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.

Please cite this article as:

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 contemporary democracies, especially in areas with low turnout rates. Simultaneous (or concurrent) elections – i.e. the practice of conducting the elections of different institutional bodies (usually at local and national level, or including referendums) on the same day – proved to be in some cases quite effective in raising the turnout level (Cantoni et al., 2021; Leininger et al. 2018). The engine of this success is mainly the opportunity to cut citizens' costs of voting as well as institutional budgets. At the same time, these kinds of measures do not address the deep sentiments of disaffection for political institutions that often are at the origin of not voting. They cut voting fatigue but do not necessarily improve citizens' political efficacy nor support for parties and the system as a whole.

Consequently, the benefits of concurrent elections still need more evidence through different contexts. We intend to address the following questions: Is the possibility to vote simultaneously for different levels of governments enough to increase voting participation, especially in those contexts with high disaffection toward politics and institutions? Is the output of concurrent elections without negative effects for voting choice?

Simultaneous elections indeed mix elections with different levels of saliency, potentially affecting the number of empty ballot papers. Moreover, different electoral rules in simultaneous competitions might increase the likelihood of citizens making mistakes in casting their votes. When elections are held on the same day but have different rules, voters might be confused and the number of invalid votes may increase. While political offer (that is sometimes different across elections levels) remains a major explanatory element of voting behavior, variation in

electoral rules in simultaneous elections is often poorly considered by both institutional actors and the scientific literature.

We address the above questions by observing the recent case of the Italian general elections of 25 September 2022, in which also the election of the president and the regional assembly of Sicily were run simultaneously. This represents a quasi-natural experiment in a regional context where atavistic disaffection and high volatility have marked the turnout rate of the last thirty years (Cerruto and La Bella, 2022). By using the results of 2022 national elections, with municipalities as units of analysis, we specifically test through difference-in-difference (DD) models whether a) simultaneous elections of the regional government/parliament and the national parliament increased the turnout rate; and b) whether different electoral rules for the elections of the three institutional bodies (the president of the region, the regional parliament and the national parliament) had some effects in terms of blank and null votes. The data show a positive effect on turnout in the Sicilian context compared to the regions of the south. At the same time, both blank and null votes show higher percentages in Sicily, suggesting a possible threatening effect of concurrent elections having different electoral rules.

2. A new Parliament, old problems: some key contextual elements of the 2022 elections

The general elections of 25 September 2022 marked the early end of the 13th Legislature of the Italian Parliament (2018-2022) and confirmed the deinstitutionalization of the Italian party system (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2013; Chiaramonte et al., 2018). Elections were held after the different experiences of Conte's (M5S) and Draghi's governments[1].

In June 2022, Mario Draghi, the former President of the Council of Ministers resigned after a vote of confidence in the Senate, when he obtained the support of only a relative majority,

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[1] In June 2018, the M5S and Matteo Salvini's Lega created the first full-fledged populist government in a major Western European country (Garzia, 2019). The government fell as early as August 2019, after the European elections, which saw a clear success of the League and the electoral collapse of the M5S (Chiaramonte et al., 2020), when Salvini tried to exploit his popularity by calling for early elections. Within a few weeks, however, the M5S and the PD reached an agreement for a new government and the second Conte government was born in September. Only a few months later, the second Conte government faced the Covid-19 emergency and responded with various containment measures. After an initial phase in which even the opposition parties showed relative unity in their response to the emergency (Albetazzi et al., 2021), the right-wing parties – Fratelli d'Italia and Lega in particular – began to loudly criticize the government on the most important issues related to the management of the pandemic, the acceptance of special funds from the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), and the overall governance of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Cavatorto et al., 2021). In October 2021, with the withdrawal of support from Renzi's 'Italia Viva' party, the government resigned. To overcome the crisis, several leaders and commentators expressed their support for a government led by Mario Draghi, which in 2021 took the form of a government of national unity, supported by all major parties except Fratelli d'Italia.

given the abstention of the senators of the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Stars Movement - M5S), of Forza Italia (FI) and the Lega. Already during his mandate, President Draghi had difficulty in holding together such a heterogeneous government coalition. The attempt to reposition the M5S on the progressive front, by Conte as the new political leader (Carteny & Puleo, 2022), and the attempt of Forza Italia and the League to respond to electoral pressures stemming from the success of Fratelli D'Italia (Brothers of Italy – FdI), are among the key political issues that undermined the incumbent government during 2022.

After the elections were called, the campaign focused the political debate on certain socio-economic issues that are strongly intertwined with international ones. As citizens' voting behavior is influenced by contingent economic and social events (Schmitt, et al., 2021), the war in Ukraine (and its consequences on European economies, see Mbah and Wasum, 2022) was among the most salient topics of the elections (Lami and Sahota, 2022) contributing to an increasing citizens' insecurity.

The main result of the 2022 general elections was that the center-right won an absolute majority in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Fratelli d'Italia was by far the first party with an electoral result much superior to the coalition's allies. The League stopped at 8.8% and Forza Italia at 8.2%; however, both of them were crucial for the formation of the government majority. In reality, the victory of the center-right coalition was amplified (especially in the translation of votes into seats) by the absence of a cohesive alternative, since center-left forces remained divided into three subgroups (Vassallo and Verzichelli, 2023). The national elections of 2022 confirmed the already observed phenomena of volatility, fragmentation, rise of populism, polarization and reformulation of socio-economic and socio-cultural divisions (Giovannini, Valbruzzi, Vampa, 2023)[2].

