How Family Undermines Accountability: Evidence from Italy

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Motivation

- Electoral accountability is foundational to democratic systems.
  (Dahl and Polyarchy, 1971; Chappell Jr and Keech, 1985; O'Donnell, 1998)

- Political context factors are known threats to accountability
  - Electoral competition, polarization, access to information.
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This Paper: How do family ties affect electoral accountability?

Paper Preview

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Strategy: Close-elections RDD + TWFE.

Results: Large-family mayors *(formal definition coming soon)* exhibit:

RQ1. Worse performance,...

RQ2. ...Yet, retaining same re-election probability.

Family Ties and Voting (1)

- Families often act as electoral machines (Grimmer et al., 2025).
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H1: Large-family mayors perform worse.

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  1. Performance-based support (**PBS**) - the core of standard models.
  2. Performance-insensitive support (**PIS**).
     - **Valence**.
       (Stone and Simas, 2010; Evrenk et al., 2018)
     - **Clientelism**.
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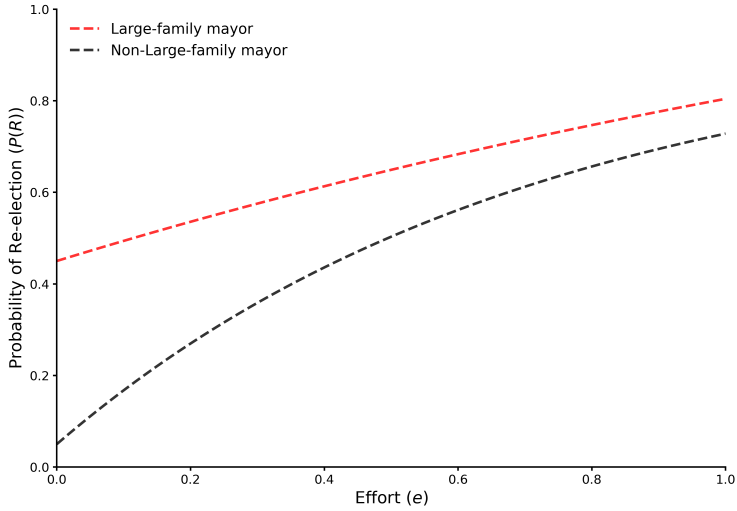
H2: **PIS** shields large-family mayors against accountability.

Sketched Performance — Reelection Relationship



Contributions

1. Politicians' connections to members of civil society.
   (Amore and Bennedsen, 2013; Chaudhary and Rubin, 2016; Cruz et al., 2017; Brassiolo et al., 2020; Pulejo, 2022; Ravanilla et al., 2022)

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   Beyond entry: family ties shape behavior in office.

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   Beyond entry: family ties shape behavior in office.

3. Electoral accountability in local politics.
   (Chappell Jr and Keech, 1985; Trounstine, 2006; Berry and Howell, 2007; Rubenstein, 2007; Snyder and Strömberg, 2010; Pierson and Schickler, 2020)

   Social connections as a threat to accountability.

Setting & Data

Setting: Why Small Italian municipalities?

- Politically:
  1. Direct mayoral elections.
  2. Centralized executive and legislative power.
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  - Distrust outsiders.
    (Banfield, 1958; Alesina and Giuliano, 2011)

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- How small?
  - Less than 5k inhabitants.
    - ≈70% of Italian municipalities.
    - ≈10M residents.

Main Measures of Economic Performance (Effort)

1. **EU** Cohesion **Funds**.
   ▸ Map EU Funds ▸ More on Funds

2. **Debt repayment**: $\frac{\text{Disposed Liabilities}}{\text{Accumulated Liabilities}}$.

3. **Debt accumulation**: $\frac{\text{Current Liabilities}}{\text{Initial Liabilities}}$.
   ▸ Debt in Italian Municipalities

Defining Large-Family Mayor

- Family ties proxy: % residents sharing mayor's last name.
- Data source: ancestry.com phone records.

