

Letter

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Mafia Infiltration and Political Participation

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Abstract: This paper investigates whether mafia infiltration episodes may affect citizens' participation in the electoral process of local administrations. Using a novel dataset that combines information on city council dissolutions and voter turnout in local elections of municipalities located in southern Italy for the period 1991–2020, we show that the negative informational shock provided by mafia infiltration episodes decreases the participation rate by margin of about 2 % points. We also find that this effect is persistent in time. We show that the effect is homogeneous across locations but not over time. Finally, we document a spillover effect in neighboring municipalities, showing that the participation rate in local elections decreases by a margin of 1 % point.

Keywords: organized crime; local elections; political participation

JEL Classification: D72; K14; P37

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1 Introduction

Political participation is essential for the functioning of democratic institutions. Among other factors, citizens' willingness to vote depends on trust in local governments and the perceived fairness of political processes. In this context, corruption plays a central role. When corruption scandals outbreak, they may undermine citizens' confidence in the integrity of the political system thereby discouraging participation in democracy (Daniele et al. 2023). However, they may also lead to public mobilization wherein citizens punish corrupted politicians at the ballot boxes (Rienks 2023).

A particular form of corruption scandal is the exposure of colluded relations between public officials and organized criminal groups, such as mafia. Mafia infiltration represents a salient and credible signal of institutional failure. When these groups infiltrate public institutions, citizens' trust may be severely undermined potentially discouraging subsequent electoral participation permanently.

While a growing literature documents how organized crime distorts public expenditure (Acconcia et al. 2014; Baraldi et al. 2024), economic performance (Calamunci et al. 2022; Fenizia and Saggio 2024; Pinotti 2015), housing market (Calamunci et al. 2023), quality of politicians (Alesina et al. 2019; Baraldi et al. 2022; Baraldi and Ronza 2024; Daniele and Geys 2015) and other socio-economic outcomes (Buonanno et al. 2024; Cingano and Tonello 2020), much less is known about how anti-mafia interventions affect citizens' participation in democracy. Indeed, whether anti-mafia policies may affect citizens' engagement in the electoral process by reducing or increasing voter turnout remains an open question. On the one hand, the removal of corrupted public institutions may positively affect individual trust towards democracy, thus increasing participation in elections (Fenizia and Saggio 2024). On the other hand, the negative informational shock provided by mafia infiltration episodes may lead individuals to part away with politics, thus reducing participation rates (Chong et al. 2015). Understanding this channel is crucial from the perspective of policy makers as electoral participation is one of the mechanisms through which citizens discipline governments and shape policy and economic outcomes, including income distribution, government size, public spending and economic growth (Mueller and Stratmann 2003; Fumagalli and Narciso 2012).

In this paper, we study whether the dismissal of the local governmental body due to mafia infiltration may affect voter turnout in subsequent local elections. In Italy, the dissolution of city councils found to be colluded with mafia groups is allowed by law 164/1991. Using a novel dataset on city council dissolutions and participation rates in local elections of municipalities in southern Italy for the period 1991–2020, we find that mafia infiltration episodes reduce on average political

participation by a margin of about 2 % points. We also find that this effect is persistent in time, up to 6 years from the event, corresponding to two election cycles past the dissolution. We show that the effect of dissolutions is homogeneous across locations but grows in saliency over time. Finally, we document a spillover effect in neighboring municipalities, which reduce participation rates by about a half of the estimated effect for treated units.

The article is thus organized as follows. Section 2 describes the institutional background, the data and the sample used. Section 3 presents the empirical strategy. Section 4 reports and comments on the results. Section 5 concludes.

2 Background and Data

The presence of mafia-type criminal organizations in southern Italy traces back to the 19th century, when the territories of the peninsula unified following the Napoleonic Era. After World War II, these organizations expanded in the wake of the Italian industrial development, infiltrating both the legal economy and the political fabric of the country through strategies of violence and terror (Catino 2020). To limit this expansion, the Italian parliament issued a series of laws aimed at preventing the proliferation of mafia groups into society.