The outcome of the Italian elections is consistent with the electoral dynamics that characterize Western European democracies. The progressive expansion of the radical right, in some cases, was favoured by the effects of the Covid-19 health emergency and, even more, by Putin's Russian invasion of Ukraine. The presidential and legislative elections in France are a clear example of radical changes in party competition dynamics (Durovic 2023). In Germany, the end of the Merkel era accelerated a process of increasing fluidity in inter-party relations with

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[2] There are many common features between the 2022 elections and the 2013 elections, especially when one looks at the structure of the political offer. As in the 2013 elections, upon the fall of the technical government led by Mario Monti, the main parties of the (large) majority positioned themselves in different groupings. One substantial difference is the fact that Draghi, unlike Monti, did not directly participate in the elections. Moreover, Draghi's legacy was much more popular than Monti's one, as he implemented public expenditure, whereas Monti had to promote harsh austerity measures. In general, researchers have observed that successive waves of Italian populism have emerged in a context of economic stagnation and precariousness (Vampa 2023).

the consistent growth of the Greens (on the progressive side) and the Alternative for Germany (Alternative fur Deutschland, AfD), which profited from the raising saliency of some social and economic emergencies. The Spanish party system has become more fragmented and polarized (SimOn 2020). In Sweden, the growing influence of the populist radical right has led to the mainstreaming of anti-immigration rhetoric. This trend was already present in Denmark (Aylott and Bolin 2023). In 2022, in Portugal, Chena – a nascent party in the galaxy of the European radical right – grew from 1.3 % to 7.2%.

The economic and political events that characterized the national political elections inevitably also had repercussions on the Sicilian political context. There is a strong link between the two scenarios – the national and the regional – highlighted by incumbent President Musumeci's U-turn from an initial will to run again for the presidency (the legislature having been completed) to the sudden decision to resign. The strategic intent was to strengthen cohesion within the Sicilian center-right by planning candidatures simultaneously at the regional and national level. The coalition of progressists showed also a national-regional linkage since Conte's (M5S) decision to break the coalition with the Democratic Party was consistent with the lack of support for the PD's candidature of Caterina Chinnici for the presidency of Sicily.

The electoral campaign began in a public environment highly dissatisfied with Musumeci's incumbent government. Criticism emerged especially on the systematic delay in the approval of the Budget Law – passed after the maximum time limit – and on the several reforms announced but, in the eyes of the public, poorly implemented. Thus, at the end of the legislature, several reforms in many areas such as waste management, water supply, bureaucracy, forestry etc. were poorly addressed by both the regional governmental and parliamentary activities.

The outcome of the Sicilian regional elections – held simultaneously on 25 September 2022 – was consistent with that of National elections. In Sicily the competition was played out on two different levels: the one of the candidates for the presidency of the Region (the regional lists), and that of the territorial constituencies (therefore of the provincial lists that contribute to 62 seats out of 70 in the Sicilian Regional Assembly - ARS). The center-right coalition was the winner of regional elections, getting the presidency (42.1% of votes) and the majority within the regional Assembly. Looking at the votes for candidates to the presidency, the center-left parties remained below the twenty per cent of preferences (Chinnici 16.2%, and the M5S candidate Di Paola 15.2%), while the emerging South calls North (Sud chiama Nord) regional populist party gained a surprising 24% of preferences for its leader Cateno De Luca.

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3. Electoral rules and political "offer" in Sicilian and national elections of 2022

The political dynamics and the results of national and Sicilian regional elections of September 2022 appear in fact highly related to each other. Despite these strong ties, the electoral systems and rules differed in some aspects that might turn out to be crucial for participation and voting choices.

At the national level, for the second time, Italians voted with the mixed (proportional and majoritarian) system introduced in 2017 (Chiaramonte & D'Alimonte, 2018). Nevertheless, two constitutional reforms – approved by Constitutional Law 1/2021 – have changed the rules in the last five years. First, eighteen years old citizens may now vote for candidates to both chambers (previously the limit was set at 25 for the Senate). This made the electorate of the two Chambers completely overlapping. Secondly, the number of deputies was reduced from 630 to 400 in the Chamber of Deputies and from 315 to 200 in the Senate[3].

The structure of the electoral law (the so-called 'Rosatellum') has remained essentially unchanged: a mixed electoral system assigns 37.5% of the seats through the uninominal majority method both in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate (excluding MPs elected abroad from the calculation, this amounts to 147 MPs, out of 392, and 74 senators, out of 196), while the remaining 62.5% of the seats (245 in the Chamber of Deputies and 122 in the Senate) are assigned through the proportional system[4]. To qualify for the proportional share, coalitions must attain at least 10% of the votes, while individual lists, whether cohesive or not, need the 3% of the votes[5]. An important aspect of the electoral law in its proportional component is the impossibility to choose a specific candidate. Those elected are proclaimed according to the order of presentation established by the list itself. The voter has no choice between the different candidates on each list. Finally, it is important to bear in mind that, despite the coexistence of two different systems (majoritarian/plurality and proportional), there is only one ballot paper (for each Chamber) and it is not possible to vote different lists for the two systems.

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[3] These are constitutional reforms strongly desired by the 5 Star Movement and confirmed by a national referendum in 2020 that called for a drastic reorganization of constituencies.

[4] On the share of seats allocated by proportional method, there is a distinction between the Chamber and the Senate. In the Chamber of Deputies, the distribution is first on a national basis and then to the 28 regional or sub-regional constituencies. In the Senate, the distribution is on a regional basis, according to Article 57 of the Constitution.

[5] Under this electoral system, a list, which is part of a coalition, if it does not reach the 3% threshold, does not obtain seats in the multi-party part. However, if it has received at least 1% of the valid votes, these are not dispersed but distributed among the other components of the coalition that have passed the threshold.

In terms of electoral offerings, the general elections of 25 September 2022 present many elements of continuity with the past. The main forces in the field were the same as the last two elections: the center-right coalition, the center-left coalition and the Five Star Movement (M5S) (D'Alimononte and De Sio, 2024). However, the Italian party system, as we have seen in the previous section, shows persisting instability due to tensions, fractures, new power relations and alliances (Sartori 1976). The main novelty was represented by the reappearance of the centrist pole (present in 2013 but not in 2018). Moreover, the Italian case shows a strong weakness of the political class due to citizen disaffection and distrust, but also to the tendency to delegate to technocrats during harsh times. The 2022 general elections represented an attempt of the political class to regain control of the government (Pasquino 2023).