Distribution Proxied Relatives

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  Distribution Proxied Relatives

- **Close-election RDD-cutoff**: 95^{th} percentile (8.1%) to identify large-family candidates.
  - $\approx$ 40k elections.
  - $\approx$ 2.6k large-family candidates.
  - $\approx$ 1.6k large-family mayors.

Are Last Names Problematic?

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     - Mitigated by focusing on small towns.
     - Robustness: weighting rare surnames more.

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- Last names (or similar proxies) often used for family identification.
  (Gagliarducci and Manacorda, 2020; Mirenda et al., 2022; Vitale, 2023)

Proving H1

(Worse Performance)

Close-Elections RDD

$$EconomicPerformance_{i,t} = \beta LrgFmlyMyr_{i,t} + \gamma f(FmlyMrgn)_{i,t} + \\ + \lambda(LrgFmlyMayor \times FmlyMrgn)_{i,t} + \theta X'_{i,t-1} + \phi_d + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

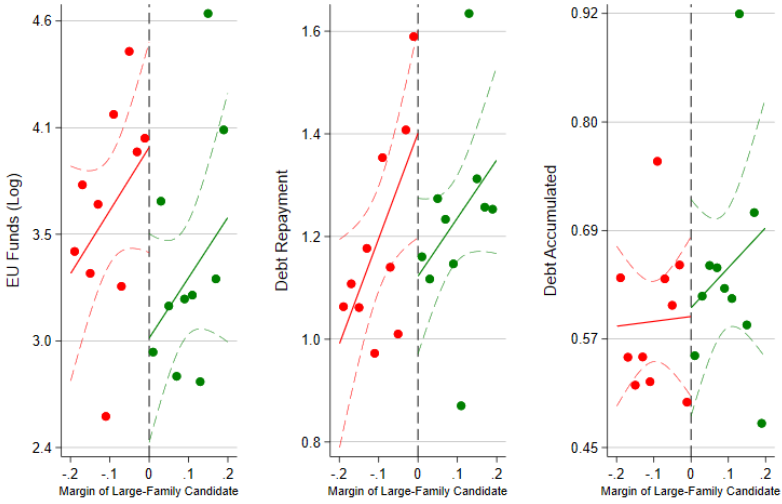
- Correlational evidence. Go
- Validity checks:
  1. Tests of no-sorting assumption. Go
  2. Balance of covariates at cutoff. Go
  3. Compensating differentials (Marshall, 2022). Go

Large-Family Mayors Perform Worse — RDD Table

	EU Funds p.c. (Log)		Debt Repayment		Debt Accumulated	
Large-Family Mayor	-1.14**	-0.61*	-0.42*	-0.42*	-0.00	-0.06
	(0.51)	(0.36)	(0.26)	(0.24)	(0.08)	(0.07)
Observations	1,302	1,273	1,327	1,309	1,336	1,318
Effective Obs. (Left)	478	377	409	366	386	374
Effective Obs. (Right)	436	348	381	352	372	357
Bandwidth	.28	.19	.2	.17	.21	.2
Fixed Effects	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES
Controls	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES

- **EU Funds**' drop is 0.2-0.4 SD.
- **Debt Repayment** drop is 0.3 SD.

Large-Family Mayors Perform Worse — RDD Graph



Placebo and Robustness Tests

1. *Robustness*: weighted last names. Go
2. *Robustness*: different large family candidate's cutoffs. Go
3. *Robustness*: different bandwidths. Go
4. *Robustness*: jackknife regions-election years. Go
5. *Robustness*: polynomial degree. Go

6. *Different Measures*: waste management. Go

7. *Placebo*: lagged dependent variables. Go
8. *Placebo*: irrelevant cutoffs. Go

Alternative Explanation: Moral Hazard vs. Adverse Selection

- **Moral hazard**: lower *ex-post* efforts due to weaker incentives.
- **Adverse selection**: *ex-ante* quality differences (Fearon, 1999).

