

What drives the supply of verifiable information in politics?

Project outline

The well-functioning of representative democracy hinges on the accountability of representatives. Politicians act on behalf of voters and voters evaluate politicians upon their acts or better upon a combination of political promises and implemented policies. At the same time, political promises and more generally political persuasion are based on a wise mixture of verifiable and unverifiable statements in order to sway voters and create consensus. This project will inform the academic and public debate on how to effectively improve politicians' accountability by assessing the drivers of the supply of verifiable information in politics.

Verifiability Index

Finding the optimal mixture of verifiable and unverifiable statements is a valuable political skill. It amounts to resolve a fundamental trade-off. A statement containing verifiable information, albeit overstated or even incorrect, may be more effective than a personal opinion in persuading voters. However, since such a claim is potentially subject to fact-checking, reporting incorrect information may expose the politician to public criticism. As a result, policies that may encourage the supply of verifiable information may also have the welfare-enhancing indirect effect of spurring truthfulness in the political discourse. To shed light on political communication strategy, we will construct a verifiability index of Italian MPs' statements at the daily level over a large time span using a supervised learning model from machine learning theory to classify politicians' statements as fact checkable or not. Guided by a simple theoretical framework, we will estimate the causal effects on the verifiability index of potential shocks both on the supply side, such as electoral and career incentives of politicians, and on the demand side, such as the cost of acquiring information by voters.

Program of Activities

The candidate will be involved in all phases of the project: theoretical modelling, construction of the verifiability index, and empirical analysis.