The electoral system for the election of the President and the members of the Sicilian Regional Assembly is regulated by Regional Law No 7 of 3 June 2005. This is a mixed electoral system based on the proportional formula with a majority bonus and with the possibility of disjointed voting. This formula is in line with the neo-parliamentary form of government prefigured by the Constitutional Law No 2 of 2001, which in the Sicilian case was included in the statutory text (Vassallo and Baldini, 2000). Specifically, 62 out of 70 deputies are elected with the proportional system on a provincial basis (Hare quotient method), 7 deputies are elected in a regional blocked list, as a prize awarded to the winning coalition. The last seat goes to the presidential candidate ranked second. Finally, the law set some rules to foster gender balance within the elected parliament[6]. It included also a threshold of 5% at the regional level, the highest explicit threshold in force in Italy[7]. The law includes a majority bonus awarded only if the coalition linked to the elected presidential candidate does not reach 60% of seats. It relates to the number of seats that the winning coalition obtains in the proportional distribution. Therefore, it is not decisive in absolute terms, because it works only in the event of failure to reach an absolute majority of seats[8].

The different electoral rules of the national and the Sicilian regional systems, here briefly described, might have consequences when the two electoral competitions are run simultaneously, especially in terms of blank and null votes.

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[6] The candidates in each regional list must be included according to a criterion of alternating men and women, and in the provincial lists neither gender may be present for more than two-thirds of the number of candidates to be elected in the constituency.

[7] According to the provisions contained in the transitional regulations of 2001.
Law no. 43 of 23 February 1995 established a threshold of 3% of valid votes that would not apply if the list was linked to another list exceeding the 5%.

[8] If the winning coalition exceeds 60% of the seats, it turns into a minority prize that transfers the seats of the regional lists to the losing proportional provincial lists (Cerruto La Bella, 2022).

Regarding the level of political supply and demand, the Sicilian political system has been characterized by a series of phenomena – such as electoral absenteeism, voter instability, personalization of the vote - which contributed to radical changes at party system level during the 90s (Cerruto and Raniolo, 2009). The introduction of the direct election of the President of the Region poorly limited uncertainty and turbulence in the Sicilian political system (Cerruto and La Bella, 2018).

The Sicilian voter has traditionally shown a lower propensity to participate in elections (especially at regional/local level). Sicily shows (along with Calabria and Campania) the highest rates of electoral absenteeism, defining the Centre-North – South fracture in political participation (Caciagli, 1988). The political offer within the Sicilian regional system has been traditionally fragmented with a high number of parties and lists (Bartolini, 1986). Until the introduction of the direct election of the President of the Region, the number of lists presented was double that of the other regions (Feltrin, 1990). Sicily has also shown a high level of personalization of vote. This has been particularly evident in case of regional elections, since localistic factors and personalism emerge in the relationship between voters and parties (D'Amico 1993). These characteristics have been registered in the electoral behavior of Sicilians during the last 20 years. The substantial difference with the 1990s in the electoral offer can be seen by the affirmations of new populist political subjects such as the Movimento per le autonomie (Movement for Autonomy), the Magafono (Megaphone), the M5S and Sud Chiama Nord (South calls North). The electoral success of these parties, albeit in line with tendencies at national and European levels, was particularly significant in such a turbulent political scene where dissatisfaction is prevalent within the electorate (Cerruto and La Bella, 2024). However, the electoral success (and proliferation) of populist lists remained limited. The political offer for the 2022 regional elections confirms the reduction in the number of lists observed since 2017, with about 800 candidates for the Regional Assembly. The M5S was the third party in terms of preferences at regional level while mainstream lists of the center-right were the winning coalition. At the same time, the new populist regional list of Cateno De Luca was the "real" competitor for the presidency, and the second emerging force (about 24% of vote obtained for the candidate to the presidency).

The process of defining the coalition candidacies, as previously anticipated, was crossed by long and exhausting negotiations on which contingencies, internal and external to the natural dynamics of the regional political system, had a decisive impact. This is the case of the no-confidence vote in the Draghi government which had repercussions on the progressist coalition that had reached an agreement on the candidacy of Caterina Chinnici through primaries. In the

center-right coalition, on the other hand, the diktats to Musumeci's re-candidacy determined the resignation and, therefore, the choice to go to simultaneous elections.

On the whole, the electoral offer at regional level in 2022 was (as usual) smaller than the national one. In Sicily there were 6 regional lists and 19 linked provincial ones, while a larger offer (more than 30 symbols) was present at national level (see table D1 in the appendix).[9] The political offer was then larger at national level. At the same time, it was quite overlapping, at least for the big parties. Mainstream parties such as PD, FdI, FI, M5S, and Salvini League were present in both regional and national elections. They attracted the greatest majority of preferences. The regional list of Cateno De Luca (Sud chiama Nord) had a great success in Sicily (24% versus the national 0.8%) but were present in both national and regional competitions. In short, the electoral offer in terms of parties and ideologic positions was basically overlapping between the regional and the national level. However, regional dynamics show different voting patterns due to the presence of some candidates (such as De Luca) or voters' orientations.

4. Hypotheses

Both voting participation and the quality of vote represent key subjects of electoral studies and political research. Different paradigms and theoretical approaches have defined the sources of electoral participation across contexts and territorial entities. The list of the elements affecting (or relating) to turnout rate is quite long nowadays. At the individual level, different researchers have proved the influence of sociodemographic factors such as education, income/social status level, age, working condition (among others see Bhatti and Hansen, 2012; Fieldhouse, Tranmer and Russell, 2007), as well as attitudinal elements such as interest in politics, trust in institutions (Blondel Sinnott, and Svensson 1997), and media exposure. At the sociotropic level, voting turnout shows significant variations across different level of economic conditions (e.g. Di Mauro, 2016), welfare, clientelism and corruption (Dahlberg and Solevid, 2016). Other factors relate to "electoral engineering" such as the dispositions included in the electoral law and the electoral procedures (see Chen, 2011): from the most substantial ones, concerning the way to cast voting preferences, to those appearing innocuous such as the form of the ballot

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[9] 1.310 candidates for uninominal and 2.788 for plurinominal constituencies at the Chamber of deputies. 693 i candidates for uninominal and 1.418 for plurinominal constituencies for the senate. 95 candidates for the Chamber and 41 for the senate in the foreign constituency. See https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/online-sul-sito-viminale-tutti-i-candidati-nelle-liste-e-nei-collegi-uninominali-elezionipolitiche2022 and https://dait.interno.gov.it/elezioni/trasparenza/elezioni-politiche-2022 .

papers or the day of the week where elections are held. These institutional arrangements include also the practice to conduct elections for different levels of representation (and government) on the same day.

