

10. The Long-Run Commuting Population: Effects on Electoral Turnout in Inner Areas

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Abstract

The study leverages access to highly granular data on the population with administrative signals of long-run commuting, particularly students and workers, to explore the effect on electoral participation, with a special focus on Italy's internal areas, territories marked by depopulation, economic fragility, and limited access to service. Administrative data from 7,896 municipalities have been collected and standardised commuting indicators for students and workers have been computed to analyse the voter turnout patterns. The results show that these areas with economic decline, outmigration, and limited access to socio-economic resources often exhibit lower rates of turnout, showing how structural inequalities affect electoral behaviour. Areas marked by economic hardship and long-run commuting population are particularly vulnerable to economic limitations and less effective services. These findings assess the impact of long-run commuting on electoral participation. The study proposes a multidimensional framework that aligns socio-economic and demographic variables to support participation, advocating for an inclusive approach to building resilient communities.

1. Internal areas and electoral turnout

Sustainable development increasingly encompasses political participation as a core dimension, especially in regions marked by demographic decline and infrastructural marginality.

Italy's so called "aree interne" (inner areas) represent a paradigmatic case of such peripherality. These territories are marked by demographic aging, declining birth rates, and significant youth outmigration (Barca et al., 2014). These patterns contribute to the depletion of human capital and further economic marginalisation.

Demographic analyses indicate that structural imbalances, driven by negative net migration and fertility decline, progressively undermine the institutional and civic foundations of these communities (Livi Bacci, 2008; Casacchia et al., 2020; ISTAT, 2023). Aging and depopulation, in turn, erode the institutional and social infrastructures necessary for resilience.

The concept of inner areas - geographically distant from urban centers and often with limited access to essential services and economic opportunities - has become central to discussions on population dynamics, community resilience, and sustainable regional development. These areas, marked by significant socio-economic challenges such as youth outmigration, aging populations, and economic stagnation, often face weakened resilience and reduced social cohesion, which collectively hinder sustainable growth and local engagement.

Scholarly attention to political participation in rural or marginal areas underscores a persistent gap in turnout compared with urban centres (Pattie and Johnston, 2000; Franklin, 2004). In Italy, the gap has widened in recent decades, with inner areas exhibiting significantly lower electoral participation (Cavallaro and Lelo, 2021). This gap is particularly observed in the South and Islands, where abstention rates are structurally higher and intensifying (Cetrulo et al., 2023).

Voter disengagement in these areas is driven by logistical barriers, such as distance to polling stations, but also by political disillusionment stemming from long-standing economic neglect (Diamanti, 2018). When compounded by youth outmigration and commuter detachment,

abstention emerges not simply as apathy, but as an involuntary consequence of mobility.

Furthermore, the disaffection expressed in low voter turnout should not be simplistically interpreted as apathy. Rather, it reflects systemic disenfranchisement shaped by geography, demography, and the perceived ineffectiveness of political institutions (Norris, 2011; Putnam, 2000).

2. Contextual framework of electoral turnout in Italian inner areas

In Italy, there has been a progressive growth of abstentionism since the 1970s, with a significant acceleration in recent decades (Mete and Tuorto, 2025). Between 2008 and 2022, the percentage of voters who turned out to vote fell by almost 17 percentage points. In the 2022 General election, the proportion of voters who did not exercise their right to vote reached 36%, representing a new record and a significant increase from the 27% recorded in the 2018 General election (Eligendo, Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2022). Inner areas, as territories further away from urban centres and essential services (such as schools, hospitals, and railway stations), tend to have higher abstention rates than urban areas. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in the Southern inner areas, where the rate of abstention frequently exceeds 40%, with Calabria experiencing particularly high rates of abstention, reaching almost 50%. High values are also recorded in Sardinia and Liguria.

