News media and political participation in Italy at the regional elections: An empirical analysis

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ABSTRACT

Widespread information improves the monitoring powers of the citizens and increases reputational concerns of the public officers. Our paper focuses on the relation between the readership of newspapers and political participation in the Italian Regions by estimating a regression model for the period 1980-2009. We find that local newspapers, which generally provide more political information about the performance of the local, play a relevant role in motivating voters to participate to the elections. The informational content of the local newspapers, in this perspective, maybe at the origin of this result. An increase of fiscal responsibilities of the regional governments together with most of the selected socio-economic variables increase as well the turnout.

JEL classification codes: C26, D83, K23
Keywords: Turnout, regional elections, diffusion of newspapers, decentralization
1. *Introduction*

The idea that in well-functioning democracies news media are beneficial for voters as they provide a bulk of the information that people use in elections is rooted in the theory of liberal democracy. Indeed by reducing the information bias about the governmental activities, press may significantly create an important synergy with the political institutions designed to increase political accountability.

In a recent and exhaustive survey, Sobbrio [2014] divide the literature on the political economy of news media into three main branches: a) The literature looking at the effects of the coverage of news media on political and public policy outcomes; b) The literature trying to capture and explain specific characteristics of the market for news and establishing whether there is a systematic bias in the reports of news media; c) The literature looking at the effects of specific media outlets on political outcomes (i.e., assessing the effects of biased news media on political outcomes).

The political economy literature on news media has mostly analyzed the effects of an improved media coverage on political and public policy outcomes. A growing number of studies have shown that news media have a relevant impact on electoral participation (Stromberg, 2004; Gentzkow, 2006; Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel, 2010; Snyder and Stromberg, 2010; Gentzkow, Shapiro and Sinkinson, 2011; Miner, 2012), and on other important electoral and public policy outcomes (see Prat and Stromberg, 2011 for an exhaustive survey) such as incumbency advantage (Ansolabehere, Snowberg and Snyder, 2006; Prior, 2006; Ferraz and Finan, 2008; Snyder and Stromberg, 2010; Fergusson, 2012) and government spending and redistributive outcomes (Besley and Burgess, 2002; Stromberg, 2004; Snyder and Stromberg, 2010; Eisensee and Stromberg, 2007). A further line of research mostly focused on the effects of increased news media competition on the selection of politicians and their performance once elected (Drago, Nannicini and Sobbrio, 2013).

In this paper we focus on the impact that news media have on political participation. Theoretical models of electoral participation suggest that a higher level of voters’ information leads to an
increase in turn-out (Matsusaka, 1995; Fedderson and Pesendorfer, 1996; Feddersen, 2004). Accordingly, empirical analyses generally find that more informed voters are also more likely to turnout (Chang, Golden and Hill, 2010; Lassen, 2005; Green and Gerber, 2008; Degan and Merlo, 2011; Larcinese, 2009).

In this paper we empirically focus on the impact that local news media have on political participation in the twenty Italian Regions as an interesting for the period 1980-2009. This choice of this case-study is driven by different reasons. First, newspapers are a vital source of political information at local level, especially in the period of our interest. As matter of fact starting from the mid-1980s the Italian newspaper industry experienced some technological innovation which decreased both the cost and length of production and greatly facilitated the expansion of the supply of the local news and related changes in readership. Moreover, the market for national and local news presents different characteristics with respect to the ownership. While the national news market is highly concentrated and subject to capture by political interest groups, the market for local news exhibits a wide range of variation in the extent of newspaper competition both across and within regions (see, on these aspects, Drago, Nannicini and Sobbrio, 2013).

Second, an important institutional event occurred in Italy in the 1990s which may have affected the political participation of voters to the regional elections, i.e. a process of decentralization which increased the degree of both expenditure competences and tax autonomy of the Italian Regions.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the existing literature on the nexus between media news and political participation within the political economy. Section 3 describes the institutional setting, the empirical strategy and the variables. Section 4 discusses the results. Conclusions are drawn in Section 5.

