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Title: *Abstention and protest vote between perceived and actual social and territorial marginalisation. Insights from regional elections in Emilia-Romagna, Italy*

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Abstract: Recent political events at the global level have shown a rapid growth of populist voting alongside declining electoral participation. 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. However, electoral behaviour shows path dependencies embedded in the history of a territory, and results from the interplay of complex territorial- and individual-level factors. Additionally, rather than being driven by marginalisation as measured through objective indicators, it may be driven by the perception of marginalisation, with the two not necessarily being aligned. In this article, we use data from an original survey conducted at the regional (NUTS2) level, merged with secondary data at the municipal (LAU2) and Local Labour System (LLS) levels, to investigate how individual and territorial characteristics impact voting behaviour. Questions about recent and past electoral behaviour allow us to determine voters' switching patterns, considering abstention as well as populist voting as potential alternative outcomes. Additionally, we test the impact of both individual perceptions and indicator-based measures of social and territorial marginalisation. Our survey was conducted immediately after the 2024 regional elections in Emilia-Romagna, Italy. This region represents a particularly interesting case study because of its high social capital, its tradition of socialist 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. We estimate multilevel models with two potential outcomes: abstention or voting for populist parties. Preliminary results suggest that perceived marginalisation is a stronger explanatory variable than marginalisation as measured through objective indicators of socio-economic and demographic decline. Similarly, although both territorial- and individual-level characteristics show statistically significant associations with electoral behaviour, the latter explain a much larger share of the variation. Therefore, alongside redistributive policies across households and territories, policy practitioners aiming to address the 'revenge of the places that do not matter' and to generate diffuse social wellbeing should pay attention to prevailing narratives of marginalisation rather than targeting purely economic and geographical indicators.

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

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