Several interrelated factors contribute to high abstention rates in inner areas. Firstly, a crisis of trust in politics and in the politicians because many citizens, particularly in these areas, feel that the political class is out of touch with their real problems and irresponsible to local needs (Tarrow, 1996; Bobbio, 2010). Mistrust of political parties is widespread, with an average rating that is very low. Secondly, a lack of representation of marginal areas in policy-making by traditional parties which often fail to adequately represent the territory's specific interests in the national debate. This results in weak local ties for the parties and a perception that local actors carry little weight. Thirdly, the absence of an adequate place-based political offering for inner areas, combined with a top-down approach and reduced media capacity to highlight local issues, contributes to general disaffection with

political participation (Tomaney, 2014). In addition, socio-economic factors marginality plays a decisive role. Abstentionism is often widespread among the disadvantaged populations. In inner areas, where economic and social hardship is more prevalent, this factor may result in lower electoral participation. There is an inverse correlation between *per capita* income and turnout: as income increases, abstention decreases (Gallego, 2007; ISTAT, 2023). Abstention has become a genuine "political option" for the Italian voter, who perceives a sense of ineffectiveness rather than mere indolence (Sampugnaro, 2024). Lastly, while it may be considered less pertinent than socio-political factors, logistical challenges or barriers - physical or material constraints - can render challenging for individuals to exercise their right to vote. This is particularly crucial in geographically isolated regions or communities with a significant elderly population (Prota and Viesti, 2019; Benassi and Colleoni, 2021).

Several socio-political and economic dynamics are reflected in the growing complexity of electoral turnout in inner Italian areas characterised by demographic aging, declining birth rates, and population mobility. The impact of a high percentage of non-voters, especially in rural areas, can have several implications in terms of the weakened democratic legitimacy of elected institutions and governments, since they represent a smaller proportion of the voting-age population. Furthermore, if inner areas do not actively participate in voting, their specific needs and concerns may be underrepresented in national and regional political decisions, reinforcing the idea that voting is ineffective in improving living conditions and entrenching a vicious cycle of disinterest and disaffection towards political participation impacting, thus, the territorial marginalisation.

3. Impact of population long-run commuting on turnout

Traditional electoral regulatory frameworks presumed a settled population residing permanently in a specific area and establishing social and political ties there. However, this assumption is increasingly challenged by rising patterns of intra-national mobility. It is crucial to recognise that voting conditions are not homogeneous for all voters. For some, abstention is not a deliberate choice but rather the consequence of factors or structural

conditions or constraints preventing or discouraging electoral participation. This results in an increasing share of non-voters whose abstention can be considered involuntary, thereby contributing to 'apparent abstention' (Barisione and Maggini, 2019). A significant portion of this typology comprises voters who, for various reasons, reside far from their designated polling stations, making it unlikely that their abstention is intentional but due to logistical or emotional difficulties.

Moreover, mobility, even when accompanied by an immediate change of residence, could generate identity-related challenges that influence citizens' voting propensity. New relocated residents traditionally exhibit lower voter turnout because they have not yet established community ties nurtured through relationships and life experiences.

Individuals who live and work far from their place of origin, even if they maintain official residence there, often experience a separation between different spheres of life: on one hand, the work and study context and, on the other, their official place of residence (sometimes only formally). It is generally accepted that high mobility of subjects (i.e. those who change domicile several times within a year) has the potential to influence voting propensity (Putnam 2000), given that social ties are not consolidated when the subject moves from one place to another one (Hooghe, 2008). The detachment from place-specific identities and institutions reduces, then, the likelihood of participating in local elections. Long-term commuting, therefore, is not only a mobility trend but also a behavioural variable with significant political consequences.

In addition to quantitative evidence, case-based insights drawn from policy studies (Benassi & Colleoni, 2021; Prota & Viesti, 2019) reveal the subjective dimensions of territorial exclusion. Residents in internal areas often express perceptions of neglect and alienation from national politics. These narratives correlate with empirical indicators of poor service access, limited mobility infrastructure, and low civic capital. In particular, they emphasise the mismatch between regional governance narratives and local priorities, underscoring the importance of co-produced policies. Civic exclusion is not merely a result of physical distance, but also of 'institutional silence'. Notably, the perceived disjuncture between regional development

rhetoric and lived territorial realities undermines trust in democratic processes (Cersosimo and Donzelli, 2000; Barca et al., 2014). These insights underline the need to embed democratic renewal efforts within broader place-based development strategies.