2. Media and political participation: A review of the literature
The role of the media in affecting voter participation has been broadly discussed in the political economy literature. Various arguments in support of the idea that information is “behaviour
irrelevant” have been recently elaborated by Popkin (1991), Wittman (1995), and Lupia and McCubbins (1998). Their main argument is that voters manage to behave as if they were informed even if they are not. Also, some papers that apply spatial models of elections show that it is possible for imperfectly informed voters to emulate the behavior of the better informed ones when they receive a credible signal from a source whose preferences are known (McKelvey and Ordeshook, 1984; Calvert, 1985; Sobel, 1985; Grofman and Norrander, 1990; Lupia, 1992).

Over the last two decades, a growing number of theoretical studies have endogenized the role of informative media coverage in the political agency models on political accountability; the related empirical literature has focused on the effects of the availability and pluralism of news media on various political and public policy outcomes such as the turnout, the incumbency advantage, the selection of politicians, the public goods provision. The underlying hypothesis that this literature implicitly aims to test is whether the coverage of news media effectively improves the level of information of citizens and then translates into changes in electoral politics and public policy outcomes.

Most existing contributions have focused on the effects of news media on electoral participation. Specifically, both decision-theoretical (see Matsusaka, 1995) and game-theoretical (see Feddersen and Pesendorfer, 1996) models of electoral participation suggest that better informed individuals are more likely to turnout. More specifically, Besley and Prat (2006) develop a theoretical model of democratic politics in which media affect the voters’ information and consequently their voting decisions creating a link between media capture and government accountability. Establishing a link between observable characteristics of the media industry (concentration and ownership) and observable political outcomes (capture, corruption, and turnover), the model shows that media pluralism provides effective protection against capture, independent ownership reduces capture and media capture affects political outcomes (political turnover and corruption). Indeed, empirical studies looking at the link between voters’ information levels and turnout generally find a positive correlation between the two (Lassen, 2005; Green and
Gerber, 2008; Larcinese, 2009; Sobbrio and Navarra, 2010; Degan and Merlo, 2011; Drago, Nannicini and Sobbrio, 2013). However, some contributions point out how an increase in the supply of news media may lead to a negative effect on electoral participation due to a crowding-out effect on the existing (and more informative) type of news media (Gentzkow, 2006; George and Waldfogel, 2008).

A positive effect of news media on electoral participation has been found specifically in the context of newspapers. Snyder and Stromberg (2010) find that a higher share of a newspaper’s readership that lives in a given congressional district is associated with a larger number of newspaper articles about the congressmen belonging to the local congressional district, a higher level of voter information and a higher level of electoral participation. Gentzkow et al. (2011) analyze the effect of the entrance and exit of newspapers on political participation and the incumbency advantage using a panel of US newspapers from 1869 to 2004 and show that newspapers have a robust positive effect on participation in congressional and presidential elections. Drago et al. (2013) show that an expansion in the supply of local news provided by local and national newspapers increases the turnout in the municipal elections in a sample of medium-large Italian municipalities in the period 1993-2010\(^1\). On the other hand, other papers (Gentzkow, 2006 and George and Waldfogel, 2008) show that a change in the supply of news media through the introduction of new types of media (respectively, the television in the 50s in the US and the expansion of home delivery of the New York Times in one hundred cities in the US) actually created a negative effect on electoral participation indirectly affecting the consumption of the pre-existing local news media.