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- **Moral hazard**: lower *ex-post* efforts due to weaker incentives.
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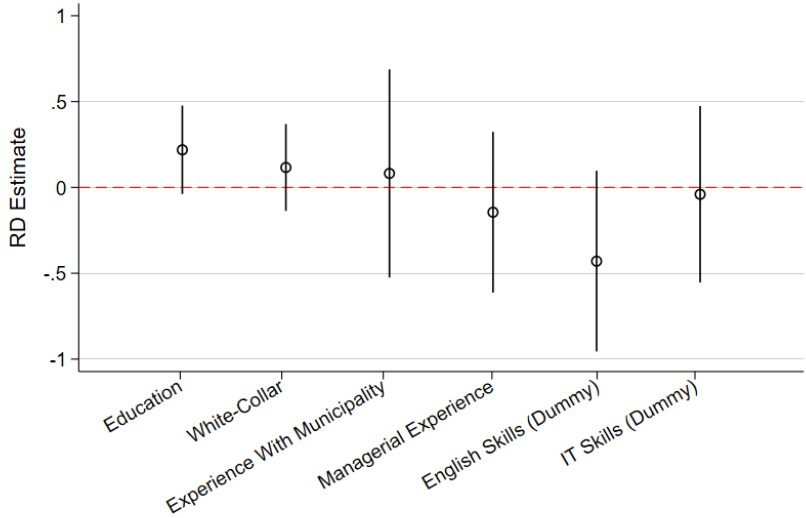
- Testing for discontinuous changes in quality at the cutoff.
- **Data source**: Registry of local administrator + CVs (when available).

No Evidence of Adverse Selection



Proving H2

(Undermined Accountability)

Effect of Family Ties on Election Probability

- Starting point: share of relatives predicts share of votes. Go

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- Can large-family mayors hold their office?

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	Mayor Reelected	
Large-Family Mayor	0.02	-0.02
	(0.08)	(0.08)
Observations	1,632	1,501
Effective Obs. (Left)	568	475
Effective Obs. (Right)	548	478
Bandwidth	.22	.19
Fixed Effects	NO	YES
Controls	NO	YES

- As if large-family mayors choose an **optimal** level of **effort**.

On Unconditional Support

Clientelistic Behaviour

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Clientelistic Behaviour

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- Large-family mayors may provide particularistic goods to their relatives.
  - Legal constraints rule out direct contracts/positions. Go
- **Test**: Subtler forms of clientelism.

Subtler Forms of *Formal* Clientelism

- Do large-family mayors direct more funds to relatives' streets?

Subtler Forms of *Formal* Clientelism

- Do large-family mayors direct more funds to relatives' streets?
- Relatives' geocoded addresses + procurement contracts.
- $\approx$16k addresses from $\approx$2k large-family candidates.

No Evidence of *Formal* Clientelism

	Funds for Relatives' Streets p.c. (Log)	
Large-Family Mayor	-0.01	-0.45
	(0.61)	(0.47)
Observations	942	926
Effective Obs. (Left)	289	266
Effective Obs. (Right)	265	251
Bandwidth	0.23	0.19
Fixed Effects	NO	YES
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- **Remark**: This does not rule out *informal* clientelism.

Recap & Conclusion

Takeaways

- Large-family mayors perform worse due to weaker incentives.
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- Large-family mayors perform worse due to weaker incentives.
- Yet, they retain an electoral edge despite poor performance.
- **Social connections** - e.g., family ties - **are a threat to accountability**.

Thank You!