The increasing mobility of populations, driven by factors such as labour and educational opportunities, is consequential in terms of actual socio-economic implications and behavioural shifts. The phenomenon of long-term commuting is emerging as a critical area due to its impact on labour markets, demographic trends, and electoral outcomes. The increasing prevalence of long-distance commuting - particularly toward metropolitan poles - reflects broader economic transformations, including the polarisation of labour markets and educational opportunities (ISTAT, 2023). This phenomenon must be read within the broader framework of mobility that does not affect the entire Italian territory uniformly, with a pronounced impact in the South and the Islands, particularly in inner areas compared to major urban centres. Metropolitan areas surrounding large cities emerge as attractive hubs, exhibiting positive migration rates due to employment growth patterns favouring urban centres.

The present study employs innovative data on the population's long-term commuting in Italy that inform electoral turnout analysis. These metrics, normalised by demographic profiles, allow for granular analysis of the interplay between mobility and turnout.

The indicators developed specifically focus on the latter mobility patterns, a less evident phenomenon linked to the mobility of 'false' or 'apparent' residents. These are citizens formally present in the municipality's registry but have a domicile elsewhere - often in other areas, sometimes hundreds of kilometres away - where they study or work.

By analysing these commuting patterns, this study provides insights into the internal mobility trends affecting these areas. The presence and number of commuters suggest a propensity for interterritorial mobility. Commuting is only a partly known and observable phenomenon, even if it cannot be employed as the only reliable measure of mobility.

By estimating the average travel time between a resident's home municipality and their place of work or study, it is possible to categorise

residents into two groups: (i) local commuters and (ii) intra-national movers within Italy. This classification allows for an in-depth examination of how mobility trends affect different types of municipalities, with a special focus on the unique vulnerabilities of internal areas.

To provide an accurate analysis of these trends, various normalization methods based on the demographic structure of each municipality were applied, resulting in a detailed system of indicators. This system primarily highlights the socio-economic vulnerabilities of municipalities far from major economic and activity hubs, where restricted accessibility can deepen social and economic isolation.

The study examines intra-national mobility indicators in relation to social and political participation, analysing socio-economic, demographic, and territorial factors, with a particular focus on micro-territorial areas affected by these mobility patterns.

4. Data and Methodology

Unlike previous studies that employed census data (Tóka, 2009; Franklin, 2004), the present study employs a methodology that provides dynamic, timely updated measures of long-run commuting, offering novel and more reliable insights into the impact of population mobility patterns on electoral abstention.

Administrative micro-data at the municipality level offer a methodological advancement that enhances the precision of the measurement of commuting. Unlike traditional survey-based approaches, which suffer from recall biases and low response rates (Bartels, 2008), administrative data provide real-time, objective indicators of population mobility.

The study introduces data and indicators related to internal population mobility, estimating the average round-trip time between two towns of residence and activity. It employs high-resolution administrative micro-data, aiming to analyse the effects of long-run commuting on electoral participation through a novel and more accurate set of data.

Employing different normalization methods based on demographic data of the municipality of residence, comprehensive indicators are arranged.

The indicators primarily assess the fragility of municipalities located far from more developed municipalities in terms of economic and social assets. Intra-national mobility indicators are related to electoral turnout, considering socio-economic, demographic, and micro-territorial variables, with a particular focus on micro-territorial areas affected by relevant internal population mobility.

Multiple administrative datasets are integrated. Firstly, ISTAT's commuting matrices, MIUR student registries, and electoral data turnout of the 2022 General elections from Eligendo platform (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2022), ISTAT's Statistical Register of Employment of Enterprises (ASIA EMPLOYMENT) which includes information on employment at the enterprise level, providing insights into where workers are employed relative to their places of residence. By cross-referencing this with other employment records, the study identifies workers who engage in long-run commuting due to job locations distant from their homes. ISTAT's Statistical Register of Local Units (ASIA UL) offers valuable information on the location of economic activities across municipalities. The spatial distribution of businesses and services directly impacts commuting patterns, as individuals are required to travel significant distances for employment in specific industries or specialised occupations and additional employment records from governmental agencies:

- MEF - NOIPA (salary statements) provides insights into public sector employment and associated commuting requirements
- INPS - domestic labour relations and agricultural self-employment records help identify mobility trends among self-employed and informal workers
- MIUR's archives of state school personnel capture commuting behaviour among educational professionals.

