

POLITICS 2.0: THE MULTIFACETED EFFECT OF BROADBAND INTERNET ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Filipe Campante

Harvard Kennedy School

Ruben Durante

Universitat Pompeu Fabra
and Sciences Po

Francesco Sobbrío

LUISS “Guido Carli”

Abstract

We study the impact of the diffusion of high-speed Internet on different forms of political participation, using municipal data from Italy from 1996 to 2013. Our empirical strategy exploits the fact that the cost of providing ADSL-based broadband services in a given municipality depends on its relative position in the pre-existing voice telecommunications infrastructure. We first show that broadband Internet had a substantial negative effect on turnout in parliamentary elections up until 2008. It was, however, positively associated with other forms of political participation, both online and offline, such as the emergence of local online grassroots protest movements. The negative effect of the Internet on turnout in parliamentary elections essentially reversed after 2008, when local grassroots movements coalesced into the Five-Star Movement (M5S) electoral list. Our findings support the view that: i) the effect of the Internet varies across different forms of political participation; ii) it changes over time, as new political actors emerge that are able to take advantage of the new technology to attract disenchanted or demobilized voters; and iii) these new forms of mobilization eventually feed back into the mainstream electoral process, converting “exit” back into “voice.” (JEL: D72, L82, L86)

The editor in charge of this paper was Nicola Gennaioli.

Acknowledgments: We are grateful to “Osservatorio Banda Larga-Between” for providing access to the data on ADSL coverage used in this paper. We are also grateful to Nicola D’Amelio and Giuseppe Piraino for their help with data collection, and to Stefano Gagliarducci for sharing the data on Italian municipal elections. We thank the editor, Nicola Gennaioli, as well as an anonymous co-editor and two anonymous referees, for many excellent comments and suggestions. Thanks also to Adriana Camacho, Stefano DellaVigna, Matthew Ellman, Leopoldo Fergusson, Ed Glaeser, Rema Hanna, Andrea Ichino, Valentino Larcinese, Andrea Mattozzi, Luke Miner, Luigi Pascali, Nicola Persico, Giacomo Ponzetto, Andrei Shleifer, Tommaso Valletti, David Yanagizawa-Drott, seminar participants at NYU, Warwick, IIES, Chicago Booth, World Bank, EUI, Harvard, IAE-CSIC, Catholic University of Milan, Tufts, Pompeu Fabra, Siena, and participants at the Petralia Applied Economics Workshop, the Social Media and Political Participation Workshop (NYU La Pietra), the 10th Workshop in Media Economics (Bogotá), and the 2014 Conference on the Economics of Intellectual Property, Software and the Internet (Toulouse). Maria Chiara Cavalleri and Iván Torre provided excellent research assistance. The usual disclaimers apply. Campante is a Faculty Research Fellow at NBER, Durante is a Research Affiliate at CEPR, and Sobbrío is a Research Fellow at CESifo.

E-mail: filipe_campante@harvard.edu (Campante); ruben.durante@upf.edu (Durante); fsobbrío@luiss.it (Sobbrío)