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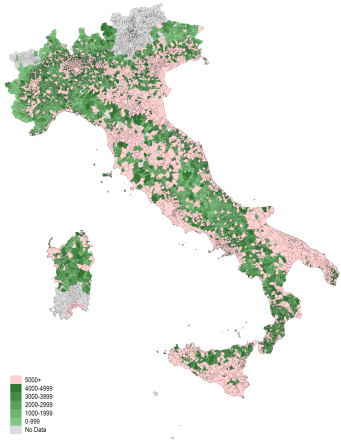
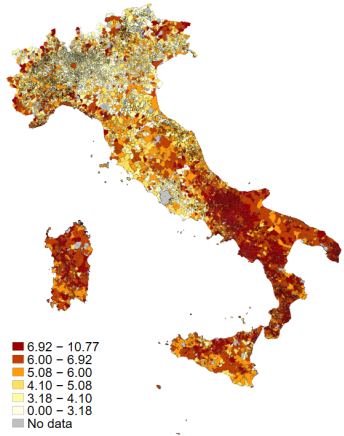
Appendix

Map Relevant Municipality



Back

Map EU Funds



Back

More on EU Funds

European Cohesion Funds aim to reduce regional gaps and promote sustainable development.

- Distributed via regional calls; municipalities apply for EU-aligned projects.
- Why use it to measure performance?
  1. Requires complex applications, compliance, and reporting.
  2. Signals capacity to attract external funding.
- Dataset: 75,164 funded projects.

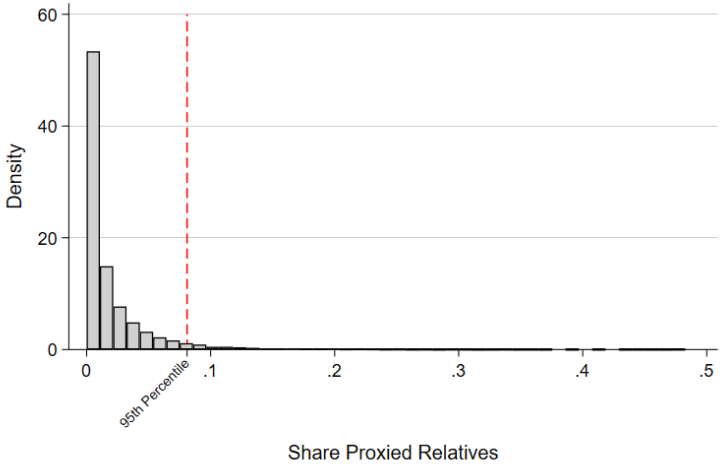
Back

More on Debt in Italian Municipalities

- Municipal borrowing allowed only for investment, under strict limits.
- Since 1999, all municipalities are subject to the "Domestic Stability Pact" (DSP).
- DSP imposes evolving fiscal rules to contain the fiscal gap.
- New debt allowed to refinance old debt if it saves costs and funds investment (Law 311/2004).

Back

Distribution Share Relatives



Summary Statistics

Variable	Whole Sample		Effective Sample	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Outcomes				
EU Funds p.c. (Log)	2.811	2.575	3.353	2.854
Debt Repayment	1.123	1.175	1.223	0.956
Debt Accumulated	0.642	0.576	0.659	0.607
Funds for Relatives' Streets p.c. (Log)	0.054	0.778	0.446	2.200
Cabinet Member Relatives	0.019	0.136	0.120	0.324
Funds p.c. for Mayor Street	26.694	150.035	38.024	168.756
Pr(Mayor Reelected)	0.388	0.487	0.402	0.490
Mayor Characteristics				
Sex (1 = Female)	0.106	0.308	0.097	0.296
Age	49.171	10.543	48.847	10.869
Education	0.376	0.484	0.349	0.477
White Collar	0.557	0.497	0.534	0.499
Experience With Municipality	0.491	0.500	0.522	0.500
Managerial Experience	0.262	0.440	0.269	0.444
English Skills (Dummy)	0.200	0.401	0.163	0.370
IT Skills (Dummy)	0.331	0.471	0.388	0.488
Native	0.432	0.495	0.522	0.500
Dynastic	0.048	0.214	0.116	0.320
Shares of Votes	0.633	0.180	0.654	0.181
Municipality Characteristics				
Population (Log)	7.222	0.867	6.588	0.915
Surface (Log, Km^2)	2.891	0.925	2.767	0.843
Latitude	43.415	2.434	43.207	2.442
Longitude	11.265	2.841	11.622	2.902

