

After the split

Does the division of municipal territory increase (and by how much) the political participation of citizens?

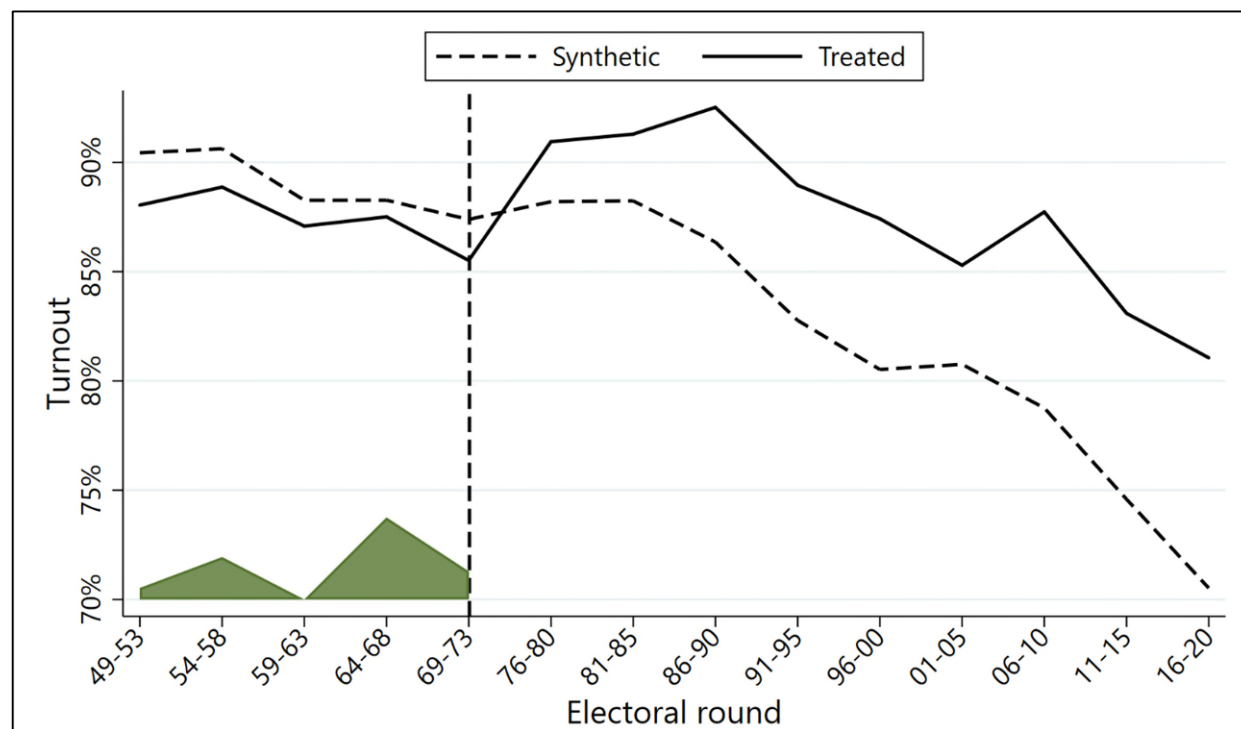
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*Amalgamations, mergers, inter-municipal cooperation or consolidation: in recent years, many developed countries have approved **territorial reforms** that have led to **mergers between municipalities** with the aim of pursuing **objectives of cost control and greater administrative efficiency**. Italy too, with the reform of the local government system approved in 2000, has strongly encouraged mergers and inter-municipal cooperation: from 2002 to date, **the number of municipalities has fallen from 8,102 to 7,901**, through the suppression of 326 municipalities and the establishment of 125 new larger territorial entities.*

*In rare cases, however, municipalities split. As happened in the 1970s in **Apulia**, when **five hamlets** - for historical and identity reasons - asked for and obtained a **split from the capital municipalities**. What consequences did the split have on the participation of citizens in voting? A study has investigated, using recently developed evaluation methods, this little-known aspect of territorial dynamics.*

The starting point

Law 281 of 16 May 1970 created 20 regions. One of the first measures adopted by regional governments concerned changes to the administrative boundaries and jurisdictional structure of municipalities within their territory: in Apulia, Regional Law No. 26 set guidelines in 1973 for municipalities that wished to proceed with any form of territorial reorganization.