Simultaneous (or concurrent) elections are largely spread across the globe within different democratic regimes. They present some intuitive benefits for institutions, political elites/parties and voters. Concurrent elections reduce organizational costs by doubling the election outcome in a single organizational effort. Elements such as recruitment of electoral commissions, data collection and treatment, supply material, updating of electoral lists, control activities, reservation and management of venues etc. are high demanding activities that might be cut by concentrating different elections on the same day. A consequent reduction of costs is an attractive reason to implement these types of measures. Parties benefit from concurrent elections by reducing the costs of their campaign, taking advantage of multiple arenas of communication (and conflict) and of bargaining political (potential) positions with alleys. Voters reduce also their participation fatigue by having the possibility to deal with different voting choices in one session. From a cost/benefit analysis, concurrent elections are then expected to produce higher levels of electoral participation. Some researchers have proved this relationship in different contexts. In Europe, Leininger et al. (2016) showed that simultaneous elections increase the turnout rate.

Italy is not a deviant case. As Cantoni et al. (2021) showed, concurrent elections in Italy increase the turnout level especially when high-salience (national) elections were run simultaneously with low-salience (regional, local, European) elections. We refer here to low/high salience elections instead of "first/second order" elections (Reif and Smith, 1980). This last concept has had an extensive application in voting behavior analyses, but it has also attracted some criticism. Schakel and Jeffery (2013) observed that "the conceptual heritage mobilised by Reif and Schmitt has imported a 'nationalizing' bias into the study of regional elections" (p. 325). Their study demonstrated that "the second-order model has limited explanatory power in explaining regional election outcomes" (p.339). Entering into this debate is beyond the aims of this study. However, a national-driven perspective better applies to our case, since we observe national results. Accordingly, we prefer to refer to the saliency of elections within a polity rather than to an ordered logic. Assuming a national perspective, lower salient elections are less considered in the political debate than national ones. This is the case of regional elections in Italy, since they usually are less salient in (national) political discourse and less participated. At the same time, the influence of national political dynamics (at party

level) and issues on regional/municipal elections – a main argument of the second order thesis – does not always applies to these electoral competitions.

Some studies observed that a) "lower-salience elections in the South increase turnout even when they concur with higher-salience contests (Cantoni et al., 2021, p. 21); and b) "the margins for increasing political interest (hence, voter turnout) in the South may be wider, leaving more space for concurrent elections to increase political participation" (Cantoni et al., 2021, p. 21). In other words, since disaffection toward politics is higher in some contexts, simultaneity might be more important than saliency: the effects relate to simultaneity rather than to elections' "order". This is a less explored (and quite counterintuitive) perspective deserving more empirical investigation.

Consistently with this perspective, we hypothesize that *the level of turnout is significantly higher within municipalities in Sicily where concurrent elections were run on 25th of September 2022 (H1)*.

In this case the concurring effect of simultaneous lower-salience elections (regional) would break the descending turnout trend in the island and reveal a clear gain in terms of participation.

The second hypothesis concerns blank ballots. If citizens feel empowered by the possibility to choose for different levels of representation in one day (and turnout increases) it is reasonable to expect a limited number of blank votes in concurrent elections. On the other hand, difference in electoral rules and campaign dynamics within concurrent elections might tarnish the vote of more salient elections such as national ones. In this case, some voters might be motivated principally by the will to vote for a candidate at regional level, having no clear choice for the national one. This dynamic is accentuated in local context where candidate compete for a personal vote and directly contact voters: the will to choose for a name at regional level (that is impossible due to blocked lists at national one) could represent an input to vote in both tournaments but does not imply a choice for the national elections. In other words, the differences in the electoral offer (between regional and national elections) might not be the only reason to vote blank, but it concurs with other aspects (such as individual preferences) linked to electoral rules and campaigns. In order to see this potentially threatening effect we hypothesize that *blank ballots are significantly higher within municipalities in Sicily where concurrent elections were run on 25th of September 2022 (H2)*.

Finally, we know that benefits on turnout are effective only if concurrent elections produce valid votes, and voting blank is different from invalid votes. Most of the studies proving an

increase of turnout during unique election days show a positive effect in terms of valid votes. However, these researches mostly ignore differences in electoral rules or potential threats in technicalities. Our narrowed focus on the Sicilian case might address specifically this question after we discussed the differences in electoral rules and voting procedures. As we observed, these differences are potentially leading voters to mistakes when they cast their votes, at least for two main reasons: 1) the candidate selection and 2) the disjoint vote. The voter has the possibility to write a name of a favored candidate in the ballot paper of the regional elections but not to choose a candidate in the one of national elections (blocked lists). More importantly, at regional level, voters may choose for a candidate to the presidency and to a candidate for the regional parliament that are not in the same list (disjoint vote). This option might confuse voters since the national ballot paper has a similar scheme (see figures A1 and A2 in the appendix) with a candidate for each list running for the majoritarian seats and many others for the proportional ones. In the national case, of course, is not however possible to select two candidates (for the majoritarian and the proportional seats) running in different lists. In other words, the similarity of the ballot papers in the two concurring elections might increase voters' mistakes because electoral rules are different.

