

Trust Issues: How Unveiling Organized Crime Infiltration in Politics Increases Abstention

Preliminary Draft

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November 19, 2024

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Abstract

This paper investigates how the unveiling of infiltration by the organized crime in Italian municipalities influences voter participation. We claim that the public disclosure of the infiltration represents an informational shock for the local voters, affecting their level of trust in political institutions and – in turn – their level of political participation. We leverage the timing of dismissal of the infiltrated city councils in an event-study design and estimate its effect on turnout in elections at national and regional level. We find that, on average, turnout drops by about 2 percentage points in municipalities where the city council was dismissed for infiltrations by the organized crime. This effect is registered in following 12 months from the dissolution and persists up to 4 years. The effects are intensified in more recent years, reflecting a higher salience of mafia crimes following early 2000s. We finally document relevant spillover of the policy in neighboring municipalities, that display similar reductions in voter turnout. In sum, our findings suggest that the public disclosure of anti-mafia interventions, despite the benefits documented in the literature, also carry unintended consequences for political engagement.

Keywords: Organized Crime, Government Trust, Voter Behavior

JEL Classification: D72, D73, K42

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1 Introduction

Voter participation in developed democracies has steadily declined in recent decades. The average turnout for national parliamentary elections in OECD countries was around 80% in 1980 and has fallen by at least 10 percentage points since then (see [Figure 1](#)). This decrease in voter turnout has raised concerns of being connected to political inequality, endangering the representativeness and the legitimacy of electoral outcomes ([Lijphart, 1997](#); [Gallego, 2015](#)). Besides, the reasons for this decline are unclear. In particular, this evolution appears even more puzzling when considering that in these countries the practical costs of participation have declined and individual factors positively correlated to turnout – such as age, education and income – have generally increased. Many hypotheses have competed to explain this trend: declining group mobilization of trade unions and labor parties ([Gray and Caul, 2000](#)), generational changes ([Blais and Rubenson, 2013](#); [Kostelka and Blais, 2021](#)), the rise in the number of elective institutions ([Kostelka and Blais, 2021](#)). However, the literature does not seem to agree on a conclusive explanation for this puzzle.

We explore the role of trust in political institutions as a driver of political participation. Political trust can be conceptualized as the feeling that the "own interests would be attended to even if the authorities were exposed to little supervision or scrutiny" ([Easton, 1975](#)). Trust in political institutions can affect the benefit side of the typical Downsian voting equation ([Riker and Ordeshook, 1968](#)), as the lack of credibility in institutions lowers the expected return of the preferred electoral outcomes as well as the expressive benefit from the act of voting. [Hooghe \(2018\)](#) and [Devine \(2024\)](#) provide a good overview of the correlational literature linking political trust to electoral turnout. Similar to voter turnout, trust in political institutions has declined in most Western democracies ([Clarke et al., 2018](#)). The link between political trust and endangered democratic outcomes is also a common narrative in the media (e.g. [Davies \(2018\)](#)). Despite that, the synchronized erosion of voter turnout political and trust may be the joint result of other processes, which does not allow for a causal interpretation.

This paper investigates how the unveiling of organized crime infiltration in Italian municipalities affects voter participation. We argue that the public disclosure of the infiltration represents an informational shock for the local voters, which affects their level of trust in political institutions and – in turn – their level of political participation. We leverage the timing of the dismissal of the infiltrated city councils in an event study design and estimate its effect on voter turnout. To avoid contamination from other consequences of the dismissal within the affected municipality, we measure turnout at a higher institutional level – i.e., in provincial, regional, and national elections.

We construct a dataset containing information on municipalities in central and southern Italy over the period 1991–2020. First, we collect data on the dissolution of Italian municipal council from the Department of Internal and Territorial Affairs ([DAIT, 2024](#)). We merge this dataset with municipal-level data on voter turnout in municipal, provincial, regional, national, and European elections from the Department of Internal and Territorial Affairs ([Eligendo, 2024](#)) and the Sicilian Electoral Service ([Sicilian Electoral Service, 2024](#)). We exclude municipal elections from the sample to avoid problems with municipal turnout being endogenous to municipal dissolution. Finally, we complete the dataset with census information on population, age and gender distribution, educational attainment, and unemployment for the years 1991, 2001, 2011 and 2021 ([ISTAT, 2024](#)). The final dataset consists of 44,399 municipality-year observations. Municipalities under compulsory administration due to mafia infiltrations are about 2.2% of the sample.

Using a staggered difference-in-differences design, we find that, on average, voter turnout drops by about 2 percentage points in municipalities where the city council was dismissed due to organized crime infiltration. This effect is registered suddenly in the year following the dissolution, and persists for up to 4 years. This finding is robust to a variety of specifications, such as the implementation of matching procedures to construct control municipalities or the use of alternative estimators. As a proof of concept, we also find that municipal dissolutions for reasons other than organized crime infiltration – e.g. the death of the mayor – have no effect on voter turnout. In recent decades, we find larger effects, with turnout declining by up to 4 percentage points. We attribute this effect to the lower resonance profile of the mafia’s crime strategy since the 2000s, and the associated greater salience of the infiltration news. Finally, consistent with previous literature (Galletta, 2017), we document negative spillover effects of the infiltration news on voter turnout in neighboring municipalities. In sum, our findings suggest that despite the benefits documented in the literature, public disclosure of anti-mafia interventions also has unintended consequences for political engagement. Publicly revealing the depth of organized crime’s infiltration of local governments is likely to lead to political distrust, thereby reducing voter participation.

We contribute to the literature on the electoral consequences of the organized crime. This literature is vast and growing, as summarized by Accardo et al. (2022). More specifically, we add to the literature started by Acconcia et al. (2014) on the study of the effects of infiltrated city council dismissals. City council dismissals for organized crime infiltration were introduced in Italy in 1991 (law act 164/1991). So far, the literature has found positive effects of this policy. City council dismissals generate large economic returns (Fenizia and Saggio, 2024), promote positive demand-driven political turnover at local level (Daniele and Geys, 2015; Baraldi et al., 2022; Fenizia and Saggio, 2024), reduce violent intimidation against politicians (Baraldi et al., 2023), and improve the tax collection and the public funds’ allocation (Di Cataldo and Mastrorocco, 2022). Moreover, dismissals generate law enforcement spillovers in neighboring municipalities (Galletta, 2017), though they also induce strategical elusive behavior (Tulli, 2019). Our paper shows that city council dismissals also induce disaffection with the political system, presumably by exposing the existence of links between politics and organized crime. This result appears even stronger when conjugated with the documented positive effects of the dissolution at the local level. Moreover, the involvement of the high-level political system in the dissolution of the connection between local political power and organized crime could be welcomed by local citizens and further counteract the distrusting impact of the news.

We contribute to the literature on the electoral consequences of political scandals. The closest strand of literature has connected corruption scandals with decreased voter participation in Mexico (Chong et al., 2015), Italy (Giommoni, 2021), and Spain (Costas-Pérez, 2014; Ares and Hernández, 2017). Differently to most of the literature, we focus on elections at higher level (regions, national parliament) than the level in which the scandal happens (municipality) – this allows to disentangle electoral dynamics from effects on political trust.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the background context on city council dismissals, Section 3 describes the used data, Section 4 discusses the research design, Section 5 presents the results, and Section 6 concludes.

2 Background

2.1 Italian Elections

Italy is a representative democracy, organized on several institutional levels. Besides the national level, Italy has three levels of local government: as of January 1, 2024, Italy was divided into 20 regions (*Regioni*), 107 provinces (*Province*), and 7,900 municipalities (*Comuni*).

At the lowest institutional level, Italian municipalities handle local matters such as urban planning and proximity public services (e.g. primary schools and waste management). Italian citizens elect representatives to the legislative municipal councils (*Consigli Comunali*) through a proportional system, as well as the mayor (*Sindaco/o*) through a two-round system. The mayors then form executive bodies called *Giunte comunali*.