From the above sources, the data collected are:

- local commuters, individuals who maintain residence in one original municipality but usually work or study in another municipality

- time-distance estimates, computed average by road round-trip times between the residence and the activity municipalities
- normalised long-run commuting measures, adjusted for demographic features to enable meaningful comparisons: for students, the 19-29 aged total population, and for workers, the 30-44 aged total population, both in 2022.

Long-run commuting is defined as a round trip exceeding 4 hours. These data are normalised by population age groups (19-29 for students, 30-44 for workers).

The SNAI classification informs the analysis, dividing municipalities into six types: core poles, inter-municipal poles, belts, intermediate, peripheral, and ultra-peripheral areas.

Expanding the empirical scope and analytical framework and extending the robustness of the findings of the present study, two additional analytical dimensions are added. First, data from the Inner Areas Policy Evaluation Reports (INAPP, 2022) are incorporated, providing local-level assessments of service accessibility, community resilience, and economic diversification.

These dimensions enrich the model with territorial governance metrics. Second, a typology of municipalities based on commuting intensity and electoral behavior are introduced, creating the following profiles:

- i. High commuting, high abstention (critical disengagement)
- ii. High commuting, low abstention (integrated mobility)
- iii. Low commuting, high abstention (isolated demobilization)
- iv. Low commuting, low abstention (stable participation)

Cross-tabulating these profiles with internal area status reveals that over 65% of critical disengagement cases are in designated internal areas. This supports the hypothesis that the combination of long-run commuting and structural disadvantage drives abstention.

5. Results

The data presented in Table 1 highlight the uneven spatial distribution of Italian municipalities according to the SNAI 2021–2027 classification. Almost half (48.3%) of all municipalities fall within the Belt category, reflecting the structural weight of semi-urban territories in Italy's territorial configuration (Istat, 2022).

By contrast, a negligible proportion of municipalities are classified as Core Poles (2.3%) or Inter-municipal Poles (0.7%), thereby substantiating the pronounced degree of rural fragmentation that characterises a substantial portion of Italian territory.

Table 1. Municipalities by inner area (SNAI, 2022)

Area Type	Frequen cy	%	% Cumulative
Core Pole	182	2.3	2.3
Inter-mun. Pole	59	.7	3.0
Belt	3816	48.3	51.3
Intermediate	1925	24.4	75.7
Peripheral	1523	19.3	95.0
Ultra-peripheral	382	4.8	99.8
<i>Missing</i>	9	.1	99.9
Total	7896	100.0	

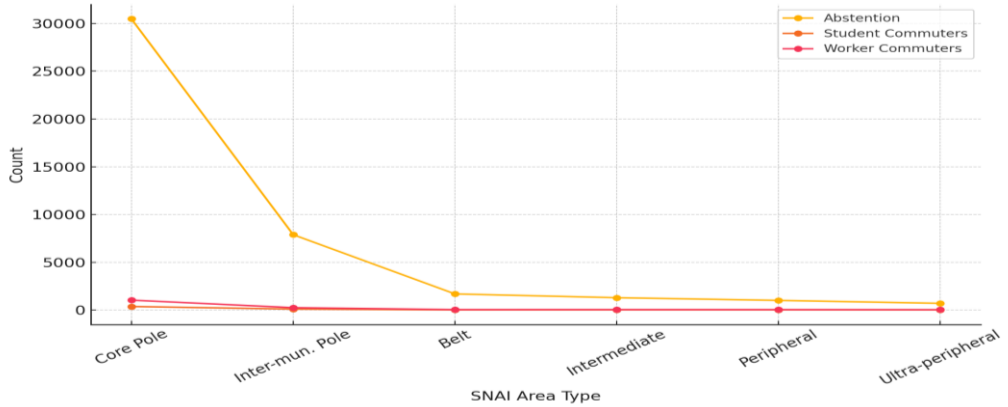
As illustrated in Table 2 and Figure 1, a clear distinction emerges: both abstention and commuting rates exhibit significantly higher levels in the peripheral and ultra-peripheral regions. This convergence suggests that geographic isolation and underdevelopment may function as dual impediments to civic engagement and daily accessibility.