One of the most important pieces of this legislation was the enactment of law 164/1991. The law weakened the political power of mafia groups by allowing for dismissal and replacement of local authorities suspected to be colluded with criminal organizations. The process of dismissal is structured in two steps. First, after being informed by a police investigation about the risk of mafia infiltration in the local government, local prefects appoint an external commission that is mandated to gather evidence and draft a report about the collusive relation between local officials and criminal groups.¹ The report must be completed and submitted to the Ministry of Interior within 45 days. Second, on the ground of the evidence collected and upon the signature of the Minister of Interior, the President of the Republic mandates the dissolution of the local governmental body, replacing it with an *ad interim* commission that is in charge of the local administration for a period ranging from 12 to 18 months followed by regular elections.² A key feature of this process is

¹ The law defines evidence as the proof of connections between local officials and criminal organizations that may have jeopardized the free will of the elective body and the proper functioning of the local administration (Iezzi and Pauselli 2025).

² In some instances, the period may be extended up to 24 months.

that it remains confidential until the investigation is completed and the dissolution decree issued.³

We collect information on city council dissolutions due to mafia infiltration from the Official Gazette of the Italian Republic.⁴ Since the enactment of the law, about 250 municipalities experienced a city council dissolution episode due to mafia infiltration, corresponding to the 3.1 % of the total number of cities in the country, with some municipalities experiencing it more than once.⁵ In this group, municipalities located in Apulia, Calabria, Campania and Sicily account for almost 95 % of the total number of dissolution cases. Given the spatial segregation of the phenomenon, in our analysis we focus only on municipalities located in these regions. To examine the effect of dissolutions on voter turnout, we combine this information with data on participation rates in local elections sourced by the Ministry of Interior.⁶ Finally, we incorporate demographic information of municipalities sourced by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT).⁷

We exclude municipalities located in the region of Sicily because local election results are not available starting from 2005.⁸ We also exclude cities that merged and/or ceased to exist during the observational period. Figure 1 displays the spatial distributions of the participation rate across municipalities and mafia infiltration episodes for the area considered. Figure OA.1 compares the time-series plots for the average participation rate of our sample and the national one.

3 Methods

Our goal is to study whether the dissolution of a city council due to mafia infiltration may affect participation in the electoral process of local administrations. To this end, we estimate the following two-way fixed effects (TWFE) model specification:

$$y_{it} = \delta \text{Law164}_{it} + \beta X_{it} + \lambda_i + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

where i and t are the municipality and election year indexes. y_{it} is the share of participants in local elections in each municipality, whereas Law164_{it} is a binary indicator equal to 1 if the municipality experienced a city council dissolution due

³ For details, see Section 2 in Baraldi et al. (2024).

⁴ For details, see <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/> (last accessed May 21, 2026).

⁵ In Italy, there were approximately 8,000 municipalities in the period from 1991 to 2020.

⁶ For details, see <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/eligendo/opendata.php> (last accessed May 21, 2026).

⁷ For details, see <https://demo.istat.it/> and <https://www.istat.it/notizia/basi-territoriali-e-variabili-censuarie/> (last accessed May 21, 2026).

⁸ In a sensitivity analysis reported in Table OA.1, we incorporate information for local elections in Sicily. We find that the results are very similar to our baseline findings.

