The COVID-19 virus is thought to be mostly spread by respiratory droplets or by hand contacts with a contaminated surface. Once carrying the virus on their hands, people usually pick up infection by touching facial mucous membranes such as eyes, nose and mouth. Therefore, the risks associated with the pandemic are increasing with the number of people gathered at the same location. We make use of a unique experiment – the first round of the March 2020 municipal elections in France – to evaluate the human cost of a large public event that was held when the pandemic gained momentum in Europe.

Several countries had scheduled local or national elections in the first half of 2020, and thus had to choose on whether maintaining them. The decisions greatly varied across countries, suggesting that political leaders were divided on the right actions to be taken to tackle the issues related to public gatherings planned during the COVID-19 pandemic. The French government was one of the first having to deal with the problem, during the two-round municipal elections that were scheduled on March 15 and 22, 2020. At the same time, Germany opted for holding the municipal elections in Bavaria on March 15, while adopting a mandatory postal voting for the second round on March 29. Italy postponed the elections that should have taken place on May 31. In the US, the course of the presidential election on November 3 has been discussed, with a universal vote-by-mail option put forward to circumvent the risks of the pandemic that has been strongly rejected by President Trump. The related turmoil implies that it is crucial to get a sense of the effects on the diffusion of the epidemic of maintaining the vote and, more generally, of allowing large public meetings.

On average, concerns about COVID-19 led to record levels of abstention

Facing the uncertainty induced by the health conditions, extensive political debate occurred across parties before the elections in France. In particular, the lack of support for a proposal to defer the vote, which was described as an unconstitutional act or even a coup d’état, eventually induced the French government to go ahead with the first round on March 15. The second round

Simone Bertoli is Professor of Economics at CERDI, Université Clermont Auvergne (Clermont-Ferrand, France). His main research interests include international migration, economic development and labor economics. His current research activities focus on the theoretical and empirical study of the determinants of international migration and on the economic effects produced by migration on origin countries.

Contact: simone.bertoli@uca.fr
was ultimately called off, with the old mayors who stayed in power until May 23 (for municipalities in which the mayor had been elected already in the first round), and the second round was eventually held on June 29. The decision on the first round could have potentially influenced the spread of the pandemic through two (not mutually exclusive) mechanisms: the crowded electoral meetings held before the vote, and the struggles in respecting the newly introduced social distancing measures implemented at voting stations.

On the voting day, concerns about the ongoing situation led to a historically high level of abstention. Voter turnout stood at just 44.6%, almost 20 percentage points below the level recorded in the first round of municipal elections in 2014. The average turnout conceals however a substantial heterogeneity observed both across and within French départements. Our analysis investigates the link between local elections and the pandemic in France: did municipalities experiencing higher voter turnouts register a significantly higher mortality in the weeks after the vote? We rely on the monthly data published by the INSEE (the French National Statistical Institute) that are built on all death certificates in the country, to elaborate a research design suitable to answer this question. More specifically, we look at the relationship between voter turnout in the first round of the local elections and municipal-level age-specific mortality defined as the number of deaths recorded on a weekly basis in 2020, while taking into account the average mortality over the same week between 2010 and 2019.

The analytical implementation is made difficult by a likely spurious negative correlation between elections and mortality, which could arise because the early local diffusion of the pandemic likely had an influence on both voter turnout and mortality in the weeks following the vote. Consistent with this argument, some surveys show that more than 50% of the non-voters reported fear of the pandemic as one key reason (and often the only reason) underlying their choice to abstain.

We base the identification strategy on local differences in the intensity of electoral competition, measured by the ratio between the number of candidates and the number of municipal councilors to be elected. The number of councilors is a function of the population of the municipality, while the lists were finalized by February 27 at the latest, a time in which concerns about the epidemic in France were still limited, and can thus be plausibly regarded as exogenous. A more intense electoral contest can increase the turnout, while a number of candidates matching the seats to be filled in each council can clearly discourage the voters, who perceive that they have little to no role to play.

Lucas Guichard is a Post-doc Research Fellow at the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER) and participate to the EUFIRST project on Globalization, Inequality and Populism. He holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the Université Clermont Auvergne (CERDI, Clermont-Ferrand) and was involved in the GradAB Programme of the Institute for Employment Research (IAB, Nuremberg). While at the IAB, he was also a Research Associate in the department “Migration, Integration and International Labour Market Studies”. He is working on topics revolving around the economics of (forced) migration, with a particular interest in the study of the determinants of international migration flows and gravity models.

Contact: lucas.guichard@liser.lu

---

1 The level of abstention rose to 58.4% for the second round of the elections, almost 4 percentage points higher than in the first round on March 15, and more than 20 percentage points higher than in the second round of the 2014 municipal elections.
Municipalities with higher voter turnout experienced higher mortality in the elderly

The results reveal that French municipalities with a higher voter turnout on March 15 experienced a significantly higher mortality among the elderly population in the weeks subsequent to the elections. In terms of magnitude, the estimates imply that the nationwide number of deaths in the five weeks after the vote would have been around 20% larger, i.e., around 5,000 deaths, if turnout had stood at the level observed for the first round of the 2014 municipal elections. Most of these additional deaths would have hit the most vulnerable part of the French population composed of individuals aged 80 and above.

Our findings suggest that governments should be extremely cautious about maintaining a vote that is scheduled at a time in which the spread of the epidemic is gaining momentum. Moving forward with allowing the voters to express their preferences can accelerate the diffusion of the pandemic and increase mortality. However, policy-makers face a trade-off coming from the fact that proceeding differently with respect to the vote involves cancelling or postponing an election, thus raising major questions about the legitimacy of the democratic process. A vote-by-mail option should be seriously considered, especially in the countries where the epidemic was to regain momentum.


Francesca Marchetta is Assistant Professor at CERDI, Université Clermont Auvergne (Clermont-Ferrand, France). After having obtained her Ph.D. in Development Economics at the University of Florence in 2008, Francesca was a Post-Doc Fellow at the European University Institute and at CERDI. Her research interests relate to human development, with special focus on economic migration, education, labor market and gender.

Contact: francesca.marchetta@uca.fr