

# IDENTIFYING THE EFFECT OF ELECTION CLOSENESS ON VOTER TURNOUT: EVIDENCE FROM SWISS REFERENDA

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## ELECTION CLOSENESS AND VOTER TURNOUT

Surprising lack of clear evidence on one of the most widely proposed drivers of voter turnout: election closeness

- Observational studies: typically find a *significant association* between election closeness and turnout
  - Causality unclear: issue type? Behavior of the political supply side?

## ELECTION CLOSENESS AND VOTER TURNOUT

Surprising lack of clear evidence on one of the most widely proposed drivers of voter turnout: election closeness

- Observational studies: typically find a *significant association* between election closeness and turnout
  - Causality unclear: issue type? Behavior of the political supply side?
- Lab experiments suggest a positive, causal effect
- Field experiments (particularly Enos and Fowler, 2014, and Gerber et al., 2020) find *null results*
  - But experimenters typically cannot fully control information acquisition outside the experiment

*Open question:* Is there a causal effect of anticipated election closeness on voter turnout?

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- We exploit the rich data and frequent referenda in Switzerland
- We provide evidence of a significant, causal effect of anticipated election closeness on voter turnout
  - A credible quasi-experiment arising from the release of polls
  - Less affected by common information sets (relative to field experiments)

## OUR FINDINGS: EVENT-STUDY EVIDENCE

We exploit the precise *day-level* timing of release of Swiss national poll results for 52 referenda, and *daily* mail-in voting for the canton of Geneva:

- Event study design holds fixed issue type
- Close polls are associated with higher turnout (by 0.4 pp per day) for the three days following the poll release
- Not driven by reactions of the political “supply side”

We next test auxiliary predictions using data from across Switzerland:

1. *[The role of coverage:]* Close polls should have a larger effect when reported on more
2. *[The role of beliefs:]* Polls should matter more in locations where locally available signals of national closeness are noisier

## OUR FINDINGS: AUXILIARY PREDICTIONS

We exploit *newspaper readership* data by canton, and *coverage* of polls by newspapers:

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We exploit municipal-level outcomes, before/after the *introduction of polls* in 1998:

- Before 1998, “unrepresentative” municipalities do not exhibit a correlation between turnout and eventual closeness
- “Representative” and “unrepresentative” municipalities converge in behavior after 1998

## ASYMMETRIC EFFECTS?

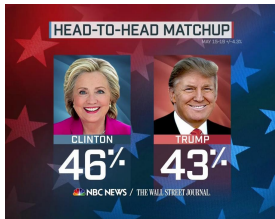
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- Survey evidence: Clinton supporters in 2016 were overconfident because of projected probabilities, Trump profited from *underdog effect*

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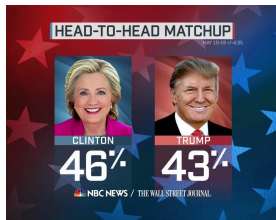
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# ASYMMETRIC EFFECTS?

Ambiguous evidence so far on the relationship between (close) polls and asymmetric turnout:

- Survey evidence: Clinton supporters in 2016 were overconfident because of projected probabilities, Trump profited from *underdog effect*
- Field experiment: Orkin (2020) finds turnout effects for supporters of the *leading* side (*bandwagon effect*)



We find asymmetric effects of closeness on turnout:

- Anticipated closeness mobilizes *trailing* side differentially more (*underdog effect*)

# COUNTERFACTUALS

We find asymmetric effects of closeness on turnout:

- Anticipated closeness mobilizes *trailing* side differentially more (*underdog effect*)

This heterogeneous effect on the *composition* of the electorate is sufficient to affect electoral outcomes:

- We conduct two *counterfactual* exercises (less close/closer polls)
- Several high-stakes referenda would be overturned under these assumptions



## OUTLINE

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND DATA

POLLS AND TURNOUT: GENEVA EVENT STUDY

POLLS AND TURNOUT: AUXILIARY PREDICTIONS

POLLS AND OUTCOMES: EFFECTS AND COUNTERFACTUALS

DISCUSSION

## INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND DATA

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- Switzerland has a long tradition of direct democracy
- Very *high-stakes*: taxation, immigration, international relations, ...
- Politically contentious: political parties take different (official) positions in vast majority of votes

## VOTING PROCESS AND VOTER INFORMATION

- *No registration* to vote is necessary; every eligible voter receives the voting documents *by mail* at home
- Voters cast ballots either at the polling booth on the election day (always a Sunday) or through early voting
  - Early voting typical, primarily via standard mail — in our sample of Genevan voters, *90%* of those turning out use postal voting
- Voters informed about issues; political advertising only in newspapers

- In 1998, Swiss public television decided to sponsor the first widely disseminated national voting forecasts in Switzerland
- Pre-election polls conducted for nearly all votes since June 1998
- Results of the last poll typically released 11 days before the voting date

