

The impact of Voting Rights Act on city elections and finances



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Define



1. “City elections”
2. “Voting Rights Act”
3. “Financial impact”

1. City council elections



District

- Vote only for councilmember for your own district

At-large

- Vote for all councilmembers
- Winner take-all (i.e., not proportional representation)

Empty box for Precinct Official's Initials

Precinct Official's Initials

OFFICIAL BALLOT

City Election

Henry County, Iowa-November 5, 2013

Northeast-Winfield (0302)

Shelly Barber
Shelly Barber
County Auditor & Clerk
Election

INSTRUCTIONS TO VOTERS

Using blue or black ink, completely fill in the oval next to the candidate or question response of your choice like this:

WRITE-IN: You must darken the oval AND write the name of your candidate in the space provided.

Do not cross out. If you change your mind exchange your ballot for a new one.

City of Winfield

For Council Member

Vote for no more than THREE.

Ryan J Kinneberg

Kathy K Nelson

Ryan Rees

Jan Walter

(Write-in vote, if any)

(Write-in vote, if any)

(Write-in vote, if any)



Example of at-large election

Model city charters



- All have recommended at-large elections
- The most current (2003) makes two exceptions:
 - When necessary to assure minority representation, some council members should be elected by district, while others should be elected at-large
 - The entire council may need to be elected by district to comply with a court order