According we hypothesize that *invalid votes within municipalities in Sicily are higher than in cities of other regions during 2022 general elections (H3).*

5. Data and method

In order to test our hypotheses, we use official data of elections' results having municipalities as unit of analysis. Data provided by the Ministry of the Interior[10] are collected in different files – both for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate - reporting the main variables for each constituency (number of voters, total votes casted, number of white ballot paper, null votes, etc.) as well as the votes for each list (about 107 thousand cases). Since we are not interested in votes by lists, we dropped redundant information by keeping only the variables for each constituency for a total of 7846 cases. They in fact corresponds to Italian towns/municipalities except for some big cities where the territory is divided in few (2 or 3) constituencies[11]. Our

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[10] The Eligendo platform is the database of election results in Italy since 1946 from Ministry of Interior. Data might be accessed to the website https://elezioni.interno.gov.it/ .

[11] Data for the Chamber of Deputies do not include towns in Valle D'Aosta.

first dependent variable is the turnout rate in percentage terms. We obtained this measure by creating a new variable that multiply the number of casted votes by 100 and then divide it by the total number of voters (i.e. those who formally have the right to vote) for that town.

Aggregating the results at regional level, the north/south deep divide on turnout clearly appears. Northern and Center regions such as Emilia Romagna, Lombardy, Veneto and Toscana are at the top of the list while southern regions such as Campania and Puglia are at the bottom, with Calabria ranking last at about 50% of participation. Turnout rate in Sicily is in the middle-lower part of the list but clearly up other southern regions and Sardinia.

Figure 1

Average percentages of turnout rate in municipalities aggregated by region, Italian General Elections 2022.
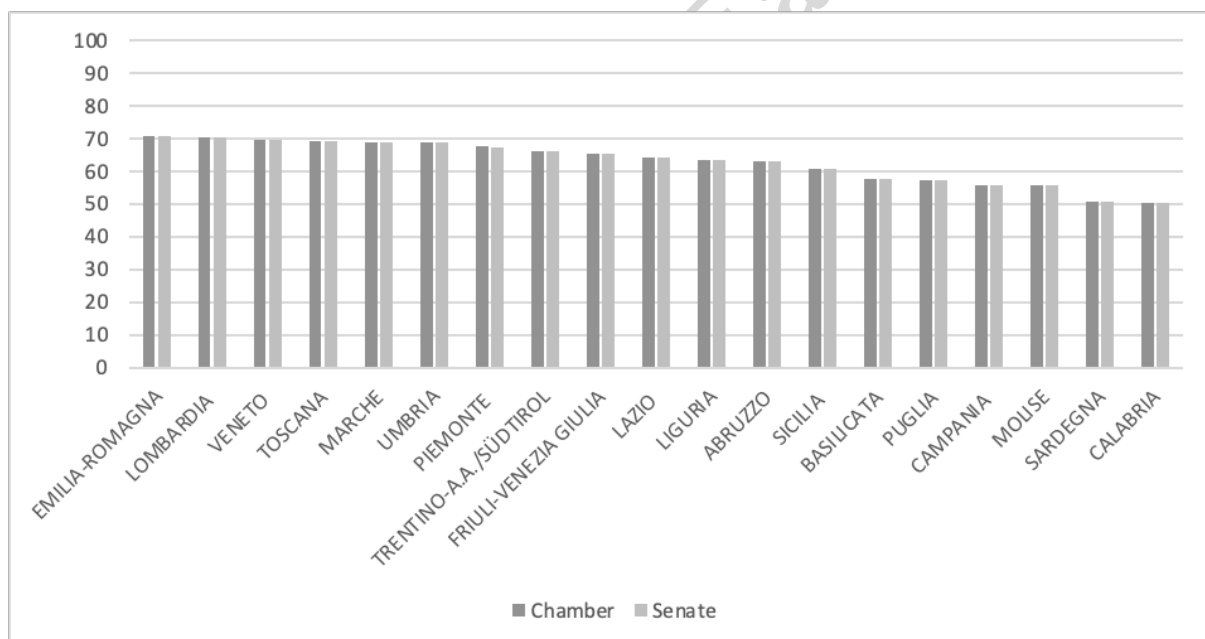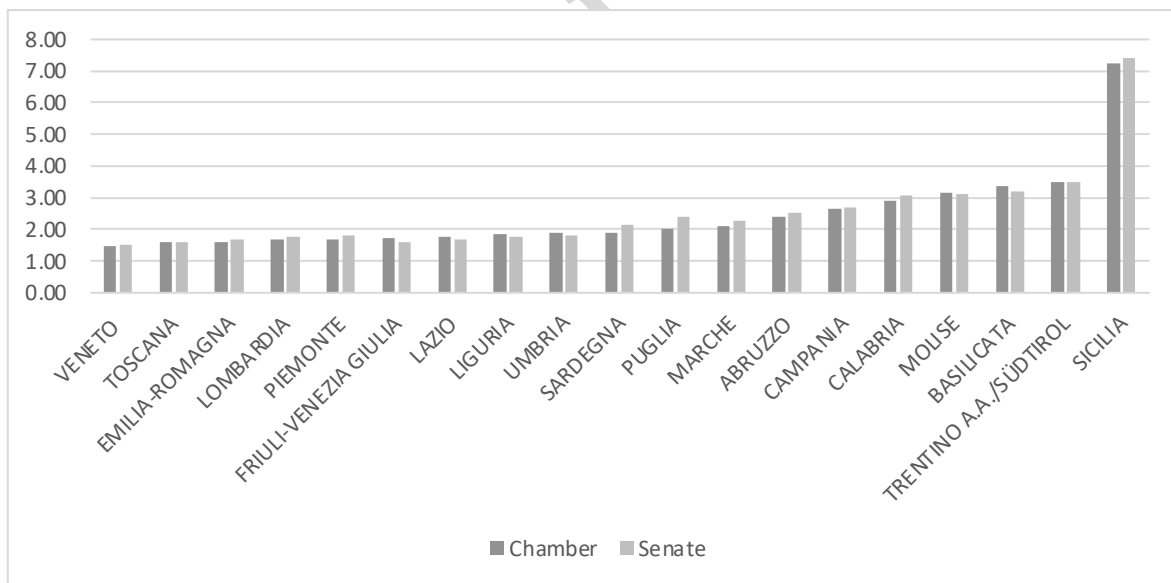

Source: own elaboration on municipalities from Eligendo.

