

Sounds of Silence: Electoral Consequences of Turnout Decline and Access-based Selective Demobilization

Declining voter participation has raised concerns about the responsiveness and sustainability of democratic systems. While determinants of reduced participation have been studied in an extensive literature, consequences of turnout variations are less explored and mostly rely on weather-induced shocks for identification. I shed new light on this topic by studying the effects of a reform that suddenly cut polling stations by 30% in Italy as part of broader fiscal consolidation measures. Leveraging variation at the municipality level in a fuzzy difference-in-differences design combined with a novel Wikipedia-based measure of political ideology, I provide causal evidence on the intertwined relationship between voting access, participation, and electoral outcomes. Potential mechanisms are explored through the analysis of precinct-level and geo-referenced individual data. The paper provides three main contributions. First, restricting voting access determines a decline in voter participation. Second, lower participation is driven by demobilization of peripheral voters with specific political and economic attitudes, who show higher voting-cost elasticity. Third, the exogenous reduction in turnout shifts the ideological distribution of the electorate persistently to the right, inducing different dynamics of support across party groups.