\(^1\) This study shows also that the entry of newspapers in the market for local news increases the effort exerted by incumbent mayors in managing the municipality efficiently. Then, voters reward this higher effort by incumbent mayors by increasing their electoral support and thus enhancing their probability of being re-elected. At the same time, the impact of newspapers on government efficiency is larger and statistically more significant when the incumbent mayor is not term-limited. Moreover, newspapers do not seem to have any effect on the observable characteristics of elected mayors (i.e., age, gender, education, employment status). Therefore, these results suggest that while newspapers have an relevant effect on the accountability of elected politicians (i.e., on what politicians do once in office), they do not seem to have a major impact on the selection of politicians (i.e., on who gets into office). Finally, the evidence emerging from this study suggests that local newspapers (rather than national ones) are the main driver of the results.
The role of media supposedly reinforce and complement the working of internal mechanisms of political accountability such as fair elections, electoral rules, decentralization. The importance of the elections as a democratic device is extensively recognized in the literature (see, on this point, Manin et al., 1999; Ferraz and Finan, 2008). As far as the electoral rules and government concentration are concerned, the majoritarian system provide a greater incentive for voters to participate to elections choosing among single candidates rather than among parties and the election outcome tends to be more sensitive to the incumbent’s performance (Persson and Tabellini, 1999; Persson et al., 2003). By developing a different line of reasoning Lijphart (1999) argues that the proportional systems are more accountable than the majoritarian because they lead to policy decisions closer to voters’ preferences. Political participation may also be affected by fiscal decentralization where the relation between voters and elected politicians is closer and the mechanisms of vertical and horizontal competition between levels of governments may induce people to express their preferences.

In Italy newspapers still remain the main source of news for local information providing more extensive coverage of local politics with respect to national ones (Drago et al., 2013). Therefore, based on this literature, we will empirically investigate whether local newspapers have affected electoral participation and consequently the efficiency of the electoral process in the regional elections.

3. Empirics

3.1. The institutional setting

The Italian Constitution, promulgated in 1948 and recently revised on this matter in 2001, foresees the principle of decentralization of the government functions and the establishment of regional Governments (Article 5 and Title V of the Constitution). Italy has been divided in 20 Regions; five enjoy a special statute (Regioni a Statuto Speciale, or RSS) because of their multilingual status, borderline position or secessionist movements (Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, Sicilia,
Sardegna, Trentino Alto Adige comprising the two Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano, Valle d’Aosta) while 15 Regions (Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, Liguria, Marche, Umbria, Abruzzo, Lazio, Molise, Basilicata, Campania, Puglia, Calabria) are characterized by an ordinary statute (Regioni a Statuto Ordinario, or RSO). Since the mid-1990s a gradual, though slow, process of fiscal decentralization accomplished through several legislative acts and a constitutional reform in 2001 occurred and was aimed to increase the fiscal autonomy of the regional governments. The latter have the major responsibility of health care, social services, environment, local transportation, housing, culture and tourism, and differences in competences between the RSO and RSS have been reduced. Currently regional governments levy on own taxes (about 24% of the total national fiscal revenue), as well as shares of national taxes and transfers (about 53%) (Giardina et al, 2009).

In those years a massive judicial investigation against corruption, known as Mani Pulite or Tangentopoli, involved many Italian politicians for alleged bribery. The scandal, constantly highlighted by the media newspapers, deeply affected the Italian political scenario and increased voters participation to the elections. Important changes were made to increase the political accountability of the national and regional representatives, such as the reform of the electoral system which shifted from a proportional to a mixed system characterized by a strong majoritarian component.

From mid-1980s the technological innovation which characterized the Italian newspaper industry resulted into an expansion of the supply of the local news and a related increase in readership. Figure 1 shows the variability of both local and national newspapers over the total number of newspapers. Between late eighties and early nineties local newspapers account for more than 70% of the total and remain substantially stable until the end of the considered period. National newspapers instead start to decrease from mid-eighties signaling that local newspapers become prevailing in the newspaper market.
Figure 1. Share of local and national newspapers (1980-2009)

Figure 2 shows the dynamics of the readership in Italy; Figure 3 shows its distribution across Regions. Overall, from 1980 to 1990 per capita diffusion of the newspapers increases, then start to slowly decreases. The highest number of readers are in the North (Liguria, Emilia Romagna, Toscana, Lombardia, Veneto and Piemonte) as well as in Lazio, the Region where Rome, the center of political and institutional networks, is located. The Souther Regions (Abruzzo, Calabria, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata and Molise) show the lowest levels of per capita newspapers readership.
3.2. Model specification and variables

