

(How) Do Elections Build States?

Evidence from Liberian Electoral Administration

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Abstract

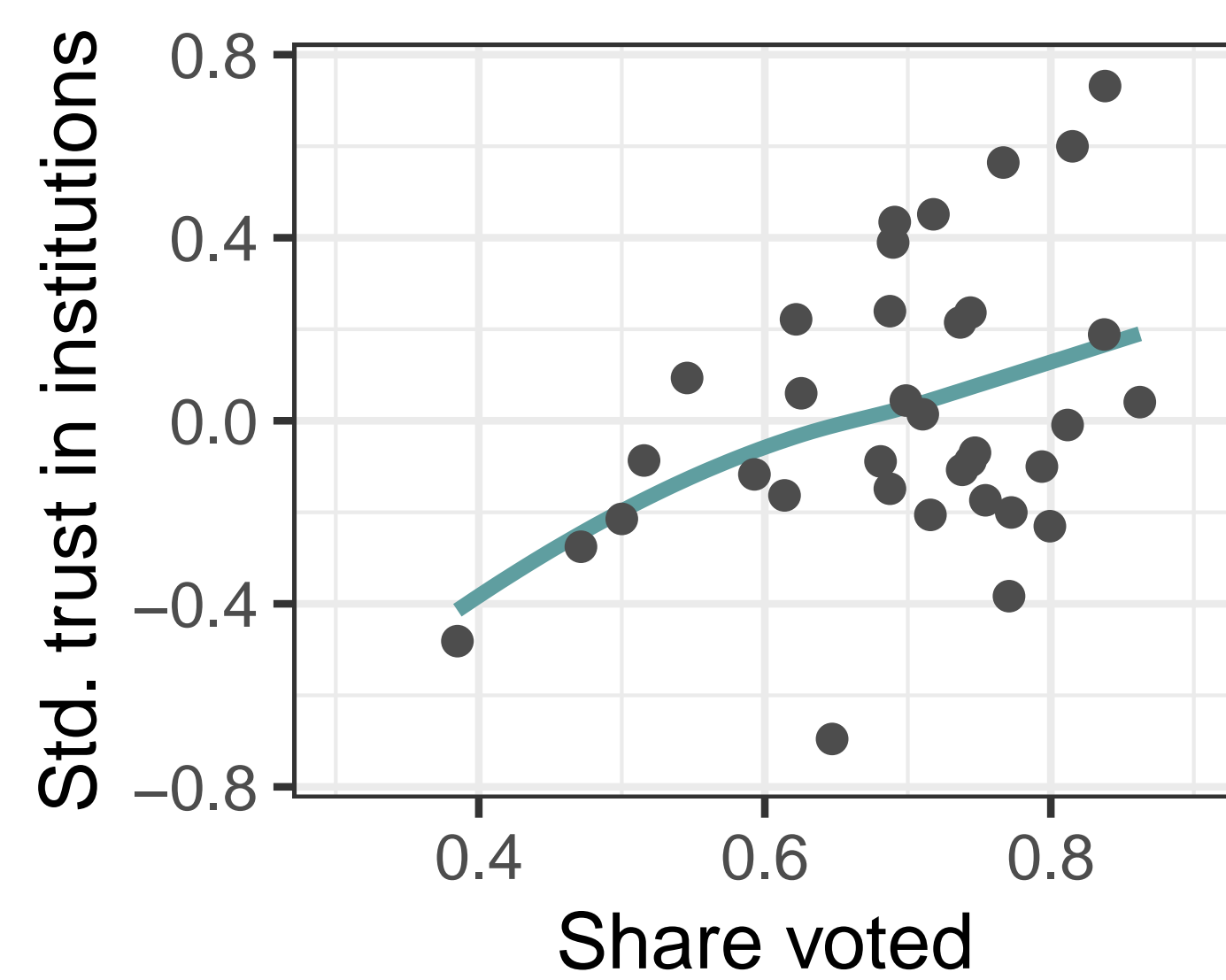
- How does increased electoral access affect trust in formal political institutions?
- Particularly relevant in fragile democracies. Little empirical evidence.