Our descriptive statistics shows consistent results with differences in regional levels of turnout during past elections[12]; while turnout in regional elections in Sicily was always different from national elections[13].

Our second main dependent variable is the number of blank votes. This measure has been standardized by the number of vote casted in each municipality (number of blank*100/total votes). Descriptive data at regional level show an impressive difference of this percentage between Sicily and the other regions. At the national level, the municipalities register on average about the 2.25% of blank votes while in Sicily this percentage raise to 7% (fig. 2).

Figure 2

Average percentages of blank vote in municipalities aggregated by region, Italian General Elections 2022.

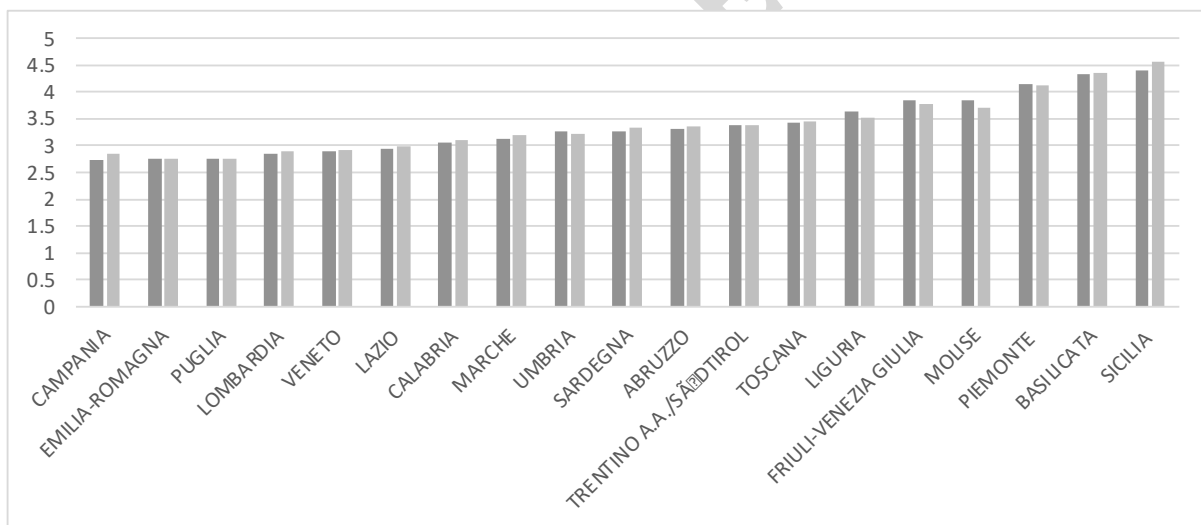

Source: own elaboration on municipalities from Eligendo.

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[12] For an extensive analysis of trends of turnout in Italian elections (also by regions) see Angelucci et al (2024), Marini and Piccolino (2023) and Cantoni et al. (2021). Data show a continuous declining trend though Italian history (e.g. turnout rate was 85% in 2001 and declined constantly to 63.9%). Sicilian turnout rate in national elections made no exceptions decreasing from about 75% of 2008 to respectively 65% and 63% in 2013 and 2018.
[13] Turnout in 2022 Sicilian regional elections was of 48.7% of the electorate (46% in 2017). Source https://www.regione.sicilia.it/la-regione-informa/elezioni-regionali-sicilia-affluenza-al-4862-dalle-14-allo-scrutinio

An indication of possible threatening effects of concurrent voting concerns also null votes. According to our third hypothesis we focus on null vote in order to assess whether simultaneous voting with different electoral rules may create confusion and relate to a higher number of invalid votes. Descriptive data shows some evidences supporting this hypothesis: the average number of null votes in Sicily is the highest registered (about 226 votes per town). We also standardized the frequency number by creating a measure of the percentage of null votes over the total casted votes (number of null*100/total votes). Once again Sicily results the region with the highest percentage of null votes (about the 4.4%) followed by Basilicata and Piemonte (figure 3).

Figure 3

Standardized average percentages of null vote per municipality aggregated by region, Italian General Elections 2022.

Source: own elaboration on municipalities from Eligendo.

Descriptive statistics on both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate show very similar (if not identical) results. Our main independent variable is the dummy (Sicily) distinguishing Sicilian municipalities (equals to 1) from others (at 0).

Once we generated the turnout and standardized measure of blank and null votes, we proceeded to a DD comparison between municipalities in Sicily and two other groups: the

whole municipalities of the national sample and those in Southern regions[14]. We believe the last group of cities to be very important to assess the relationships under analysis because it allows for a most-similar case design strategy. Despite differences among regions of the South, the literature proves key similarities in this part of the country ranging from economic indicators to political culture, institutional performance and citizens/parties behavioral and attitudinal aspects. The comparison on this selection of towns allows then to control for many aspects considered important for the DVs under analysis. Some indicators concerning these factors have been also included in the regression models on both the national and the southern regional sub-sample. Specifically, from the databank of the Italian Institute for Statistics (ISTAT) we collected key indicators concerning a) a standardized percentage of low salary per municipality[15], b) the population size, and c) a basic measure of health services (standardized measure of public health structures per municipality[16]). The appendix reports their descriptive statistics (tables B1, B2 and B3). Despite the huge number of data collected by the national institute of statistics, data aggregated at town level relates only to a limited number of indicators. Moreover, only some of them are collected (and released) on yearly basis. Our selected variables refer to the year before elections and have been collected/released in 2022. We acknowledge these limits of our control variables albeit we still think they might be useful for our analysis, at least, for two main reasons. First, they grab the main dimensions of the differences between Italian regions especially in terms of economic development/well-being, welfare state services and demography. Within the Italian contests these differences are clear especially between southern and center/northern regions. They are also persistent through the history of the country with very small variations in the long period and little or no variation from year to year.

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[14] In this definition we include six regions: Sicily, Basilicata, Campania, Calabria, Molise, and Puglia.