At the intermediate local institutional level, the Italian provinces are mainly responsible for local planning of transport and school networks. Their role has diminished over the years. Moreover, since the law 56/2014, provinces are no longer elected by the electorate, but indirectly by local municipal councils and mayors. At the highest local institutional level, the Italian regions are divided into 15 ordinary statute (*Statuto Ordinario*) and 5 special statute (*Statuto Speciale*) regions. Usually, Italian citizens elect the representatives of the regional councils (*Consigli Regionali*) through a proportional system, as well as the president (*Presidente della Regione*) through a two-round system.

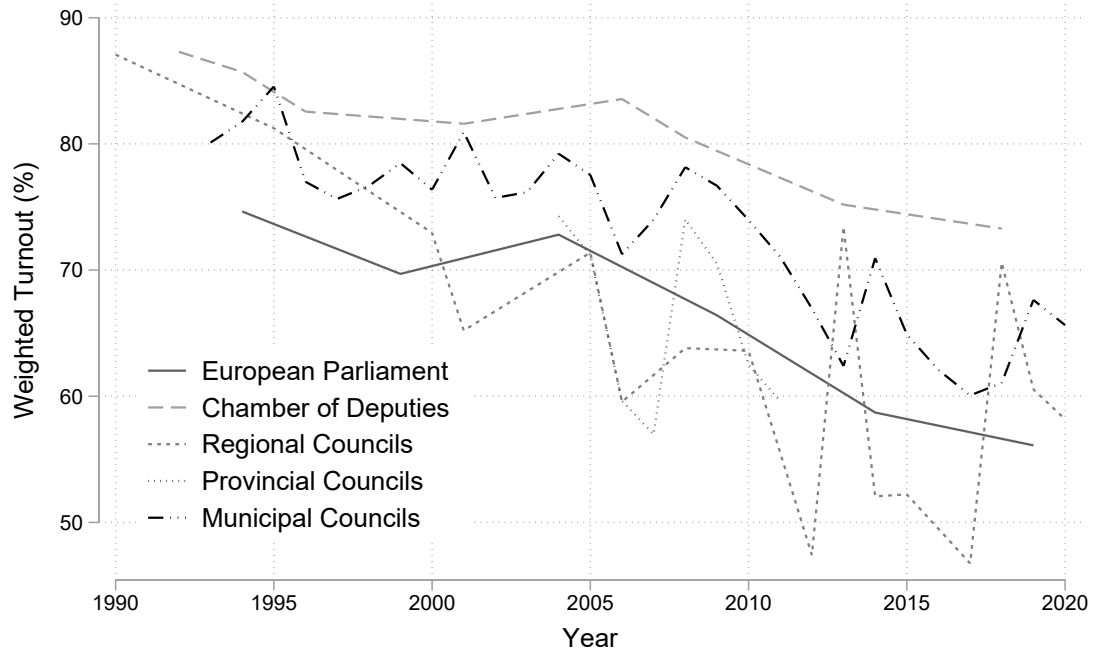
At the national level, Italian citizens elect representatives to the two chambers of the Parliament, the Chamber of Deputies (*Camera dei Deputati*) and the Senate of the Republic (*Senato della Repubblica*). The Parliament constitutes the legislative power of the State, nominates (supported by a selection of regional representatives) the President of the Republic (*Presidente della Repubblica*) every 7 years, and its confidence is necessary for the appointment and the stability of the Government (*Consiglio dei Ministri*). In recent decades, both the electoral system and the electoral formula for parliamentary elections have changed several times. Both chambers are now elected by a mixed-member proportional system, with the majority of the seats allocated by first-past-the-post system and a minority by proportional representation system.

Finally, Italian citizens elect representatives to the European Parliament every 5 years. Seats are allocated to parties based on national performance, and then distributed proportionally to the top vote-getters in 5 different constituencies.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of turnout levels for each type of legislative election since 1990, weighting turnouts at the municipal level by the number of electors.¹ Regardless of the type of election, voter turnout declined steadily over the period. Note that municipal, regional and provincial elections are held at different times in different regions, and therefore show jumps in turnout as a consequence of different sampling (Figure A1 resolves the sample selection by showing linear trends over the observed period). As shown in Figure A2 for the 2013 Chamber of Deputies elections, there are also regional variations: In general, turnout is lower in the southern part of Italy.

¹ Turnout in elections for mayors, regional presidents, and the Senate of the Republic is not shown, as it is very similar to the turnout in elections for municipal councils, the regional councils, and the Chamber of Deputies, respectively.

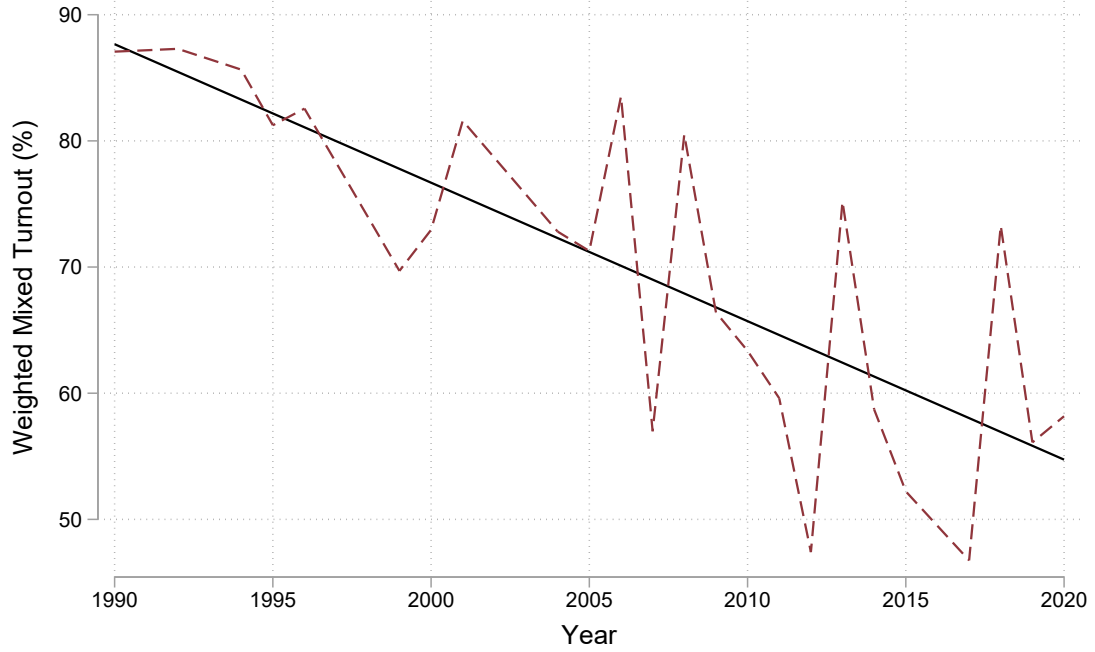
Figure 1: Average Turnout by Election Type and Year, 1990-2020.



Source: Eligendo.

In order to use the largest number of votes in individual municipalities over time, we combine different elections into an aggregate turnout measure. We consider elections to the Chamber of Deputies, regional councils and provincial councils – excluding elections to the European Parliament, which may capture a different level of institutional trust. Where multiple elections were held in the same time unit, we hierarchically selected the turnout in the election at the higher geographical level. **Figure 2** shows the evolution of this form of aggregated turnout between 1990 and 2020. As expected, this measure declines steadily over the observed period.

Figure 2: Average Aggregated Turnout by Year with Linear Fit, 1990-2020.



Source: Eligendo.

