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Being or Feeling Left Behind?

Marginalisation, Abstention, and Protest Voting in Emilia-Romagna, Italy

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Abstract: Many Western democracies are seeing a rapid growth of populist voting alongside declining electoral participation. These dynamics are the results of complex individual and territorial factors, with perceptions of marginalisation playing a key role. In this article, we investigate how individual and territorial characteristics affect voting behaviours, namely abstention and populist voting, and whether these are better explained by individual perceptions or objective indicators or socioeconomic performance, not necessarily aligned. We focus on the case of Emilia-Romagna, Italy, a region (NUTS2) characterised by high social capital, historical dominance of the political left, and polycentrism, where electoral abstention and polarisation along the centre-periphery fault line are relatively new yet emerging phenomena. We use data from an original survey conducted immediately after the 2024 regional elections, merged with secondary data at the municipal (LAU2) and Local Labour System (LLS) levels. We estimate multivariate, multilevel Bayesian models, addressing endogeneity through a Control Function Approach and a partial two-stage residual inclusion specification, complemented by a *naïve* model, and a transition model incorporating past voting behaviour. Results show that territorial heterogeneity explains a moderate share of variation in electoral behaviour, with individual-level factors dominating across model specifications. Perceived economic hardship and social marginalisation are associated with abstention, perceived territorial marginalisation with populist voting. The transition model reveals continuity and substitutability between abstention and populist voting. Policy implications highlight the need to address narratives of marginalisation alongside territorial redistribution, particularly in industrial districts.

Keywords: regional election; voting behaviour; abstention; populist vote; urban-rural divide; discontent

JEL codes: D72 – Models of Political Processes: Rent-Seeking, Elections, Legislatures, and Voting Behavior; O18 – Regional, Urban, and Rural Analyses

1. Background and motivation

Recent political events in Western democracies have shown a rapid growth of populist voting alongside declining electoral participation (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2020). The regional economic literature argues that a relevant driver of this phenomenon is the progressive marginalisation of many (mostly rural) places due to the effects of agglomeration economies (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). However, electoral behaviour is characterised by path dependencies embedded in the history of a territory, and results from the interplay of complex territorial- and individual-level factors. Additionally, online communication and “fake news” are allegedly causing increasing disconnection between perceived individual and territorial marginalisation, and objective indicators of these phenomena as measured by national statistics offices and administrative data. These considerations call for careful consideration of multilevel drivers, and individual socioeconomic perceptions. For instance, past research has highlighted the role of perceived inequality for abstention and protest voting in Italy (Cavazza *et al.*, 2025).

Among European countries, Italy is characterised by a well-known territorial cleavage in terms of social capital (Putnam *et al.*, 1993), with high social capital regions of the Centre-North mostly immune from the above phenomena, until recently. Within this context, the Emilia-Romagna region (NUTS2 level) represents a particularly interesting case study because of its tradition of left-wing governments providing high-level public services, its polycentrism, and its territorially diffused economic activity, exemplified by the many industrial districts. Electoral abstention and political polarisation along the centre-periphery fault line are relatively new yet clearly emerging patterns.

2. Research question and hypotheses

In this paper, we investigate how individual and territorial characteristics are related to voting behaviour in the Emilia-Romagna region. We are interested in understanding whether such behaviour can be better explained by individual and territorial socioeconomic marginalisation measured through individual perceptions or by territorial indicators from secondary data sources.

We focus on regional elections, considering both abstention and populist voting as alternative outcomes to account for trade-offs. We hypothesise that perceptions of socioeconomic and territorial marginalisation are a more effective explanatory variable for voting behaviour after accounting for endogeneity, and that territorial indicators still explain part of the variance after controlling for individual characteristics. We further hypothesise that, in line with previous research, lower education and higher marginalisation increase the likelihood to abstain or to vote for populist parties, but the specific outcome depends on the specific political history of an individual and their territory.