[15] This is the result of the sum of total people declaring less than 15,000 euros multiplied by 100 and divided by the total number of people declaring some work-income per municipality. The institute of statistic (ISTAT) report the number of people declaring some income from working activities by four categories: 0-15000; 15000-26000; 26000-55000; 55000-75000; 75000-120000; more than 120000 (http://dati.istat.it/index.aspx?queryid=31940). Data are at 2021. According to the Ministry of the economy, the average Italian income is 22500 euros (https://pagellapolitica.it/articoli/redditi-contribuenti-italiani-2022).

[16] We standardized the number of health structures reported by the ISTAT data by dividing their number for the population of each municipality and multiply by 1000. Data at 2021 (http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS_OSPEDSSN).

6. Results

In order to test the formulated hypotheses, we run different models for each dependent variable, for the two samples (national and southern regions) and concerning the vote for the Chamber and the Senate. Since the number of models is particularly high to represent, and the results for the two chambers almost completely overlap (their electorate is the same), we decided to show the models relating to the vote for the Chamber of Deputies and move the tables concerning the vote for the Senate in the appendix (Tables C1 to C3).

Regression analyses on turnout show some mixed results about the relationship with concurrent elections in Sicily. At the national level there is a negative statistically significant relationships between turnout rate in Sicilian towns and the whole sample of municipalities in the country. When we add controls, however, the sign turns positive indicating a positive increase in turnout for Sicilian towns. This is probably due to the effect of the percentage of low income per municipality that shows the higher coefficient. When we restrict the sample to southern regions (poorer in terms of average income), we observe a significant and positive relationship between the vote in Sicily and the electoral participation: turnout of municipalities in Sicily is significantly higher than turnout within municipalities in the south (table 1), and the beta coefficient is the biggest value. Our first hypothesis is, accordingly, only partially confirmed: simultaneous elections show higher level of turnout mainly for homogeneous groups of regions. In those contexts, the effect of low income is reduced, as compared to the national sample, and slightly significant[17].

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[17] VIF values are below 1.16 (1.17 for south sub-sample) suggesting no multicollinearity. In the Senate, the percentage of low income (0-15000 euros) show still a high beta coefficient, confirming a strong influence of low income on turnout. For an extensive analysis on the relationship between income and turnout in the Italian 2022 elections see Angelucci et al. (2024).

Table 1

Regressions analysis: vote in Sicily and turnout rate, national and "south" sample.

	National				South			
	Basic Chamber of Deputies		*Controlled* Chamber of Deputies		*Basic* Chamber of Deputies		*Controlled* Chamber of Deputies	
	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error
Sicily	-.096	.441****	.080	.407****	.224	.430****	.231	.455****
Population Size								
1-4,999								
5,000-14,999			-.045	.214****			.023	.425
15,000-99,999			-.074	.303****			-.024	.557
100,000-199999			-.019	1.410*			.018	2.761
200,000+			-.014	1.859			.015	3.186
% of low income			-.536	.008****			-.042	.019*
St. health structures			-.000	1.535			-.006	3.45
Cons (Coef.)	64.492	.099****	82.111	.366****	56.093	.183****	56.303	1.129****
N	7846		7720		2179		2170	
R	0.009		0.260		0.050		0.053	

Note:*p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01,****p<0.001.

We then moved to test the second hypothesis by observing the relationship between voting in Sicily and blank vote, both in the whole sample and the selected municipalities of the south. In this case a clear relationship immediately emerged: simultaneous vote in Sicily is associated to

Table 2

Regressions analysis: vote in Sicily and blank vote, national and "south" sample.

	National				South			
	Basic Chamber of Deputies		*Controlled* Chamber of Deputies		*Basic* Chamber of Deputies		*Controlled* Chamber of Deputies	
	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error
Sicily	.641	.071****	.598	.074****	.705	.099****	.708	.102****
Population Size								
1-4,999								
5,000-14,999			.005	.039			-.030	.097*
15,000-99,999			.002	.055			-.043	.127***
100,000-199,999			.010	.255			-.005	.627
200,000+			.024	.337***			.042	.724****
% of low income			.137	.001****			-.015	.004
St. health structures			-.007	.278			-.031	.786***
Cons (Coef.)	1.998	.016****	1.080	.066****	2.660	.042****	2.964	.257****
N	7,837		7,711		2,173		2,164	
R	0.411		0.431		0.497		0.502	

Note:*p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01,****p<0.001.

an increase of the percentage of blank vote (H2 confirmed). Beta coefficients (table 2) of the variables indicating Sicilian municipalities are particularly high in the models as well as the goodness of fit[18].

An increase in turnout, albeit relative, sounds quite inconsistent with an increase in empty choice. It seems indeed that Sicilian citizens vote more than similar regions and leave empty ballot paper at the same time. A possible explanation of this phenomenon resides in the particular effect of concurrent lower-saliency elections observed in the past in southern Italy. In these regions, local elections positively increase participation also of (simultaneous) national one (Cantoni et al., 2021). As observed, this stimulating effect is also linked to the candidates' activity during the regional electoral campaign, aiming to acquire personal preferences, since the choice of a preferred candidate is allowed by the regional law. In other words, since voters may write down a name in regional elections (and not in national one), the pression of candidates at local level could be motivating to vote (see Cantoni and Pons, 2021); but while candidates might convince voters to choose them at regional level, the choice at national level could result empty. Proving this upside-down change in saliency from national to regional prevalence for some voters is behind the possibilities (and the aims) of this research. Moreover, grabbing the most important reasons bringing citizens to vote, and their effect on no-choice, might be very difficult because blank vote have a quite large set of motivations at the individual level. However, some data seems to support the candidate pression thesis. If we look at the average percentages of blank vote by cities, for instance, it emerges that cities over 200 thousand residents in Sicily have an impressive average percentage of blank vote (11%); very much higher than middle and small cities in the island (about 6%). This is not casual because the electoral campaign at regional level is massively focused on these centers: they are the towns of the main candidates to the presidency, and the largest basin of votes where competition brings to victory. Differences in the electoral offer between regional and national elections might also explain blank votes: as voters do not find their favorite list at national level, they might leave the ballot paper empty. In the case under analysis, however, the lists presented at national and regional level strongly overlap. The offer of national lists is also wider than the regional one, potentially giving the possibility to find the same favored list at regional and national level. However, the capacity of a list to attract voters might change across different

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[18] VIF values are below 1.16 (1.17 for south sub-sample) suggesting no multicollinearity.

contexts. It is then difficult to clearly distinguish between the effects of personalization of vote at regional level from that of lists attractiveness at regional and national levels on blank votes.