“The only logistical planning that is bigger than [an] election is when you are going to war.”

Executive Director of Liberia’s National Elections Commission (2016).

Background

Weakly-institutionalized democracies: limited state reach, and little interaction with citizens. Electoral administration might contribute towards state-building (e.g. Slater 2008).



Source: Afrobarometer (R4-R6).

Empirical challenges:

- Credible variation in electoral access.
- Validated measures of participation in data-limited settings.

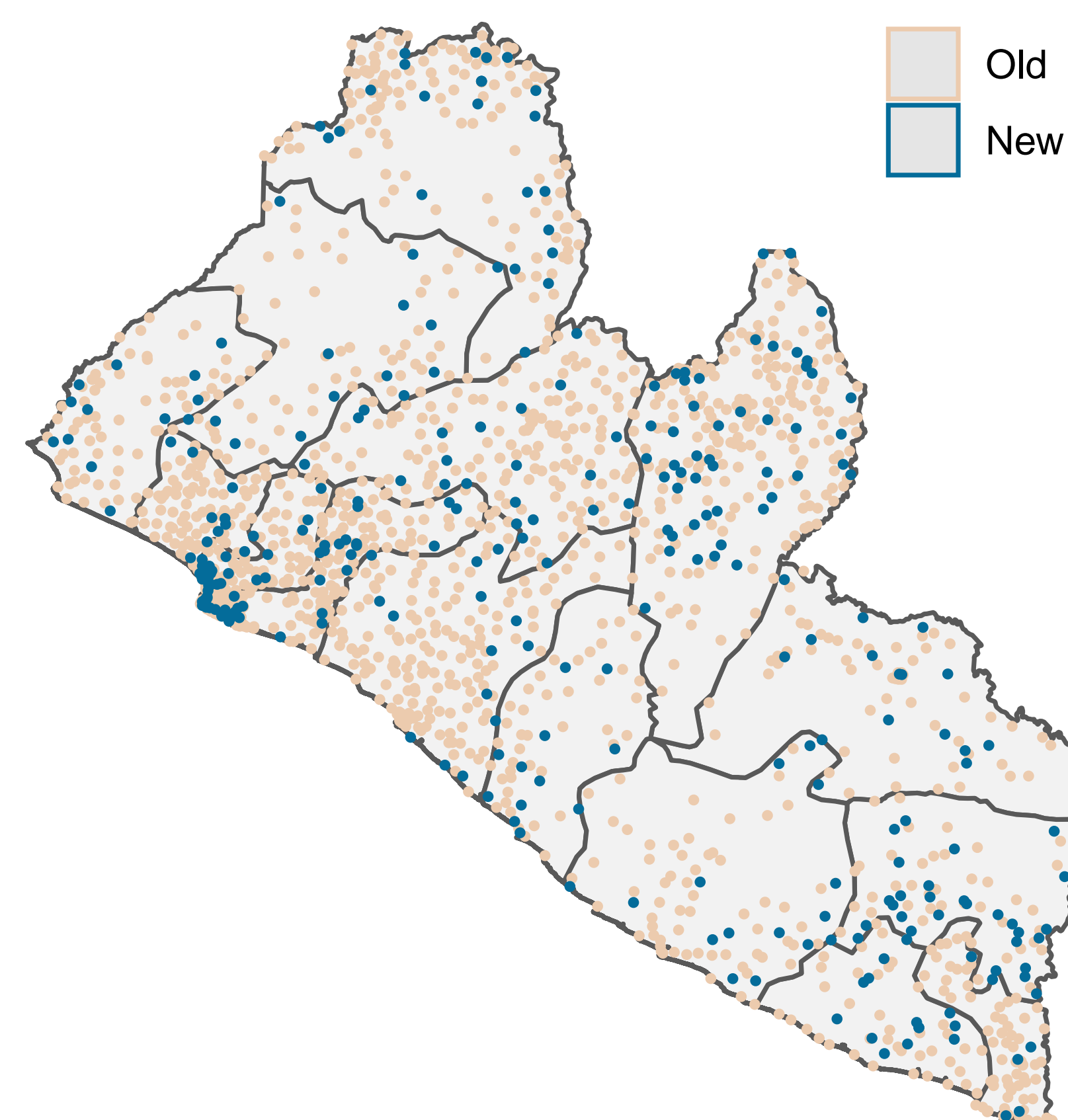
Liberian context:

