

Electoral participation, voter turnout, consequences of turnout decline

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Electoral participation

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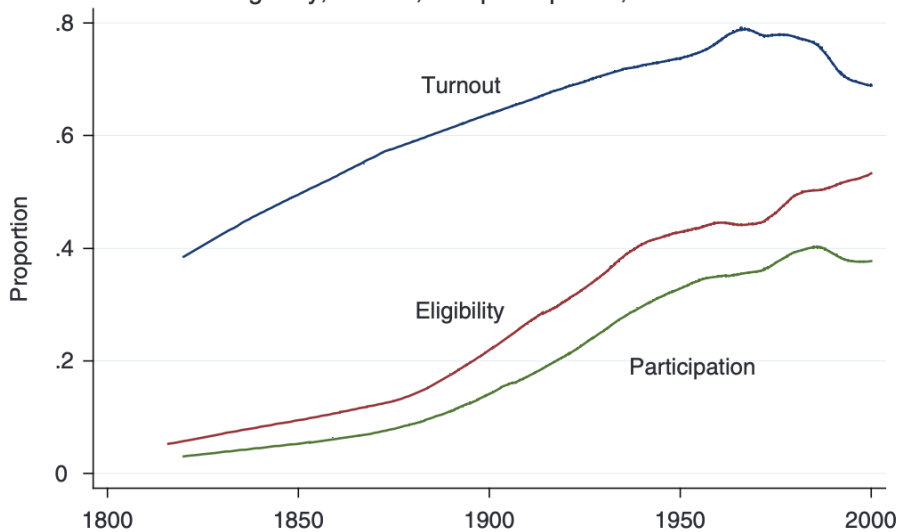
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- Eligibility and turnout

Electoral participation in historical perspective

Eligibility, turnout, and participation, 1815-2000



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- Does enfranchisement increase participation of socio-demographic groups newly eligible to vote?
- Historical evidence: increases in participation are due almost exclusively to extensions of suffrage rather than to increase turnout of eligible population
- Extensions of franchise generally depress turnout (Przeworski, 1975)

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- Extensions of franchise generally depress turnout (Przeworski, 1975)
- Negative to mixed evidence from case studies: women (Firebaugh and Chen, 1995; Corder and Wolbrecht, 2006), literacy (Larcinese, 2011)

Voter turnout: theoretical framework

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- Individuals vote if expected benefits exceed the costs; therefore, higher voting costs \Rightarrow lower turnout

Explaining voter turnout

- Which factors affect turnout by altering costs and benefits?

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- A meta-analysis of the literature explores the role of three groups of determinants ([Geys 2006](#))
 - ▶ Socio-economic
 - ▶ Political
 - ▶ Institutional

Socio-economic factors

- Population size:

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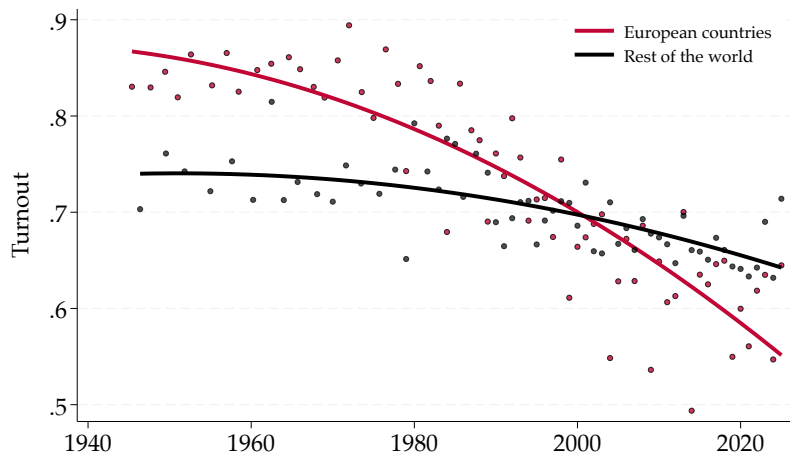
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Global turnout decline



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- To better understand the electoral consequences of turnout variations, it's fundamental to understand which voters are more exposed to the costs and benefits of turning out (the composition of the electorate)
- My research analyzes the consequences of an increase in voting costs, i.e. a massive closure of polling stations in Italy

Who votes?