Figure 1. Turnout trends in municipal elections in newly established municipalities

Source: Authors' elaboration

Figure 1 shows the turnout in municipal elections in the five newly established municipalities in Puglia (Castro, Ortona, Porto Cesareo, San Cassiano and Zapponeta: solid line). The synthetic counterfactual (dashed line) simulates the situation where municipal splits never occurred.

Analysis

In recent decades, **many mergers and aggregations** between municipalities **have occurred in developed countries**. The motivations behind spatial reorganization can be influenced by a trade-off between multiple drivers, such as **political, demographic or socio-economic changes** (OECD, 2017), but the key point underlying the two theories driving spatial reform plans - the *reform theory* and the *political economy theory* (Mouritzen, 1989) - is the size of cities.

The **theory of reform** rests on the postulate of **economies of scale**: a certain population threshold for cities is necessary to provide **efficiency in the delivery of institutional services** to citizens. Therefore, there is a need for larger-sized local administrations, achieved through amalgamations,

mergers, inter-municipal cooperation or consolidation.

In contrast, political **economy theory** emphasizes the **economic and political role of smaller-sized governments**. In this view, the active participation of the constituency in political life benefits from direct interaction with local representatives, who are perceived to be less bound by bureaucracy and technocracy (De Ceuninck et al., 2010).

This rationale can be exemplified by Tiebout's postulate (1956), which suggests that **people 'vote with their feet'**, meaning that a larger number of small governments allows people to find places where their preferences are better satisfied, thereby determining an optimum size for the community concerned. Such a theory leans towards the opposite type of territorial reorganization, where splits and fragmentation are prevailing.

Splits? Not today, thanks

In Italy, the reform of local authority administration (Legislative Decree No 267 of 18 August 2000) has strongly **discouraged municipal divisions in favor of mergers** and compulsory inter-municipal cooperation.

Thus, **326 municipalities have been abolished** since 2021, resulting in 127 larger-sized administrations.

Article 15 of the reform stipulates that **each newly established municipality must have at least 10,000 inhabitants**, a threshold currently exceeded by only **15 per cent of Italian municipalities**.

Table 1. Number of Italian municipalities

Years	Suppressed municipalities	Newly founded municipalities	Total
2002	-	-	8.102
2003	3	1	8.100
2004	-	1	8.101
2005	-	-	8.101
2006	-	-	8.101
2007	-	-	8.101
2008	-	-	8.101
2009	2	1	8.100
2010	8	2	8.094
2011	3	1	8.092
2012	-	-	8.092
2013	4	2	8.090
2014	57	24	8.057
2015	17	6	8.046
2016	75	27	7.998
2017	31	11	7.978
2018	42	18	7.954
2019	65	25	7.914
2020	14	3	7.903
2021	-	1	7.904
2022	-	-	7.904
2023	5	2	7.901
Total	326	125	7.901

Source: ANCI

The case of Apulia

From the Unification of Italy until the late 1960s, mergers or splits of municipalities were managed by the national government on parliamentary push. This scenario changed with Law 281 of 16 May 1970, which resulted in the creation of 20 regions, an intermediate level of government between the central government and the municipalities.

The new regional governments were given greater decision-making autonomy in matters of jurisdictional organization. As a result, **each region had the final decision-making power** to approve or reject requests for mergers or demergers.

At the time, the regions inherited a chameleon-like institutional framework: during the fascist period, the number of municipalities first markedly dropped from 9,195 to around 7,200, and then, immediately after the Second World War, 778 municipalities regained their autonomy.

