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## Electoral cycles, partisan effects and U.S. immigration policies

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# Electoral cycles, partisan effects and U.S. immigration policies

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## **Abstract**

Using a panel of naturalizations in U.S. states from 1986 to 2012, we empirically analyze the impact of elections on immigration policy. Our results indicate that immigration policy is (partly) driven by national elections: there are more naturalizations in presidential election years and during the terms of Democratic incumbents. Further, the partisan effects are more pronounced in politically contested states.

**Keywords:** Political competition, migration policies.

**JEL:** H11, D72, F22

# 1 Introduction

In the United States, as in most developed countries, immigration policy is a highly contentious issue. The two major parties clearly differ in their attitudes toward migration levels, legalization, and citizenship. At the same time, there is a huge number of immigrants who have obtained or are entitled to citizenship, but exhibit little political participation. For example, the Hispanic population in the United States is likely to double by 2030, but two-thirds of legal Mexican immigrants are not U.S. citizens.<sup>1</sup> Thus, naturalization<sup>2</sup> policies are crucial as they signal an incumbent politician's stance on immigration and have the potential to increase the number of new voters.

In the following, we analyze the impact of presidential elections and the incumbent president's party on the level and pattern of naturalizations across U.S. states for the period 1996 to 2012. Naturalization is a crucial part of the immigration process, influences the political impact of immigrants,<sup>3</sup> and is a way of quantifying an element of immigration policy at the state level. Our results provide strong evidence of a relationship between presidential electoral cycle and number of naturalizations, a relationship that clearly depends on the incumbent president's party. There is no similar effect of elections or party in power at the state level. In line with the way the electoral college works, our evidence furthermore suggests that election-cycle effects on migration policies are more pronounced for politically contested states.

In contrast to the extant literature which is based on the tradeoff between investment and consumption inherent in various fiscal policy measures, our study builds on the ideological divide between the two major U.S. parties and its impact on immigration policy. Therefore, our setup implies that the effect of electoral cycles on immigration policy depend on the incumbent president's party. If supporters of the party in power prefer strict (lenient) immigration policies, the incumbent might try to reduce (increase) naturalizations above average levels. Based on evidence from the political budget cycle literature, this effect is likely to be more pronounced in during elections when incumbents try to signal their policy stance with the intent of securing the continued allegiance of their core supporters. Analogous to Drazen and Eslava (2010), we argue that the incumbent government influences federal agencies to speed up (slow down) the naturalization process. Of course, naturalization policies do not only send a signal to existing voters, but also shape the electorate by creating new voters. If the newly created voters have a clear tendency to support (oppose) the incumbent party, it is expected that incumbents will pressure the federal administration to increase (decrease) the number of naturalizations. In states with large immigrant populations such as California, Florida, and New York the number of naturalizations is large enough to influence a close election, whereas such is

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<sup>1</sup>See Xu (2005) and Gonzalez-Barrera, Lopez, Passel, and Taylor (2013).

<sup>2</sup>Naturalization is the acquisition of host-country citizenship by legal immigrants.

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., DeSipio (2013) and Mariani (2013).

not usually the case in most smaller states.

Given the common wisdom that in the United States the Democratic party tends to favor increases in the level of legal immigration and the granting of full citizenship to immigrants,<sup>4</sup> we expect a more clearly pronounced election-cycle effect on naturalization when there are Democratic incumbents. Republican incumbents are a less clear-cut case: on the one hand, traditionally, Republican Party supporters are skeptical of migration-friendly policies; however, recently the party has begun to target the growing Hispanic population. Therefore, we expect the electoral-cycle effect to be less pronounced for Republican incumbents. As immigrants in the United States (for the period considered here) show a clear tendency to support the Democratic Party, the Democrats would seem to have an incentive to strategically increase the number of naturalizations. Hence, it is expected that the level of naturalization will be higher under Democratic presidents. We do not expect that state politics will matter in our analysis as naturalization is governed by federal law and administered by federal agencies. However, if the incumbent president exploits naturalization policies to improve the party's vote share, it is expected that he will pressure federal agencies to focus effort on contested states rather than safe states.