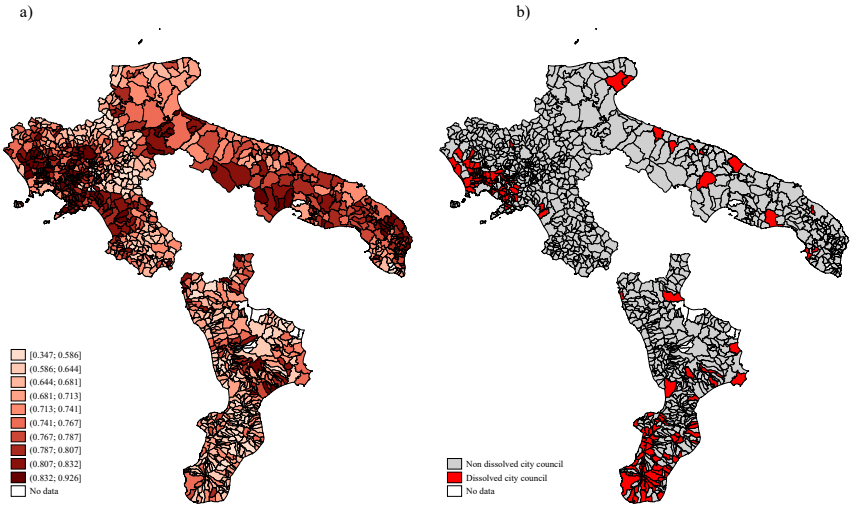


Figure 1: Maps of the participation rate in local elections (panel a) and occurrence of city council dissolution episodes due to mafia infiltration (panel b). Notes: Panel (a) displays the average share of participation in local elections across municipalities. The polygons in darker (lighter) red refer to municipalities with higher (lower) participation rate. Panel (b) displays the city council dissolution phenomenon. The polygons in red (gray) refer to municipalities that experienced at least one time (never experienced) a city council dissolution due to mafia infiltration. Finally, the polygons in white refer to excluded municipalities which experienced a process of merging/extinction during the observational period.

to mafia infiltration. We assume that Law164_{it} is an absorbing state type of treatment.⁹ $\mathbf{X}_{it}$ is a vector of municipality characteristics, such as total population, share of female inhabitants, number of employed individuals, and share of individuals with an educational level less than high school diploma. Finally, λ_i and τ_t are the spatial and time fixed-effects, and ε_{it} is the error term.

Under the assumption that treatment effect is homogeneous across groups and time, the parameter δ identifies the causal effect of city council dissolutions on participation rate in local elections. However, in our data city council dissolutions occur at different points in time. Recent econometric literature has shown that the staggered rollout of the treatment may lead to a biased estimation of the regression coefficient by part of the TWFE model (Roth et al. 2023). As pointed out by de Chaisemartin and d’Haultfoeuille (2020) and Borusyak et al. (2024), the parameter δ is a weighted sum of several treatment effects that compare the evolution of the mean outcome across groups between consecutive periods. In the case of treatment

⁹ As a sensitivity analysis, we assume the treatment to be as non-absorbing. We report the results in Table OA.1 and Figure OA.3 showing that they are very similar to the benchmark ones.

heterogeneity, some changes may receive negative weights, leading to difficulties in interpreting of the estimated coefficient of the TWFE model (Roth et al. 2023).¹⁰ To address this problem, we employ the estimators proposed by Borusyak et al. (2024) and de Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille (2024). Both estimators rely on the no anticipation and parallel trends assumptions, which are crucial for the validity of our empirical strategy. The former requires treated units not to react to the treatment prior to its implementation. The latter requires that the average outcome of both groups would have followed a similar evolution if the treatment was not implemented. In Section 4, we test this assumption by comparing pre-period average outcome evolution of treated and control units.

The difference between the two estimators stems from an efficiency-robustness trade-off arising from the conditions imposed on the parallel trends assumption (Roth et al. 2023). More in detail, Borusyak et al. (2024) require parallel trends to hold for all groups and time periods before treatment implementation, which increases the precision of the estimated effect, whilst de Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille (2024) impose a weaker requirement wherein it must hold in the period preceding the treatment switch, which favors the robustness of the estimator. Roth et al. (2023) argue that over longer time horizons, the stricter requirement of Borusyak et al. (2024) may lead to larger distortions if the parallel trends assumption holds only approximately.¹¹ However, the comparison of the two estimators is informative about sensitivity and consistency of the estimated effect under different identification assumptions. The consistency of the results across estimators shall provide stronger evidence that the estimated effect is not driven by the specific assumptions of either approach.