2.2 Organized Crime in Italy

The Mafia in Italy has undergone significant transformations, with 1993 marking a turning point in its history. Initially, mafia organizations like *Cosa Nostra* in Sicily, the *Camorra* in Naples, and the *'Ndrangheta* in Calabria developed as local power structures, deeply embedded in the political and economic fabric of southern Italy. Historically, they wielded influence through a combination of violence, political connections, and infiltration of the local economy (Paoli, 2003). In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Mafia's power was challenged by the Italian state, most notably during the Palermo Maxi Trials (1986–1992), which saw over 400 Mafia members convicted. This state-led crackdown was met with brutal retaliations, culminating in the assassinations of anti-Mafia magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992 (also known as *Strage di Capaci*). The murders, followed by a bombing campaign in 1993, created widespread public outrage and pushed the Italian government to intensify its anti-Mafia efforts.

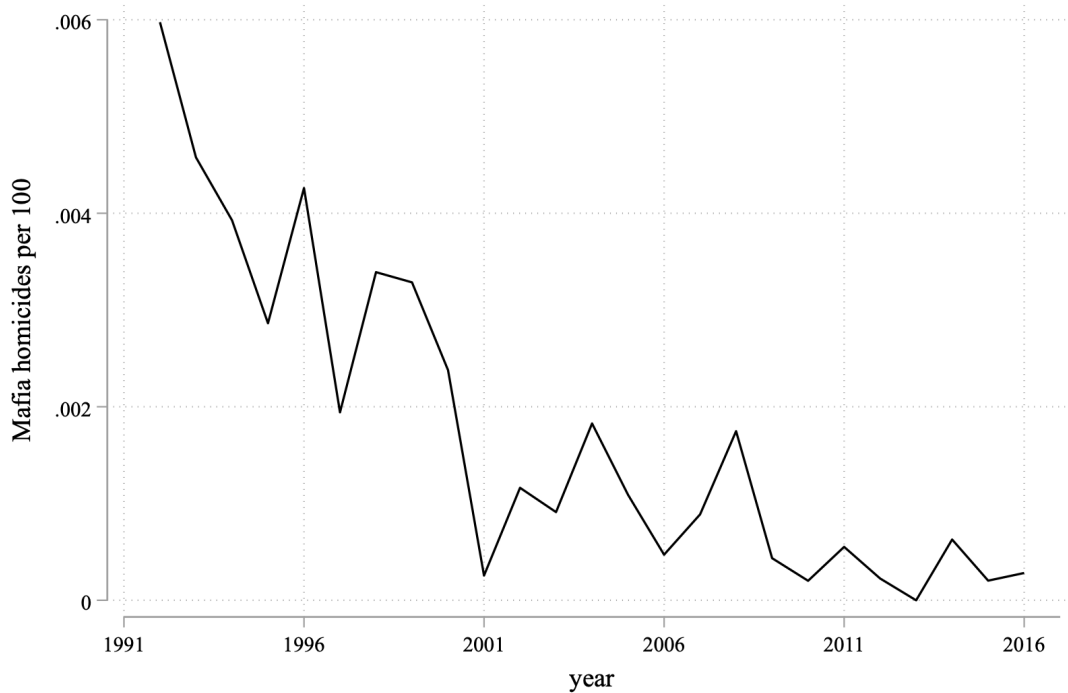
After this massacre, as a part of a broader shift in Italy's anti-Mafia strategy, on August 7 1992, the Italian government enforced the decree n. 356, or Martelli-Scotti decree, implementing tougher prison conditions for Mafia members under the "41-bis" law regime.² The decree determined a turning point in the in Italy's fight against organized crime, particularly because of its success in encouraging Mafia defections and breaking the Mafia's code of silence (*omertà*).

As a result, Mafia related crimes in Italy have been decreasing ever since. Evidence is

² So-called *Decreto antimafia Martelli-Scotti* on June 8 1992 n.356 enforced in law on August 7 1992 provides witness protection to collaborators of justice, tougher sentences and special detention regimes, seizure of mafia assets, strengthening the role of anti-mafia magistrates and police.

furnished in [Figure 3](#), which depicts Mafia homicides rates per 10'000 people. The trend in homicides decreased by about 70% since 1991, and stabilizing at a lower level after the year 2000.

Figure 3: Mafia Homicides per 100 inhabitants by Year



2.3 Council Dismissals

On May 31, 1991, the Italian Parliament approved the Legislative Decree No. 164, which introduced the possibility of dismissing municipal councils with proven links to the organized crime. The dismissal of city councils is an aggressive policy, and is subject to a strict procedure that is carried out without disclosing any public information. The process begins with a police investigation that establishes the existence of contacts between municipal officials and organized crime. It is important to note that most investigations are not initiated due to suspicious of mafia infiltration. The police allegations are communicated to the head of the provincial authority (the *prefetto*), who forms an investigative commission and reports to the Ministry of Interior within four months. The Ministry of Interior, in consultation with the Cabinet, then decides on the dismissal. In case of dismissal, the whole procedure is confirmed by a decree of the President of the Republic and made public. At this point, the mayor, the executive body, and the legislative municipal council are replaced by unelected commissioners who administer the municipality for a transitional period that can last up to 18 months, until new elections are held.

[Figure 4](#) shows the number of council dissolutions by year since the policy was introduced. Between 1991 and 2020, up to 280 municipalities have been dissolved. More than 70 dissolutions were ordered in the first three years of the policy, but dissolutions have continued into recent years. The sharp discontinuity after 1993 can be attributed to several

factors. One worth mentioning is the aforementioned decree *Martelli-Scotti*, which introduced tougher sentences for crimes suspected of being related to the Mafia. More than 90% of the dissolutions took place in central-south Italy. [Figure 5](#) shows the spatial distribution of dissolutions in the center-south Italy. Calabria and Sicily stand out as having the highest percentage of municipalities dissolved over time.

Figure 4: Council's Dissolutions over the Years

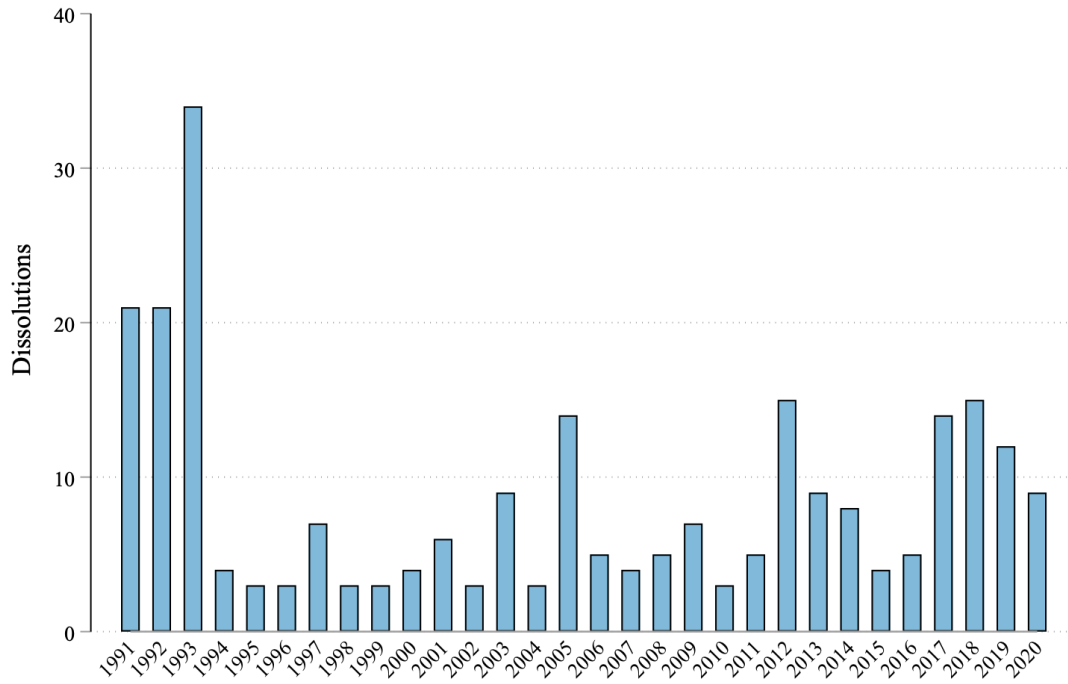
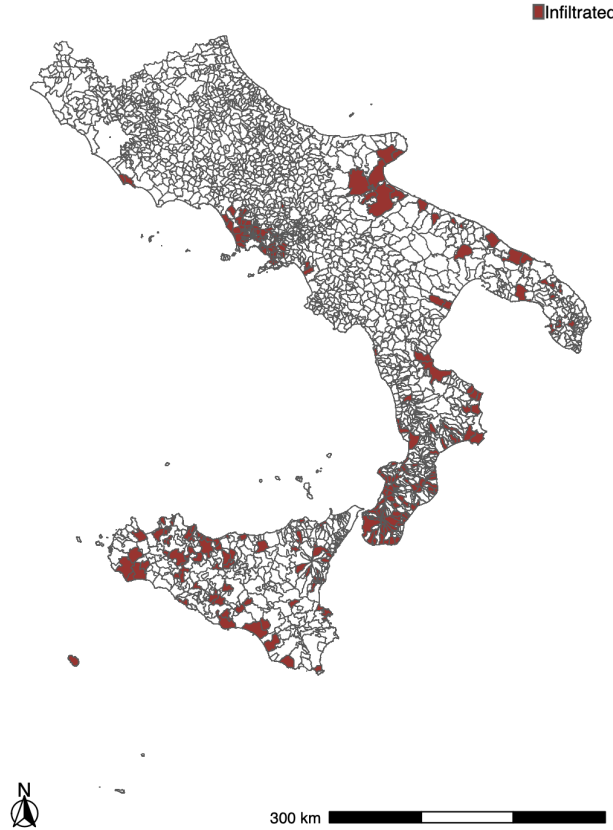


