

Empirical evidence on the impact of the Catholic Church on political participation in Italy

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Abstract

At the end of the 19th century, the leading proponent of the Unification process of Italy (1861), Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour, insisted on the importance of a "free Church within a free State". As a retaliatory act to the loss of ownership over episcopal lands, a papal policy was promulgated. The Non Expedit Act (1874) compelled Italian Catholics to abstain from the polls in parliamentary elections of the newly formed Kingdom of Italy. This prescription lasted for almost a century until 1919, but it was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) that ultimately turned the tide by pushing for active participation in political life. Using a novel dataset on voter turnout and historical religiosity proxies spanning four general election years straddling the Second Vatican Council, the present thesis aims to investigate whether the shift in the Holy See attitude may have affected Italian Catholics' civic participation. We find that in areas where citizens are more likely to abide by religious norms, electoral engagement significantly grows after the Second Vatican Council.