A particularly noteworthy observation is the precipitous decline in the average number of commuters and voters between the Core Poles and the most remote areas. For instance, Core Poles have an average of over 300 student commuters and over 1,000 worker commuters, whereas ultra-peripheral areas report averages of just 14 and 32, respectively.

Table 2. Commuting and Abstention by Area Type (SNAI, 2022).

Area Type	Student Commuters Average number (absolute value)	Worker Commuters Average number (absolute value)	Non- Voters Average number (absolute value)
Core Pole	369 (67127)	1035 (188334)	30474 (5515855)
Inter-mun. Pole	101 (5957)	247 (14570)	7888 (465411)
Belt	15 (56111)	44 (168241)	1687 (6370183)
Intermediate	20 (39111)	46 (87618)	1292 (2440906)
Peripheral	21 (31233)	42 (63879)	1010 (1518638)
Ultra-peripheral	14 (5208)	32 (12148)	700 (264687)
<i>Missing</i>	0	0	1261 (5043)

Figure 1. Distribution of Abstention and Long-Run Commuting by SNAI Area.



Note. Peripheral and ultra-peripheral areas show higher abstention and commuting levels.

The summary statistics in Table 3 confirm the presence of significant territorial disparities in the commuting proportions. The distributions of both students and workers exhibit high standard deviations relative to their means (3.91% and 5.26%, respectively), with maximum values reaching up to 50% for students and 89% for workers in some Municipalities. This wide variation highlights the importance of considering geographic context when interpreting civic behaviour metrics.

Table 3. Summary Statistics of Commuting Proportions

Statistical measures	Student (19–29 y.)	Worker (30–44 y.)
Mean	2.94%	4.92%
Median	1.37%	2.80%
Std. Dev.	3.91%	5.26%
Max	50%	89%

The findings of the regression models presented in Table 4 indicate a dual effect. Firstly, younger populations demonstrate a higher correlation with abstention ($\beta = 0.0317$, p -value < 0.001). Secondly, student mobility exhibits an increased correlation with abstention ($\beta = 0.0545$, p -value < 0.001). In

contrast, the relationship between adult and worker mobility is weaker and negative.

In particular, the findings of this study indicate that adult worker mobility may be a more effective measure for mitigating disengagement than the value of the relationship between adult population and turnout. This is evidenced by the results of the regression analysis, which show that $\beta = -0.0114$, p -value = 0.04, and $\beta = -0.0306$, p -value = 0.001, respectively.

Table 4. Regression Results (Y-Dependent variable: abstention rate)

Predictor	Coefficient	<i>p</i> -value
Student Commuting Rate (19–29 y.)	0.0545	< 0.001
Worker Commuting Rate (30–44 y.)	- 0.0114	0.040
Youth Share (19–29 y.)	0.0317	< 0.001
Adult Share (30–44 y.)	- 0.0306	< 0.001

As illustrated in Table 5, with a focus on inner areas disaggregated by region and area type, it is evident that the Southern inner areas, including Calabria, Basilicata, and Sicily, exhibit the highest levels of commuting and abstention.

Table 5. Mean Abstention and Commuting Rates in Selected Regions (2022)

Region	Areas	Abstention (%)	Student Commuters (%)	Worker Commuters (%)
Calabria	Ultra-peripheral	54%	10%	21%
Basilicata	Peripheral	44%	10%	15%
Sicilia	Inter-municipality / Pole	48%	16%	14%

This finding supports the hypothesis that spatial remoteness, limited services, and long-term commuting act in unison to suppress participation. Finally, by calculating the proportions of student and worker commuters within the 19-22 and 30-44 age demographics, respectively (see Table 6), and the number of non-voters within the enrolled population in electoral registries, it becomes evident that the most intriguing data are not the minimal values, but rather the discrepancies between the Core Pole and Inter-municipal Pole, on the one hand, and the Peripheral and Ultra-peripheral, on the other.

Table 6. Abstention and Commuting Rates (mean)

Areas	Abstention (%)	Student Commuters (%)	Worker Commuters (%)
Core Pole	.35	.03	.05
Inter-mun. Pole	.34	.03	.04
Belt	.33	.02	.04
Intermediate	.37	.03	.05
Peripheral	.39	.04	.07
Ultra-peripheral	.41	.06	.09
<i>Missing</i>	.32	.00	.00

The findings reveal that internal areas facing economic decline, youth outmigration, and limited access to resources – characteristics commonly associated with Italy's internal areas – tend to experience low levels of participation. Specifically, by analysing commuting patterns among individuals officially registered in one municipality but domiciled elsewhere, this study identifies the hidden dimensions of 'apparent' residency.