Figure 5: City Council Dissolutions due to Organized Crime in Southern Italy, 1991-2020



3 Data

We mainly use three sources of data covering municipalities in the center-south Italy between 1991 and 2020. We focus on cohorts treated up to 2017 to ensure that we observe treated municipalities for at least 3 years after the shock.

We collect municipal-level data on voter turnout in each type of election through *Eligendo*, the historic archive of the Department of Internal and Territorial Affairs for the period 1970-2022 ([Eligendo, 2024](#)).³ The archive collects data from all elections in the used period, with the exception of regional elections in special statute regions (Aosta Valley, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Sardinia, Sicily, Trentino Alto Adige). We collect Sicilian regional election data between 2006 and 2016 from the website of the *Sicilian Electoral Service* ([Sicilian Electoral Service, 2024](#)). In the observed period, municipalities had the median number of elections of 6 for European-, 8 for national-, 7 for regional-, 2 for provincial- and 6 for legislative elections. [Figure A3](#) gives an overview of the years in which elections take place, divided by election type.

We collect data on city council administration from the Department of Internal and Territorial Affairs's "Anagrafe degli Amministratori Locali e Regionali" ([DAIT, 2024](#)). The dataset reports all compulsory administrations due to organized crime infiltration or other

³ In the rare cases where elections were held at a level lower than the municipality, such as in some large cities for national elections, we aggregate the results to the municipal level. For mixed proportional and single-member elections, we focus on turnout in terms of proportional seats.

reasons (e.g. death of the mayor). All reasons are listed in [Table A1](#). It also reports demographic characteristics of the mayors (age, gender, education), party affiliation (right wing, left wing, civic list), type of electoral system (proportional/majoritarian) and the duration of the charge.

Finally, we collect census data for the years 1991, 2001, 2011, and 2021 from the Italian National Institute of Statistics ([ISTAT, 2024](#)). The censuses contain a information for each municipality on the resident population, such as the number of residents, foreigners, their age and gender distribution, educational attainment, and (un-)employment. We mainly use these data to construct control variables in our regression and to construct a matched sample of municipalities.

4 Research Design

4.1 Sample Selection and Descriptive Statistics

To maintain comparability in the sample, we focus only on center-south regions. Indeed, as shown in [Figure 5](#) and [Figure A2](#), both the dissolutions due to organized crime and low-levels of voter turnout are concentrated in these areas. To ensure we can observe treated cohorts for at least three years after the dissolution, we focus on cohorts until 2017 both in our main sample of dissolved municipalities, in the sample with other dissolutions, and in the sample with neighbors. This ensures that we observe all treated cohorts at least in the first three years after the dissolution and mitigates a potential bias driven by a cohort composition effect.

The summary statistics for the main outcomes and characteristics used in our preferred model ([Equation \(1\)](#)) are reported in [Table 1](#).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Obs.	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<i>Panel A: Dissolutions</i>					
Infiltrated	44'399	0.022	0.145	0	1
Bordering Infiltrated	44'399	0.153	0.36	0	1
Other dissolutions	44'399	0.471	0.499	0	1
<i>Panel B: Elections</i>					
Turnout	44'399	0.722	0.135	0.004	1
Turnout Camera	24'817	0.76	0.103	0.051	1
Turnout Regionali	17'363	0.661	0.158	0.004	1
Turnout Provinciali	5'290	0.69	0.125	0.218	1
Voters	44'399	6'844	38'061	67	2'347'455
Blank ballot	44'399	149.96	449.85	0	29'980
N. elections-year	44'399	1.414	0.614	1	4
N. elections-day	44'399	1.249	0.527	1	3
<i>Panel C: Census</i>					
Unemployment rate	44'399	0.098	0.052	0	0.49
Old age ratio	44'399	0.37	0.141	0.081	1.79
High Education	44'399	0.247	0.099	0.023	0.721
Middle Education	44'399	0.287	0.044	0.056	0.51
Low Education	44'399	0.284	0.066	0.08	0.746

Source: Census, DAIT, Eligendo.

As a robustness check for the unconditional control group, we propose an alternative control group of municipalities built using matching procedures. [Table 2](#) compares observables characteristics of treated municipalities ("Treated, T") to the unconditional control group ("Control, C") and the matched control group ("Matched, M"). The table report average values in the first three columns, and standardized differences in the last two columns. Generally, treated municipalities are very similar to municipalities in both types of control groups in terms political variables. In particular, the levels of participation in the aggregated turnout measure are 72% and 71%, respectively. Also the age of the mayor and the presence of female mayors is similar. On average, mayors in treated municipalities have slightly lower office duration.

Table 2: Balancing Table: Treated, Unconditional Control and Matched Control

	Treated T	Control C	Matched M	Std.Diff T-C	Std.Diff T-M
Panel A: Political Characteristics:					
Turnout	0.72	0.71	0.71	0.05	0.08
Turnout Camera	0.74	0.75	0.74	-0.04	-0.00
Duration Mayor (Years)	4.14	4.6	4.57	-0.32*	-0.29*
Age mayor	47.44	47.36	47.66	0.01	-0.02
Female mayor	0.03	0.05	0.04	-0.07	-0.05
Panel B: Other Characteristics:					
Unemp. Rate	0.14	0.11	0.12	0.30*	0.16*
Old-Age Ratio	0.25	0.34	0.29	0.55*	0.16*
High School +	0.23	0.29	0.25	-0.14*	-0.15*
Mid School	0.31	0.29	0.30	0.39*	0.15*
Elementary School	0.26	0.27	0.26	-0.39*	-0.11*
N	186	1'847	530	-	-

Source: Census, DAIT, Eligendo. Notes: *Standardized Difference > 0.1.

4.2 Estimating Equation

To estimate the effect of mafia infiltration on turnout we exploit variation in the staggered dissolution of municipalities in Italy between 1991 and 2017. We use the following difference-in-difference model

$$y_{it} = \sum_{k=-4}^5 \gamma_k \cdot \text{Dissoluted}_{i,t-k} + X'_{it} \delta + \theta_t + \theta_i + u_{it}, \quad (1)$$

where y_{it} is the aggregated electoral turnout in municipality i at time t , $\text{Dissoluted}_{i,k}$ is an identifier for the dissolution of the city council at time $k = 0$ in municipality i , $X_{i,t}$ is a vector of time-varying municipality and election-level control variables, θ_t and θ_i are year and municipality fixed effects, and $u_{i,t}$ is the error term. Note that the event time k is constructed in terms of 365 days distance from the dissolution date, rather than in calendar years, so that elections in $k \geq 0$ always take place after the dissolution. Control variables include election type dummies for the turnout considered, as well as for other elections held on the same day and their interaction. The coefficient of interest is represented by γ_k , which identifies the difference in turnout between dissolved municipalities and non-dissolved municipalities at $k \neq -1$. Standard errors are clustered at the municipal level.