Enacted in
1965 to
allow
minorities
to vote



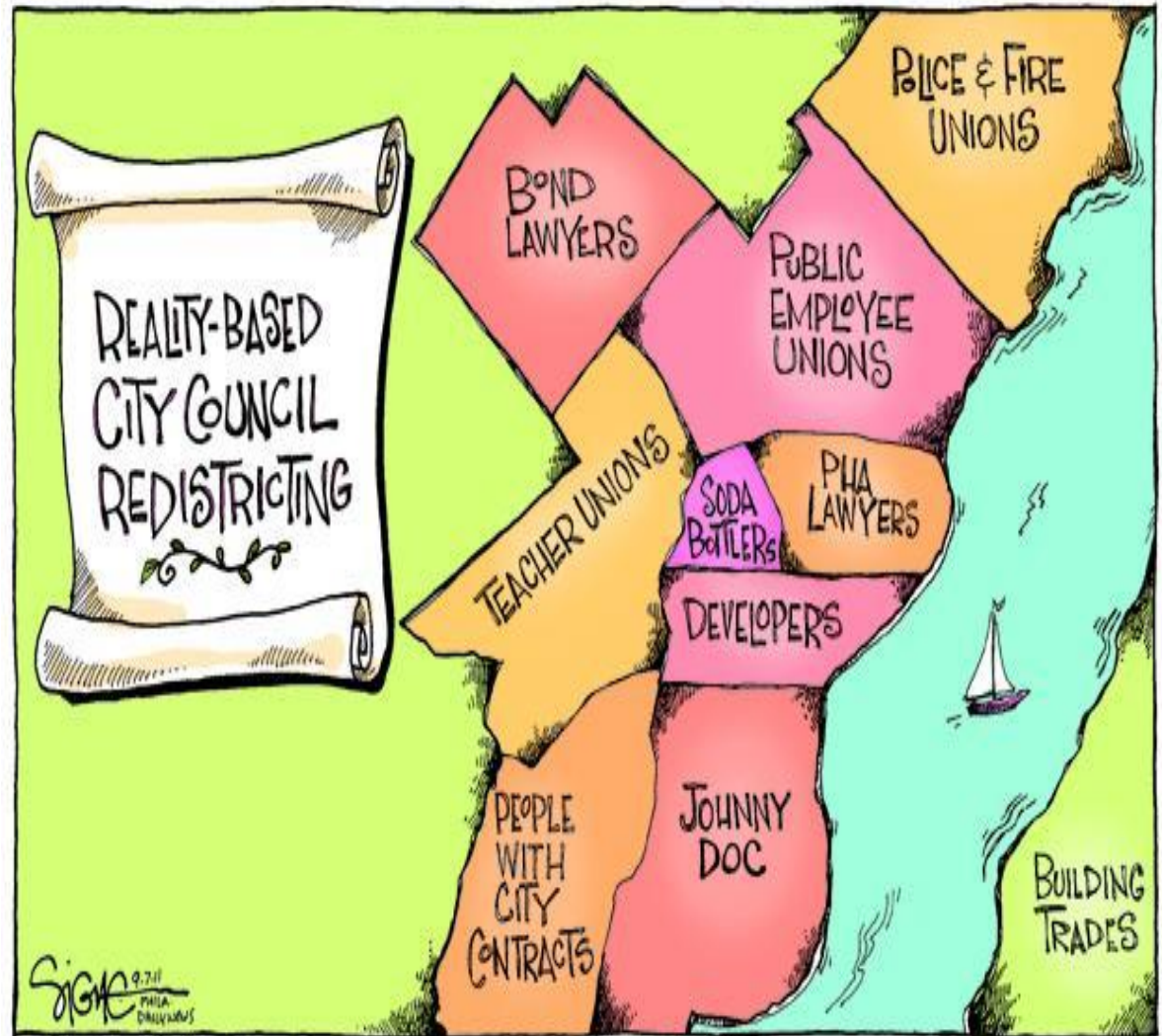
2. Voting Rights Act

Court-ordered district elections



- City councils remained all-white in cities with at-large elections → Starting in 1975, courts ordered district elections (for violating 14th Amend. U.S. Const.)
- 1982 Amd. VRA prohibited any voting law that had a discriminatory effect → Increase in court-ordered district elections
- Courts more likely to order district elections in jurisdictions with a history of voter discrimination, here proxied by **% turnout in 1964 Presid. Elect.**