- Palfrey & Rosenthal (1985) models turnout as a voter participation game under uncertainty: when uncertainty about preferences and costs is present, marginal voters (as opposed to core voters) are the first to abstain when costs rise
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- A reduction in polling stations leads to higher costs that in turn produces selective abstention: the composition of the electorate changes - not only its size

Voting costs and turnout

Distance and time costs consistently reduce participation

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- Previous cost shocks lead to lower turnout in the future through habit formation ([Fujiwara et al. 2016](#); [Pettigrew 2021](#))

Unequal participation and partisan bias

- Participation costs are not evenly distributed:
 - ▶ Low-income, younger, and less-educated citizens face higher barriers to voting
 - ▶ These groups are, on average, more left-leaning on redistribution and welfare
- Unequal participation creates systematic representation bias ([Lijphart 1997](#))

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- Unequal participation creates systematic representation bias ([Lijphart 1997](#))
- Empirical evidence:
 - ▶ Rain lowers turnout and benefits Republicans ([Gomez et al. 2007](#); [Hansford & Gomez 2010](#))
 - ▶ Electronic voting in Brazil enfranchised poorer voters and boosted support for the left ([Fujiwara 2015](#))

When costs rise and turnout falls, results shift to the right (but plenty of mixed evidence)

Selective demobilization and the centrist advantage

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- When voting costs rise, the first to abstain are marginal or weakly committed voters
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- Mainstream parties are more insulated:
 - ▶ Stronger organization, higher informational and mobilization capacity
- Extreme parties rely more on alienated, protest, or younger voters - those most cost-sensitive

Implication: mainstream/centrist parties gain when turnout declines, while extreme parties lose; overall polarization decreases

Municipal voting precincts (pre-1998)

- Division of municipalities into voting precincts regulated nationally; implemented locally by municipal electoral commissions
- Commissions revise precinct boundaries and voter lists **twice a year**; registration is automatic
- Each polling station served **100–800 voters** (Law 1058/1947; DPR 223/1967)
- Every station requires a staffed **electoral office**:
 - ▶ President, secretary, 4–5 scrutineers
 - ▶ All receive compensation for electoral duties

Very costly system: each of the $\approx 92,000$ operating polling stations cost 1.15 million Lire ($\approx \text{€ } 595$) in 1997 (lowerbound)

The 1998 reform of polling stations

- Law 449/1997 mandated a **30% reduction** in polling stations to cut public expenditures
- New limits on eligible voters *per* station: **500–1,200**
- Implementation deadline: **end of 1998**
- Cuts prioritized merging stations in the same building; external merges only if necessary
- Reductions adjusted across municipalities to achieve 30% target **at the provincial level**
- At the end of 1998, 60,318 polling stations nationwide

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 - ▶ Yes, a decline in turnout explains:
 - Overall shift to the **right**
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- How did the reform produce these effects?
 - ▶ Selective **demobilization** of disengaged, disaffected, alienated individuals

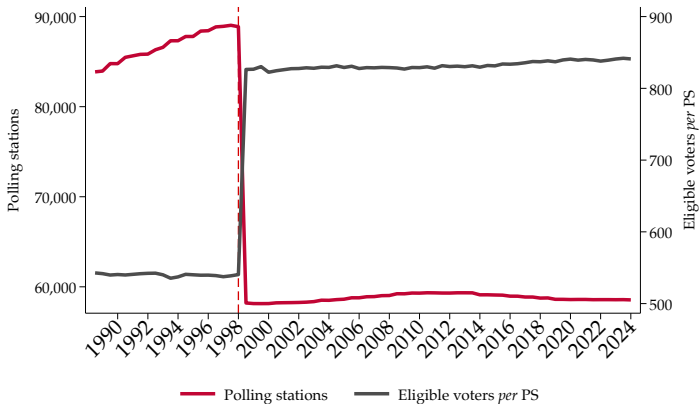


Fig. 3 Aggregate number of polling stations and average eligible voters across the 1998 reform

Giornata elettorale caratterizzata da una grande partecipazione al voto con lunghe code ai seggi

Da Cesano a Torrenova, crisi di nervi tra i presidenti di seggio



Preghiera di maggior ordine e partecipazione al voto. In molti seggi, però, le polemiche si sono accese. In alcune zone, le code ai seggi sono durate anche oltre un'ora. In altri, invece, le polemiche si sono accese per le irregolarità riscontrate durante la scrutinazione. In alcune zone, le polemiche si sono accese per le irregolarità riscontrate durante la scrutinazione. In alcune zone, le polemiche si sono accese per le irregolarità riscontrate durante la scrutinazione.



