



Research paper

Neighborhood heterogeneity and electoral turnout[☆]Giorgio Bellettini^{a, *}, Carlotta Berti Ceroni^b, Chiara Monfardini^c^a University of Bologna and CESifo, Italy^b University of Bologna, Italy^c University of Bologna, CHILD-CCA and IZA, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 September 2015

Received in revised form

19 February 2016

Accepted 22 February 2016

Available online 2 March 2016

Keywords:

Electoral turnout

Neighborhood heterogeneity

Income inequality

Ethnic diversity

ABSTRACT

We perform an empirical analysis to investigate how neighborhood heterogeneity affects electoral turnout. To this end, we rely on a unique dataset on local elections in an Italian municipality, which merges information on socio-economic characteristics of about 370,000 individuals with turnout data for 434 electoral precincts in 2004 and 2009. Exploiting both across and within precincts variation, we are able to disentangle the contextual effects on precinct-level electoral turnout of two different dimensions of neighborhood heterogeneity: income inequality and ethnic composition. Our results support the idea that contextual heterogeneity negatively affects political participation.

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1. Introduction

Well-functioning democracies require citizens' political participation to provide adequate representation of the general interest and to discipline politicians. The recent decline in political participation experienced by several countries, namely in the form of reduced voting turnout in democratic elections, is therefore a cause of concern. According to a recent publication of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), "electoral participation is in general falling, at least as measured by voter turnout. Rising levels of public apathy or cynicism are of growing concern in both newer and older democracies, and are a particular focus of concern in Western Europe" (IDEA, 2006, p. 5).

Historical trends show that in the last decades, along with decreasing rates of voter turnout, most democratic countries experienced also a substantial rise in economic inequality (see, for instance, the figures in Horn, 2011, pp. 11–13). At the same time,

ethnic diversity has increased in developed countries, mainly as a consequence of international migration.

These facts raise an important question: Are increasing socio-economic and ethnic heterogeneity and declining political participation correlated? According to a prominent view among economists and political scientists (see, for instance, Alesina and La Ferrara, 2000, 2002, and Putnam, 1993, 2007) increasing heterogeneity tends to reduce interpersonal trust and civic engagement, as heterogeneity-averse individuals shield from social interactions with others that are different from themselves. Reduced social cohesion translates into lower participation along many dimensions, including the political one.¹ Thus, according to this view, electoral turnout may be negatively associated to socio-economic and ethnic heterogeneity as individuals who live in increasingly heterogeneous communities tend to participate less in activities that affect collective outcomes.

In this paper we investigate these issues by focusing on the (not much explored) link between neighborhood heterogeneity and political participation. The main motivation to consider heterogeneity at the neighborhood level is that such geographically narrow measure seems particularly appropriate to shed light on the effects

[☆] We would like to thank the Statistical Office of the Comune di Bologna, and in particular Gianluigi Bovini, Franco Chiarini, Elena Galoppini, and Teresa Scarnati for data provision. We are also indebted with Silvia Giannini for her support throughout the entire project. We benefited from comments by André Blais, Enrico Cantoni, Anna Lo Prete, participants to the 13th Journées Louis-André Gerard-Varet, and two anonymous referees. We are also grateful to Antonio Dalla Zuanna for excellent research assistantship, and to Giovanni Prarolo for his help with ArcGIS.

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¹ Existing empirical evidence show that participation in social and civic activities and trust decrease with income inequality and ethnic diversity (see, among others, Alesina and La Ferrara, 2000, 2002, Costa Dora and Kahn, 2003; Uslaner and Brown, 2005; Bjornskov, 2006; Putnam, 2007, and more recently Barone and Mocetti, 2014).

(if any) of heterogeneity on electoral turnout via changing social interactions and cohesion among increasingly unequal individuals.

Specifically, we investigate the relationship between income inequality, ethnic heterogeneity and electoral turnout at the precinct level, by means of a unique panel dataset for the 2004 and 2009 local elections in Bologna, an Italian municipality of about 370,000 inhabitants in the Center-North of Italy. Two are the most important and distinctive features of our dataset. First, all variables of interest are measured at the precinct level, that is, at the smallest unit for which electoral outcomes are officially reported. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the only one in the existing literature in which income inequality is measured at such a small unit of investigation. This feature allows us to work with a large number of observations even within the municipality's boundaries.² Second, we rely on data that come *exclusively* from official sources and cover the entire municipality's resident population. This distinguishes our paper from the majority of existing papers that use survey data.³

Note that electoral precincts in Bologna can be considered as good approximations of residential neighborhoods as they include geographically contiguous areas. Contrary to what one may expect, population is heterogeneous both in terms of income and ethnicity within precincts. In particular, considerable income inequality is observed at the precinct level: in the pooled sample, the average precinct Gini index is 0.45.⁴ At the same time, there is no evidence of segregation of foreign immigrants in some specific precincts: their share over total resident population is everywhere below 31%. Moreover, and crucially for our analysis, the variability in terms of income inequality and foreign population composition is substantial across precincts and, at least for the latter variable, also over time.