3. Financial impact of district voting



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City council elected by district



- Face a *common pool problem*
- Council members fully value spending that benefits district, but value only a fraction of spending that benefits entire city
- Postponing infrastructure repair allows for more spending on district today
- ↓ *Infrastructure investments*
- ↑ *Non infrastructure spending*

Empirical evidence





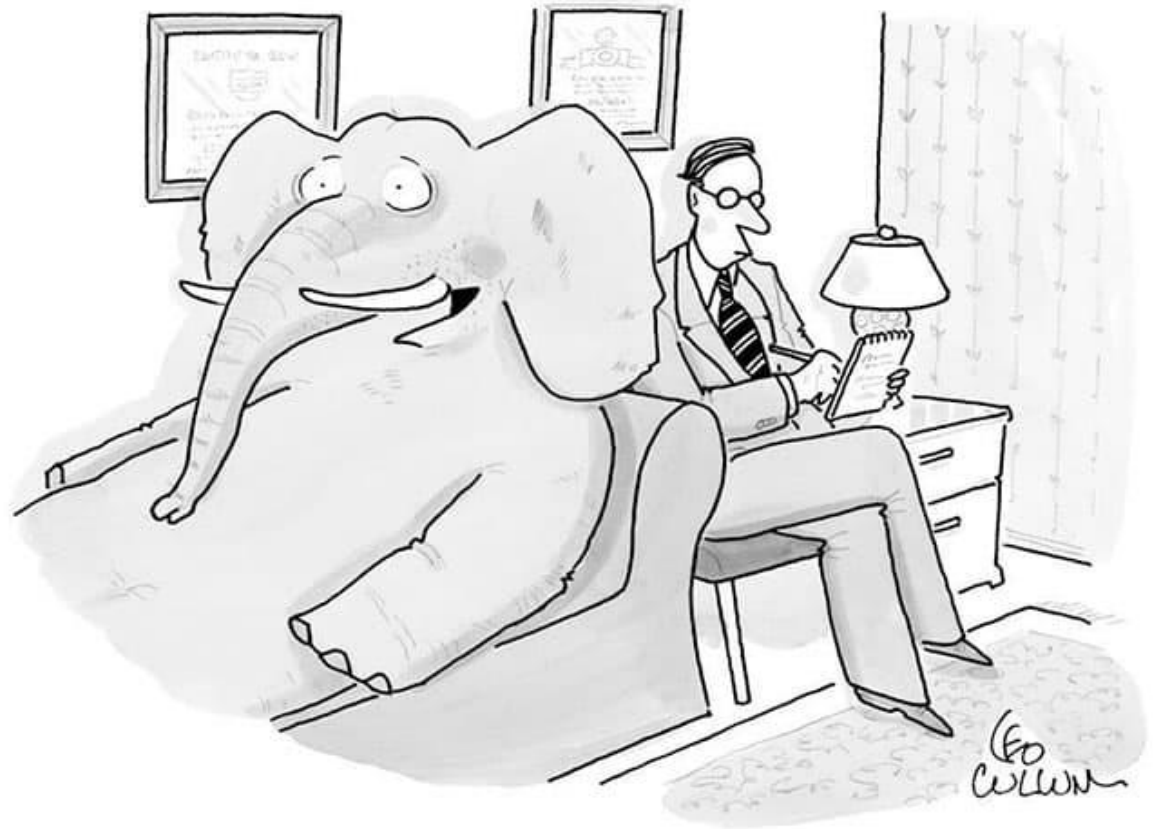
VRA



District
elections



City Spending



“I’m right there in the room, and no one even acknowledges me.”

