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The dark side of simultaneous elections. The case of Sicily in 2022 Italian national elections

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Abstract. Instruments of “electoral engineering” such as compulsory voting, incentives and simultaneous multi-level voting, have become pretty common in contemporary democracies, especially in areas with low turnout rates. Simultaneous elections – i.e. the practice of establishing an election day when different governments (usually at local and national level, or including referendums) are elected – implies a reduction of costs for the institutions and increased empowerment for voters. However, these kinds of measures do not address the deep sentiments of disaffection for political institutions that often lie at the origin of non-voting. Moreover, simultaneous elections with different voting rules might confuse voters, thus increasing the number of invalid votes or no-choice. In order to examine the advantages and the threats of simultaneous elections, this study focuses on the recent case of the Italian general elections of 25th of September 2022, during which also the elections of the president and the regional assembly of Sicily were run simultaneously. This represents a regional context where atavistic disaffection and high volatility have marked the turnout rate of the last thirty years. By looking at the results of national elections within municipalities through a difference-in-difference strategy, we observe a slight increase in turnout rate in Sicilian municipalities. However, the number of both null and blank votes is significantly higher in Sicilian towns, suggesting a threatening effect of simultaneous voting.

Keywords: turnout, simultaneous elections, invalid vote.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite different definitions of liberal representative democracy, the vast majority of scholars agree on the point that elections are at the very core of any democratic system. Elections must be ruled through key mechanisms that ensure fair and open competition as well as voting expression. Whether the level of participation is crucial for representativity or not is a contentious issue. However, turnout is largely considered an indicator of “healthy” democratic status, since it is associated with the way the demand and the supply side of a political space is balanced. On the other hand, poor electoral participation relates to disaffection toward institutions and citizens’ alienation (Lijphart, 1997).

Instruments of “electoral engineering” such as compulsory voting, incentives and simultaneous multi-level voting have become quite common in