



Economics Seminars

Friday 28 November 2025 at 12:00

Aula Magna Edificio Baffi

Facoltà di Scienze Economiche Giuridiche e Politiche - Viale Sant'Ignazio 74

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Contagious Polarization: How Divisive Shocks Reshape Legislative Behavior Across Policy Domains

Abstract. This paper examines how exogenous divisive shocks contribute to political polarization among U.S. legislators and influence legislative outcomes. Using roll-call vote data from the U.S. House of Representatives between 2005 and 2015, I study the effects of mass shooting events (MSEs)—salient but quasi-random shocks—on legislators' behavior. Leveraging a difference-in-differences design, I find that Representatives from affected districts significantly increase party discipline and reduce bipartisan cooperation. These effects extend across a wide range of cultural policy areas while leaving economic policy largely unchanged, revealing the contagious nature of polarization: a shock on one divisive cultural issue triggers partisan realignment across broader domains. To unpack these dynamics, I analyze congressional speeches to show that representatives from affected districts display stronger rhetorical polarization. I further show that this polarization arises from identity-based voter realignment rather than from changes in electoral incentives.