



Electoral rules and voter turnout



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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the effect of electoral rules on voter turnout. It focuses on Italian municipalities, where a single ballot system applies to municipalities with less than 15,000 inhabitants, while a dual ballot system applies above that threshold. By exploiting this discontinuity, the paper finds that the dual ballot increases participation at the local polls by about 1 percentage point. The increase in voter turnout is associated with broader political representation, higher quality politicians, and greater fiscal discipline. Finally, we document that the higher political participation triggered by local electoral rules extends to nationwide voting contexts.

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1. Introduction

Voter turnout has declined in many large and well-established democracies over the last decades. This obviously gives cause for concern since voter participation has far-reaching political and economic consequences. Low participation determines a lack of representativeness of democratic institutions, undermines the quality of the democratic process and is associated with a more unequal distribution of income (Mueller & Stratmann, 2003) and poorer public sector efficiency (Borge, Falch, & Tovmo, 2008).

We add to the empirical literature on the determinants of voter turnout by investigating the role of the dual ballot (a run-off or two-round system) as opposed to the single ballot in a quasi-experimental setting. Under a dual ballot scheme, voters cast two sequential votes. First, they vote for one of the candidates standing for election. The two candidates who obtain the most votes then compete again in a second round, which defines the winner. By contrast, under a single ballot scheme the winning candidate is selected in the first round, following a competition with several other contenders. The dual ballot system has a number of attractive features: it increases political competition and produces better quality politicians and public policies (see Section 2). For these reasons the dual ballot rule might positively affect voter turnout.

Our empirical analysis focuses on Italian municipalities. This institutional setup is ideal for our empirical test: since 1993, there have been two different electoral schemes for mayoral race, according to the size of the town. A single ballot applies to municipalities with less than 15,000 inhabitants, while a dual ballot applies above that threshold. This allows us to exploit a sharp change in electoral rules to identify a causal effect through a regression discontinuity design (RDD). To the best of our knowledge this is the first contribution to assess explicitly the role of dual ballot elections in shaping voter turnout.¹ Italy is also an interesting case as voter turnout at parliamentary elections has rather monotonically decreased from more than 90% during the 1970s to 75% in 2013.

Our results show that, compared with the single ballot, the dual ballot does increase the political participation of residents. The estimated magnitude of the effect is non-negligible: it is roughly equal to 1 percentage point (about one ninth of the standard error of the dependent variable). After establishing our core result, we shed some light on the transmission channels by testing whether our data are consistent with the theoretical arguments supporting our empirical test. We find that this is the case. In fact, the run-off rule leads to broader political representation, politicians of higher calibre and greater fiscal discipline. Finally, and very interestingly, our

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¹ The only (partial) exception is Fujiwara (2011), who studies Brazilian mayoral races in a RDD framework. However, he focuses on a different issue: the effect of the dual ballot rule on the vote share of the third and lower placed candidates and he only tangentially analyses the effect on turnout in a test for a quasi-random assignment of the baseline covariates.

results suggest that the impact on voter turnout is persistent and, hence, not limited to local elections: dual ballot municipalities also exhibit higher voting participation at parliamentary elections. This last result provides some support for the idea that turnout reflects civic duty values and that those values can be encouraged. Overall, and in light of the concerns about the widespread reduction of voter turnout in many countries, we believe that our findings might have important implications for the design of institutions.

This paper is related to those contributions which analyse the empirical determinants of voter turnout (for a review see [Geys, 2006](#)). A few points are worth mentioning here. First, the electoral system is generally believed to have an effect on the number of people who turn out to vote. Nevertheless, existing studies have focussed mainly on comparisons between proportional systems and majoritarian ones and no broad consensus has emerged ([Katz, 1997](#)).² Second, the size of the population involved in voting is seen as a first-order explanatory factor for turnout ([Mueller, 2003](#); [Owen & Grofman, 1984](#)).³ The RDD empirical design we adopt allows us to carefully differentiate out the role of population to gauge the role of different explanatory factors, such as the electoral rules. Third, unlike this work, the existing empirical work mainly draws conclusions on the basis of simple correlations so it fails to identify genuine causal links.⁴

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section we briefly sketch the theoretical arguments underlying our empirical test. Section 3 describes the electoral systems in Italian municipalities. Section 4 illustrates the empirical strategy and Section 5 the data. Section 6 presents the results. Section 7 concludes.

2. Conceptual framework

In this section we show why the difference between single round and two-round elections are likely to matter for voter turnout. Following [Dhillon and Peralta \(2002\)](#), from the voter's point of view the expected payoff from voting is $R = BP + D - C$ where B is the benefit stemming from the implementation of their preferred policy, P is the (perceived) probability that one's vote will be decisive, D is the expressive value from the act of voting and C is the cost of voting (gathering information on candidates, going to the polls, etc.). A voter casts a vote if and only if R is nonnegative $R \geq 0$. The dual ballot scheme (as opposed to the single ballot one) might positively affect the probability of voting by increasing B and D . According to an established strand of literature, in fact, there are at least three related effects of the run-off rule.