Code e proteste ai seggi: in molte sezioni si è votato dopo la mezzanotte

L'odissea di uno scrutatore del Trionfale

Il forzato del seggio tra insulti e tensioni



Gli effetti della rivolta in un seggio dei Quartieri spagnoli, a Napoli

L'election-day finisce nella notte

Alle 24 aperto un seggio su tre

«Ventiquattr'ore di fronte ai cittadini impazziti»

18 Aumenta l'astensionismo. Caos ai seggi: a mezzanotte elettori ancora in fila per votare

IL VERDETTO DELLE URNE



OME 18 Nella grande città il caos nei seggi: l'ordine non è mai stato ristabilito. In molti seggi, però, le polemiche si sono accese per le irregolarità riscontrate durante la scrutinazione. In alcune zone, le polemiche si sono accese per le irregolarità riscontrate durante la scrutinazione.



OME 18 In Molise, la gente non sa dove andare a votare. In alcune zone, le polemiche si sono accese per le irregolarità riscontrate durante la scrutinazione. In alcune zone, le polemiche si sono accese per le irregolarità riscontrate durante la scrutinazione.



OME 21 Nel Lazio il caos è ormai un fatto. In alcune zone, le polemiche si sono accese per le irregolarità riscontrate durante la scrutinazione. In alcune zone, le polemiche si sono accese per le irregolarità riscontrate durante la scrutinazione.



OME 14 In provincia di una zona dove si è votato, in alcune zone si è votato dopo la mezzanotte. In alcune zone, le polemiche si sono accese per le irregolarità riscontrate durante la scrutinazione. In alcune zone, le polemiche si sono accese per le irregolarità riscontrate durante la scrutinazione.

Il ministro dell'Interno: ritardi per la riduzione del numero dei seggi

SEGGI E CAOS (3)

Magnani: voto proibito

Ho presentato con altre persone una denuncia per violazione del diritto di voto nel quarto municipio di Roma. Se-

Bianco resta solo contro tutti dopo il caos ai seggi

Finì e Casini: si dimetta. Critiche dalla stampa estera. Osservatore Romano: democrazia ferita. Il ministro: chiedo scusa

«Noi, astensionisti per forza»

In coda al seggio, non sono riusciti a votare

«Per le code ai seggi qualche testa salterà»

Bianco si scusa per il voto all'alba

La beffa dei risultati, processo al Viminale

Finì chiede le sue dimissioni: imperdonabile

Il ministero: la Finanziaria ci ha tagliato i fondi e la riduzione delle sezioni ha portato a un aumento delle schede da scrutinare

Reggio Calabria: Antonio Surace, 50 anni, è stato l'ultimo italiano a votare. «Nell'attesa ho tenuto su di morale i miei compaesani»

«Erano quasi le 5 del mattino, e la mia scheda cadeva nell'urna»

TORRENTI (Reggio Calabria) — Ha alzato i tre occhi per vedere il numero del seggio, per poi andare a votare. È il momento di votare. È il momento di votare. È il momento di votare.

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ELEZIONI 2001
IL VOTO
PUNTO DI LUNGO



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- Focus on votes from 9 rounds of national elections for parties running for the Chamber of Deputies (first-best for homogeneous political supply)
- Sample: municipalities without missing data holding other elections off-cycle ([Cantoni et al. 2021](#); [Kogan et al. 2018](#))

Dependent variable(s)

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- Ideology scores collected on parties' Wikipedia pages

Wikipedia as data source

Fratelli d'Italia - Alleanza Nazionale	
	
Presidente	Giorgia Meloni (dal 2014)
Segretario	Arianna Meloni (dal 2023)
Coordinatore	Edmondo Cirielli (dal 2018) ^[1]
Stato	 Italia
Sede	Via della Scrofa, 39 Roma ^[2]
Abbreviazione	Fdi
Fondazione	28 dicembre 2012 ^[3]
Derivato da	Il Popolo della Libertà
Ideologia	Conservatorismo nazionale ^[4] ^[5] Nazionalismo italiano ^[5] ^[6] Populismo di destra ^[7] ^[8] Reazionarioismo ^[8] ^[9] ^[10] ^[11] Conservatorismo sociale ^[5] ^[12] Post-fascismo ^[5] ^[13] ^[14] Euroscetticismo ^[15] Atlantismo ^[15]
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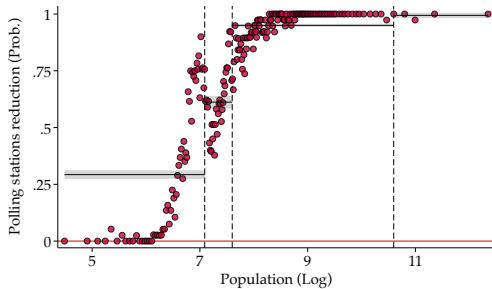
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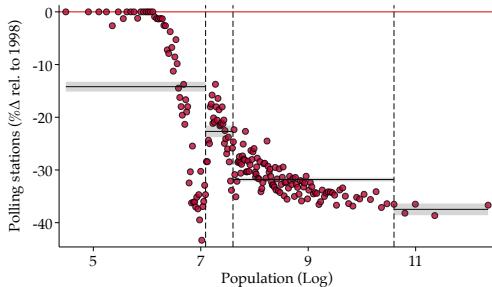
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- Ideology tags: hundreds of labels
- Political position: 7-level ordered list (left-right)
 - ▶ Summary
 - ▶ Validity
- Herrmann & Döring (2023) combine them to obtain an ideology scale interpretable as left-right
 - ▶ Her-Dör estimation