Finally, to ensure that the informational shock provided by the treatment assignment does not influence other units' potential outcomes (Cox 1958; Di Cataldo and Mastrorocco 2022; Galletta 2017), we remove cities neighboring affected municipalities to rule out the possible contamination of the control group due to a spillover effect of mafia-related dismissals. Our final sample is thus made of 826 municipalities, corresponding to 5,327 municipality-year observations, 115 of which experienced at least one mafia-related city council dissolution.¹² Table 1 reports the summary statistics.

10 In extreme scenarios, the negative weights issue may lead to sign reversal of the TWFE estimand, that is the δ may be negative even if all the treatment effects in the various groups are positive (de Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille 2020).

11 For details, see Section 3.3.4§4 in Roth et al. (2023).

12 In our data, only 23 municipalities, corresponding to 154 municipality-year observations, experienced two or more city council dissolutions due to mafia infiltration, accounting for the 2.7 % of the overall sample. In Section 4.4, we perform a sensitivity analysis excluding this group of municipalities from the estimation sample finding very similar point estimates to our baseline.

Table 1: Summary statistics.

Variables	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Participation rate in local elections (overall)	5,327	0.718	0.117	0.117	1.000
Treated municipalities	288	0.685	0.132	0.117	0.924
Control municipalities	5,039	0.720	0.116	0.145	1.000
City council dissolution	5,327	0.054	0.226	0.000	1.000
Total population (in logs)	5,327	8.107	1.091	5.063	12.348
Share of female inhabitants	5,327	0.511	0.012	0.429	0.568
Number of employed individuals (in logs)	5,327	6.853	1.112	3.555	10.987
Share of individuals with less than high school diploma	5,327	0.496	0.053	0.232	0.723

4 Empirical Findings

4.1 Main Results

Table 2 shows the effect of city council dissolutions on participation rates in local elections. By and large, the negative informational shock provided by mafia infiltration episodes reduces voter turnout by a margin of about 2 % points. This result is consistent both when not considering (column 1) or accounting for (columns 2 and 3) the staggered rollout of the treatment. The point estimate from the TWFE model is comparable, both in sign and significance, to those obtained from the estimators proposed by Borusyak et al. (2024) and de Chaisemartin and d’Haultfoeuille (2024).¹³ However, the former estimator returns a somewhat smaller point estimate, suggesting that the exact size of the estimated effect may be sensitive to the assumptions imposed by the estimator employed.

An important aspect is whether mafia infiltration episodes may permanently affect citizens’ participation in local elections. To answer this question, we perform an event study analysis. Figure 2 displays the results. We show that the effect of mafia infiltration episodes on voter turnout is persistent in time. We document a sharp reduction of about 2.2 % points in the participation rate of the first regular elections after the dissolution, and a drop of about 1.2 % points when considering the second regular elections. Our findings indicate that the negative informational shock may lead to political disaffection of citizens towards democracy that can last

¹³ We use the Stata commands `did_imputation` and `did_multipllegt_dyn` developed by Borusyak et al. (2024) and de Chaisemartin and d’Haultfoeuille (2024), respectively.

Table 2: Main estimation results.

	Participation rate in local elections:		
	TWFE	Borusyak et al. (2024)	de Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille (2024)
	(1)	(2)	(3)
City council dissolution	−0.019*** (0.007)	−0.009** (0.004)	−0.018** (0.007)
# of observations	5,237	5,237	5,236
# of municipalities	826	826	826
R ²	0.844		

Notes: ** Significant at 5 %, and *** significant at 1 %. Standard errors robust to within municipality correlation are reported in parentheses. Each model specification includes the list of covariates and fixed effects described in Section 3.

