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Democratization and Civic Capital in Italy

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Democratization and Civic Capital in Italy

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Abstract

We document a sharp reversal in electoral participation between the North and the South of Italy after the 1912 enfranchisement which extended voting rights from a limited élite to (almost) all adult males. When voting was restricted to the élite, electoral turnout was higher in the South but falls significantly below that in the North after the enfranchisement. Furthermore the new gap is never bridged over the following century and participation remains lower in the South despite the enrichment of democratic institutions and further extension of voting rights to the female population during the post war democratic republic. This pattern in the data is consistent with a simple model where individuals' voting in political elections is affected by private benefits and by civic duty, only élites can grab private benefits from participation in politics and civic culture differs across communities. We also find that extension of voting rights to non-elites results in a significant transfer of power to their political organizations only among populations with a high sense of civic duties. Together with the very persistent gap in participation between North and South our findings suggest that democratization – a process of concession of democratic rights – can benefit non-elites only when the latter have already a high sense of civic capital and is unlikely to be a viable avenue for inducing norms of civic behavior.

JEL Classification: A1; E0; N4; Z1
Keywords: democracy, culture, civic capital, institutions formation, voting

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