The validity for difference-in-differences generally relies on two core assumptions: (i) Parallel trends; (ii) No anticipation effect (Angrist and Krueger, 1991; Card and Krueger, 1994). In the context of our study, these assumptions imply that, in the absence of the dissolution, the treated and control units would have followed similar trajectories, and that the dissolution was unforeseen by the agents. On one hand, while it is challenging to perfectly validate the parallel trends assumption, we employ a dynamic DiD approach to provide

statistical evidence on its satisfaction. Specifically, we examine the γ_k coefficients in the pre-treatment period to assess whether treated and control municipalities displayed comparable trends prior to the shock. On the other hand, while we cannot provide empirical evidence on the satisfaction of the no-anticipation assumption, the framework presented in [Section 2.3](#) on the secret investigation upon the dismissal, mitigates the risk of a foreseen presence of Mafia in the municipal council.

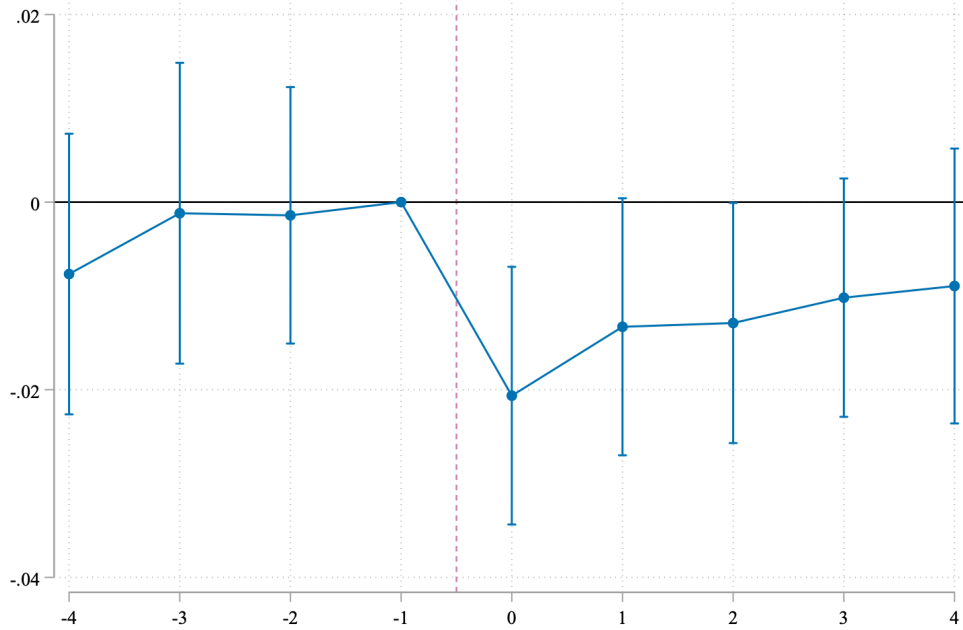
On top of the standard identifying assumption, staggered designs also require treatment homogeneity for identifying an average treatment effect ([Sun and Abraham, 2021](#)). In our context, this implies that voter turnout reacts homogeneously across treated cohorts, otherwise the result could be driven by contamination of pre-period and post-period estimate on the coefficient of interest. To tackle this issue, we provide an alternative specification in which we restrict the sample to years 2000–2017 and we also use the interaction weighted estimator proposed by [Sun and Abraham \(2021\)](#). The results are qualitatively similar to the ones in the main specification, mitigating treatment heterogeneity concerns.

5 Results

5.1 Main Estimation

In [Figure 6](#) we plot the γ_k coefficients of [Equation \(1\)](#). We estimate that voter turnout drops by about 2 percentage points on average at event time $k = 0$, that is, within 12 months of the dissolution date. The effect remains significantly negative in the years following the policy intervention, but appears to converge back to zero over time. The coefficients in the pre-period are close to 0 and not statistically significant, indicating that the treated municipalities show similar trends as the control municipalities in terms of voter turnout.

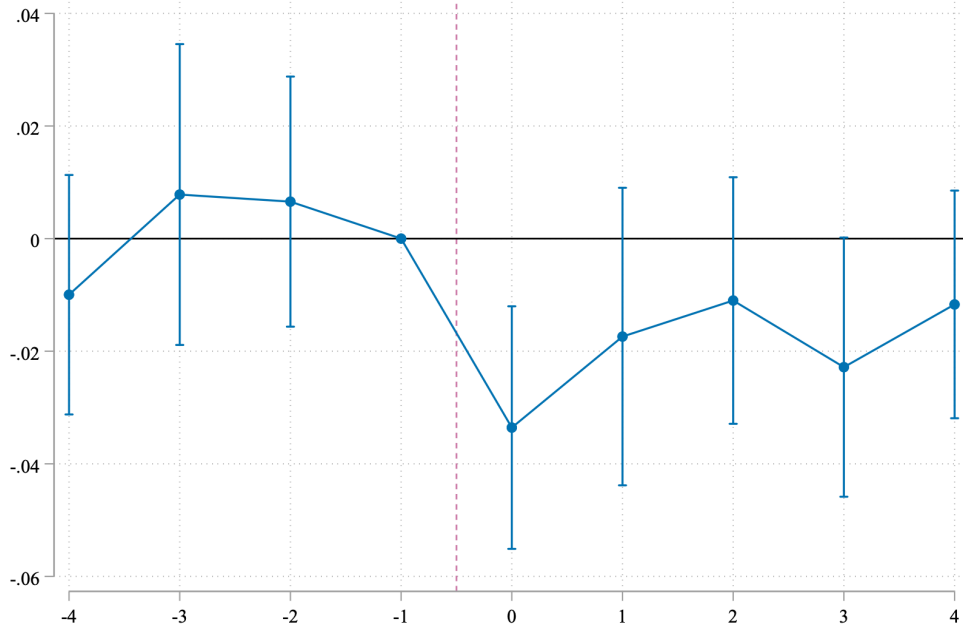
Figure 6: Impact of City Council Dissolutions due to Organized Crime Infiltration on Aggregate Voter Turnout, 1993-2017



Notes: Note: The figure displays the estimate $\hat{\gamma}_k$ from [Equation \(1\)](#), namely the estimated difference in the turnout at election in Italy between dissolved municipalities at the shock. The total number of observations is 44'399. We control for municipality and year-fixed effects. Clustered 95%-significance level confidence intervals reported. Source: Census, DAIT, Eligendo.

We also use the same specification on a subsample of municipalities dissolved between the year 2000 and 2017 to attenuate treatment heterogeneity concerns and to underline the saliency of Mafia crimes in the years after 2000. [Figure 7](#) shows that, when we restrict the sample to cohorts treated in 2000–2017 the effects are exacerbated reaching a 4% decrease in turnout. This evidence suggests that the saliency, due to heightened public attention on organized crime during this period, increased in later years, consistent with lower levels of mafia related crimes after year 2000.

Figure 7: Impact of City Council Dissolutions due to Organized Crime Infiltration on Aggregate Voter Turnout, 2000–2018



Notes: For each year, the Figure displays the estimate of the γ_k coefficients using Sun & Abrahams's command. The Figure reports the estimated difference in the turnout at election in Italy between dissolved municipalities at the shock. The total number of observations is 43'954. We control for municipality and year-fixed effects. We also report 95% level confidence intervals clustered at the municipality level. Source: Our elaboration on Eligendo data.