Our paper is related to the seminal work of Nordhaus (1975), who argues that incumbent politicians have strong incentives to distort public investment in order to increase approval rates whenever elections are pending. There is ample evidence suggesting that electoral cycles occur in many if not all advanced democracies, but differ substantially across countries depending on the country's fiscal transparency and its experience with democracy (see, e.g., Brender and Drazen (2005); Alt and Lassen (2006); Shi and Svensson (2006)). Earlier work inspired by Nordhaus (1975) is based on backward-looking voters who evaluate past government policies; however, more recent approaches model the interaction between voters and the incumbent as a signaling game (see, e.g., Rogoff and Sibert (1988); Persson and Tabellini (2003); Shi and Svensson (2006)). For example, Drazen and Eslava (2010) use a game-theoretical framework to explain the role of political budget cycles in government spending. In their model, the incumbent uses targeted expenditures in election periods to gain the approval of swing voters, resulting in an electoral cycle of certain expenditure categories gaining at the expense of others. Partisan effects as drivers of political business cycles were first studied by Hibbs (1977). Empirical evidence on partisan political business cycles both for the United States and OECD countries is provided by Alesina, Roubini, and Cohen (1997).

Our paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the institutional background, our data, and the methods employed to empirically test the above hypotheses. Section 3 presents the results of the empirical analysis; Section 4 contains a number of robustness checks. Section 5 concludes.

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<sup>4</sup>For a detailed analysis see, e.g., Gonzalez-Barrera, Lopez, Passel, and Taylor (2013).

## 2 Background, estimation approach and data

### 2.1 Background

The U.S. naturalization process is based on federal law and implemented by federal agencies, in particular the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). An immigrant who has been a permanent resident in the United States for at least five years is entitled to apply for citizenship.<sup>5</sup> Applicants are required to pass a simple test of their English and civics knowledge, and the vast majority of applicants do. The entire application process is known to take roughly five to eight months.

The USCIS has a certain amount of discretion in regard to the speed (or lack thereof) of the decision process, in regard to where it focuses its efforts, and in regard to the level of campaigning (i.e., information dissemination about the naturalization process) among immigrants.<sup>6</sup> An incumbent president might be inclined to influence the workflow of federal agencies in order to improve his party's chance of reelection. The empirical part of this study investigates whether the output of federal agencies is influenced by elections.

### 2.2 Estimation approach

To test whether elections and partisan factors influence the level and pattern of naturalizations across U.S. states, we test variants of the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \log Nat_{it} = & \alpha_1 PresEl_t + \alpha_2 PresPart_t + \beta_1 StaEl_{it} + \beta_2 StaPart_{it} \\ & + \delta_1 MigrantStock_{it} + \Omega X_{i,t} + \tau_t + \theta_i + e_{i,t}, \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where  $\log Nat_{it}$  is the logarithmized number of naturalizations in state  $i$  and year  $t$ . As there are large disparities in the number of naturalizations per year (see histogram and summary statistics), we use a logarithmic specification and restrict our attention to state-year observations with more than 60 naturalizations.<sup>7</sup> To avoid the potentially disproportionate influence of state-year observations with a very large number of naturalizations we use the logarithm of our dependent variable in most specifications.

To discover whether there is an electoral-cycle effect on naturalization policies, we include  $PresEl_{it}$  as an indicator for years in which a presidential election takes place. Based on previous literature on electoral cycles, we expect  $\alpha_1 > 0$ . Potential partisan effects are captured by  $PresPart_{it}$  denoting the presidential incumbent party (where Democratic=1 and Republican=-1). In line with stylized facts of US immigration politics, we

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<sup>5</sup>For exceptions, e.g. for military members, and more details please see [www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship](http://www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship).