Back

Large-Family Mayors Perform Worse — TWFE

- Baseline correlations (TWFE), using:

Large-Family Mayors Perform Worse — TWFE

- Baseline correlations (TWFE), using:

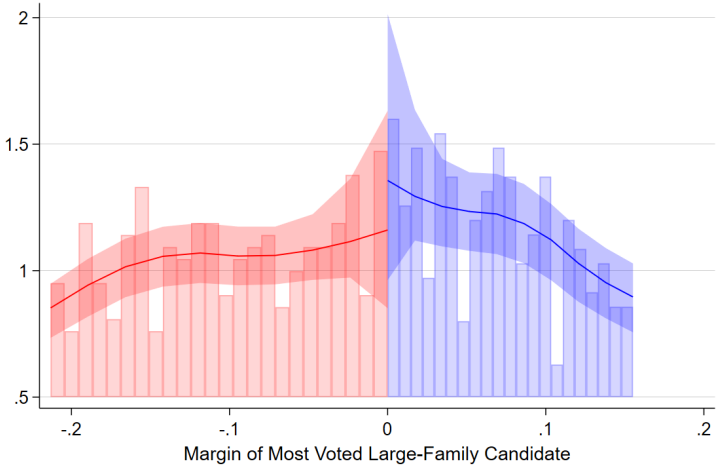
$$\text{EconomicPerformance}_{i,t} = \beta(\text{Share Relatives})_{i,t} + \\ + \psi X'_{i,t} + \phi_i + \tau_t + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

Summary Stats

	EU Funds p.c. (Log)		Debt Repayment		Debt Accumulated	
Share Relatives of Mayor	-0.57		-1.28***		0.50	
	(1.30)		(0.47)		(0.32)	
Share Relatives of Mayor > 95th Percentile		-0.30*		-0.15**		0.09*
		(0.18)		(0.07)		(0.05)
Observations	11,743	11,743	12,739	12,739	13,035	13,035
Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Controls	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