We use a dataset which collects newspapers, politico-institutional and socio-economic information for the 15 Ordinary Statute Italian Regions during the period 1980-2009. Overall we have 420 observations.
Due to the small number of degrees of freedom and the high degree of correlation among some variables, we apply an incremental approach, by starting with a relatively parsimonious specification and progressively introducing a vector of variables that captures the degree of decentralization (tax and expenditure autonomy) and socio-economic characteristics of the voters (income, education, unit of labour and social capital). The data source, if not differently specified, is the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT).

Equation (1) defines the structural equation:

\[
TURNOUT_{it} = a_0 + a_1 NEWS_{it} + a_2 DEC_{it} + a_3 SOCEC_{it} + u_{it}
\]

for \(i=1,\ldots,15\) and \(t=1980,\ldots,2009\).

The dependent variable. Our dependent variable is the share of the population that has cast its vote. Different measures of voter turnout have been employed in the economic literature depending on the statistics available (Geys, 2006). Most of the empirical studies have focused either on the ratio between the number of voters and voting age population and/or on the number of voters over the number registered to vote. Some papers use the absolute number of votes cast and the number of voters over the number of eligible voters. It is hard to say which operationalization of the turnout rate is ‘best’. Our variable (Turnout) has been driven by the availability of the data and has been calculated as the ratio between the number of voters and the population of voting age (the ‘age eligible’ population) in Regional elections. Data come from the Archivio Storico of Ministero dell’Interno.

The explanatory variables. NEWS is our vector of interest concerning information which includes:

1) Newspapers readership. This variable is measured as the regional per capita number of newspapers. The diffusion of the press reduces the informational problems that characterize the relationship between citizens and public officials. Therefore we expect that the higher is the number of informed voters, the higher is the degree of political participation.
2) *Share of Local Newspapers.* This variable is measured as the ratio between the number of local newspapers diffused in every Region over the total number (national and local) of newspapers. Most likely the political information provided by a local newspaper concerns the performance of the regional government rather than of the national one and this circumstance may motivate voters to actively participate to the elections of regional representatives.

Data on the variable *NEWS* come from ADS (*Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa*) which provides yearly certified data on circulation at the provincial level. We follow Petrarca (2014) and classify the journals as national if they are diffused in all the Regions. There are 12 newspapers in this class (national press): *Avvenire, Il Corriere della Sera, Il Giornale, Il Messaggero, Il Tempo, Italia Oggi, Libero, Il Manifesto, La Repubblica, Il Sole 24 Ore, La Stampa* and *L'Unità*. The remaining journals are considered as local press.

**Control variables.**

1) The vector *DEC* captures the *degree of decentralization.* We measure this variable taking into account both the expenditure side and the revenue side. Specifically, we use per capita total regional expenditure (*Exp*) as a measure of expenditure autonomy and the share of own taxes over total tax revenue (*OwnRev*) as a measure of tax autonomy. We expect that the higher is the degree of the regional governments’ expenditure and tax autonomy, the higher is the involvement of voters in the regional politics.