- ▶ T1
- ▶ T2
- ▶ T3
- ▶ T1 exp
- ▶ T2 exp
- ▶ T3 exp



- ▶ T1
- ▶ T2
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Fig. 6 Polling stations reduction following the 1998 reform

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 - ▶ Turnout (first stage)
 - ▶ Electoral outcomes (reduced form)
- Combining the two differences provides an estimate of the effect of turnout on electoral outcomes

Identification strategy

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- The details of the reform create an ideal source of variation for voting access
- Within population brackets, some municipalities are more exposed (treated) and other municipalities are less exposed (control)
- The latter group is used as a counterfactual to measure the treatment effect of a reduction in voting access, and, in turn, of a reduction in turnout

Individual-level analysis

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- Geo-referenced through information on municipality of residence → linked to exposure

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- 2001 survey asks retrospective information both on 2001 election and, critically, 1996 election
- As-good-as longitudinal data → within-respondent variation
- DV: demobilization dummy (1 if i voted in 1996 and did not in 2001)
- Moderators of exposure to characterize who is more elastic to a voting-cost shock

First stage

$$T_{i,t} = \beta(\mathbb{I}\{V_i \neq V_b^*\} \times \mathbb{I}\{t > 1998\}) + \mu_i + \nu_t + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (1)$$

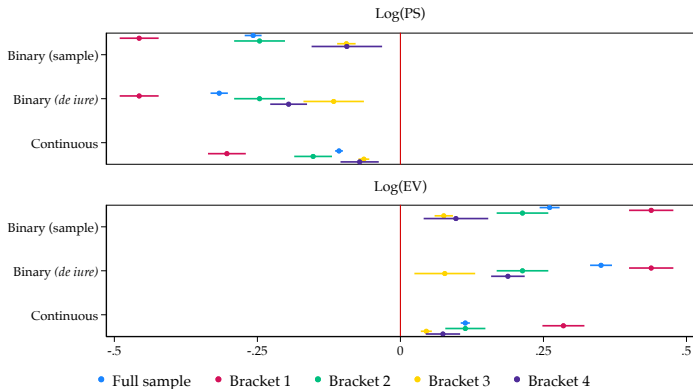
- $T_{i,t}$: turnout rate in municipality i and year t
- $\mathbb{I}\{V_i \neq V_b^*\}$: exposure dummy, 1 if non-compliant with target V^* in bracket b ($> PS^*$ if $i \in \{b_1, b_2\}$, $< EV^*$ if $i \in \{b_3, b_4, b_5\}$)
- $\mathbb{I}\{t > 1998\}$: time dummy, 1 if election occurs after 1998
- β : DiD estimator, instrument for $T_{i,t}$
- μ_i : municipality FE
- ν_t : election year FE

Second stage

$$Y_{i,t} = \gamma \widehat{T}_{i,t} + \pi_i + \rho_t + \eta_{i,t} \quad (2)$$

- $Y_{i,t}$: election outcome in municipality i and year t
- γ : LATE estimator
- π_i : municipality FE
- ρ_t : election year FE

DV: Voting access

**Fig. 8** Exposure(s) to reform and implementation outcomes - DiD estimates

DV: Turnout

Table 2 Exposure to reform and turnout – First stage estimates

	Full	B1	B2	B3	B4
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Exp. × Post-1998	-0.723*** (0.225)	0.831 (0.517)	1.822*** (0.507)	-1.497*** (0.277)	0.148 (0.691)
Adj. R^2	0.82	0.73	0.81	0.89	0.96
KP F -stat	10.3	2.6	12.9	29.3	0.0
AR Wald test	27.2	0.0	3.7	20.0	0.0
Meany	78.7	76.9	77.6	80.0	80.0
Std. Dev. $_{\gamma}$	[10.63]	[11.29]	[10.53]	[10.13]	[9.37]
N	29,916	8,613	4,869	15,894	540
Municipality FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Robust standard errors, clustered by municipality, in parentheses.