3. Data and methods

In this article, we use data from an original survey conducted on a sample of 1,004 individuals representative of the adult population with voting rights of the Emilia-Romagna region, stratified by age, gender, province (NUTS3), and professional condition. The survey deals with recent and past electoral behaviour, political opinions, and socioeconomic conditions, and was conducted immediately after the 2024 regional elections to reduce the recall bias. Questions about past electoral behaviour allow us to determine individual switching patterns. We merge the resulting data with secondary data at the level of municipality (LAU2) and Local Labour System (LLS), i.e., contiguous groups of municipalities that are self-contained in terms of labour demand and supply (Istat, 2024). When the number of local observations is less than 10, we aggregate them into larger units. To obtain our dependent variable, we categorise the political parties as either *mainstream* or *populist*, drawing inspiration from the classification proposed by Rovny *et al.* (2025) and Rooduijn *et al.* (2023). We apply this procedure to the vote for the regional councillors, obtaining a variable with three outcomes: abstention, populist vote, and mainstream vote (our baseline). We replicate the same procedure for the 2020 regional council elections, and the 2024 European elections, which adopt similar electoral systems based on party lists and proportional representation.

Following established practices in political behaviour studies (see, for instance, Koeppen *et al.*, 2025), we estimate multivariate, multilevel models (Steenbergen & Jones, 2002), with two hierarchical levels: individuals (level 1) nested within aggregated LLS (level 2) via random intercepts. Secondary territorial predictors, measured at the LAU2 and LLS levels, are included as contextual covariates. The models are estimated in a Bayesian framework, which provides full posterior uncertainty quantification.

Acknowledging the potential endogeneity of individual perceptions, we tested a Two-Stage Residual Inclusion (2SRI) Control Function Approach (Heckman & Robb, 1985). First-stage reduced-form equations were estimated using several instrumental variables (IVs) in addition to the exogenous explanatory variables. As IVs, we first tested transformations of the endogenous variables (the shares of respondents providing a specific response at SLL level) with the “leave-one-out” method; and then, for each endogenous variable respectively, the Gini index of income at municipal level, the number of voluntary associations per resident, and the percentage of unoccupied homes controlling for municipalities with high tourism density (then replaced by the density of business units in the industry and service sectors). Due to weak instruments for economic and social perceptions, we present a partial 2SRI specification, where first-stage fitted values and residuals are incorporated solely for territorial marginalisation, alongside a *naïve* model containing the observed perception variables. Finally, we extend the *naïve* specification by including past voting behaviour to model electoral transitions across elections. Due to many do-not-remember responses, this latter transition model is only based on 684 observations.

4. Results

At the 2024 regional elections, 53.6% of our respondents abstained (exactly in line with the population), and 14.8% voted for a populist party (right-wing in over 80% of the cases). In our sample, abstention and populist votes account for 27.9% and 24.9% at the 2024 European elections and 24.6% and 17.1% at the 2020 regional elections (the sample is not balanced in this regard). The partial 2SRI model specification is reported in Table 1, the *naïve* model in Table 2, and the transition model in Table 3. The estimation

results do not differ significantly between specifications, including the model with all perceptions instrumented (not reported here).

The standard deviation of the random intercepts is almost identical in the first two models (0.30 and 0.29 for populist voting, and 0.35 and 0.4 for abstention), while it is larger in the transition model (0.87 and 0.39 respectively), suggesting that the territorial level (SLLs) explains a moderate share of heterogeneity, but the individual level dominates. This is also shown by the limited significance of the territorial-level variables, except for the transition model, where we observe an increase in abstention in rural areas with intensive agriculture, in municipalities belonging to industrial districts, and in those dominated by the centre-left, and a decrease in the presence of larger foreign (migrant) population. The likelihood of populist voting is larger within industrial districts. Among the individual-level covariates, the political leaning is, understandably, the strongest predictor of both populist voting (centre-right as well as other), and abstention (other) across all specifications, followed by high education, which reduces the likelihood of abstention.