- Fragile democratic state.
 - 3 major elections since end of civil war in 2003.
- Low levels of trust in state institutions.
 - ~ 5th lowest in sub-Saharan Africa.
- High distances to vote ($\bar{x} \approx 3km$).
 - Partially offset by ubiquity of ‘trucking’ voters.

Polling station expansion

2014 → 2017: 300 new PS added to 1,780 old.

- Average distance to register/vote ↓ 12%.
 - All voters had to re-register before 2017.
 - People register, then vote on election day, in the same place.
- Aim: leverage PS expansion to study effects on attitudes towards formal institutions.



Empirical strategy

‘Naive’ difference-in-differences might use:

- T : $\mathbb{1}(\text{unit } i \text{ experiences reduction in distance to register/vote between 2014 and 2017})$.
- $Post$: $\mathbb{1}(\text{unit } i \text{ observed in 2017})$.

Problem: T confounded.

- Typically targeted at most rural areas.
- Cannot directly assess pre-trends (i.e. pre-2014 VRs).

Solution: use internal administrative data on *potential* new PS to restrict control units (C).

- T and C have good cross-sectional balance.
- General preference for school buildings.

⇒ Compare differences in (T vs. C units), (before vs. after) PS expansion.

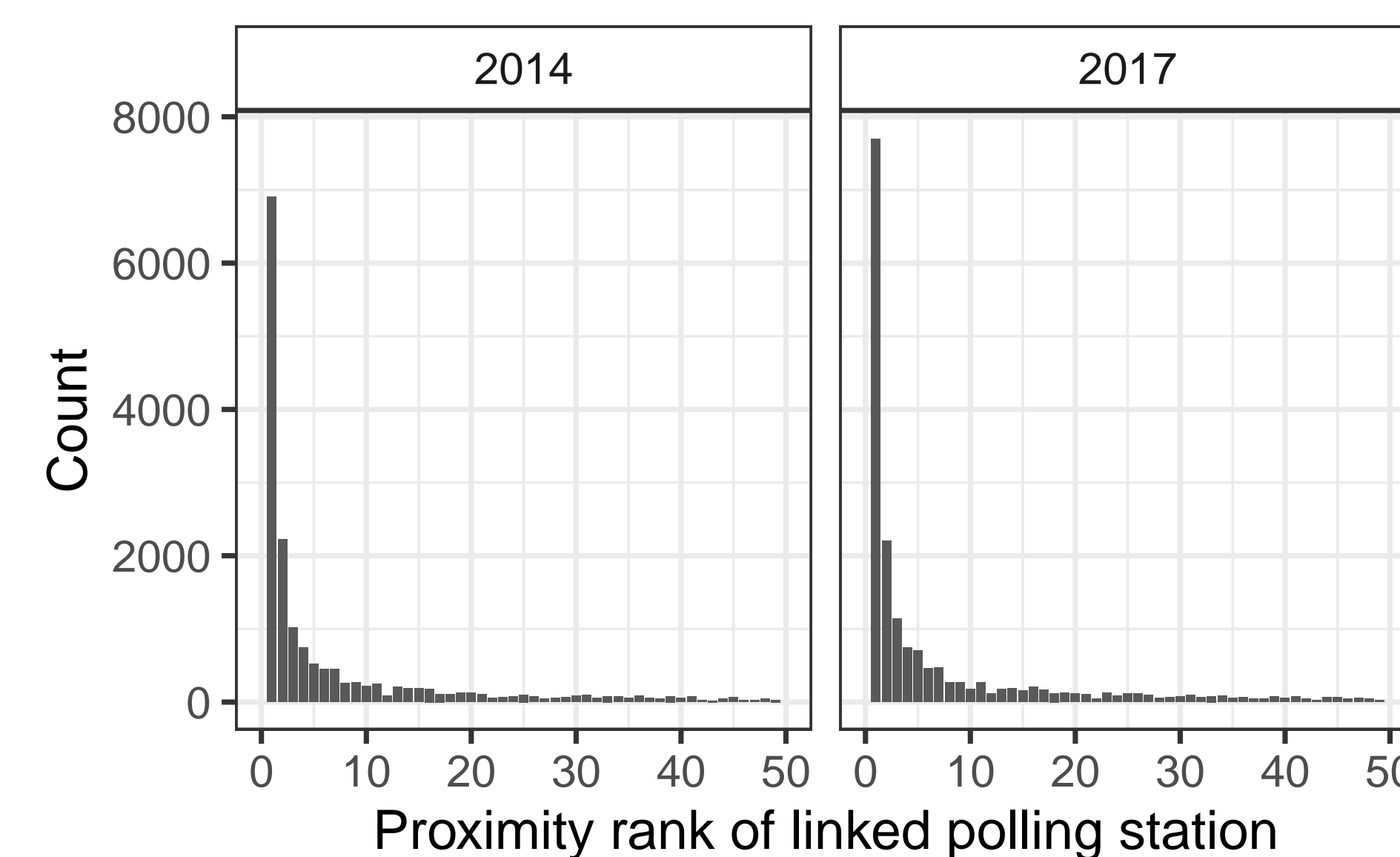
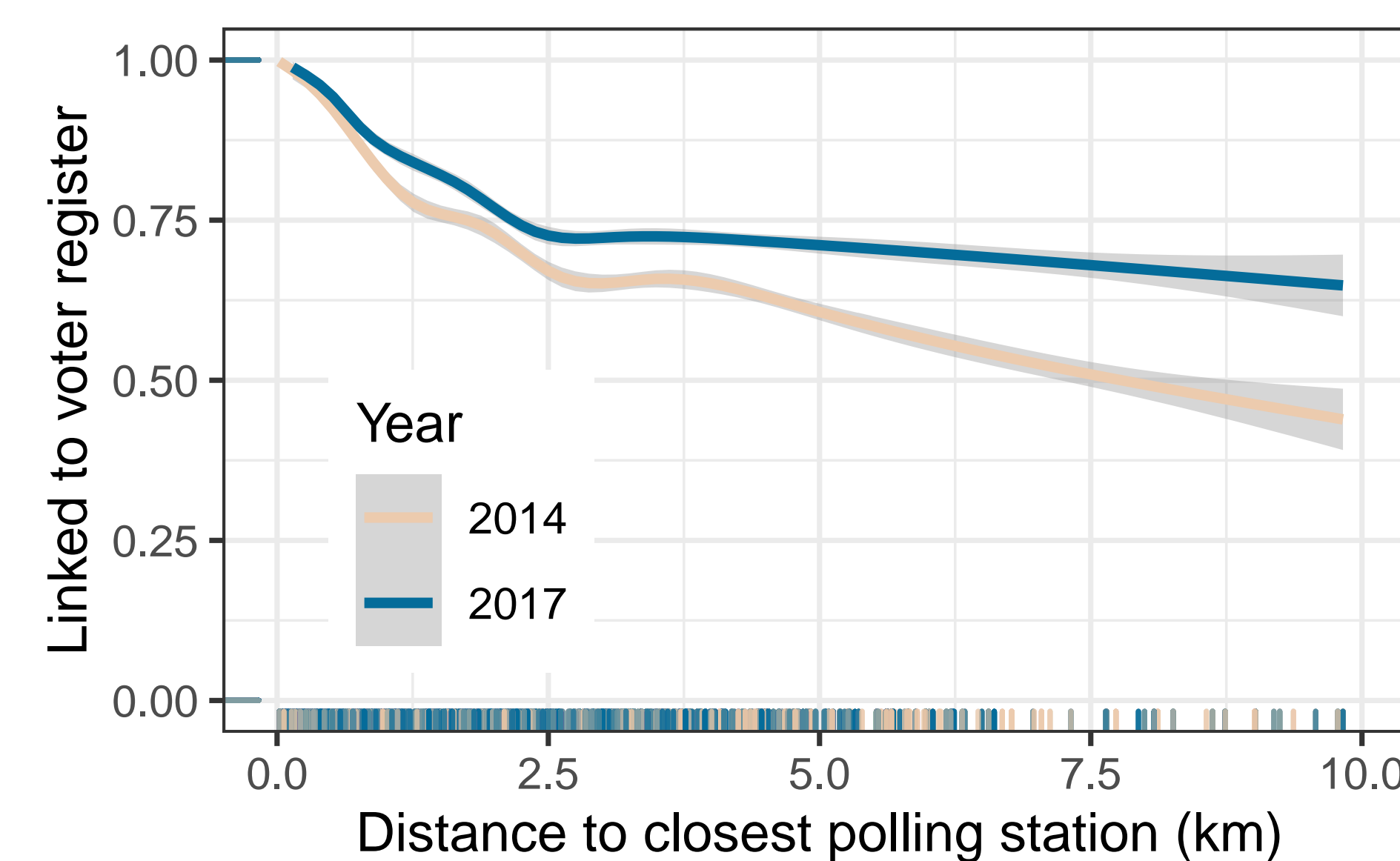
- $T \approx 60\%$ (2 km) reduction in distance.