5.2 Spillovers over Neighbor Municipalities

Figure 6 provide evidence that a municipal dissolution due to mafia infiltration affects voters turnout and Figure 9 suggest that trust in institution is likely one of the driving mechanisms.

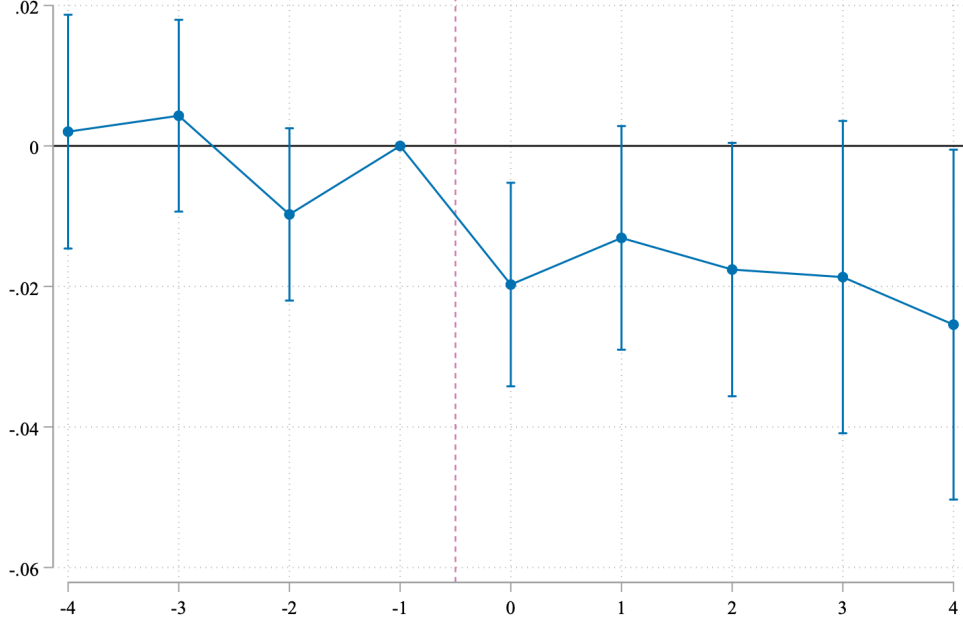
To isolate the effect of trust, we try to analyze whether the municipal dissolution has spillover effects in terms of turnout in the nearby municipalities. Galletta (2017) finds indeed that there are significant spillover effects of the observed outcomes on neighboring municipalities. In our case, if the effect of turnout passes through trust we would expect the news to be circulating in nearby municipalities, which would in turn be affected by their neighbors' treatment.

To investigate this dynamic, we identify as neighbors the municipalities that shares the same borders with the dissolved municipality. We then assign them as shock the municipal dissolution of the the neighbor municipality and we run the specification of Equation (1), removing the actual dissolved municipalities to avoid the spillover effect to be contaminated by the main effect. Figure 8 reports these results. Neighboring municipalities experience a reduction in turnout of approximately the same magnitude. This suggest that the information on the mafia infiltration has geographical spillovers.

Since these municipalities are part of our main control group and display a treatment effect, this would lead to bias for the main estimates in Figure 1. For this reason Figure A4 estimates Equation (1) removing from the control group neighboring municipalities. We find that the effects are qualitatively similar to the the main estimates, but slightly less

precise.

Figure 8: Turnout in border municipalities



Notes: For each year, the Figure displays the estimate of the γ_k coefficients reported in Equation (1), namely the estimated difference in the turnout at election in Italy between bordering dissolved municipalities at the shock. The total number of observations is 44'399. We control for municipality and year-fixed effects. We also report 95% level confidence intervals clustered at the municipality level. Source: Our elaboration on Eligendo data.

5.3 Robustness Checks

To mitigate the effect of cohort heterogeneity in the response we analyze robustness of our results by using the interaction weighted estimator (Sun and Abraham, 2021). Figure A5 in appendix reports that the effect is robust to this specification, but the magnitude is slightly smaller.

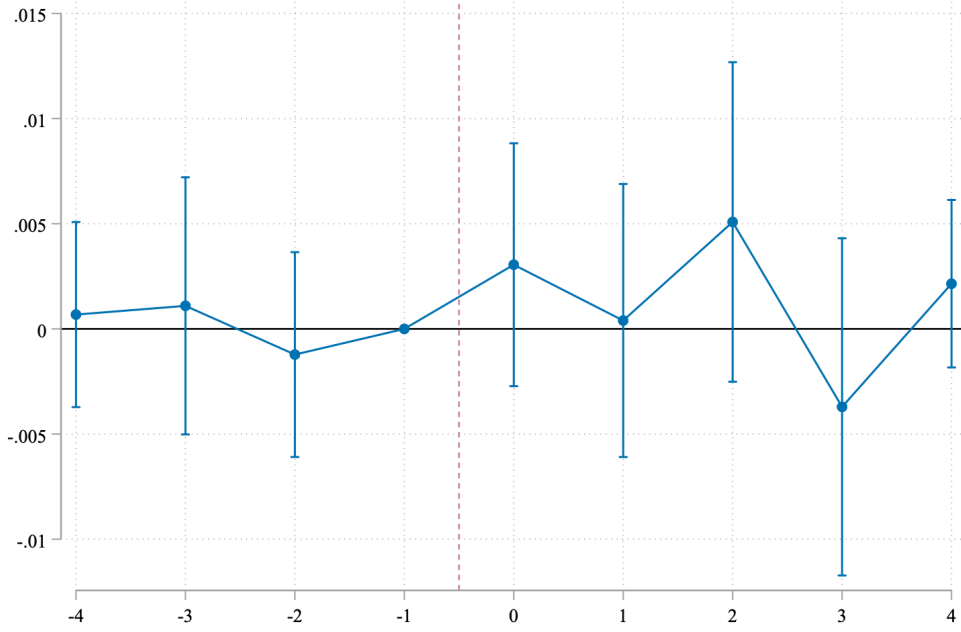
For robustness, in Figure A6 in the Appendix we confirm the result using the same regression where we matched the municipalities in the control using turnout in the year previous to the dissolution, the average turnout over the previous 5 and 10 years to the dissolution, population and unemployment rate. Table 2 in Appendix also presents the standardized differences between the treatment, the control group and the matched control group.

While Figure 6 provides evidence on reduction in turnout following the municipality dissolution, it is difficult to disentangle the effect on turnout from the municipal dissolution or from the information on the mafia infiltration. To address this concern, we use a placebo test where we compare the effect of turnout for municipality dissolutions occurred for other reasons.⁴ Figure 9 plots the event time coefficients for other reasons for dissolutions. We find that no effect significantly different from zero. These results suggest that the effect is driven by the mafia infiltration rather than the municipal dissolution, therefore it is more likely that effect passes through the disclosure of the information, and therefore affecting

⁴ A full list of reasons for dissolution is available in Table A1 of the Appendix.

voters' trust in institutions.

Figure 9: Turnout other dissolutions



Notes: For each year, the Figure displays the estimate of the γ_k coefficients reported in Equation (1), namely the estimated difference in the turnout at election in Italy between dissolved municipalities for other reasons at the shock. The total number of observations is 44'399. We control for municipality and year-fixed effects. We also report 95% level confidence intervals clustered at the municipality level. Source: Our elaboration on Eligendo data.

6 Conclusion

This paper investigates the effect of organized crime infiltrations in Italian municipalities on voter participation, providing an understanding of how mafia-related corruption in local councils influences electoral behavior. Our central argument is that the public exposure of these infiltrations acts as an informational shock, reducing trust in political institutions and diminishing voters' perceived benefits from participating in elections. We use an event-study design, leveraging the timing of the dismissals of infiltrated city councils to estimate their impact on turnout. By measuring voter turnout at the provincial, regional, and national levels, we avoided potential contamination from local political dynamics, particularly those specific to municipal elections.

