

Discussion of 'Sick of Politics?' by Jon H. Fiva, Jo
Thori Lind, Bjørn-Atle Reme, and Henning Øien

Bas Machielsen (discussant)

2024-04-23

Short Summary

Short Summary

- ▶ The paper uncovers the causal effect of political office on (i) income, (ii) general health, and (iii) mental health
 - ▶ Political office: being appointed (!) as a mayor, or being elected into the national Norwegian parliament
- ▶ Study uses objective administrative data on public health service usage to gauge general and mental health
- ▶ Research Design: (Generalized) difference-in-difference:

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \sum_{r=-4, r \neq -1}^4 \tau_r I_r + \sum_{r=-4, r \neq -1}^4 \beta_r I_r \times \text{Elected}_i + \theta \text{Elected}_i + \epsilon_{it}$$

with time $r = -1$ acting as the normalized difference.

- ▶ The treatment is defined as the appointment (as mayor) into political office
- ▶ Suggested channel: deterioration of mental health through

Discussion Plan

Discussion Points

- ▶ Is the treatment the right treatment?
 - ▶ More refined ways of gauging the mental-health related impact of politics?
- ▶ Is the control group the right control group?
- ▶ Ultimately, the answer to these questions might be “yes”

Treatment

- ▶ A significant part of the motivation of the paper concerns harassment and slander
 - ▶ These two are responsible for the potential deterioration of mental health following assumption of political office
 - ▶ But this is left out of the empirical design altogether
- Using the names and party affiliations of candidates, we have collected the daily appearances in each media outlet for all candidates running for national-level office and all local-level mayoral candidates (i.e., first-ranked candidates).*
- ▶ It seems that you do have individual-level data of media appearance
 - ▶ About 30 hits per month: provided this concerns enough unique mayors, you can use this data (how: next slides)
 - ▶ The pooling of mayors subject to slandering with mayors who are “left alone” might also be a principal reason for the null effects you find

Treatment

- ▶ A suggested more refined treatment group would be mayors subjected to slander / disapproval
 - ▶ With mayors “left alone” serving as a control group
- ▶ Complication: you (presumably) want to isolate the channel:
Slander → Mental Health from Policies → Slander → Mental Health
 - ▶ Media hits before they assume office can only be related to slander / approval and is plausibly orthogonal to policies (conditional on covariates like gender)

Treatment: Text Processing

- ▶ How to distinguish mayors subjected to slander/disapproval from mayors subjected to flattering/approval?
- ▶ NLP-based approach:
 - ▶ Sentiment analysis
 - ▶ Manually classify articles as “slandorous”, “neutral” or “flattering”
- ▶ Use e.g. random forest to classify the remaining articles on the basis of e.g. a document-term matrix, a tf-idf matrix, or embeddings of the text in a language model
 - ▶ Can be transparent and externally validated
- ▶ Timing issue: effect of past and contemporaneous slander
 - ▶ Pre-election more likely to be exogenous

Control Group

- ▶ Taking the treatment definition as given, what is the most plausible control group?
- ▶ Candidates with the same demographic profile ignores selection (i) into candidacy and (ii) from candidacy into office
 - ▶ From Dal Bo, Finan, Folke et al. (2017):
this positive selection is present even when conditioning on family (and hence social) background, suggesting that individual competence is key for selection
- ▶ Maybe a more plausible group (but estimates with less precision): only the candidates
- ▶ In case of Lower House treatment: why not a (within-party) close elections design?

Minor Additional Comments

- ▶ Other sources for slander: Twitter API, or city Facebook pages (possibly accessible through Selenium)
- ▶ The paper you mention in regard to the effect of politics on longevity has been faced with a lot of criticism from Andrew Gelman