Empirical evidence



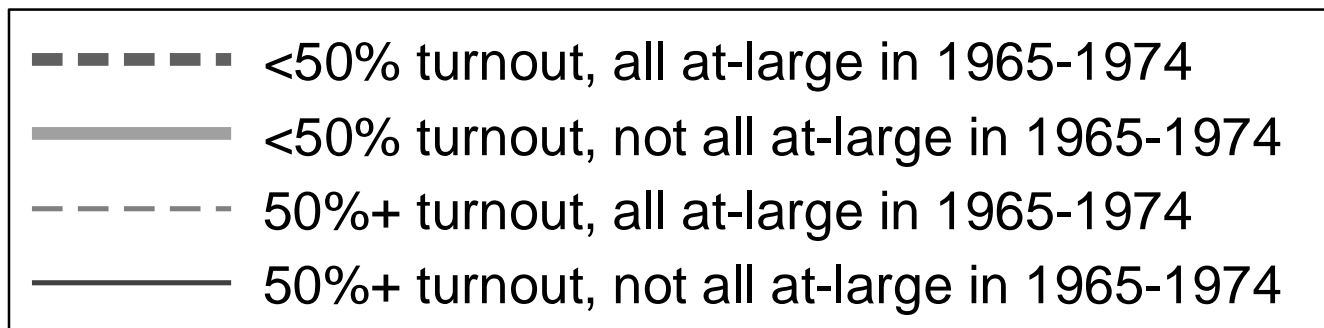
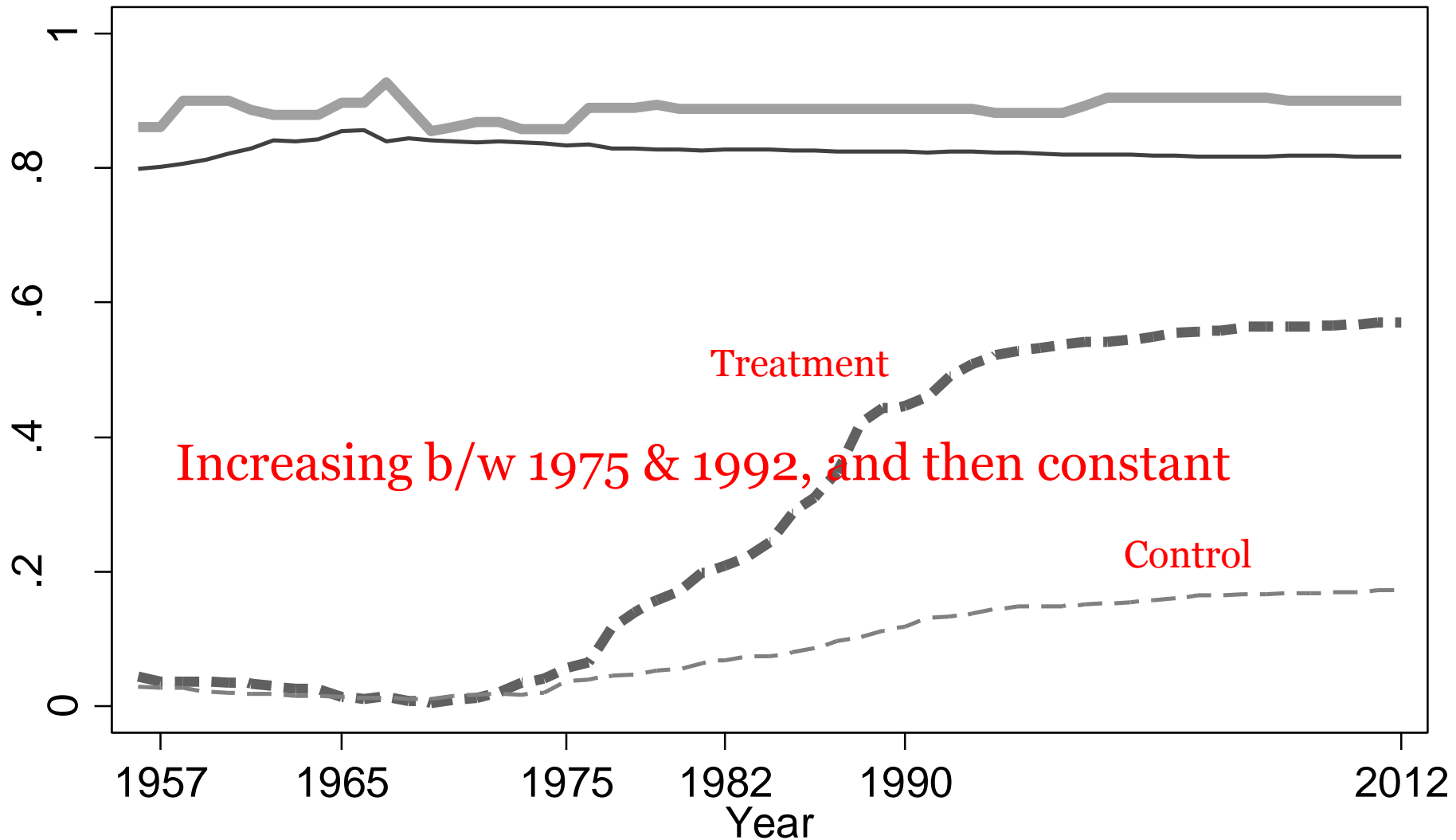
- A. Event study* → Timing of increase in city non-infr. spending matches timing in increase in district elections [but not of other changes]
- B. Regressions* → District elections increase non-infrastructure spending when we control for a large set of possible explanations
- C. Matching* → Cities that adopt district elections spend more than similar cities that kept at at-large elections

