we find suggest that the channels through which it functions might differ according to the social and institutional environment.

The paper is organised as follows. In Section 2, we present the literature review. Section 3 is devoted to the description of the institutional framework and of our data set. In Section 4 and 5, we discuss Two Stage Least Square results. Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature review

Understanding why people vote in large elections and which factors affect this decision is of great interest both for political scientists and economists. The literature on the topic typically distinguishes between "instrumental voting", when people vote because they are interested in the consequences of the electoral process, and "expressive voting", when people obtain an intrinsic reward from casting a vote (see Brennan and Brooks, 2013; Hillman, 2010; Tóka, 2009).

An incumbent's standing as a candidate in an electoral race could affect turnout through a number of channels relating to both instrumental and expressive motivations. Firstly, due to so-called incumbency advantage (disadvantage), the incumbent candidate can reduce (increase) the degree of political competition (the probability of being the decisive voter) and, as a consequence, voters might be less (more) inclined to participate in the polls (see for example, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S017626801000073X>Hortala-Vallve and Esteve-Volart, 2011). This would be an indirect effect, since the electoral turnout is influenced through the change that the candidacy of an incumbent produces on electoral competition. Electoral turnout may also be influenced through more direct channels.

If the level of political competition remains constant, elections in which one or more incumbents run for re-election might exhibit different levels of information availability. On the one hand, we might see incumbents stand in low information elections, as it is easier to be re-elected. On the other hand, in elections in which the incumbent runs for re-election, citizens have the opportunity to evaluate, even if imperfectly, the incumbent candidate's past performance (Houser et al., 2011; Grofman et al., 1995; Keele, 2007; Sobbrío and Navarra, 2010). This means that there is greater availability of information and this, in turn, might lead to an increase in turnout, either because information directly increases the expected utility from voting (decision-theoretic models of turnout, Matsusaka, 1995) or because informed voters are less afraid that, in their ignorance, they might make a mistake and that their vote might cancel out a vote cast by a better informed elector with similar preferences (game theoretic models, Feddersen and Pesendorfer, 1999). However, offering more information to voters might also translate into lower political participation. Oliveros (2013) shows that voters with extreme ideologies collect information and vote if the information agrees with their bias, but abstain if the information goes against their bias.³

It should also be considered that incumbency may affect the direct utility which comes from expressing political preferences since voters may obtain higher or lower utility from voting in an election where there is a degree of novelty in the pool of candidates.

Finally, another direct channel through which incumbency might affect turnout relates to the fact that incumbent politicians are able to use their power to increase turnout. Many theoretical models predict that incumbents increase their chances of re-

³ The empirical evidence on the relationship between information availability and turnout also leads to ambiguous results (see Houser et al., 2011; Larcinese, 2009; Lassen, 2005) and even information on corruption does not increase political participation in an obvious manner; instead, a number of papers find an increase in abstentions, probably because voters become disenchanted with the political system (see for example, Costas-Pérez, 2014; Chong et al., 2013; Caillier, 2010).

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