Finally, we run the same models also on the standardized percentage of null votes (table 3). Our hypothesis is that different electoral rules in Sicily brough a higher percentage of voters to make mistakes. Our results confirm this hypothesis (H3) both using the national and the Southern sample of municipalities (for results about the senate see table C3 in the appendix): voting in Sicilian concurrent elections relates to higher percentages of null votes either if one look at the national territory or the southern part of the country[19]. The last result appears quite relevant, because it shows that Sicilian vote produced more mistakes even if compared to similar regional scenarios in terms of development, culture, social capital, etc.

As we observed for blank votes, the offer is strongly overlapping in national and regional Sicilian elections, but distinguishing precisely the main source of null-voting is beyond the possibility of our data.

Control variables show some interesting results in addition to the ones already discussed above.

Population size is mostly not significant, towns below 5000 residents tend to have a higher turnout rate and more null votes that middle-sized towns (not in the South sub sample). Big cities tend to show more blank votes. A high percentage of low-level income in a municipality is significantly related to lower turnout and higher blank vote in the national sample. This result confirms some negative influence of harsh income conditions on vote, albeit in the model on the south sub-sample, municipalities with high percentage of low income have lower null votes (but not in the Senate - table 3 and table C3 in the appendix).

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[19] Also in this case VIF values are below 1.17 (south sub-sample).

Table 3

Regressions analysis: vote in Sicily and null vote, national and "south" sample.

	National				South			
	Basic Chamber of Deputies		*Controlled* Chamber of Deputies		*Basic* Chamber of Deputies		*Controlled* Chamber of Deputies	
	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error	Beta	St. Error
Sicily	.167	.077****	.176	.082****	.327	.080****	.344	.082****
Population Size								
1-4,999								
5000-14,999			-.049	.043****			-.013	.078
15,000-99,999			-.050	.060****			-.033	.102
100,000-199,999			-.015	.387			-.026	.507
200,000+			-.000	.371			.007	.585
% of low income			-.014	.002			-.062	004***
St. health structures			-.007	.306			.011	.635
Cons (Coef.)	3.250	.017****	3. 389	.073****	3.115	.034****	3.692	.207****
N	7,837		7,711		2,173		2,164	
R	0.028		0.033		0.111		0.113	

Note:*p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01,****p<0.001.

7. Conclusions

Most studies emphasize that the number of voters who do not go to the polls constitutes an alarm for the future of the democratic systems. Indeed, there is no doubt that the quality of democratic representation is closely linked to the integrity of the electoral body. The idea that abstentionism is a consequence of the 'maturity' of Western democracies[20] seems to have been discarded.

Consistently with this warning, democratic systems have planned and experienced practical instruments to foster participation and involve citizens on voting. Among them concurrent/simultaneous elections have acquired a large fortune for the intuitive benefits they bring. Concentrating different electoral competitions in one day, they reduce costs and resources of elections for both parties and institutions involved. They are also supposed to halve the voters' fatigue and increase their effort to go to the polls vis a vis the costs of voting. Many studies in the field showed a positive effect of concurrent elections on turnout, albeit doubts emerge in some contexts about both the efficacy and the "quality" of the electoral output. When electoral rules and contexts of simultaneous elections strongly differ, there might be indeed the risk to increase empty choice or invalid votes. In order to check for such possible adverse effects, we focused on the last Italian general elections of 2022, where also the regional elections of Sicily were run simultaneously. We consider this a quasi-natural experiment enabling a test on turnout, valid/null, and blank vote.

The Italian elections of 25th of September 2022 present the lowest level of turnout at the national level of the entire post-war period (63.8 percent). Clearly, such a marked drop in turnout (-9 percentage points compared to the previous elections in 2018; Vassallo and Verzichelli, 2023), is part of that trend of "global decline in voter turnout" that involves all advanced democracies for several decades now (Kostelka and Blais 2023). The analysis of the data also confirms a territorial anchoring of the decline in participation with the regions of the South, especially in Calabria and Sardinia, which recorded a turnout of just over 50% of the votes compared to the North – Emilia Romagna (about 71%), Lombardy, Veneto and Tuscany (below 70%).

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[20] According to Lipset, it is by no means self-evident that "a high level of participation is always a good thing for the democracy" (1963, 30). According to this political scientist, high participation can be the result of high ideological conflict that still radicalizes at the ballot box, producing instability.

Our tests show that simultaneous regional/national elections in Sicily does not relate to a significant increase in turnout versus the other regions. However, when compared with similar regional scenario of the south, Sicilian turnout is significantly higher. Concurrent elections in this case seem then to have contributed to block abstentionism and even increased electoral participation, but only vis a vis the regions of the south. At the same time, Sicilian voters show significant higher percentages of blank and null votes compared both to the national and southern sample. The reasons behind blank and null votes (voluntary or not) cannot be directly inferred from real votes data. Moreover, we cannot assess whether null vote is a voluntary choice. Despite this consideration, our findings bring a dark shadow on simultaneous voting since, in the observed context, it does not implement the quality of casted vote but it seems to increase no choice (blank vote) and even mistakes (null votes).

We believe our results contribute to the existing knowledge on the strategies to increase electoral participation but also to the mechanisms behind citizens' voting. On this last aspect, we contend that those mechanisms, albeit increasing individual utilitarian gains, do not implement citizens' sense of efficacy through electoral participation. Voters, albeit participate more, are still often disoriented and confused in the polls, while they are taking decisions for multiple level of representation. This should be a warning for the debate on the citizens' empowerment and the "quality" of vote beyond formal rules.

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