for as long as 6 years. This is in line with the previous evidence showing that political corruption scandals reduce individual trust towards public institutions and increase citizens’ disaffection (Daniele et al. 2023; Poertner and Zhang 2024). Further, the joint test of pre-treatment event study coefficients provides evidence in favor of the parallel trends assumption, albeit with different strength across estimators. On the one hand, the p -value is equal to 0.147 when using de Chaisemartin and d’Haultfoeuille’s (2024) estimator, which identifies the treatment effect under weaker requirements on the parallel trends assumption. On the other hand, it is equal to 0.074 when relying on the estimator proposed by Borusyak et al. (2024), falling below the 0.10 threshold. However, this difference between tests may be expected if the parallel trends assumption imposed on treated and control units in the pre-treatment period holds only approximately (Roth et al. 2023).

4.2 Heterogeneity Analysis

We explore the heterogeneity of the estimated effect across locations and over time. First, we divide the sample according to the region where municipalities are located in. Second, we split it using time intervals of 10-years. Figure OA.2 reports the results. On the one hand, we document that the effect of mafia-related dissolutions is homogeneous across regions. On the other hand, we find this type of events has become more salient over time and towards the end of the time period under analysis.

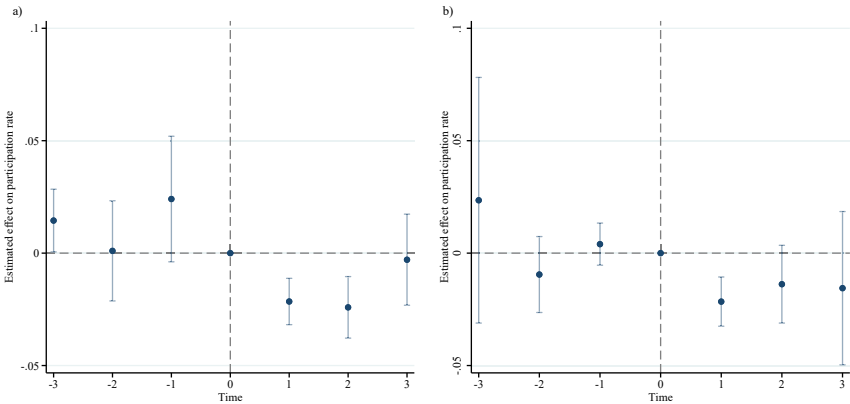


Figure 2: Event study plots of the estimated effect. Notes: The left (right) panel displays the event study plot using the estimator by Borusyak et al. (2024) (de Chaisemartin and d’Haultfoeuille (2024)). Standard errors robust to within municipality correlation are reported in parentheses. The p -values for the joint significance of the pre-treatment event study coefficients are 0.074 (panel a) and 0.147 (panel b).

4.3 Spillover Analysis

The effects of mafia dissolutions may not be limited to the municipalities where these groups are located. Previous empirical research has shown the presence of a spatial correlation between treated and neighboring municipalities in the context of mafia infiltration episodes (Di Cataldo and Mastrorocco 2022; Galletta 2017). Therefore, we check whether municipalities neighboring infiltrated ones may react as a consequence of dissolution.¹⁴ Table 3 shows the results, whilst Figure 3 displays the event study plots for the dynamic analysis.

We find that neighboring municipalities react to dissolution episodes by about a half of the estimated effect for the treated units. The dynamic analysis suggests that these municipalities experience a similar pattern as the one reported by directly treated units. We document a reduction in the voter turnout in the first two regular elections after dissolution that reverts back to pre-scandal levels from the third period onward.

¹⁴ In our data, we define neighboring cities as those units sharing an administrative border with treated municipalities. For details, see <https://www.istat.it/non-categorizzato/matrici-di-contiguita/> (last accessed May 21, 2026).

Table 3: Spillover analysis on near municipalities.

	Participation rate in local elections
City council dissolution	−0.011** (0.005)
# of observations	6,863
# of municipalities	1,059
R ²	0.865

Notes: ** Significant at 5 %. Standard errors robust to within municipality correlation are reported in parentheses. Each model specification includes the list of covariates and fixed effects described in Section 3.

