

Do Close Elections Cause Voters to Turnout? Evidence from Swiss Referenda

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Abstract

Voter turnout is among the political behaviors of greatest interest to social scientists, but remarkably little is known about the underlying mechanisms behind the decision to vote. A fundamental question is whether voters turn out more when they anticipate a closer election. While theory suggests that anticipated closeness might cause higher turnout, identifying a causal effect is extremely difficult. For example, a spurious association between closeness and turnout may simply be due to "issue type": the intensity of voters' preferences (and so willingness to turnout) may systematically vary with an issue's support within the population. In this paper, we exploit natural variation in the existence and dissemination of political polls across time and space to identify the causal effect of anticipated election closeness on turnout. Specifically, we examine Swiss voting in national referenda; national-level polls predicting election closeness were introduced in 1998. We exploit three levels of variation: first, in the time series, using variation in closeness and in the existence of polls across elections, we find that the link between ex post closeness and turnout is significantly stronger after the introduction of polls. Second, in a canton-level panel, we exploit within-election variation---holding fixed the "issue type"---by examining the effect of close polls in places with differential newspaper coverage of polls. We find (controlling for election and canton fixed effects) that close polls differentially increase turnout specifically in cantons with greater newspaper poll coverage. To address concerns about endogenous poll coverage, we exploit variation in newspaper readership of periodicals whose biggest market is outside the canton of interest, and our findings continue to hold. Third, we exploit local variation in political homogeneity using a municipality-level panel. Homogeneous municipalities (where everyone historically voted the same way across votes) have much more to learn from national polls, since their "local" signal rarely, if ever, indicates a close national election. Indeed, we find that controlling for municipality and election fixed effects, close polls differentially increase turnout in historically-homogeneous municipalities. These findings represent, to our knowledge, the first evidence based on observational data that causally links election closeness---purged of cross-election issue differences---to voter turnout.

(with Leonardo Bursztyn, Davide Cantoni, Patricia Funk).