One of the first measures adopted by the regional governments concerned the regulations governing changes to the administrative boundaries and jurisdictional asset of municipalities.

In **Apulia**, Regional Law No. 26 of 20 December 1973 set out the guidelines for **municipalities wishing to proceed with any form of institutional change**. Requests for a division had to be submitted together with a **technical proposal** demonstrating the administrative feasibility of the change (financial resources, planimetry of the new municipality and a draft of the organizational chart) and with a **popular referendum** in favor of the split. Several inhabited centers belonging to larger municipalities, named *frazioni*, moved forward the request to erect themselves as a new municipality, drawing mainly on identity, economic, geographical, cultural, and historical reasons.

In 1975, the foundation of five new municipalities was approved: Castro, Ortona, Porto Cesareo, San Cassiano and Zaponeta were thus detached from Diso, Manfredonia, Nardò, Nociglia and Orta Nova (henceforth 'old' municipalities).

After the merger. What does the research say?

Territorial reorganizations may not be without consequences in terms of citizens' political involvement: **mergers reduce the direct contact between the voter and local politics**, as population increases require the reshaping of electoral districts and political representation may be subverted by the merge (Heinisch et al., 2018).

The belief that their one is the 'decisive ballot', which is typical of local elections (Cancela and Geys, 2016), fades if voters do not perceive the possibility to elect the politician(s) with whom they share strong interpersonal relations. The empirical evidence largely supports this claim as voter turnout was significantly and negatively affected by up-scaling territorial reorganizations in many advanced democracies and in federal countries.

In **Sweden**, the municipal merger reform of 2009 reduced voter turnout by 4 percentage points, but the effect was only visible in small municipalities where the merger substantially increased the population size, as opposed to larger municipalities where the population change was barely noticeable (Lapointe et al., 2018).

Similar results come from **Netherlands**, where Allers et al. (2021) have quantified in 2.2% the turnout decrease in local elections and in 0.7 % the decrease in national turnout. A substantial drop in turnout was also observed in two different Swiss cantons after the mergers, **Ticino** (Koch and Rochat, 2017) and **Glarus** (Frey et al., 2023).

A partial different story arises from **Denmark**, where a positive effect on turnout was found immediately after the municipal merger reform of 2007, but the impact quickly turned negative especially in those municipalities who experienced radical changes in their jurisdictional setting (Bhatti and Hansen, 2019). Furthermore, studies on the Denmark merger reform of 2007 show that the increased size of municipalities brought a general worsening of the citizens' satisfaction towards the local governments (Hansen, 2015), a substantial drop in the local political trust (Hansen, 2013) and discouraged citizens to participate in politics (Lassen and Serritzlew, 2011).

The study

It does not take into account public finance or efficiency profiles but explores a little investigated profile of municipal fragmentation: **the long-term effects on voter turnout**.

Indeed, most ex-post evaluation studies to date have focused (see box on the page) on the impact of mergers between municipalities (e.g., Hinnerich, 2009; Reingewertz, 2012; Blom-Hansen et al., 2014 and 2016; Allers and Geertsema, 2016; Blesse and Baskaran, 2016; Roesel, 2017; Steiner and Kaiser, 2017), leaving territorial fragmentation rather under-represented (Billing, 2019; Swianiewicz and Łukomska, 2019).

The dataset

Municipal-level data on all municipal and national elections (specifically, for the Chamber of Deputies) held between 1949 and 2022 in Apulia were collected from the historical electoral archives of the Ministry of the Interior.

These data were used to analyze the turnout in municipal and national elections in the five municipalities of interest, distinguishing between 'old' municipalities and newly established ones from 1976 onwards.

The political variables were then complemented with those obtained from **census data** on population, old-age index, incidence of graduates in the population aged 6 and over, employment rate, incidence of employment in the

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agricultural sector and incidence of employment in the manufacturing sector.