Concerning individual attitudes, perceived poor economic conditions and social marginalisation are associated with higher likelihood of abstention, perceived territorial marginalisation with populist voting. However, in the 2SRI model it is the residuals rather than the endogenous component that yield a significant coefficient, suggesting that the association does not primarily operate through objective territorial conditions (here the density of business units) but other unobserved factors, such as a generalised feeling of distrust for political institutions. Finally, past electoral behaviours reveal continuity and substitutability between abstention and populist voting, except for abstention in 2020, which is not significantly related to abstention in 2024.

5. Discussion and policy implications

We analysed the determinants of electoral behaviour in a territory with high social capital and a tradition of progressive governments that has been experiencing disappointment and territorial polarisation only recently. Our results confirm the path dependency in electoral behaviour, and suggest that while territorial conditions matter, the individual level dominates. Equally, we find that attitudes are a much better predictor than objective territorial indicators, with perceived territorial marginalisation being associated with populist voting. The negative association between the share of migrant population – a topic generally used by populist right-wing parties – and abstention and, although not significant, with populist voting, adds to the discrepancy between perception and objective indicators. Therefore, alongside redistributive policies targeting different social groups and territories, policy practitioners aiming to address the “revenge of the places that do not matter” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) and to generate diffuse social wellbeing, should pay attention to prevailing narratives of marginalisation rather than looking solely at economic and geographical indicators. The association between industrial districts – entities based on high social capital that have driven economic development in the Italian North-East – and populist voting and abstention suggests that this is extremely urgent.

Our analysis presents some limitations, primarily the weakness of the instrumental variables trialled, that forced us to rely primarily on a *naïve* model. Equally, the small number of responses coming from single municipalities, especially rural ones, limits the possibility of conducting more detailed analysis of territorial dynamics. Additionally, the need to recall past voting behaviour resulted in many missing values in transition model.

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Table 1. Multivariate, multilevel Bayesian model with Partial Two-Stage Residual Inclusion Specification.

Outcomes [baseline: Mainstream party vote] →	Populist vote					Abstention				
Variables ↓	Coeff.	Est. Error	Q2.5	Q97.5	Sig. ¹	Coeff.	Est. Error	Q2.5	Q97.5	Sig. ¹