A. Event study



Sample cities

Cities with	all seats at-large 1 year b/w 1965-74	other
<50% Turnout in 1964 Pres. Elect.	398 cities Treatment group	24 cities
>50% Turnout in 1964 Pres. Elect.	1,259 cities Control group	525 cities

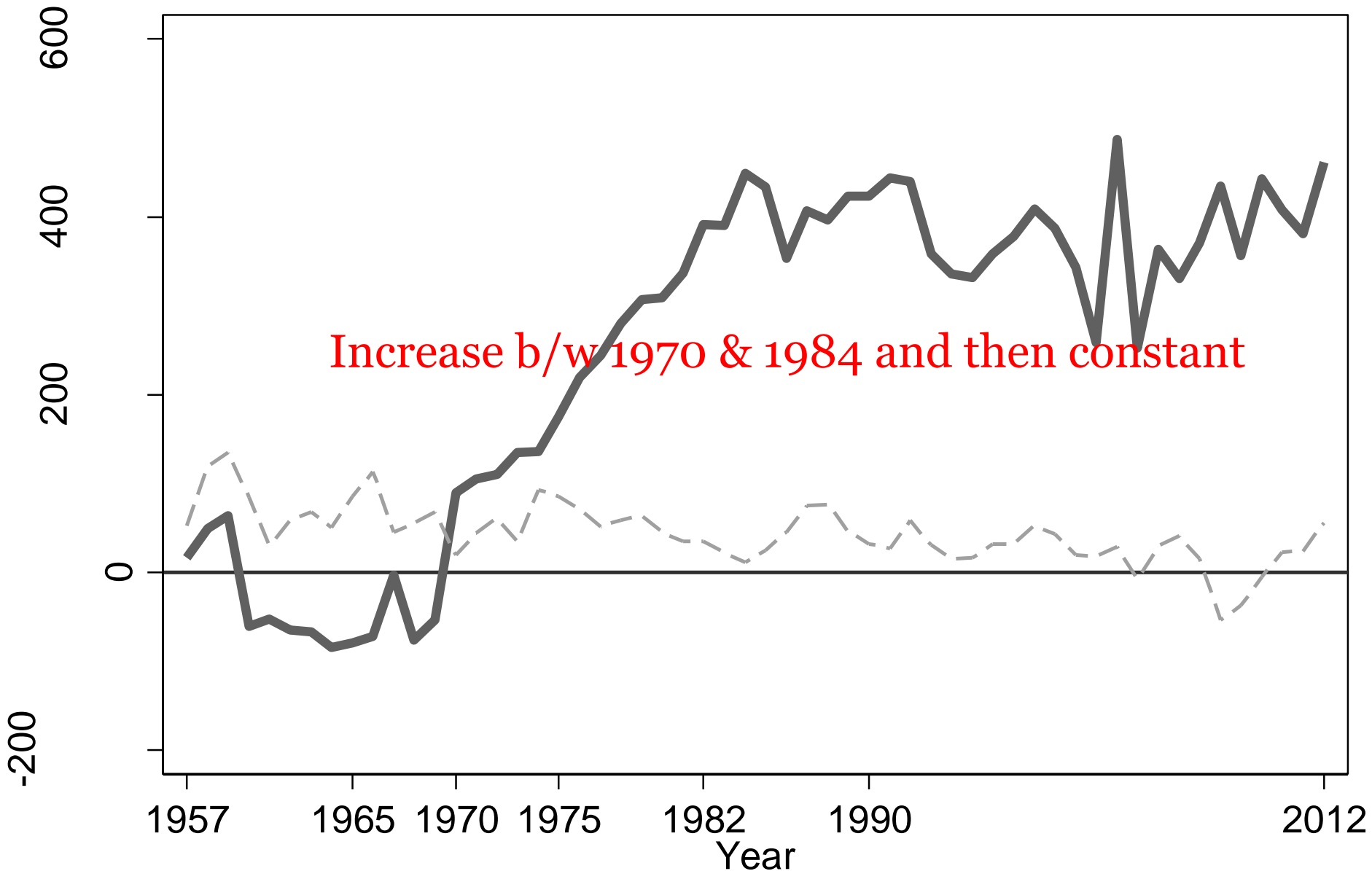


D-D on cities all at-large in 1965-74

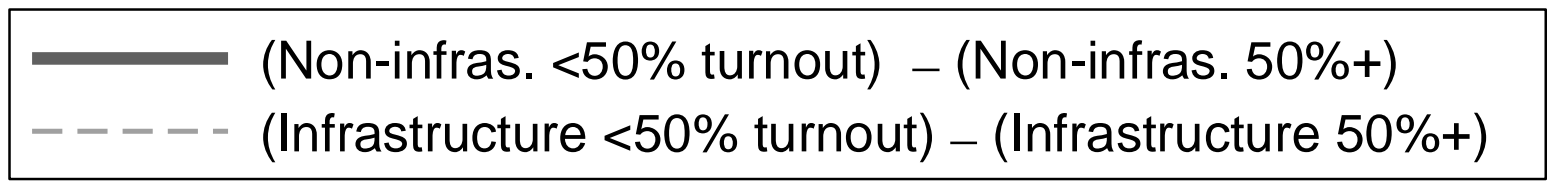


- $D = (\% \text{ District in Treatment}) - (\% \text{ District in Control})$
- D increases rapidly b/w 1975 & 1992

- $D = (\text{Spending in Treatment}) - (\text{Spending in Control})$
- “Spending” = real per capita non-infrastructure or infrastructure spending