First, it increases the number of parties/participants in the political competition. This idea can be traced back to [Duverger's \(1954\)](#) conjecture according to which simple-majority single-ballot rules tend to favour the emergence of a two-party system while a simple majority with a second ballot (or proportional representation) supports multipartyism. In this vein, the dual ballot rule weakens the incentives for political entities to merge. A simple but very effective example taken from [Chamon et al. \(2008\)](#) illustrates this point very

² For instance, majoritarian systems might deter participation because supporters of the smaller parties are led to believe that their vote is of no importance ([Ladner and Milner, 1999](#)). However, proportional systems might also discourage participation insofar as they are more likely to produce multiparty (coalition) governments, which reflect not only the will of the voters but also the result of political deal-making ([Blais and Carty, 1990](#)).

³ Smaller-scale elections are likely to display a higher turnout for a number of reasons: (i) voters know more about candidates and local issues and so information costs are lower; (ii) voters are more likely to be affected by future policies, and (iii) they are more exposed to social pressure.

⁴ Other papers that make use of randomized or quasi-randomized empirical strategies in examining the determinants of turnout are [Gerber and Green \(2000\)](#), [Gentzkow \(2006\)](#), [Hastings et al. \(2007\)](#), and [Funk \(2010\)](#). However, they do not focus on the role of electoral rules.

clearly. Consider a single ballot election and suppose that 60% of the electorate is left-leaning. If there is only one left-leaning and one right-leaning party contesting the election, the former should win easily. If, however, there are two competing left-leaning parties, the right-leaning one may be able to achieve a relative majority. In this case, under the single ballot rule the two left-leaning parties should get together and support a single candidate. Under a dual ballot rule, conversely, the presence of two left-leaning candidates should not affect the final outcome and therefore a higher supply of candidates is warranted. [Osborne and Slivinski \(1996\)](#) develop a theoretical model of electoral competition and show that the number of candidates is larger under the two-round rule. [Bordignon, Nannicini, and Tabellini \(2011\)](#) reach the same theoretical conclusion that they test on Italian municipalities by exploiting the same 15,000 inhabitant-based cutoff. Their RDD regressions confirm that under the dual ballot rule both the number of political candidates and party lists are larger. [Chamon et al. \(2008\)](#) apply a similar RDD framework to Brazilian cities and, again, find that run-off increases political competition. A greater number of parties, in turn, might foster voter participation through B and D . To give an intuition on the first channel, assume as in [Bordignon et al. \(2011\)](#) that there are four parties: a minority extreme right-wing party, a major centre party, a major centre-left party and a minor extreme left-wing party. Under a dual ballot scheme, either far-left or far-right party voters are more likely to vote because their first round ballot can influence the second ballot policy platform of the nearest moderate candidate (at that stage their vote may be crucial). This would raise B for extreme voters and would be unlikely to reduce it in a significant manner for moderate ones. At the same time, greater representativeness leaves voter freer to express and signal their preferences, thereby positively affecting the expressive benefit D , echoing the more established role of proportional systems compared to majoritarian ones.

Second, the dual ballot is likely to raise the quality of politicians. This might happen through the above-mentioned increase in political competition. For instance, [De Paola and Scoppa \(2010\)](#) and [Galasso and Nannicini \(2011\)](#) recently analysed the causal link between political competition and the quality of politicians. Moreover, the political science literature and anecdotal evidence suggest that the dual ballot might shift the voters' focus from the views and ideologies of parties and/or lists towards the personal qualities of the individual candidates. As only two candidates run for office, voters are granted a more effective right to choose. In turn, political parties are stimulated to support good candidates (even picked from outside their own ranks) to attract, in the second round, the votes of those who had preferred a different runner in the first round. Once in office, the focus on individuals rather than parties makes it easier for the voters to judge politicians according to their performance, thus reinforcing the link between performance and re-election ([Seabright, 1996](#)).⁵ To the extent that the dual ballot favours the rise of a more capable class of politicians, the expected benefits of voting might be higher (again through higher B and presumably D) and people might feel less distant from politics. Consequently, participation might increase.

Third, the dual ballot tends to generate better policies. [Lizzeri and Persico \(2005\)](#) theoretically show that the run-off system promotes the provision of non-targetable public goods instead of pork-barrel policies. Other consequences in terms of fiscal prudence have been highlighted too. Since the seminal work by [Persson and Tabellini \(2000\)](#) electoral systems have mainly been

⁵ Taking stock of the 2001 Italian municipal elections in the 103 provincial capitals, [Baldini \(2002\)](#) observes that "the dual ballot resulted in voters having more influence and mayors getting more power, while becoming at the same time more accountable."

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