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

DV: Demobilization dummy

Table 3 Exposure to reform, voting access, and demobilization – Individual-level estimates

	OLS		IPTW	AIPW	TSLS	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Panel A: Full sample</i>						
Exposed	0.021** (0.010)	0.017* (0.010)	0.019* (0.010)	0.023** (0.009)		
Availability					-0.018* (0.011)	
Congestion						0.008* (0.005)
<i>N</i>	1,800	1,769	1,536	1,769	1,769	1,769
KP <i>F</i> -stat					293.1	369.3

<i>Panel B: Bracket 3</i>						
Exposed	0.029** (0.011)	0.023** (0.011)	0.030*** (0.010)	0.029*** (0.010)		
Availability					-0.024** (0.012)	
Congestion						0.011** (0.005)
<i>N</i>	973	963	812	963	963	963
KP <i>F</i> -stat					180.8	255.8
Controls	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The dependent variable is a demobilization dummy equal to 1 if the respondent voted in 1996 and did not vote in 2001. Availability and congestion in Columns 5 and 6 are treated as endogenous regressors that quantify, respectively, a 10-percentage-point change in polling stations and

DV: Demobilization dummy

Table 4 Mechanisms of demobilization – Individual-level estimates

MV:	Reduced political interest	Neutral political efficacy	Disliked incumbent efficacy	Perceive economic problems
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Bracket 3</i>				
Exposed	-0.064** (0.032)	0.026* (0.013)	0.024** (0.012)	0.023** (0.011)
MV	-0.009 (0.007)	-0.006 (0.008)	-0.013 (0.010)	-0.043* (0.026)
Exposed × MV	0.043*** (0.015)	0.030** (0.013)	0.024** (0.012)	0.055** (0.027)
<i>N</i>	962	807	888	937
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The dependent variable is a demobilization dummy equal to 1 if the respondent voted in 1996 and did not vote in 2001. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

DV: Vote share

Table 6 Turnout and vote shares by ideology – Second stage estimates - Brack. 3

	Left	C-left	Centre	C-right	Right
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Turnout	3.065*** (0.684)	-2.569*** (0.550)	-0.624 (0.471)	0.176 (0.194)	-0.064 (0.236)
Mean _γ	13.30	22.18	24.49	18.08	21.17
Std. Dev. _γ	[14.11]	[12.09]	[18.60]	[14.38]	[14.61]
<i>N</i>	15,145	15,145	15,145	15,145	15,145
Municipality FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Dependent variables are cumulative vote shares obtained by parties belonging to specific levels of ideology. Samples include municipality-elections in which parties from all reported ideological levels were running. Robust standard errors, clustered by municipality, in parentheses.

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

DV: Vote share

Table 7 Turnout and vote shares by ideology – Second stage estimates

	Extreme		Moderate	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Turnout	6.720*** (1.802)	3.001*** (0.751)	-6.825*** (1.824)	-3.018*** (0.746)
Mean _γ	33.92	34.47	65.36	64.76
Std. Dev. _γ	[14.72]	[14.87]	[14.64]	[14.83]
<i>N</i>	27,929	15,145	27,929	15,145
Municipality FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Dependent variables are cumulative vote shares obtained by parties belonging to specific levels of ideology. Samples include municipality-elections in which parties from all reported ideological levels were running. Robust standard errors, clustered by municipality, in parentheses.