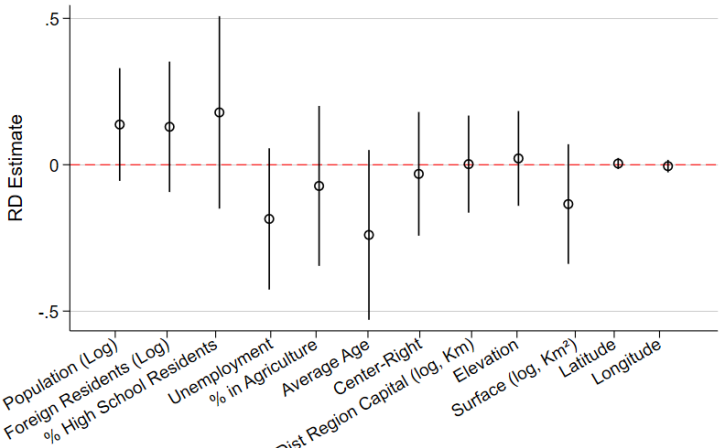
Back

Manipulation Test



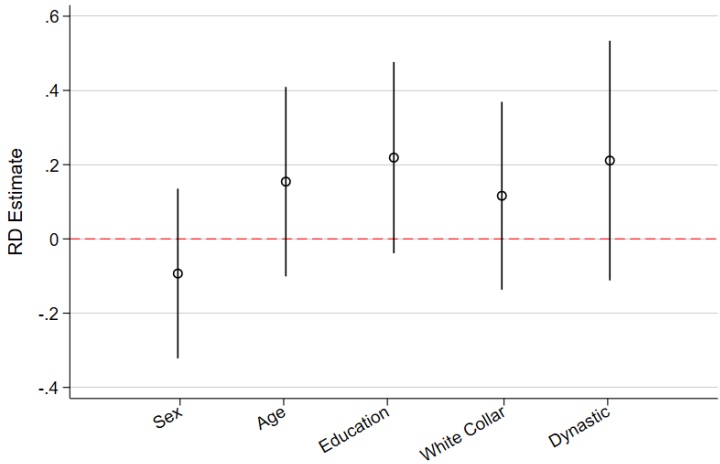
Back

Balance of Covariates at Cutoff



Back

Family Size Not a Compound Treatment



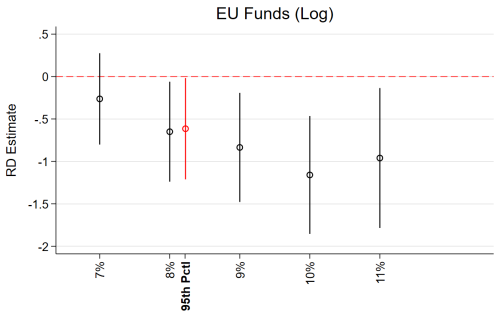
Back

Robustness to Weighted Last Names

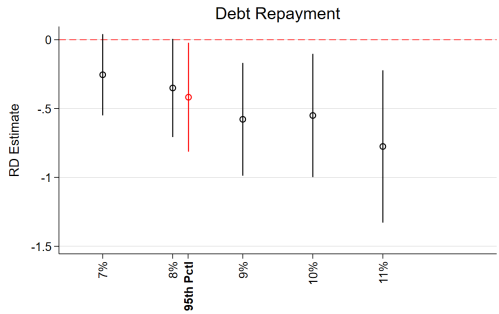
	EU Funds p.c. (Log)		Debt Repayment		Debt Accumulated	
Large-Family Mayors	1.67	-1.27**	-0.35*	-0.23**	-0.00	-0.23***
	(1.61)	(0.51)	(0.18)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.08)
Observations	1,295	1,266	1,320	1,302	1,329	1,311
Effective Obs. (Left)	422	248	377	405	375	345
Effective Obs. (Right)	383	250	365	374	361	328
Bandwidth	.28	.13	.18	.13	.19	.15
Fixed Effects	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES
Controls	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES

Back

Robustness to Alternative Definitions of Large-Family Mayor



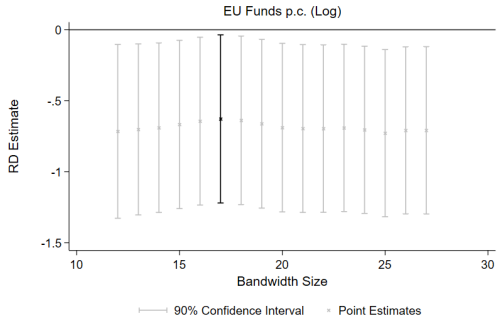
(a) EU Funds p.c.



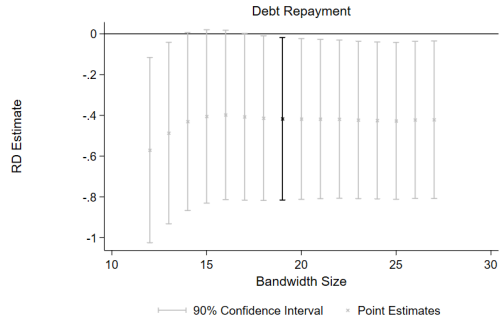
(b) Debt Repayment

Back

Robustness to Alternative Bandwidths



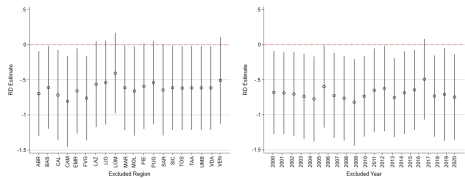
(a) EU Funds p.c.



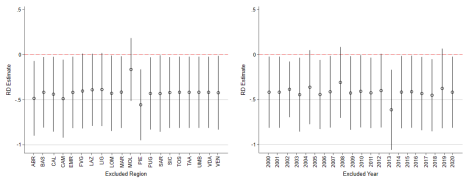
(b) Debt Repayment

Back

Not Driven by a Single Province/Year — Jackknife



(a) EU Funds p.c.