Intercept	-1.798	0.683	-3.136	-0.475	*	-0.848	0.543	-1.888	0.229	
Individual-level variables										
Perceived economic condition (1 to 5)	0.104	0.148	-0.186	0.392		0.275	0.106	0.068	0.489	*
Perceived social marginalisation (1 to 5)	0.090	0.148	-0.208	0.378		0.204	0.105	0.003	0.413	*
Perceived territorial marginalisation (standardised) (fitted)	0.743	1.032	-1.249	2.733		-1.031	0.932	-2.886	0.780	
Perceived territorial marginalisation (first-stage residuals)	0.357	0.132	0.095	0.622	*	0.089	0.102	-0.107	0.288	
Gender: Female [baseline: Male]	-0.433	0.273	-0.969	0.108		0.153	0.207	-0.254	0.550	
Age: 25-34 years [baseline: 18-24 years]	0.025	0.617	-1.165	1.267		0.311	0.488	-0.643	1.261	
Age: 35-44 years	-0.932	0.620	-2.169	0.310		0.227	0.481	-0.712	1.178	
Age: 45-54 years	-0.507	0.588	-1.682	0.667		0.335	0.488	-0.630	1.285	
Age: 55-64 years	-0.226	0.574	-1.350	0.929		-0.574	0.483	-1.522	0.381	
Age: 65+ years	-0.605	0.590	-1.752	0.572		-0.539	0.506	-1.538	0.422	
Education level: Average [baseline: Low]	0.036	0.365	-0.682	0.743		-0.263	0.297	-0.828	0.328	
Education level: High	-0.457	0.413	-1.271	0.350		-1.178	0.324	-1.820	-0.545	*
Profession: Self-employed [baseline: Employee]	0.316	0.463	-0.602	1.245		0.545	0.387	-0.209	1.328	
Profession: Student	-0.884	0.858	-2.697	0.684		0.376	0.541	-0.712	1.441	
Profession: Unemployed	-0.480	0.669	-1.841	0.810		0.663	0.445	-0.178	1.570	
Profession: Housekeeper	0.961	0.539	-0.097	2.008		0.709	0.418	-0.101	1.533	
Profession: Retired or disabled	-0.047	0.435	-0.871	0.812		0.010	0.371	-0.694	0.739	
New citizen: Yes	-0.243	0.619	-1.471	0.950		-0.324	0.512	-1.340	0.664	
New resident in the region: Yes	0.054	0.846	-1.585	1.657		0.408	0.682	-0.920	1.709	
Political leaning: Centre-right to right	2.993	0.336	2.354	3.670	*	1.786	0.256	1.282	2.289	*
Political leaning: Other	1.021	0.438	0.140	1.869	*	2.680	0.266	2.177	3.210	*
Single person household: Yes	0.029	0.322	-0.607	0.669		0.396	0.250	-0.097	0.882	
Household with children: Yes	0.072	0.319	-0.555	0.690		-0.054	0.246	-0.532	0.422	
Territorial-level variables (LAU2)										
Territorial classification: Rural with intensive agriculture	-0.020	0.503	-1.037	0.939		0.566	0.407	-0.227	1.383	
Territorial classification: Rural intermediate	-0.059	0.520	-1.083	0.953		-0.056	0.428	-0.915	0.791	
Territorial classification: Rural with development challenges	-0.291	0.655	-1.588	0.981		0.025	0.548	-1.056	1.142	
Employment rate (20–64 years), 2022	-0.121	0.218	-0.550	0.297		-0.096	0.176	-0.438	0.245	
Incidence of high-technology businesses, 2020	-0.202	0.173	-0.557	0.131		-0.130	0.134	-0.390	0.129	
Industrial districts: Yes	0.129	0.341	-0.524	0.810		-0.038	0.293	-0.632	0.531	
Population with foreign citizenship (%)	-0.243	0.155	-0.560	0.056		-0.243	0.125	-0.484	0.000	
Income per earner (EUR), 2024	0.343	0.288	-0.217	0.904		0.395	0.215	-0.019	0.830	
Electoral abstention in pre-2024 regional elections (%)	0.310	0.195	-0.061	0.702		-0.020	0.164	-0.346	0.297	
Centre-left domination pre-2024 ²	0.055	0.176	-0.295	0.402		-0.001	0.151	-0.305	0.288	