The results show a significant decline in voter turnout, with an average decrease of 2 percentage points in municipalities where city councils were dismissed due to organized crime. This effect is more pronounced within the first 12 months from the shock and persists for up to four years. We exclude that the effect passes through the municipality dissolution by looking at the effect on municipalities dissolved for other reasons, which display no treatment effect. Notably, the decline is more pronounced for elections after the year 2000, where the decrease in voter turnout peaks at 4 percentage points. The higher effects for this subsample can be attributed to an increasing salience of mafia-related crimes after 2000 in the public debate.

Additionally, we found evidence of spillover effects: neighboring municipalities, which were not directly affected by the infiltrations, also exhibited a significant reduction in turnout. This suggests that information about the mafia’s influence permeates beyond the borders of the dissolved municipalities, diminishing political engagement more broadly around regions.

Our findings add to the growing literature on the electoral consequences of organized crime, complementing the work of [Acconcia et al. \(2014\)](#) on the effects of city council dismissals for mafia infiltration. While prior studies have highlighted the positive economic and governance benefits of dismissing mafia-infiltrated councils our results provide a more complex picture by demonstrating that these interventions can also erode voter trust in the political system. Specifically, while such dismissals may improve local governance, they simultaneously uncover the extent of corruption, contributing to political disillusionment and voter disengagement.

Furthermore, we contribute to broader discussions on the relationship between political scandals and electoral participation, resonating with findings from other contexts, such as Mexico ([Chong et al., 2015](#)), Spain ([Costas-Pérez, 2014](#)), and Italy itself ([Giommoni, 2021](#)). However, our study differentiates the results by focusing on higher-level elections, such as provincial, regional, and national elections, rather than municipal elections where the corruption occurs. This allows us to disentangle the electoral dynamics of trust from those related to local political contexts, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how institutional trust operates across different electoral levels.

In sum, while anti-mafia interventions have demonstrable governance benefits, our findings suggest that they also carry unintended consequences for political engagement. The public revelation of the depth of organized crime’s infiltration into local governance likely leads to widespread disillusionment, reducing voter participation. Therefore, future anti-corruption policies should consider strategies to mitigate this loss of trust, ensuring that governance reforms do not inadvertently alienate voters from the political process.

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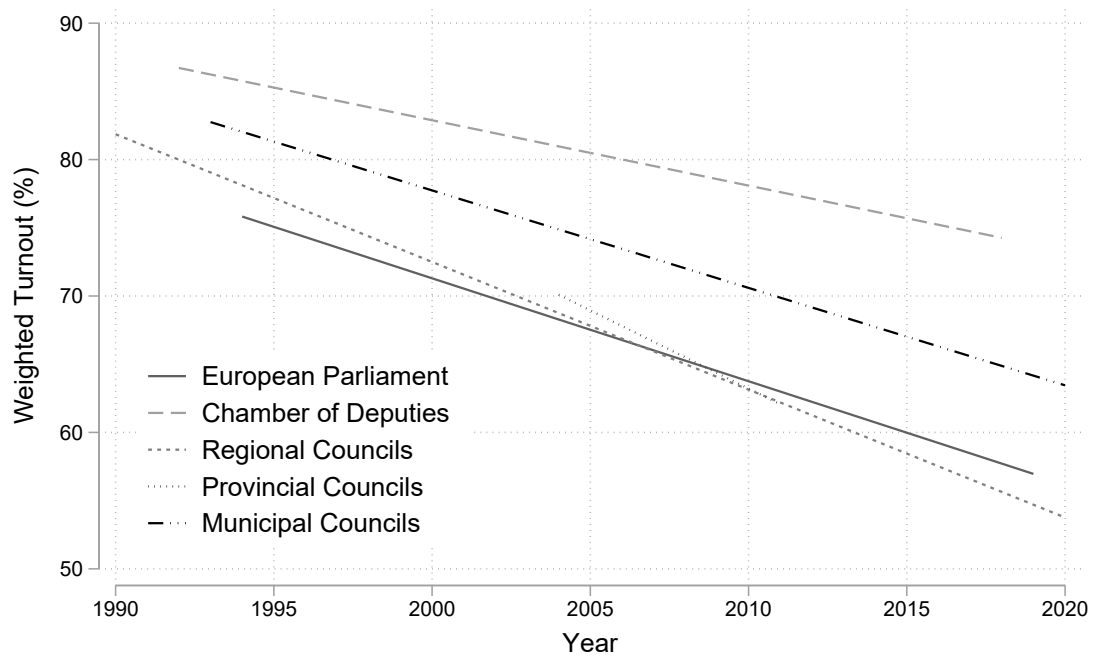
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7 Appendix

Figure A1: Linear Fit of the Average Turnout by Election Type and Year, 1990-2020.



Source: Eligendo.

Figure A2: Turnout in Chamber of Deputies Election by Municipality, 2013.