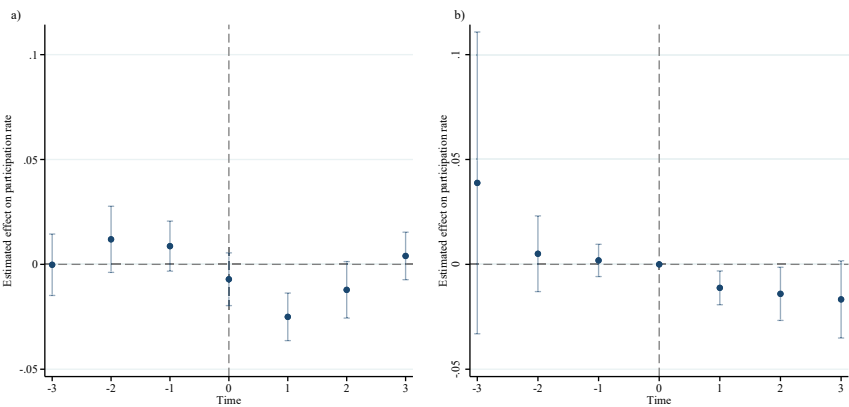


Figure 3: Event study plots of the estimated spillover effect on near municipalities. Notes: The left (right) panel displays the event study plot using the estimator by Borusyak et al. (2024) (de Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille (2024)). Standard errors robust to within municipality correlation are reported in parentheses. The p -values for the joint significance of the pre-treatment event study coefficients are 0.247 (panel a) and 0.735 (panel b).

4.4 Sensitivity Analysis

We perform several additional analyses to verify the robustness of our findings. We report the corresponding results in Table OA.1 in the Online Appendix.

First, we study whether the presence of mafia groups may produce an attenuation bias in our results. More in detail, if mafia's activity reduces voter turnout then the inclusion of the last elections before dismissal within the control units group may result in a downward bias of the average treatment effect. In column (1), we show that our estimation results are robust to the exclusion of these ballots from the sample. Second, we verify whether the presence of criminal organizations may

entail a violation of the no anticipation assumption. We exploit information on voting behavior in national elections for the lower chamber of the Italian parliament, that is the Chambers of Deputies.¹⁵ We report the results in column (2), finding that our main conclusions are qualitatively similar regardless of the type of elections considered.¹⁶ The only difference is in the size of the point estimate, which is larger when using results from national ballots.

Third, as noted in Section 2, some municipalities experienced multiple city council dissolutions. This indicates that the implementation of law 164/1991 may not have prevented future episodes of mafia infiltration from occurring, thus leading the inclusion of these units to upward bias our estimation results. In column (3), we show that the exclusion of multiple treated units do not lead to relevant changes in our baseline findings. Fourth, one may be concerned that the effect of dismissals may impact voter turnout only in the first election following the dissolution. Therefore, we re-frame the nature of the mafia-related treatment as non-absorbing. In column (4), we find that dissolutions decrease voter turnout regardless of the assumption on the type of treatment. Further, Figure OA.3 shows that the dynamic analysis of the non-absorbing treatment is qualitatively similar to the one for the absorbing case.¹⁷

Fifth, we replicate our main analysis by incorporating information on local elections held in Sicily for the period 1991–2005. In column (5), we show that the inclusion of Sicily does not affect our baseline conclusions. Sixth, because the negative effect of mafia dissolution episodes on voter turnout may be partially driven by criminal organizations depressing economic conditions of the areas where they are active in, we augment our model specification in Equation (1) including a proxy for size of the local economy. In Italy, information on GDP is available up to the

¹⁵ We select this political body for two reasons. First, the occurrence of national elections is exogenous with respect to local political dynamics. Second, both political bodies share the same age threshold for right-to-vote (i.e. 18 years old).