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

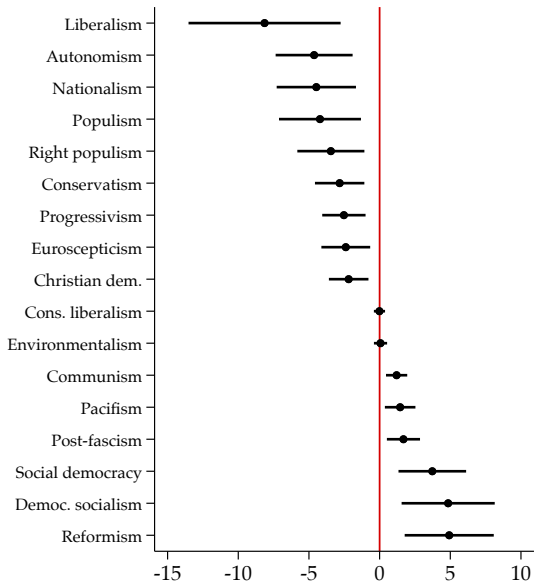


Fig. 10 Turnout and vote shares by ideology tag - Second stage

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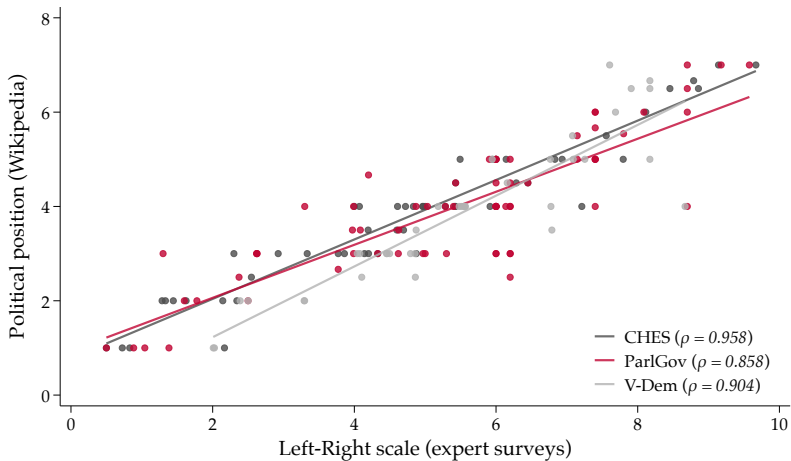


Fig. A2 Parties' ideology scores based on Wikipedia and expert surveys – Validation

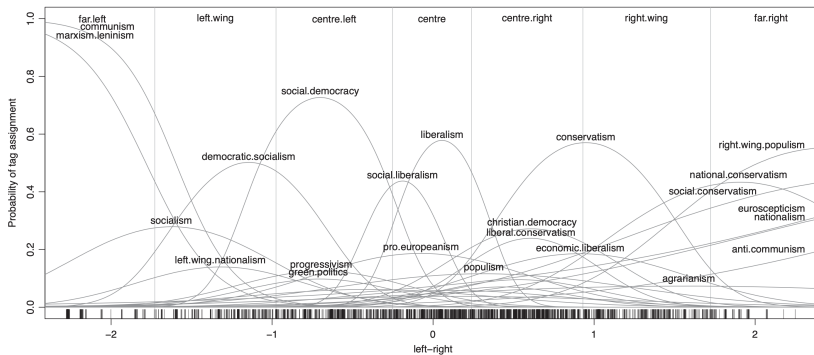
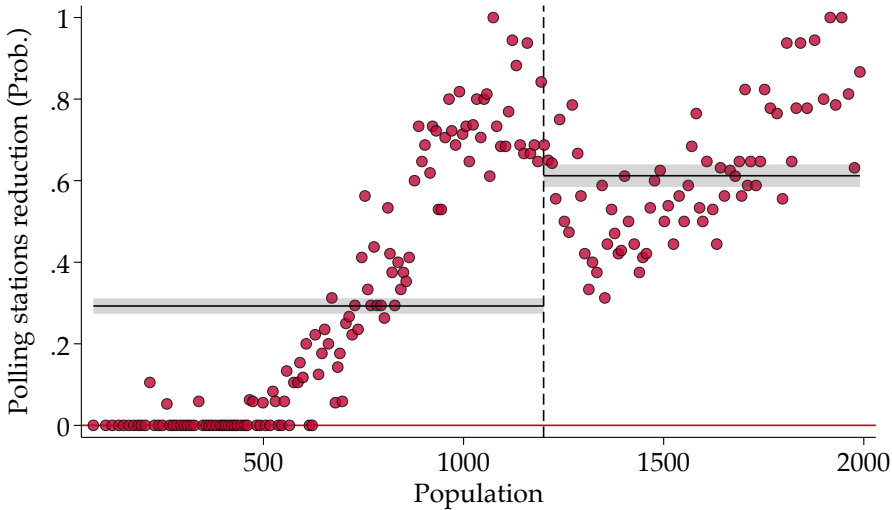
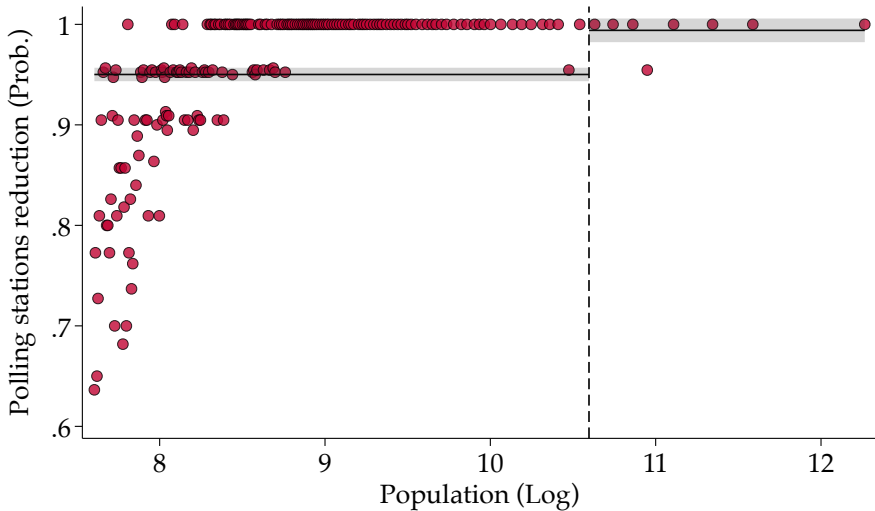