Figure A3: Elections Covered in the *Eligendo* Dataset, 1970-2022

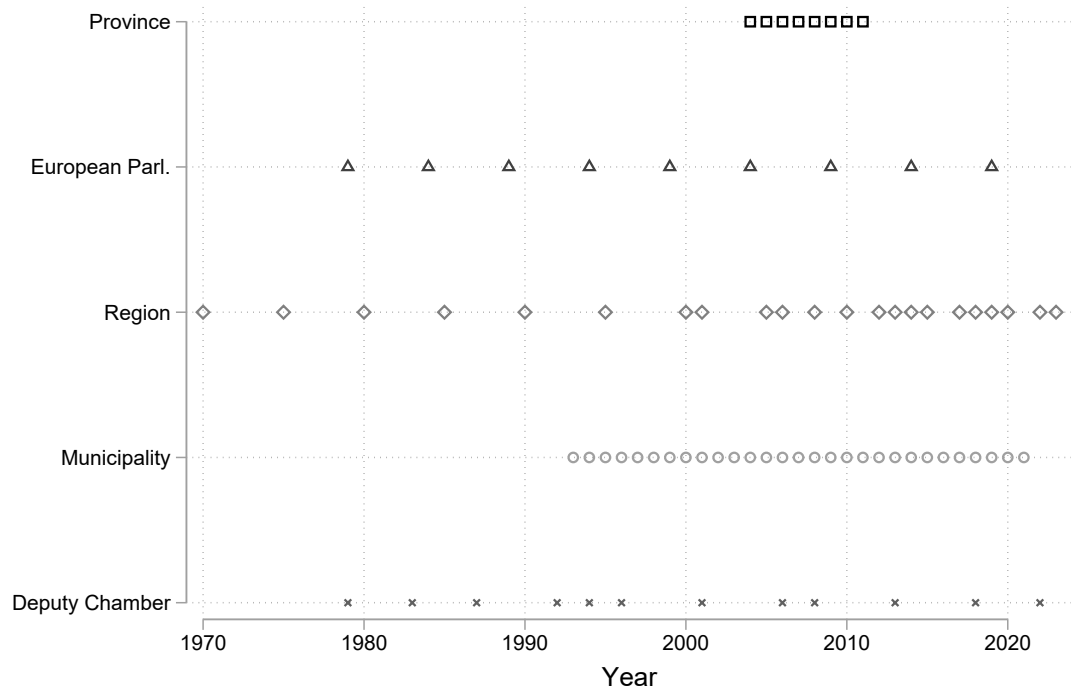


Figure A4: Turnout without border municipalities

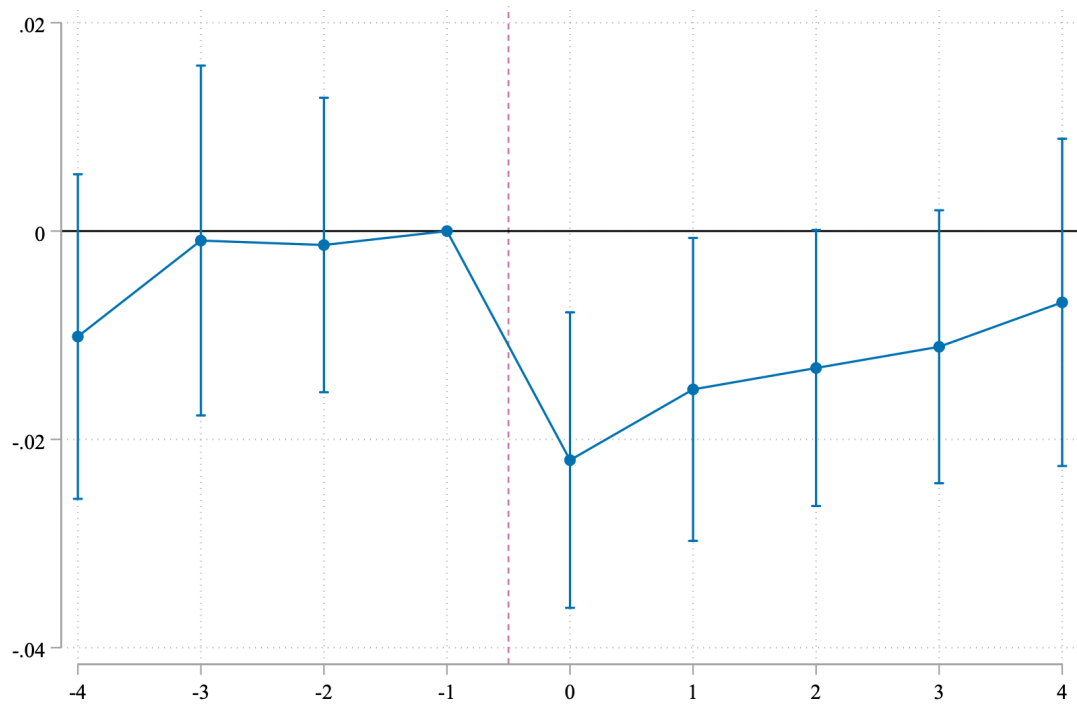
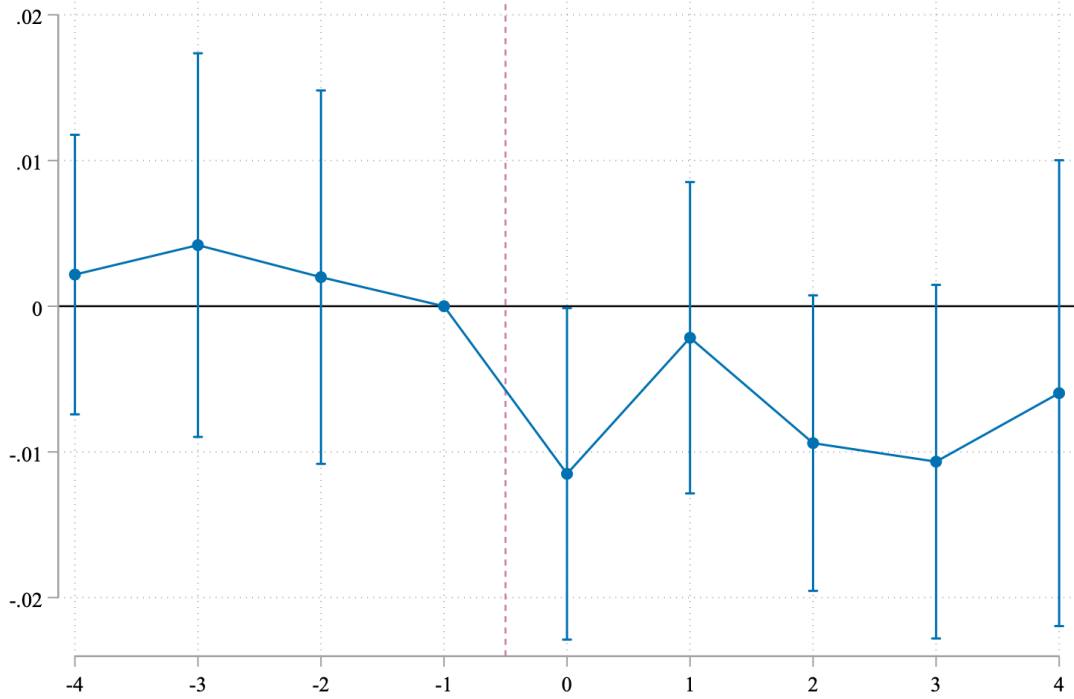


Figure A5: Turnout Sun & Abrahams



Notes: For each year, the Figure displays the estimate of the γ_k coefficients using Sun & Abrahams's command. The Figure reports the estimated difference in the turnout at election in Italy between dissolved municipalities at the shock. The total number of observations is 44'399. We control for municipality and year-fixed effects. We also report 95% level confidence intervals clustered at the municipality level. Source: Our elaboration on Eligendo data.

Figure A6: Turnout, matched municipalities

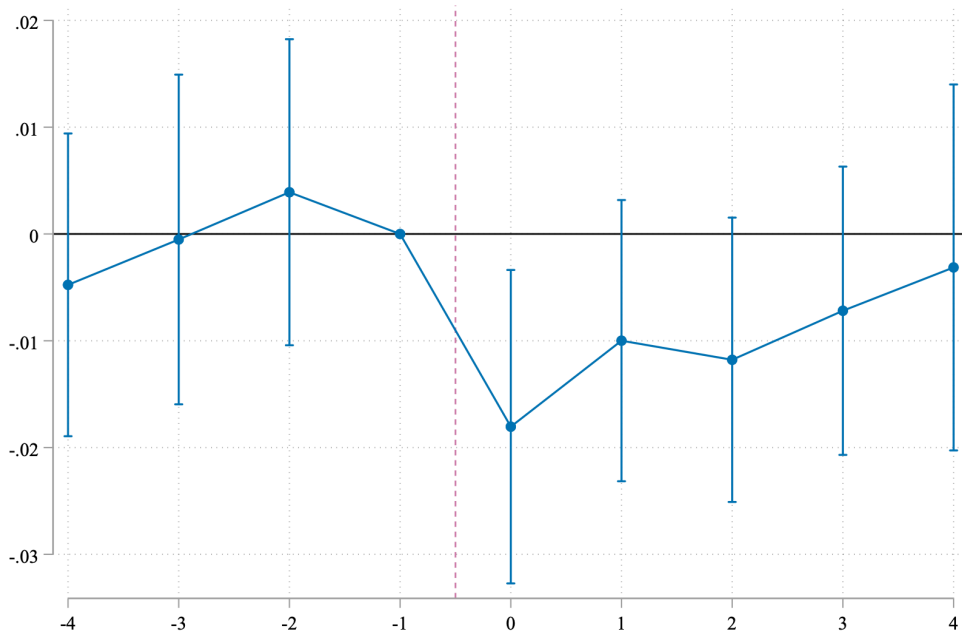


Table A1: Reasons for Municipal Dissolutions

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Description</i>
Death of the mayor or serious impediment	Vote at the first eligible date.
Remotion of the mayor	A mayor is removed if she/he pursues other activities incompatible with the political role (position in local healthcare company...), accepts another political role (regional council, parliamentary positions...), serious reasons of public order as well as for serious failure to comply with the relevant obligations, has a serious conviction (other than mafia). The municipality go to vote at the first eligible date.
Dismissal of the mayor	Dismissal include similar reasons as for the remotion, plus other personal incompatibilities. Once the dismissal letter is presented, after 20 days it is enforced. The municipality go to vote at the first eligible date.
Motion of no confidence	The absolute majority of the councillors votes against the mayor or against the financial law. The municipality is commissioned and elections are held after 18 months in general.
Resignation of the majority of municipal councillors	The absolute majority of the councillors resigns. The municipality is commissioned and elections are held after 18 months in general.
Mafia Infiltration	When concrete evidence of association between the mayors and/or the councils and mafia. The municipality is commissioned and elections are held after 18 months in general.