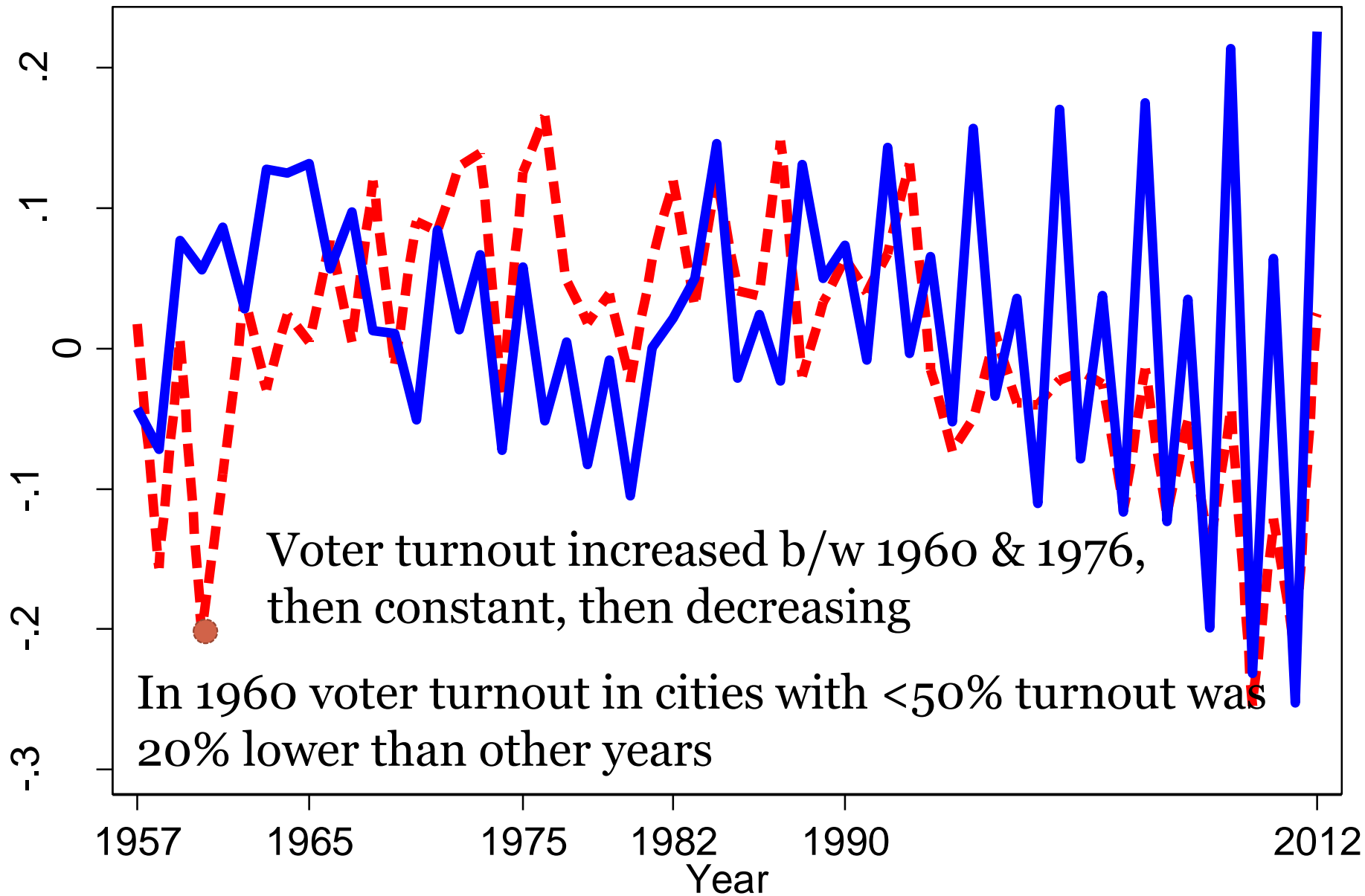
Increase b/w 1970 & 1984 and then constant



Can \uparrow voting explain \uparrow spending?