## DATA: VOTER TURNOUT, OUTCOMES AND VOTE IMPORTANCE

1. Data on daily voter turnout in the *canton of Geneva*:
  - We construct a panel of daily turnout for 52 election days
2. Data on voter turnout and outcomes *for all of Switzerland*
  - Data for single votes on an election day (i.e., specific ballot issues), disaggregated at the municipal or canton level
  - Each election day typically features several votes (ballot issues); we consider the “most important” vote held on that day

## DATA: POLL RESULTS, NEWSPAPER READERSHIP, AND POLITICAL ADS

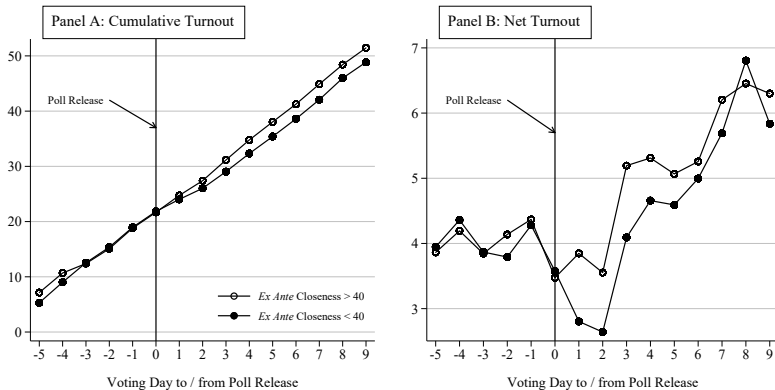
- Swiss Public TV and Radio Corporation (SRG) has sponsored *polls* since 1998; we collect poll results and timing of release
- Swiss Agency of Media Research (WEMF) conducts surveys on *newspaper readership*
  - We construct a list of newspapers read by at least 10% of a canton's inhabitants in a given year
- We hand-collect data on all *political ads* about referenda in the two major Genevan newspapers (*Le Temps* and *Tribune de Genève*), as well as on all newspapers read by at least 10% of any canton's inhabitants across Switzerland

# POLLS AND TURNOUT: GENEVA EVENT STUDY

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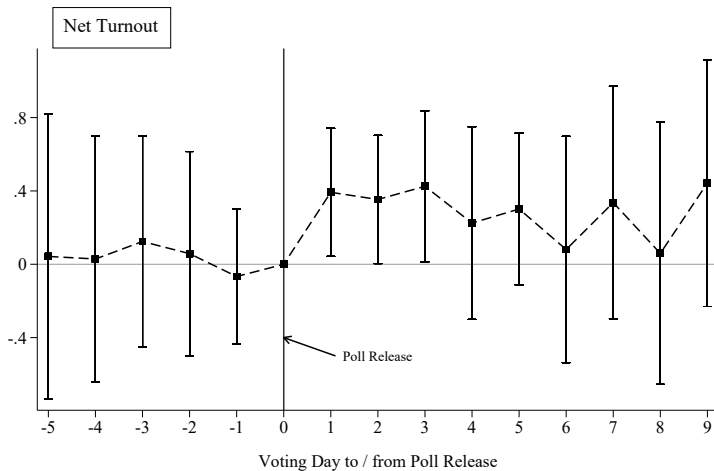
# RAW TURNOUT DATA FROM GENEVA

Split votes above/below median poll closeness



## EVENT STUDY EVIDENCE FROM GENEVA

Controls for vote fixed effects (accounting for issue type) and day-to/from-poll fixed effects

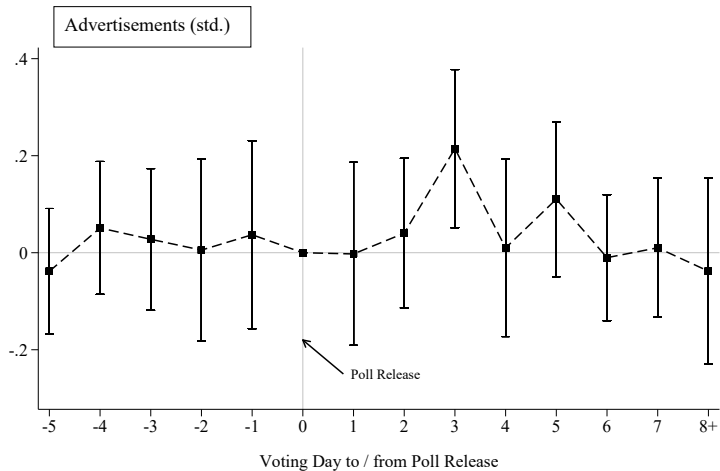




## EVENT STUDY EVIDENCE FROM GENEVA: COMMENT

- Release of a closer poll causes voter turnout to rise *immediately* after poll release
- *Cumulative* turnout remains higher through election day
- *No pre-trends* in the days prior to the release of close polls, suggesting that:
  - information in the polls was not anticipated
  - issue type was not perceived as different
  - the political “supply side” was not differentially active
- We also test formally for a supply-side response, measuring political ads (effects only after 3 days)