Five 'artificial' municipalities were then created from 1976 onwards, **mimicking that the**

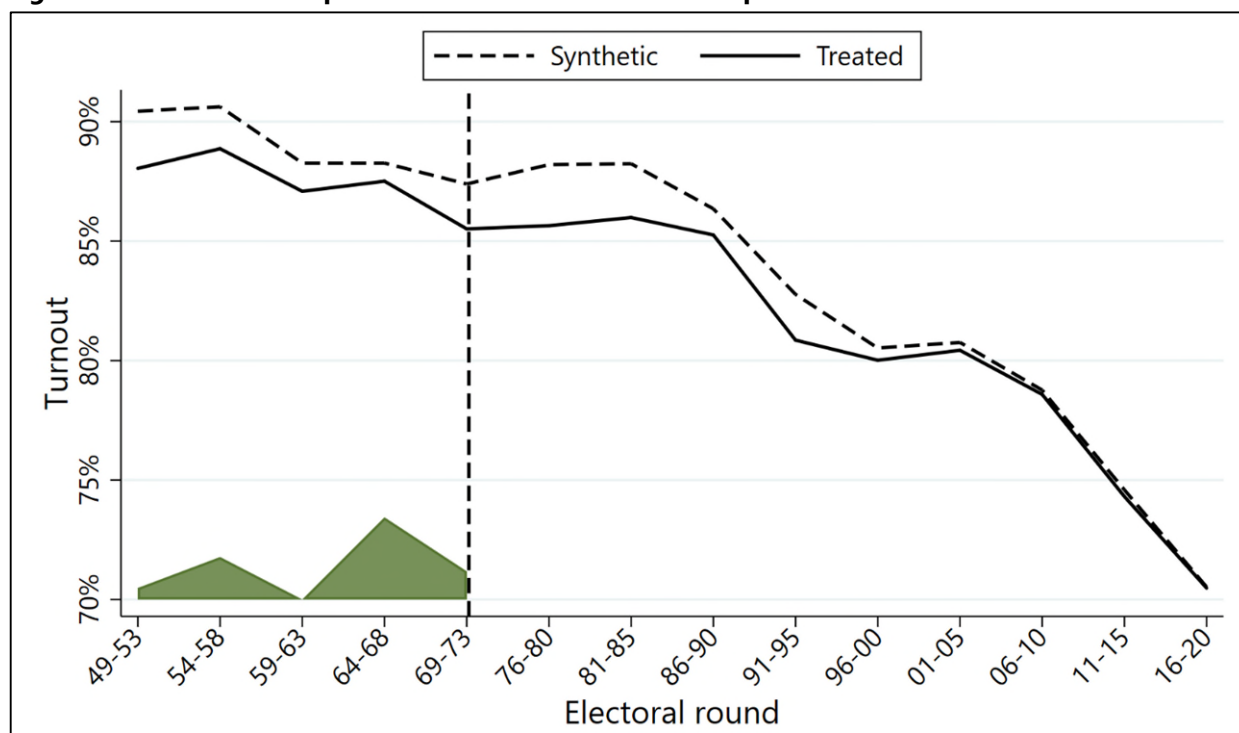
municipality splits never occurred. The turnout at subsequent elections (municipal and national) in the new and old municipalities was compared with the estimated turnout in the artificial municipalities.

The results

Has the split affected municipal election turnout? The estimates in Figure 1 show a **positive impact in newly established municipalities.** Moreover, the impact increases over time from +4 percentage points in the 1976-1980 election round **to +12 percentage points** in the 2016-2020 election round.