Figure 5. Response curves for ideology tags, estimated intervals for Ir-position tags, and estimated party positions (indicated by tick marks) from a joint scaling of ideology and Ir-position tags; 2,147 parties and 35 tags (some response curves are unlabeled to avoid clutter).

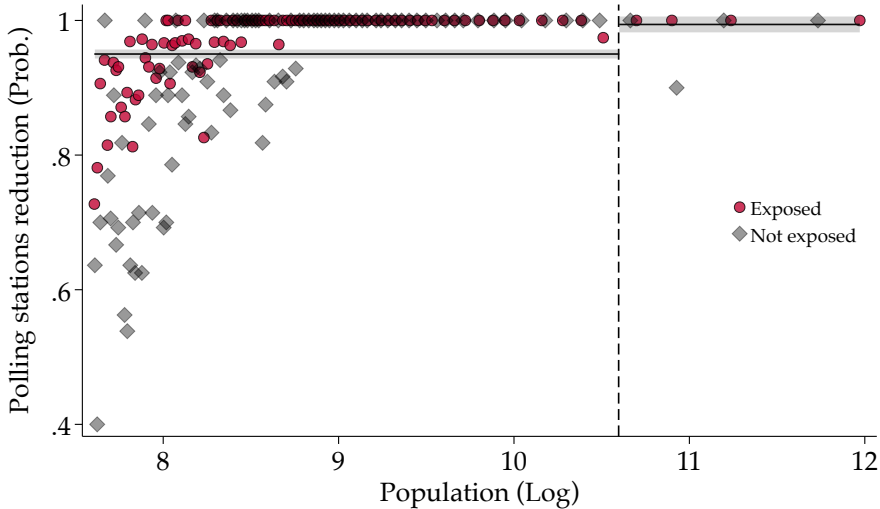
Threshold 1 [Pop. = 1,200]



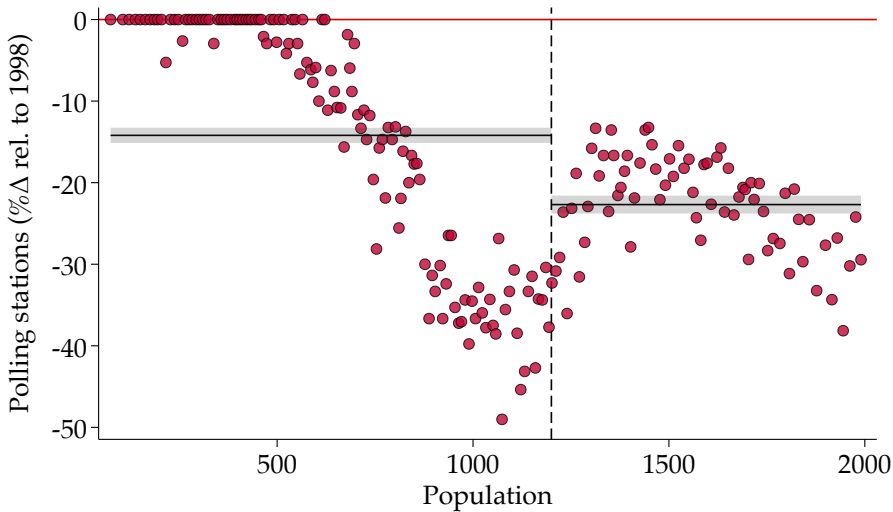
Threshold 3 [Pop. = 40,000]