Data and estimation

- De-anonymized, geolocated HIES consumption surveys from 2014/2016 ($n=25,000$).
- Complete geolocated voter registers from 2014 ($n=1.9m$) and 2017 ($n=2.2m$).
- LEAP: geolocated EA-level panel of political attitudes in 2014/2017 ($n=4,000$).
- Geolocated data on all PS:
 - 1,780 old; 300 new; 220 potential.

Measuring participation:

- Record linkage of (1.) with (2.).
 - Implemented using Enamorado et al. (2018).
 - Linkage: 77% (2014) → 84% (2017).
 - Self-reported registration: 80% (2014) → 93% (2017).



Estimating equation:

$$y_{itc} = \beta \text{Treat}_{itc} + \mu_{i/c} + \eta_t + \epsilon_{itc}$$

- y for individual i in $t \in \{2014, 2017\}$ in EA c regressed onto Treat, individual (or EA) FE, t FE, EA-clustered.
- $\text{Treat}_{itc} = \mathbb{1}(T = 1 \cap t = 2017)$.
- β estimates effect of nearby allocation of a PS on y .

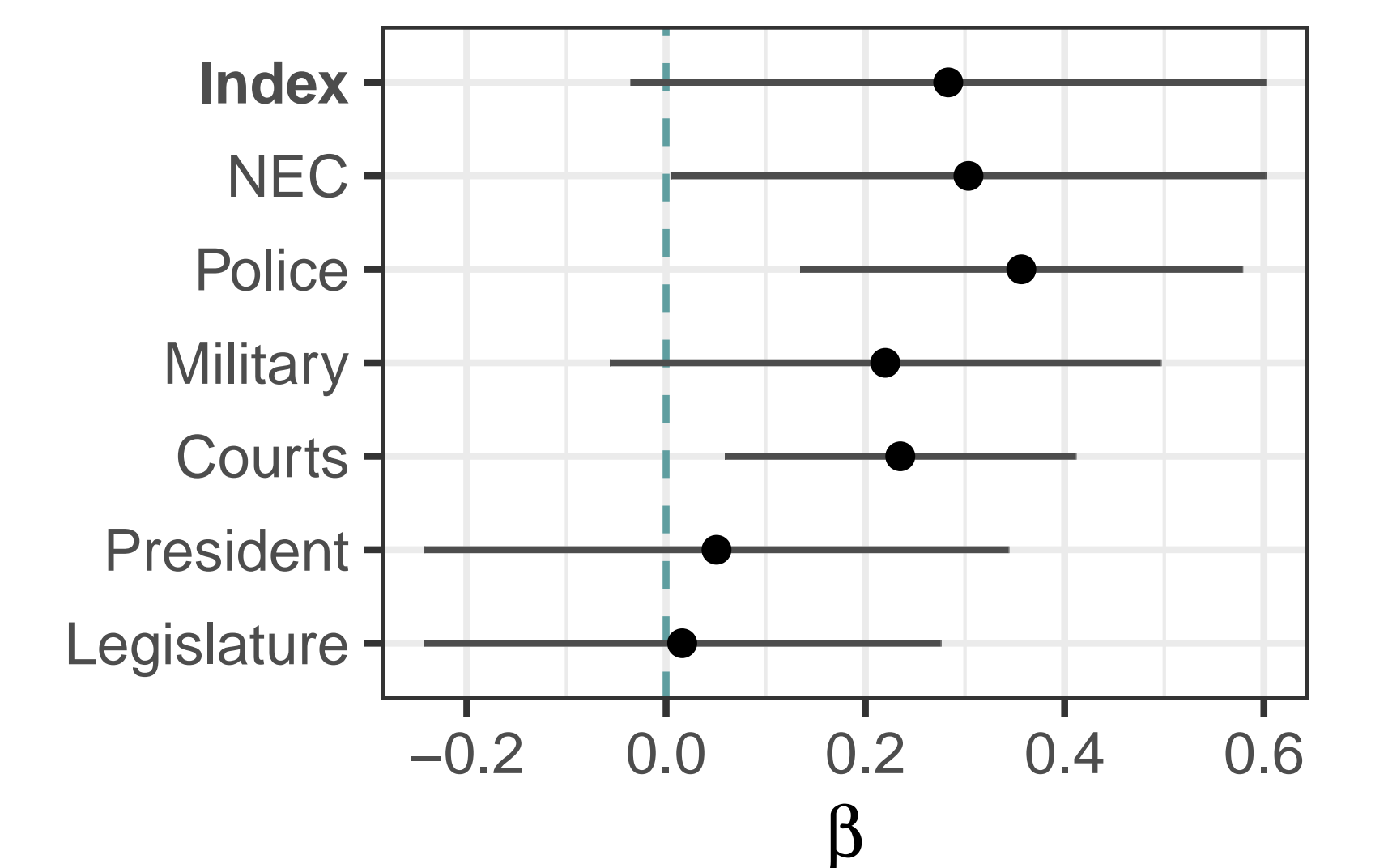
Results

Table 1: Effects on participation

	(1)	(2)
Treat (β)	0.071** (0.028)	0.085*** (0.024)
Restricted control	Yes	No
DV Mean	0.76	0.80
Clusters	151	831
Observations	9394	50456

DV: HIES respondent is linked to voter register in 2014/2017. Estimated with individual-level and year FEs. SEs clustered at EA-level. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Figure 1: Standardized effects on trust (95% CIs plotted)



- Effects on state institutions, not elected offices.
- No effects on ‘social’ trust, nor support for democracy.
- Increased exposure to campaigns and more knowledge of electoral processes.

Next steps

- Alternative approaches to inference.
- Use of administrative road data (inc. quality) instead of Euclidean distance.
- Different pre-period social survey data.

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