## (No) SUPPLY SIDE RESPONSE



## POLLS AND TURNOUT: AUXILIARY PREDICTIONS

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## VARIATION IN NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF POLLS

Newspaper coverage is potentially a source of heterogeneous exposure to information about closeness:

- We examine canton-level *within*-election variation in the coverage of polls
- We predict a stronger relationship between closeness and turnout when there is more newspaper coverage of polls:

$$turnout_{cv} = \alpha_c + \delta_v + \beta_1 closeness_v \times coverage_{cv} + \beta_2 coverage_{cv} + \epsilon_{cv}$$

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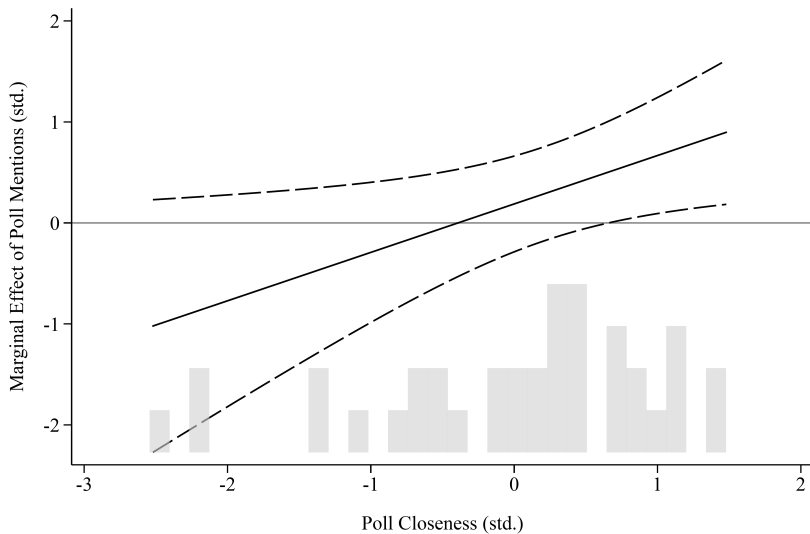
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- We control for a variety of canton  $\times$  vote-varying confounders
- We can also exploit “incidental” coverage of newspapers read in one canton, but with their largest market in a different canton

## COVERAGE-CLOSENESS INTERACTION



## HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS OF POLLS' INTRODUCTION

How to identify whether the polls actually affects beliefs on closeness? To test this more directly, we exploit:

- Municipal-level voting outcomes
- The introduction of polls in 1998
  - We proxy poll closeness with actual closeness (which is available before and after the introduction of polls)
- Differences in “representativeness” across municipalities

## HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS OF POLLS' INTRODUCTION: HYPOTHESIS

We hypothesize:

- Without national, pre-election polls, it is plausible that voters will gauge an upcoming election's closeness by “locally sampling” among their friends and neighbors
- This strategy will yield beliefs that reflect the actual national-level closeness only if the local sample is *politically representative* of the country as a whole
- We construct a measure of representativeness: how correlated is closeness at the municipal/national level?



## HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS OF POLLS' INTRODUCTION: PREDICTION

If closer polls → higher turnout, ...

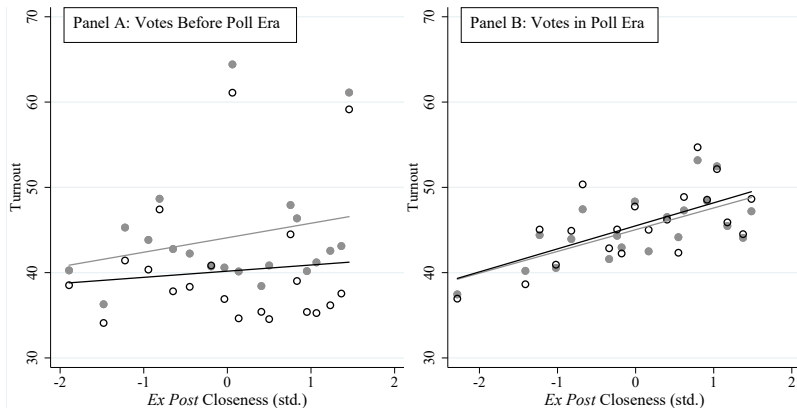
- *before* the introduction of polls:
  - Positive gradient between closeness and turnout in representative municipalities
  - Less steep gradient in unrepresentative municipalities

## HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS OF POLLS' INTRODUCTION: PREDICTION

If closer polls  $\rightarrow$  higher turnout, ...

