Social distancing, local elections and spread of the COVID-19 epidemic in France

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Abstract. We analyze the influence of the decision to maintain the first round of the local elections in France on March 15 on the local excess mortality related to the early phases of the COVID-19 epidemics. We regress the municipal-level and age-specific measure of excess mortality on the participation rate in the local elections, which is instrumented using a (pre-determined) measure of the intensity of electoral competition.

Data: France; we are going to combine (i) municipality-level data on the 2020 elections (participation rate, number of distinct lists) from the Ministry of Interior Affairs with (ii) municipality-level data on the number of daily deaths in all French municipalities for 2020 and for previous years from the INSEE, the National Statistical Institute, through the so-called fichier des décès, which is already available until the end of March 2020.

Keywords: COVID-19; social distancing; local elections; excess mortality.

JEL codes: J1, J18.

Motivation

"[I] have asked the advice of scientists about our local elections, whose first round will be held in a few days. They believe that nothing goes against the fact that the French citizens, even the most vulnerable among them, go to the polling stations.”
(Speech of the French President Emmanuel Macron, March 12, 2020).¹

To what extent social distancing, which imposes huge economic and social costs, is effective in retarding the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic? France offers a unique opportunity to give an answer to this question.

Local elections were scheduled for March 15, 2020 in each of the almost 35 thousand French municipalities, with a possible second round on March 22, 2020. The French government seemingly hesitated about maintaining the local elections while the COVID-19 pandemic was already spreading, but the lack of support from the opposition eventually induced the government to maintain the elections.

Such a decision was first announced by the French President Emmanuel Macron in the speech of March 12, 2020, when he also informed the country of the decision to close schools starting from March 16. This choice was confirmed by the Prime Minister Edouard Philippe on March 14, in a speech in which he announced that all non-essential commercial activities would remain closed from

¹ Our translation: « [J]’ai interrogé les scientifiques sur nos élections municipales, dont le premier tour se tiendra dans quelques jours. Ils considèrent que rien ne s’oppose à ce que les Français, même les plus vulnérables, se rendent aux urnes. », source: https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/12/addresse-aux-francais.
the following day, asking the French citizens to stay home except for “buying food, do a bit of physical exercise or vote.”

The second round of the elections has not been held, and all local administrations have been prolonged in office.

Research questions

The purpose of this research project is to evaluate whether, and to what extent, the decision to maintain the first round of the local elections contributed to the diffusion of the epidemic, and increased the local death counts. There are three (not mutually exclusive) channels through which this political decision can have contributed to spread the contagion: (1) contacts at the polling stations; (2) large number of local electoral meetings; (3) by blurring the message about the need for social distancing. Both Point 1 and 2 vary across municipalities, as discussed below.

Main data sources

We are going to combine (i) municipality-level data on the 2020 elections (participation rate, number of distinct lists) from the Ministry of Interior Affairs with (ii) municipality-level data on the number of daily deaths in all French municipalities for 2020 and for previous years from the INSEE, the National Statistical Institute, through the so-called fichier des décès.

Empirical approach

The comparison of the deaths during the COVID-19 with those for the same time periods in previous years will give us a measure of the (possibly age-specific) excess mortality $y_{iT}$ for the municipality $i$ in the period from March 1 and the date $T$, e.g., $T$ is March 31. We will then regress $y_{iT}$ on $x_i$, where $x_i$ is the participation rate on the first round of the local elections. Concerns about reverse causality (e.g., lower participation in regions that were already severely hit by the epidemic) will be dealt with instrumenting $x_i$ with a measure of the intensity of political competition given by the number of different lists (3,812 out of 9,825 municipalities with 1,000+ inhabitants had only a single list), or by the ratio between the number of candidates and the number of seats (lists were finalized no later than February 27, 2020). We will also control for participation rates in previous local elections to mitigate possible concerns about the validity of the instrument. Spatial econometric techniques will be deployed to capture for spillovers across neighboring municipalities.

This econometric analysis will allow us identifying the causal effect of a variation in the participation in local elections on the number of deaths. This is valuable to understand the extent to which social distancing, which imposes huge social and economic costs, is effective in reducing the number of deaths caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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3 Even though the abstention rate was high (55.36 percent) and historically unprecedented, more than 20 million voters did vote; see https://elections.interieur.gouv.fr/municipales-2020/.