Our main results are the following. By exploiting across-precincts variability, we show that political participation is undermined in socially and ethnically heterogeneous neighborhoods. Both income inequality and the proportion of foreign immigrants *who are not entitled to vote* turn out to be negatively associated with aggregate turnout. These results are robust to the use of alternative inequality measures, such as the Gini index, the median-to-mean ratio, and the ratio of the 80th to 20th percentiles, and to the inclusion of other neighborhood characteristics that may influence turnout.

Furthermore, by exploiting substantial within-precinct variation of the share of foreigners, we find evidence that the negative impact of ethnic heterogeneity on voter turnout is robust to time-invariant precinct unobservable factors. This result is confirmed using a more restrictive definition of the foreigners' group, which includes only African and Asian immigrants.

Note that, by focusing on immigrants who are not entitled to vote, our results point to an *indirect* effect of ethnic heterogeneity on electoral turnout. In fact, in our empirical analysis, the adverse effect of ethnic diversity cannot be ascribed to the well-documented lower electoral participation of immigrants relative to natives (see, for instance, OECD, 2012, ch.8). Rather, we show that participation decreases as *natives* tend to engage less in

political activities in the presence of higher shares of the foreign-born.

Additionally, we provide some evidence of a positive effect of social pressure (measured by population density) and population stability (measured by the percentage of home owners) on political participation, consistently with some long-established theories of turnout's determinants (see Geys, 2006).

The remaining of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses related literature. Section 3 describes the institutional and legal framework of Italian local elections. Section 4 illustrates the main features of our dataset and discusses the empirical strategy, while Section 5 presents the empirical results. Section 6 concludes.

2. Related literature

Our contribution is related to two strands of literature. First, a voluminous empirical literature investigates the relationship between income inequality and electoral turnout. Several contributions use individual survey data and merge them with information on income inequality, typically measured at a large geographical level (such as nation, state/region, county/province/prefecture). Generally, these works tend to find a negative association between income inequality and the likelihood of voting (see Anderson and Beramendi, 2008; Horn, 2011; Jaime-Castillo, 2009; Nguyen and Garand, 2007; Seeber and Steinbrecher, 2011; Solt, 2008, 2010).⁵ However, other studies find the opposite result, that is turnout increases with inequality, especially among the poor (see, for example, Brady, 2003), or find no evidence of a differential effect of inequality on turnout among the rich and the poor (Horn, 2011; Wichowski, 2010).

Other studies rely on aggregate turnout data. Again, results are inconclusive. Some papers provide evidence of a negative association between income inequality and turnout using data at the country (Lister, 2007) or regional level (Mahler, 2002). Using prefecture-level panel data on national legislative elections in Japan, Yamamura (2011) finds that voter turnout is associated with social cohesion and fragmentation and that income inequality has a negative effect. In a recent work on national legislative elections in democratic countries, Stockemer and Scruggs (2012) find no relationship between inequality and turnout and suggest that the negative association estimated in previous studies may be spurious and driven by the omission of a time trend.

Even if they could be considered conclusive, these results may be hardly interpreted as evidence of a negative effect of socio-economic heterogeneity in the community of residence on political participation, insofar as income inequality and other contextual variables are measured at too large units of observation to capture neighborhood effects.⁶

A second strand of literature investigates the association between ethnic and racial heterogeneity and electoral turnout. In his extensive review of aggregate-level determinants of turnout, Geys (2006) concludes that ethnic diversity is weakly related to turnout, while the latter is negatively affected by the share of the minority group in the population. Consistently with this conclusion, for the case of Britain, Fieldhouse and Cutts (2008) using individual data from marked election registers find that non-Asian

² It is worth emphasizing that we could rely on precinct-level measures of income inequality and ethnic heterogeneity as information on *individual* incomes and nationality, taken from official income tax files and registry office records, were available.

³ As we discuss below and extensively explain in the following Section, these features represent a remarkable advantage for the identification of a possible effect of socio-economic heterogeneity on turnout and for the interpretation of the empirical results.

⁴ As a term of comparison, our average precinct Gini index is larger than the one reported for Italy as a whole in the same period.

⁵ Scervini and Segatti (2012) investigate the drop in Italian turnout rate since 1994 and relate it to income inequality at the regional level.

⁶ In this literature the explanation for the negative effect of inequality on turnout relies on the idea that higher inequality generates disaffection for politics among the poor, who increasingly feel that their interests have fallen out of the political agenda, as proposed by Schattschneider, 1960 and Goodin and Dryzek, 1980, in the so called "relative power theory" (see Solt, 2008, 2010).

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