- *before* the introduction of polls:
  - Positive gradient between closeness and turnout in representative municipalities
  - Less steep gradient in unrepresentative municipalities
- *after* the introduction of polls:
  - Difference between representative and unrepresentative municipalities vanishes
  - Same (positive) gradient between closeness and turnout

# HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS OF POLLS' INTRODUCTION



		Slopes Before Poll Era	Slopes in Poll Era
— ○	Unrepresentative Municipalities	0.724 ( $p = 0.646$ )	2.699 ( $p = 0.005$ )
— ●	Representative Municipalities	1.700 ( $p = 0.244$ )	2.547 ( $p = 0.005$ )
	<i>Differences within Era:</i>	$-0.976$ ( $p = 0.010$ )	$0.152$ ( $p = 0.693$ )
	<i>Difference in Differences:</i>		$1.128$ ( $p = 0.037$ )

## POLLS AND OUTCOMES: EFFECTS AND COUNTERFACTUALS

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## CAN CLOSE POLLS CHANGE ELECTION OUTCOMES?

For turnout effects to change election outcomes, they must be affect the *composition* of the electorate.

→ Do supporters of the trailing side in the poll turn out more?

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For turnout effects to change election outcomes, they must be affect the *composition* of the electorate.

→ Do supporters of the trailing side in the poll turn out more?

- We measure, for each municipality, *ex ante* support for the trailing side as the vote share for parties who issue a recommendation to vote for that side
- We test (in a municipality×vote panel) whether the closeness effect is heterogeneous depending on (pre-determined) support for the trailing side

## ASYMMETRIC TURNOUT EFFECTS AMONG THE TRAILING SIDE

- We find heterogeneous effects of closeness (depending on trailing side support) on both *turnout* and *share of the trailing side*

	Turnout (%)	Vote Share Trailing Side (%)
	(1)	(2)
Trailing Side's Support $\times$ Poll Closeness (std.)	0.0125* (0.0073)	0.0634*** (0.0213)
Trailing Side's Support	0.0120 (0.0082)	0.3884*** (0.0255)
R-squared	0.859	0.876
Observations	124032	124032

Notes: Specifications include municipality and canton  $\times$  vote fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at the vote level in parentheses: \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

## CAN THE EFFECT FLIP ELECTIONS?

We explore 2 counterfactual scenarios:

1. Suppose polls signaled a one standard deviation higher closeness
  - Trailing side's supporters turn out *more* in response to closer poll
  - Referenda could possibly be have been won ("flipped") by the trailing side



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1. Suppose polls signaled a one standard deviation higher closeness
  - Trailing side's supporters turn out *more* in response to closer poll
  - Referenda could possibly be have been won ("flipped") by the trailing side→ Flips 4 high-stakes referenda

	Poll Yes (%)	Actual Yes (%)	Counterf. Yes (%)
Federal Act on the Army and Military Administration (Jun 10, 2001)	59.49	50.99	48.74
Federal Act on Corporate Tax Reform (Febr 24, 2008)	59.74	50.53	48.28
Initiative "Expulsion of Criminal Foreigners" (Nov 28, 2010)	55.67	52.91	49.97
Initiative "Limiting Construction of Second Homes" (Mar 11, 2012)	58.43	50.63	47.16

## POLLS' ASYMMETRIC EFFECTS ON TURNOUT SHAPE OUTCOMES

2. Suppose polls signaled average closeness (61:39), rather than actual (higher) closeness
  - Trailing side's supporters turn out *less* in response to less close poll
  - Referenda that were eventually won ("flipped") by the trailing side, would not be flipped under this counterfactual scenario

## POLLS' ASYMMETRIC EFFECTS ON TURNOUT SHAPE OUTCOMES

2. Suppose polls signaled average closeness (61:39), rather than actual (higher) closeness
    - Trailing side's supporters turn out *less* in response to less close poll
    - Referenda that were eventually won ("flipped") by the trailing side, would not be flipped under this counterfactual scenario
- Flips 3 high-stakes referenda

	Poll Yes (%)	Actual Yes (%)	Counterf. Yes (%)
Initiative "against Abuse of Asylum" (Nov 24, 2002)	53.75	49.91	50.16
Initiative "against Mass Immigration" (Feb 9, 2014)	46.24	50.33	49.89
Federal Act on Old Age Pension Reform (Sep 24, 2017)	53.78	47.31	50.24

## DISCUSSION

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- Poll closeness causes higher turnout
- Heterogeneous effects are large enough to shape election outcomes
- Looking back: some very high stakes votes would have had different outcomes under reasonable counterfactual assumptions

- External validity:
  - Many high-stakes issues are decided in referenda
  - Referenda analogous to FPTP/two-party systems
- **Policies** regulating polls' conduct, release and coverage play an important role
- In a world with increasing **polarization**, turnout margin potentially more important than persuasion