Democratization, the media, socio-economic context, and voting behavior
Project outline

The research project, which is part of a larger one funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, studies the effect of voting mechanisms and socio-economic contextual factors on political and economic outcomes focusing on two interrelated and yet distinct lines of research.

1) Mass media, democratic reform, and disinformation in nineteenth-century England
This line investigates the inter-relationships between mass media and politics using new data on 19th-century British newspaper markets. The project has two major goals. First, to test how media market structure affects political reporting and the spread of disinformation. Second, to understand the role of mass media in a fledgling democracy. To meet these goals, we will construct a new annual dataset of local newspapers in the United Kingdom between 1833 and 1914. Newspaper directories provide information on the number, type, cost, ownership, and political leaning of newspapers in each area, allowing us to identify media market structure - at this time, newspapers were the only form of mass media. We will investigate newspaper content using the British Library Newspaper Archive. The newspaper data will then be linked to a rich set of political and sociodemographic variables using existing datasets. These variables will include population, occupational structure, local and national election results, and the texts of speeches by Members of Parliament (MPs). We will then use this data to test how newspaper market structure affects reporting quality, partisanship, and the provision of disinformation; how media shape the response to democratic reform; and how democratic reform shaped newspaper markets.

2) The local context and individual voting behavior: evidence from administrative data
In this line, we investigate how the local context affects electoral behavior. By exploiting a unique panel dataset of the universe of Bologna inhabitants and survey data on individual votes for a sample of voters, we shed light on the role of several contextual factors (time-varying geo-localized amenities/nuisance, peer group) as drivers of individual voting behavior. We aim at quantifying the contributions of different characteristics of the local context to which electors are exposed as drivers of their voting behavior, specifically on the individual propensity to vote and party choice (right/left/populist/other). To do so, we will employ a unique yearly panel dataset from administrative sources, that was assembled by the research unit, spanning almost 20 years and collecting socio-demographic characteristics of the universe of the inhabitants of Bologna, a medium-sized town in Northern Italy, well known in the literature for its high civic and social capital (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti 1994). Information includes an individual and a (possibly time-varying) household identifier, birth date, gender, household characteristics, and address. Individual data is complemented with 15 years of observations on official income records from the local tax authority and hand-collected information on turnout in four elections, held between 2004 and 2013. We will further enrich this dataset with information gathered through a survey conducted in December 2020 on 5000 individuals in Bologna, with information on retrospective vote, demographics, education level and occupation. Finally, we will collect information on the location of public services (e.g., hospitals, schools, kinder-gardens, and social service counters) and geo-localized sources of nuisance (such as incidence of petty crimes, presence of night-clubs, or noisy pubs).

Program of Activities:

We will hire two candidates, one for each research line.

Research Line 1): The candidate's role will involve in data collection, data management, data analysis, and literature search/review. In particular, they will assist in building new measures of newspaper characteristics and content using newspaper directories and archives, and also use archival materials to construct other local area measures. They will work to combine datasets together for research analysis, and then undertake preliminary analysis tasks (data exploration, data visualization, tabulation, etc). In the later stages of the project they will assist with regression analysis, including producing outputs for research dissemination activities. Candidates will be expected to use STATA, Excel extensively, and may also be required to use R and Python. Pre-existing familiarity with these tools is preferable. The working language will be English, knowledge of Italian is not required.

Research Line 2): The candidate will be involved in managing, maintaining and updating existing individual and precinct-level panel datasets. These activities include building new variables using other sources of data (i.e. census, criminal records, newspaper archives in combination with data scraping, etc.), checking internal and external consistency, data visualization and other activities preliminary to the development of the research agenda. The candidate will also be required to continuously check and update the related literature and to support the research group in regression analysis, producing graphs and tables and in maintaining replication files of the analysis. Candidates will be expected to use STATA, Excel extensively, and may also be required to use R and Python. Pre-existing familiarity with these tools is preferable. The working language will be English, knowledge of Italian is not required.

Please contact Jonathan Chapman (jonathan.chapman@unibo.it) or Giovanni Prarolo (giovanni.prarolo@unibo.it) with any questions about the position.