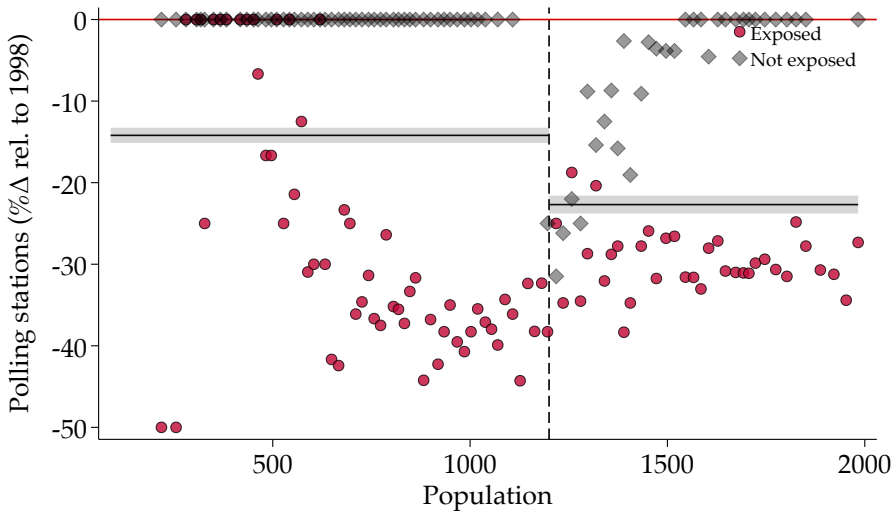
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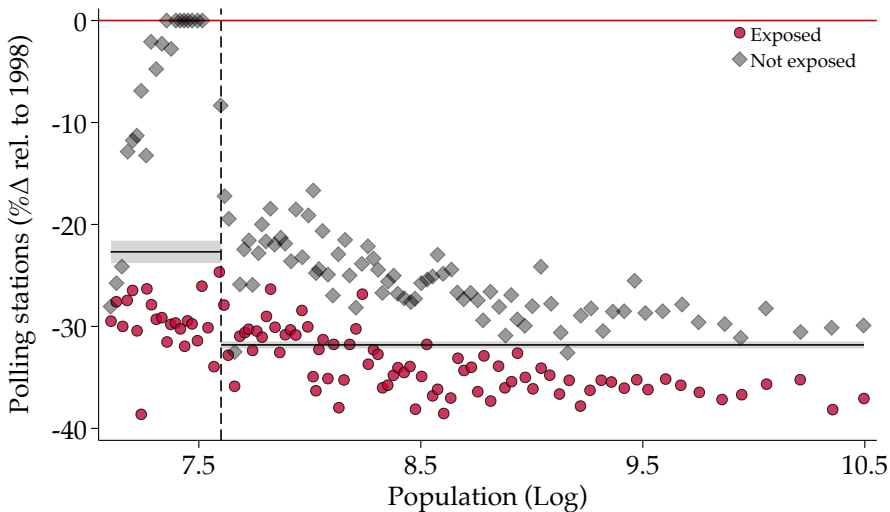
Threshold 1 [Pop. = 1,200]



Threshold 1 [Pop. = 1,200]



Threshold 2 [Pop. = 2,000]



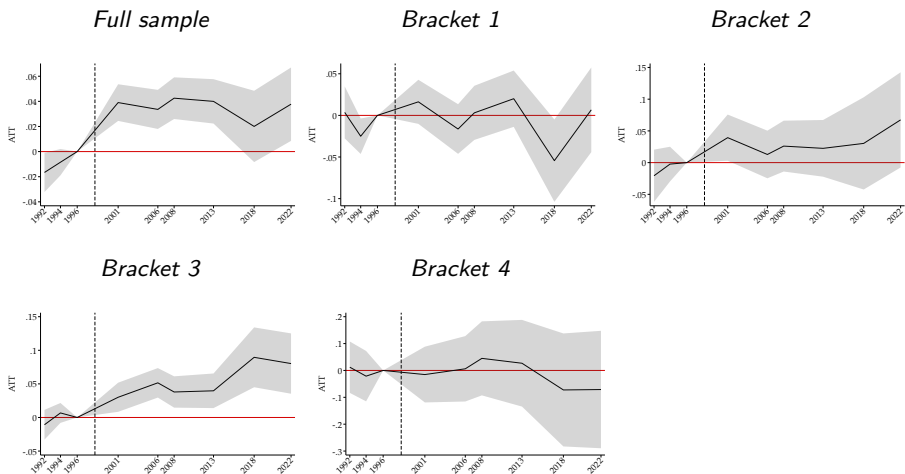


Fig. A6 Exposure to reform and turnout – Event study plots