The estimation of average travel times between home and workplace or place of study enables residents to be classified into two distinct categories: (i) local commuters, and (ii) international movers. This categorisation enhances the understanding of how mobility interacts with electoral

participation in vulnerable territories. Municipalities exhibiting elevated levels of 'apparent residency' have markedly reduced voter turnout rates.

The findings of this study provide substantial evidence of a strong correlation between mobility and electoral participation, particularly in regions considered marginal.

A demographic normalisation of the data in question reveals systemic disparities, with municipalities that are distant from economic hubs exhibiting greater social and political vulnerability.

6. Discussion

Democratic participation is a key indicator of civic engagement, but voter turnout has shown relevant inequalities. Among the various factors affecting electoral behaviour, long-term commuting remains a relatively under-researched area. The present study aims to address this gap by examining how long-term commuting affects electoral participation in Italy.

These findings point to a broader structural vulnerability among Italy's inner areas. Electoral abstention here is not merely an individual choice but reflects enduring spatial inequalities and institutional neglect. Long-term commuting exacerbates this condition by detaching residents from local political life. This civic disconnect is especially pronounced among students, whose mobility coincides with a critical period for political socialization.

High mobility rates, especially among students, may reduce political engagement due to weaker community ties and logistical difficulties in voting (ISTAT 2023; Verba et al. 1995). Conversely, worker mobility may have a more complex effect, potentially fostering integration and stability within the labour market (Blais 2006).

Given the rise of long-run commuting in Italy, particularly in areas of economic inequalities between Northern and Southern regions, it is crucial to examine its broader implications for well-being (Chatterjee et al. 2020) and electoral participation as a dimension of sustainability. Previous studies have suggested that individuals who frequently change their municipality of residence are less likely to establish robust political ties within their living communities. Furthermore, the increase in flexible

employment contracts and academic students' mobility has contributed to a highly transient population (Ferrera 2019).

By extending the scope of analysis to include multidimensional typologies and qualitative perspectives, long-run commuting - particularly in Italy's internal areas - is both a consequence and a driver of political disengagement. The cross-evidence of mobility and abstention reflects not only infrastructural or administrative barriers, but also deep-seated social and territorial asymmetries.

This observation highlights how structural inequalities in these areas both limit residents' economic opportunities and reduce availability and accessibility to essential services and further isolating them from the socio-economic mainstream. The participation, then, is examined as a critical measure for understanding the impact of socio-economic disparities, particularly within internal areas.

7. Conclusions

Policy responses must address the dual challenge of territorial and generational disengagement. Effective policies aimed at increasing participation contribute to the socio-economic revitalisation of these marginalised areas and to broader sustainable development goals, as they lay a foundation of community-driven resilience.

Long-run commuting undermines civic engagement, particularly in demographically and geographically disadvantaged inner areas. There, electoral abstention is not merely a behavioural outcome but an indicator of a deep crisis of trust and representation. This requires careful analysis and the implementation of targeted policies to encourage democratic participation among citizens.

In terms of policy discussion, the implications are critical. Electoral reforms must account for mobility-induced abstention. Proposed measures could include institutionalizing e-voting or proxy voting, improving transport access on election days, promoting local job and educational opportunities enhancing support for local educational and employment infrastructure to reduce the need for long-term commuting. Moreover,

integrating mobile populations into civic networks can reverse disconnection trends (Putnam, 2000).

The study demonstrates that long-term commuting is a key factor in the civic marginalisation of inner areas. Its effects are multidimensional eroding political ties, reducing voter turnout, and amplifying regional inequalities. Addressing these requires place-sensitive democratic, coordinated governance, adaptive policy design, and further renewed investments in peripheral territories.

Finally, electoral participation must be recognised as a measure of territorial cohesion and democratic health. As such, improving turnout in inner areas is not merely a question of institutional access, but of social justice and inclusive development.

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