¹⁶ We also study whether city council dissolution may affect the between-elections time gap of municipalities finding that they do not accelerate the occurrence of local elections. This result is available from the authors upon request.

¹⁷ For this analysis, we compare de Chaisemartin and d'Haultfoeuille's (2024) estimator with the one proposed by Dube et al. (2025). The latter is a local projection difference-in-differences estimator that ensures a robust identification by enforcing a 'clean control' condition wherein newly treated units are only compared to control observations whose outcome dynamics is not influenced by previous changes in treatment status. We use Stata command `lpidid` developed by Dube et al. (2025).

provincial level.¹⁸ Therefore, we proxy the local economic conditions of municipalities using satellite-imaging on night-time lights activity.¹⁹ We report the results in column (6), showing that our baseline findings remain unaffected even after the inclusion of this measure.

Seventh, given the possibility that political views may be correlated at spatial level, we re-estimate Equation (1) allowing for within-provincial correlation between observations. Because in our data the number of provinces is 16, we employ wild-cluster bootstrapping to account for the small-cluster bias of the covariance matrix (MacKinnon et al. 2023).²⁰ Further, we include province-by-election year fixed effects to account for possible common shocks at provincial level for municipalities located in the same area. Columns (7)–(9) report the results, showing that they are in line with our baseline findings. However, we document that the higher spatial order of correlation delivers standard errors almost twice as large as those from the main analysis, resulting in the loss of statistical significance of the estimated coefficients.

Finally, we investigate whether our results are sensitive both in magnitude and significance to an alternative definition of the treatment. More in detail, the negative effect on voter turnout may be the result of inherent characteristics of local governments, such as poor performances of local administrations, rather than an effect due to mafia activity. Hence, we test for this hypothesis by considering mafia-unrelated dismissals as source of exogenous variation. This type of dissolutions are typically related to inefficiencies of the local administration and imply that, whether they materialize, elected politicians cannot run for a seat in the next election.²¹ In column (10), we show that non-related mafia dismissals are not statistically related to voter turnout.

5 Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature of the effects of mafia infiltration episodes by exploring whether the collusion of local authorities with organized crime may

18 For details, see https://contact.istat.it/s/article/Il-Pil-comunale-non-viene-misurato-dall-Istat?language=en_US (last accessed May 21, 2026).

19 We source information on night-light activity from Li et al. (2020). For details, see https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Harmonization_of_DMSP_and_VIIRS_nighttime_light_data_from_1992-2018_at_the_global_scale/9828827 (last accessed May 21, 2026).

20 We use the Stata command `boottest` developed by Roodman et al. (2019).

21 We consider the following list of mafia-unrelated dismissals: resignation of the mayor, resignation of 50 % of the council members, vote of no confidence, and failure in approving the financial budget.

affect citizens' participation in democracy. Our results indicate that city council dissolutions due to mafia infiltration reduce voter turnout by a margin of about 2 % points on average. We document that the decline in voter turnout may persist for as long as 6 years, that is two local election cycles, from the episode and that this type of events may affect neighboring municipalities as well. Further, we show that the effect is homogeneous across locations but not over time. Finally, our results are robust to an extensive set of sensitivity analyses and different hypotheses on the treatment.

Although necessary to restore legality, our findings suggest that anti-mafia interventions may decrease citizens' engagement in public affairs. We document that the negative effect of dismissals is present also after controlling for relevant dimensions such as local size of the economy. We hypothesize that this effect is due to a lower level of trust of individuals in democratic institutions, which they may perceive as corrupt. More broadly, our findings contribute to the literature on corruption and political disaffection by providing evidence that salient corruption shocks may depress, rather than mobilize, electoral participation. In the case of mafia infiltration, the exposure of collusive relationships between elected officials and organized crime appears to signal a profound institutional failure, leading citizens to withdraw from democratic participation. Future research might take this dimension into account and delve into the trust formation process of citizens towards institutions after corruption shocks.

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