- Look at total votes cast in elections for mayor

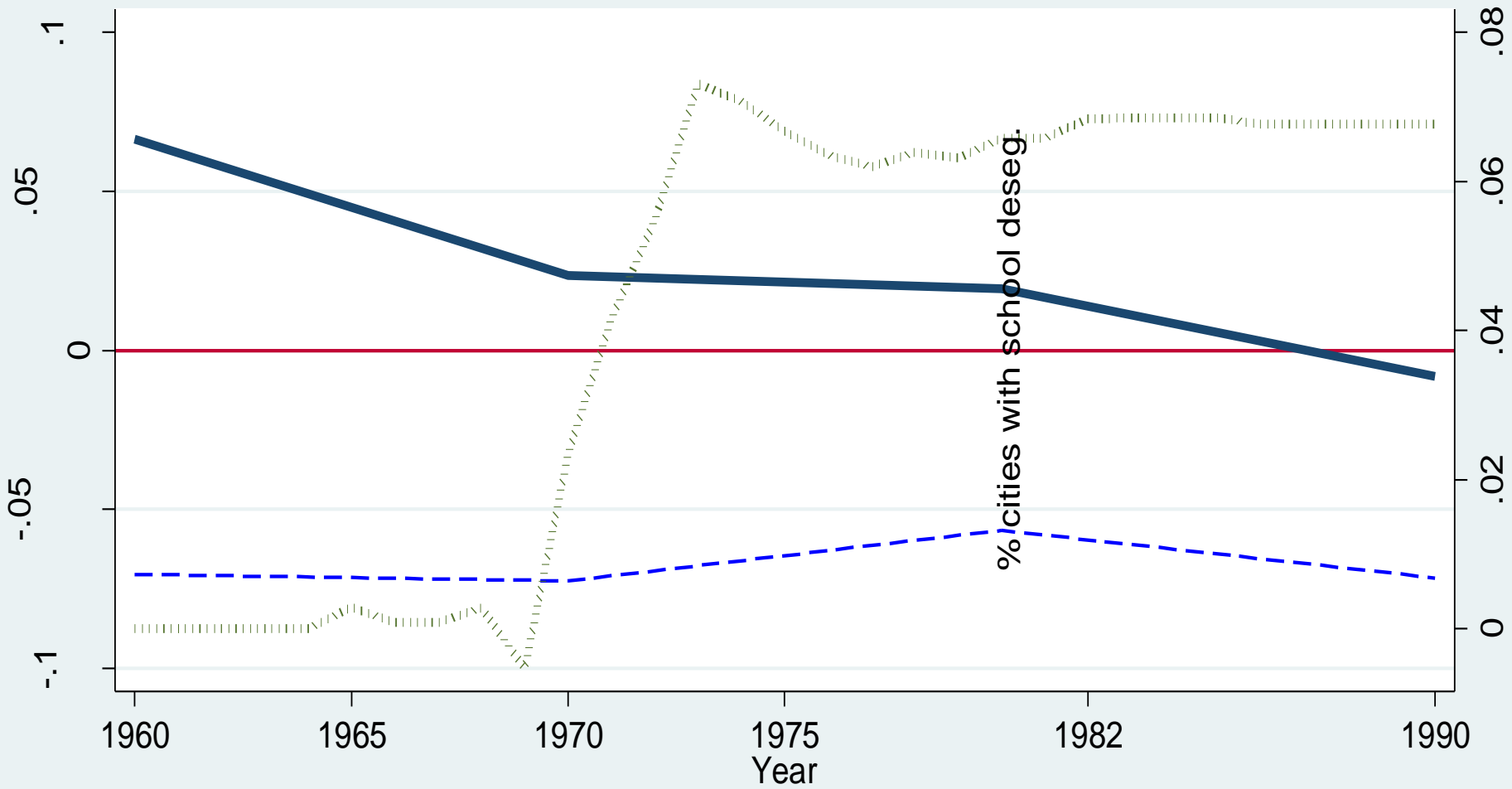


- - - - - <50% turnout in 1964 Presidential election
- 50%+ turnout in 1964 Presidential election

↑ civil rights explain ↑ spending?



- Measures of residential segregation (Cutler, Gleaser, Vigdor, 1999, data)
- Major court ordered school desegregation (Welch & Light, 1987, data)