2) The vector *SOCSEC* includes a number of variables related to the socio economic characteristics of the constituency. We choose GDP per capita and education, measured as the share of population enrolled in high school. Both data come from CRENOS. Voters with higher income and education are expected to be both more willing to participate to the elections. We also include into *SOCSEC* the employment rate, measured as the ratio between units of labour and population and social capital, measured as the number of blood donors associations’ members over the regional population (data come from AVIS, the most important association of blood donors in Italy).
Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics of the variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Obs</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turnout</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>.8134</td>
<td>.0822</td>
<td>.6439</td>
<td>.9449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers readership</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>.0730</td>
<td>.0387</td>
<td>.0153</td>
<td>.1860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of local newspapers</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>.0528</td>
<td>.0423</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.2222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownrevenues</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>295.78</td>
<td>446.97</td>
<td>1.3870</td>
<td>3119.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expenditures</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>1068.64</td>
<td>597.59</td>
<td>116.08</td>
<td>2882.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood donors</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>.0239</td>
<td>.0175</td>
<td>.0013</td>
<td>.0667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>.3991</td>
<td>.3991</td>
<td>.2790</td>
<td>.5145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>.0146</td>
<td>.0040</td>
<td>.0068</td>
<td>.0230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School attainment</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>.0470</td>
<td>.0072</td>
<td>.0198</td>
<td>.0616</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One problem with testing our model is that the variables of interest might be related to Region-specific unobservable factors. To minimize this concern we estimate Equation 1 with a fixed effects model.

4. Empirical results

Table 2 reports our preliminary results from the estimation of Equation 1. Model (1) only includes the newspapers variables, Model (2) adds decentralization, and Models (3, 4 and 5) gradually include the socio-economic factors. In all the models, with the exception of model (1) which is very parsimonious, per capita readership of newspapers is positively and significantly correlated with political participation. This result provides some evidence that, at regional level, local newspapers still represent a channel of information which motivate voters to participate to the elections. This is consistent with the positive and significant relation between both expenditure and tax autonomy and turnout: voters are politically active when they are aware of the fiscal responsibility of the regional governments in the decision making process. In other words, political participation seems to
increase when the mechanisms of vertical and horizontal competition between levels of
governments are at work. Finally, higher levels of income and education are associated to higher
turnout since better informed citizens are more likely to vote (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996;
Wattenberg et al., 2000). In presence of higher employment levels voters seem to participate more
to the elections as a way of rewarding incumbents for the good performance of the economy. Social
capital is significantly and positively correlated with voters turnout.

However political knowledge is not an exogenous variable and the same motivation that
leads to political participation is likely to drive information attainment. Therefore this correlation
can be spurious since the link between information and turnout could be driven by unobserved
voters’ heterogeneity and needs to be checked for endogeneity. Model 6 and 7 include the lagged
newspapers readership in order to take account of this problem. Both show a positive coefficient
and are significant.
### Table 2. Equation 1, fixed effects estimation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dep var: TURNOUT</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>(6)</th>
<th>(7)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NEWS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers Readership</td>
<td>-0.773**</td>
<td>0.480***</td>
<td>0.479***</td>
<td>0.455***</td>
<td>0.787***</td>
<td>0.486**</td>
<td>0.787***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.24)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.16)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Share of Local</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>0.087</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.21)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>DEC</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ownrevenues</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expenditures</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SOCSEC</strong></td>
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<td>Employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blood donors</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>0.407***</td>
<td>0.460***</td>
<td>0.504***</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.785***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
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<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
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<td>(0.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>1.791***</td>
<td>2.029***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.41)</td>
<td>(0.38)</td>
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<tr>
<td>School attainment</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.35)</td>
<td>(0.3)</td>
<td>(0.35)</td>
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<td>(0.35)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newspapers Readership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newspapers Readership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.865***</td>
<td>0.878***</td>
<td>0.875***</td>
<td>0.856***</td>
<td>0.877***</td>
<td>0.875***</td>
<td>0.865***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
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<td>394</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>366</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

### 4. Conclusion

In an idealized vision of democracy, public decisions are based on the preferences and opinions of all the members of a polity. Therefore the degree of electoral participation is considered in the political debate as a good measure of the quality of a democracy. Understanding the determinants of turnout is therefore very important. In this paper we focus on the role played by newspapers information as a driver of the voters political participation in Italy at the regional elections where newspapers still remain the main source of news and local newspapers provide more extensive coverage of local politics with respect to national ones. We find that overall the diffusion of
newspapers is quite effective in increasing the voters’ turnout. The latter is positively affected also by other factors such as a high degree of decentralization, a high level of income, education, social capital and employment.