In the five 'old' municipalities (Diso, Manfredonia, Nardò, Nociglia and Orta Nova), on the contrary, participation in the elections does not increase (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Trend of municipal election turnout in old municipalities

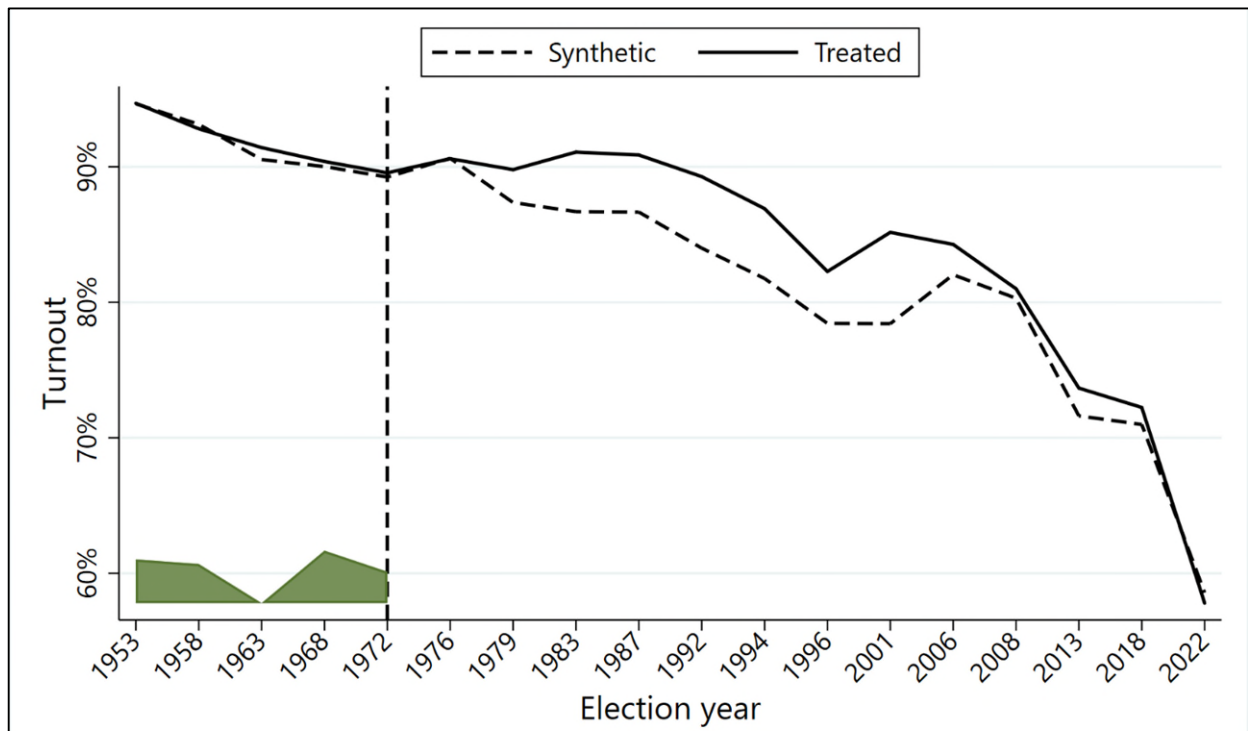


Source: Authors' elaboration

Did the split affect the turnout in general elections? For newly established municipalities, there is (Figure 3) a **statistically significant increase** in turnout from 1983 to 2001. This increase is **temporary**, as the gap becomes negligible from 2006 onwards.