Notes: All explanatory variables are normalised (mean 0, standard deviation 1) to facilitate result interpretation. ¹ Indicates the cases where the 95% posterior credible interval does not include zero. ² Share of times that the centre-left candidate overcame the centre-right one in regional elections pre-2024.

Table 2. Naïve Multivariate, multilevel Bayesian model.

Outcomes [baseline: Mainstream party vote] →	Populist vote					Abstention				
Variables ↓	Coeff.	Est. Error	Q2.5	Q97.5	Sig. ¹	Coeff.	Est. Error	Q2.5	Q97.5	Sig. ¹
Intercept	-1.792	0.681	-3.151	-0.492	*	-0.794	0.551	-1.903	0.248	
Individual-level variables										
Perceived economic condition (1 to 5)	0.104	0.145	-0.183	0.387		0.264	0.105	0.060	0.465	*
Perceived social marginalisation (1 to 5)	0.087	0.146	-0.201	0.381		0.206	0.107	-0.007	0.422	
Perceived territorial marginalisation (1 to 5)	0.362	0.134	0.106	0.623	*	0.084	0.105	-0.119	0.291	
Gender: Female [baseline: Male]	-0.404	0.266	-0.911	0.107		0.082	0.200	-0.312	0.472	
Age: 25-34 years [baseline: 18-24 years]	-0.035	0.599	-1.235	1.098		0.514	0.468	-0.365	1.432	
Age: 35-44 years	-0.875	0.609	-2.053	0.343		0.069	0.472	-0.841	0.988	
Age: 45-54 years	-0.431	0.560	-1.515	0.673		0.116	0.456	-0.769	1.037	
Age: 55-64 years	-0.161	0.563	-1.281	0.939		-0.732	0.468	-1.635	0.202	
Age: 65+ years	-0.585	0.591	-1.762	0.575		-0.535	0.503	-1.500	0.490	
Education level: Average [baseline: Low]	-0.062	0.295	-0.656	0.496		-0.025	0.224	-0.468	0.414	
Education level: High	-0.535	0.369	-1.262	0.184		-1.020	0.284	-1.571	-0.473	*
Profession: Self-employed [baseline: Employee]	0.402	0.416	-0.411	1.206		0.321	0.329	-0.323	0.961	
Profession: Student	-0.833	0.865	-2.661	0.744		0.267	0.525	-0.769	1.297	
Profession: Unemployed	-0.498	0.678	-1.867	0.780		0.625	0.434	-0.205	1.491	
Profession: Housekeeper	0.904	0.537	-0.131	1.921		0.804	0.417	0.000	1.636	
Profession: Retired or disabled	0.003	0.402	-0.753	0.795		-0.186	0.333	-0.850	0.468	
New citizen: Yes	-0.242	0.627	-1.519	0.954		-0.264	0.503	-1.246	0.769	
New resident in the region: Yes	0.194	0.796	-1.416	1.690		0.009	0.587	-1.174	1.140	
Political leaning: Centre-right to right	3.039	0.317	2.427	3.679	*	1.629	0.222	1.187	2.064	*
Political leaning: Other	1.068	0.431	0.195	1.907	*	2.566	0.245	2.092	3.049	*
Single person household: Yes	0.057	0.320	-0.565	0.697		0.315	0.242	-0.153	0.799	
Household with children: Yes	0.067	0.320	-0.568	0.694		-0.007	0.246	-0.489	0.485	
Territorial-level variables (LAU2)										
Territorial classification: Rural with intensive agriculture	-0.078	0.474	-1.035	0.850		0.729	0.395	-0.026	1.503	
Territorial classification: Rural intermediate	-0.091	0.511	-1.090	0.902		0.001	0.424	-0.817	0.831	
Territorial classification: Rural with development challenges	-0.239	0.633	-1.537	0.966		-0.095	0.546	-1.122	0.984	
Employment rate (20–64 years), 2022	-0.132	0.216	-0.554	0.294		-0.093	0.178	-0.446	0.246	
Incidence of high-technology businesses, 2020	-0.229	0.161	-0.548	0.076		-0.041	0.112	-0.255	0.180	
Industrial districts: Yes	0.122	0.334	-0.545	0.774		-0.042	0.301	-0.638	0.545	
Population with foreign citizenship (%)	-0.248	0.151	-0.556	0.047		-0.246	0.122	-0.487	-0.004	*
Income per earner (EUR), 2024	0.344	0.281	-0.218	0.886		0.412	0.217	-0.023	0.842	
Electoral abstention in pre-2024 regional elections (%)	0.280	0.190	-0.084	0.655		0.021	0.167	-0.302	0.349	
Centre-left domination pre-2024 ²	0.047	0.174	-0.302	0.398		-0.005	0.147	-0.296	0.278	

Notes: See notes to Table 1.

Table 3. Multivariate, multilevel Bayesian model with variables indicating transition between electoral behaviours between elections.