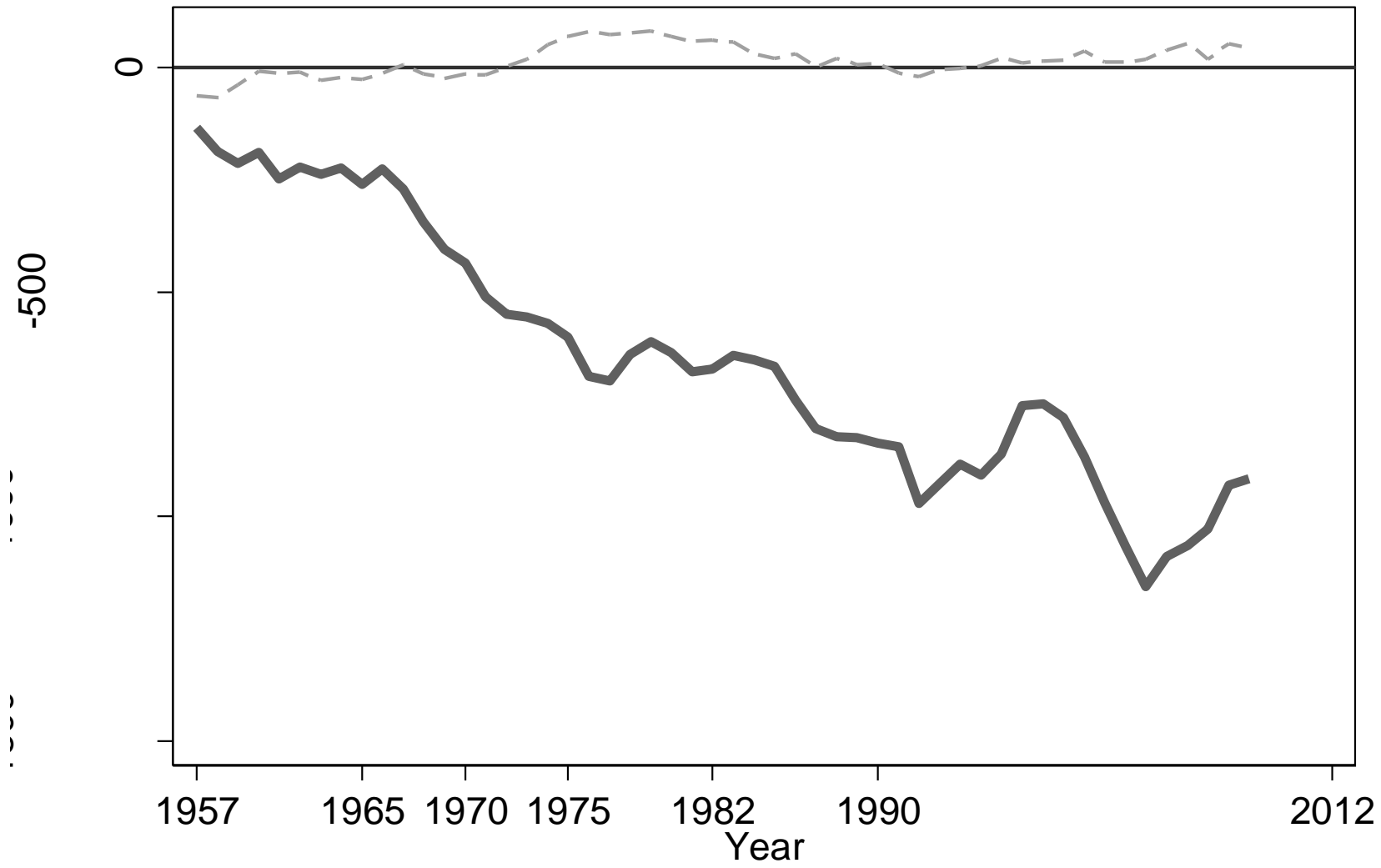


- (Dissimilarity in cities with <50% turnout) – (Dissimilarity in cities with 50%+ turnout)
- - - (Isolation in cities with <50% turnout) – (Isolation in cities with 50%+ turnout)
- (% cities with <50% turnout with school deseg.) – (% cities with 50%+ school deseg.)

↑ ??? explain ↑ spending?



- ??? = black activism, white guilt, ...
- If ??? affects city spending, ??? may also affect state spending



— (Non-infras. <50% turnout) – (Non-infras. 50%+)
- - - (Infrastructure <50% turnout) – (Infrastructure 50%+)

B. Regressions



Ordinary least squares results



- 88K city-year observations
- Y = Per capita spending
- X = % district, Δ voter turnout after VRA, type of government, council size, partisan election, city population, median family income, mean income, % black, % Hispanic, state laws regarding unions, **year & city fixed effects** → eliminate idiosyncrasies
- Change from at-large to district
 - Non-infrastructure spending ↑ by 5-6%
 - No effect on infrastructure spending
 - Share of spending on infrastructure ↓

C. Matching estimator



Sample



- 1,657 cities with entire council elected at-large in some year between 1965 and 1974
- 2 years: 1977 & 2002 → Examine 1977–2002 growth in non-infr. spending

Types of cities



1. *Cities could be affected by 1982 VRA*
2. *Change elections for other reasons*
 - City has experienced endemic corruption
 - ‘Whites’ fear that they may become the minority
 - Ruling party fears it may lose future elections
3. *Cities that never change electoral rules*
 - In federal districts with judges unlikely to find violations to VRA
 - Minorities are geographically dispersed in city

Type of city	Fraction of all cities	Non-infr growth w/ at-large	Non-infr growth w/ district
Affected by 1982 Amd VRA	39%	38%	54%
Change for other reasons	19%	?	47%
Never change	42%	47%	?

Conclusion



- VRA → district elections → lower share of spending that goes to infrastructure
- How do we know that district elections ↓ share of spending on infrastructure?
 1. Asserted by municipal reformers → Model city charters
 2. Economic theory (“common pool problem”)
 3. Empirical evidence in this paper