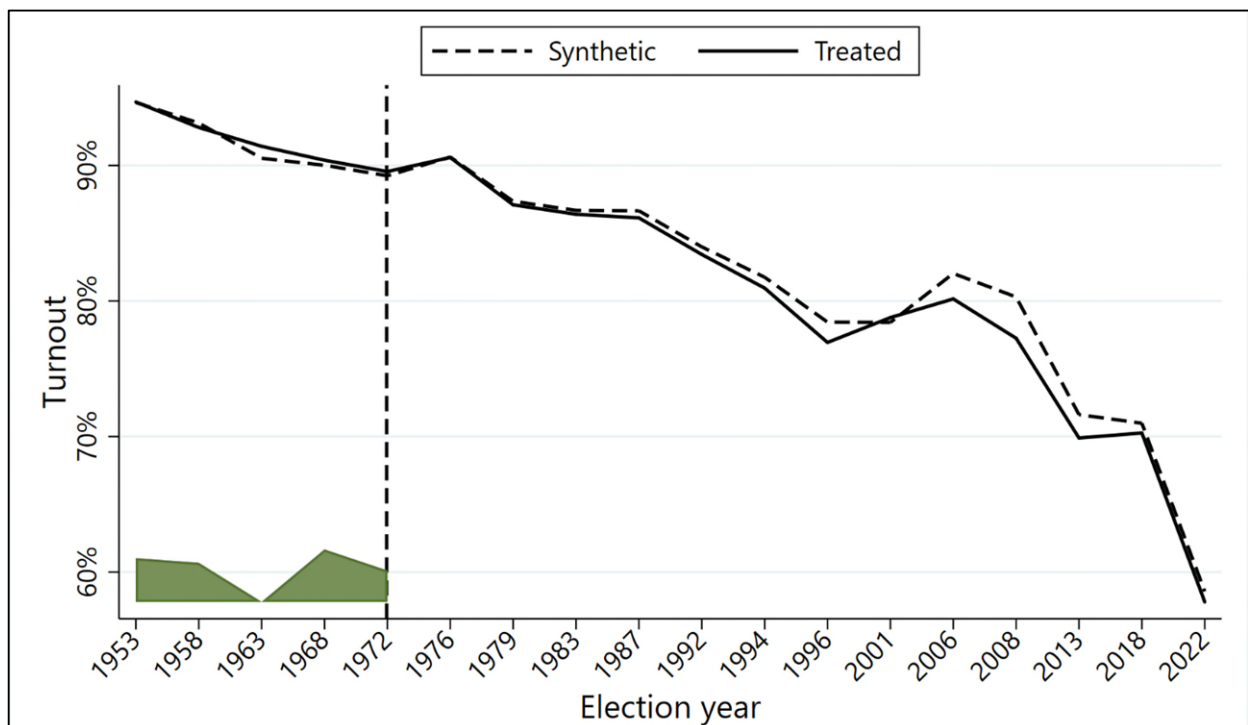
In contrast (Figure 4), the impact on the 'old' municipalities is always small and in no case statistically significant.

Figure 3. Turnout trends in general elections in the new municipalities



Source: Authors' elaboration

Figure 4. General election turnout trends in old municipalities



Source: Authors' elaboration

Conclusions

From the perspective of political economy theory, research shows that, at least at the local level and over the period considered, **territorial fragmentation mitigated the effects of**

political disaffection that led to the decline in voter turnout recorded in many representative democracies in Western Europe (Chiaromonte, 2023; Durovic, 2023).

Empirical analysis shows, in fact, that the voluntary division of existing municipalities into new

ones increases turnout at municipal election, but **only in the newly created municipalities**.

Smaller and more localized units of government are therefore more likely to generate **heightened sense of local identity**, place attachment, and **civic engagement**. Citizens may feel more connected to their local government and be motivated to participate in the local polity, including voting.

It is also interesting to highlight that newly established municipalities experienced an **increase in turnout at national elections**. However, such an increase is **much smaller** in magnitude and only **temporary**.

The dossier

It analyses the impact of five municipal voluntary splits on voter turnout. From a methodological point of view, it exploits one of the most recent developments in policy evaluation econometrics: the *synthetic difference-in-differences*

estimator SDiD (Arkhangelsky et al., 2021; Clarke et al., 2023).

The study was carried out by
AUGUSTO CERQUA, Sapienza University of Rome
DANTE DI MATTEO, eCampus University and Ci-MET

Focus by
IMPACT ASSESSMENT OFFICE
Senate of the Republic
uvi@senato.it



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