(b) Debt Repayment

Back

Robustness to Polynomial Degree

	EU Funds p.c. (Log)		Debt Repayment		Debt Accumulated	
Large-Family Mayor	-1.23*	-0.68	-0.50*	-0.51*	0.01	-0.05
	(0.66)	(0.42)	(0.29)	(0.27)	(0.09)	(0.08)
Observations	1,302	1,273	1,327	1,309	1,336	1,318
Effective Obs. (Left)	462	438	466	446	426	443
Effective Obs. (Right)	416	394	430	411	396	412
Bandwidth	.34	.31	.33	.3	.27	.29
Fixed Effects	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES
Controls	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES
Polynomial	2	2	2	2	2	2

Back

Waste Management

	Tons Waste p.c.	Tons Waste p.c. (Log)	% Recycling
Large-Family Mayor	87.02***	0.17**	-10.06**
	(29.85)	(0.07)	(5.05)
Observations	288	288	288
Effective Obs. (Left)	60	60	72
Effective Obs. (Right)	63	63	73
Bandwidth	.19	.19	.24
Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES
Controls	YES	YES	YES

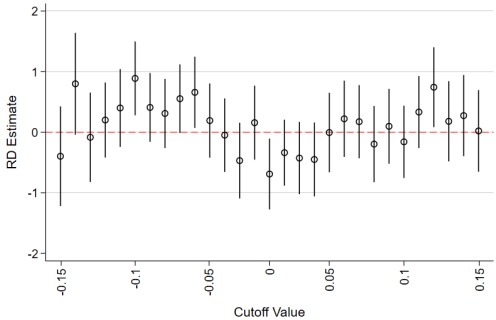
Back

Placebo — Lagged Dependent Variable

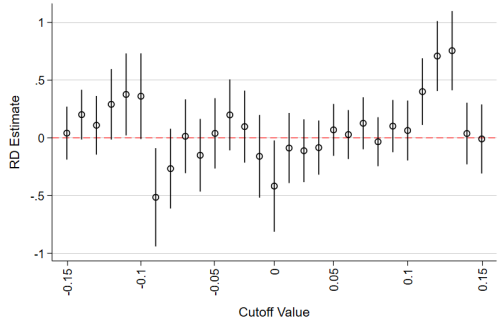
	EU Funds p.c. (Log) Lag		Debt Repayment Lag		Debt Accumulated Lag	
Large-Family Mayor	-0.34	0.91	0.10	0.04	0.01	-0.07
	(0.97)	(0.57)	(0.24)	(0.21)	(0.12)	(0.07)
Observations	401	391	467	454	468	455
Effective Obs. (Left)	160	137	203	153	174	141
Effective Obs. (Right)	95	85	122	94	110	86
Bandwidth	.25	.18	.31	.17	.21	.14
Fixed Effects	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES
Controls	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES

Back

Placebo — Irrelevant Cutoffs



(a) EU Funds p.c.



(b) Debt Repayment

Back

No Evidence of Standard Clientelistic Behaviour

	Money to Relatives (Log)		Cabinet Member Relatives	
Large-Family Mayor	-0.62*	-0.76**	-0.04	-0.04
	(0.35)	(0.36)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Observations	944	872	2,086	1,909
Effective Obs. (Left)	237	215	581	528
Effective Obs. (Right)	234	214	592	541
Bandwidth	.17	.17	.17	.17
Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES	YES
Controls	NO	YES	NO	YES

Back

Effect of Family Ties on Election Probability

- Votes are positively correlated with the share of relatives.

$$\text{VoteShare}_{i,t} = \beta \text{Share Relatives}_{i,t} + \psi X'_{i,t} + \phi_i + \tau_t + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

	Vote Share	
Share Relatives of Candidate	0.97***	0.93***
	(0.04)	(0.05)
Observations	71,475	71,462
Controls	NO	YES
Fixed Effects	NO	YES

- TWFE results support the unconditional support hypothesis.

Back