Outcomes [baseline: Mainstream party vote] →	Populist vote					Abstention				
Variables ↓	Coeff.	Est. Error	Q2.5	Q97.5	Sig. ¹	Coeff.	Est. Error	Q2.5	Q97.5	Sig. ¹
Intercept	-4.636	1.217	-7.009	-2.270	*	-5.570	1.069	-7.662	-3.515	*
Individual-level variables										
Populist vote 2020 [baseline: Mainstream vote 2020]	2.925	0.499	1.981	3.927	*	2.085	0.482	1.136	2.995	*
Abstention 2020	-0.466	0.730	-1.922	0.912		2.485	0.509	1.523	3.500	*
Populist vote EU 2024 [baseline: Mainstream vote EU 2024]	3.242	0.497	2.271	4.211	*	1.093	0.416	0.321	1.932	*
Abstention EU 2024	2.862	0.739	1.419	4.300	*	4.229	0.543	3.161	5.296	*
Perceived economic condition (1 to 5)	-0.055	0.225	-0.504	0.376		0.478	0.165	0.155	0.798	*
Perceived social marginalisation (1 to 5)	-0.046	0.234	-0.503	0.411		0.123	0.178	-0.221	0.480	
Perceived territorial marginalisation (1 to 5)	0.560	0.193	0.168	0.938	*	0.387	0.167	0.061	0.723	*
Gender: Female [baseline: Male]	0.121	0.421	-0.712	0.941		0.262	0.324	-0.364	0.903	
Age: 25-34 years [baseline: 18-24 years]	0.665	1.020	-1.285	2.717		1.482	0.870	-0.244	3.220	
Age: 35-44 years	-0.960	1.003	-2.924	0.976		1.787	0.847	0.124	3.505	*
Age: 45-54 years	-0.726	0.944	-2.499	1.138		1.434	0.823	-0.131	3.156	
Age: 55-64 years	-0.817	0.947	-2.633	1.006		0.621	0.869	-1.034	2.343	
Age: 65+ years	-1.718	1.080	-3.828	0.375		0.732	0.937	-1.114	2.593	
Education level: Average [baseline: Low]	0.285	0.485	-0.669	1.220		1.147	0.383	0.401	1.904	*
Education level: High	-0.541	0.620	-1.767	0.645		-0.558	0.522	-1.598	0.454	
Profession: Self-employed [baseline: Employee]	0.437	0.668	-0.858	1.706		0.068	0.559	-1.043	1.146	
Profession: Student	-1.146	1.567	-4.258	1.706		1.055	0.924	-0.783	2.842	
Profession: Unemployed	0.491	1.104	-1.738	2.592		0.112	0.801	-1.476	1.703	
Profession: Housekeeper	0.863	0.808	-0.778	2.490		0.894	0.659	-0.403	2.178	
Profession: Retired or disabled	0.773	0.708	-0.555	2.168		0.473	0.602	-0.725	1.624	
New citizen: Yes	-0.408	0.873	-2.138	1.256		-1.620	0.927	-3.473	0.147	
New resident in the region: Yes	-0.702	1.278	-3.411	1.703		-0.452	0.946	-2.365	1.397	
Political leaning: Centre-right to right	2.051	0.463	1.158	2.999	*	1.137	0.376	0.398	1.869	*
Political leaning: Other	0.789	0.685	-0.553	2.136		1.594	0.468	0.702	2.536	*
Single person household: Yes	0.097	0.502	-0.878	1.107		0.134	0.416	-0.688	0.957	
Household with children: Yes	0.444	0.484	-0.473	1.428		0.033	0.392	-0.749	0.806	
Territorial-level variables (LAU2)										
Territorial classification: Rural with intensive agriculture	0.304	0.807	-1.318	1.822		1.716	0.613	0.562	2.969	*
Territorial classification: Rural intermediate	0.328	0.869	-1.402	2.008		1.096	0.727	-0.305	2.510	
Territorial classification: Rural with development challenges	-0.077	1.153	-2.402	2.060		0.688	0.903	-1.040	2.444	
Employment rate (20–64 years), 2022	-0.372	0.361	-1.081	0.316		-0.308	0.275	-0.857	0.233	
Incidence of high-technology businesses, 2020	-0.463	0.260	-0.990	0.036		0.043	0.180	-0.305	0.398	
Industrial districts: Yes	1.253	0.609	0.050	2.495	*	1.276	0.456	0.372	2.139	*
Population with foreign citizenship (%)	-0.414	0.247	-0.922	0.058		-0.424	0.193	-0.804	-0.049	*
Income per earner (EUR), 2024	0.813	0.485	-0.144	1.746		0.696	0.377	-0.055	1.456	
Electoral abstention in pre-2024 regional elections (%)	0.535	0.300	-0.042	1.135		0.346	0.254	-0.171	0.839	
Centre-left domination pre-2024 ²	0.491	0.304	-0.093	1.099		0.963	0.278	0.433	1.512	*

Notes: See notes to Table 1.