<sup>6</sup>Two-thirds of legal Mexican immigrants are not (yet) U.S. citizens (Gonzalez-Barrera, Lopez, Passel, and Taylor (2013)).

<sup>7</sup>This reduces the number of observations from 1296 to 1261.

expect  $\alpha_2 > 0$  indicating a more migration-friendly policy stance of the Democratic Party. For example, the Democratic Party might try to increase the number of potential voters and/or signal its party-specific stance on migration by accelerating the naturalization process in election years. To account for the potential influence of state politics, we also use an indicator for midterm election years ( $StaEl_{it}$ ) and for the party of the incumbent governor (where, again, Democratic=1 and Republican=-1).

An econometric complication is the possibility that changes in the level of naturalizations are demand driven: that is, campaigning in election years might induce immigrants eligible for citizenship to apply for it in order to be able to vote in the upcoming election. In that case, it would be an error to interpret an observed increase in naturalizations as due to a federal agency's behavior in reaction to pressure from the federal government. Even though the timing of elections and the substantial length of the application process considerably restrict the size of this effect, it might at least partly explain our findings. Therefore, we check whether state elections matter in this context. If they do, our interpretation would become questionable as the state governments have no influence on the workflow of federal agencies. However, we cannot discover an impact of state elections on the naturalizations at any reasonable significance level. Moreover, we control for the stock of migrants in each state ( $\log MigrantStock_{it}$ ), which allows testing whether our findings are simply due to a concentration of immigrants in certain states.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of naturalization on society and, in particular, its labor market effects are likely to be very limited as the new citizens have already been permanent residents for a number of years. Nevertheless, we include a set of time-varying, state-specific control variables  $X_{i,t}$  such as income and population (all used in a logarithmized form).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, we account for unobserved heterogeneity by state fixed effects  $\theta_i$  capturing all time-invariant state characteristics and presidential-election-term-specific effects  $\tau_t$ .<sup>10</sup> Finally,  $e_{i,t}$  represents an error term with standard errors clustered by state.

If the incumbent president (or party) is able to influence naturalization procedures, it is likely that such efforts are focused on contested states. To test whether the pattern of naturalizations across states (and presidential election years) is partly explained by the states' political importance, we split the sample of state-year combinations where a presidential election takes place into a contested group where the winning party's margin of victory is less than the median margin (of 12.02 percentage points difference) and a safe group with a larger margin. Accordingly,  $PresElCont_{it}$  indicates that a certain state is rather relevant in a particular presidential election year (equal to 1; otherwise 0).

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<sup>8</sup>Additional evidence on the underlying causes could, in principle, be gathered by checking whether the results differ by origin country of the naturalized. However, number of observations is too small to conduct such an analysis.

<sup>9</sup>Another frequently used control variable is urbanization; however, it is highly correlated with the stock of migrants (correlation coefficient of 0.93).

<sup>10</sup>Identification of our main effects is based on the four-year presidential election cycle. As for the differential effect of contested elections, we are interested in whether the effect differs for certain years (in certain states). Thus, the inclusion of year fixed effects is not appropriate.

The corresponding dummy for safe states  $PresElSafe_{it}$  is constructed analogously. To account for the hypothesis that the political contestedness effect varies with the party of the current incumbent, we interact both indicators with the the incumbent president's party generating  $PresElCont_{it} \times PresPart_t$  and  $PresElSafe_{it} \times PresPart_t$ . In sum, we use the following model to analyze the pattern of naturalizations across states:

$$\begin{aligned} \log Nat_{it} = & \alpha_3 PresElCont_{it} + \alpha_4 PresElSafe_{it} + \alpha_5 PresPart_t \\ & + \gamma_1 PresElCont_{it} \times PresPart_t + \gamma_2 PresElSafe_{it} \times PresPart_t \\ & \delta_2 \log MigrantStock_{it} + \Psi X_{i,t} + \tau_t + \theta_i + u_{i,t}, \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

where all other variables are defined in analogy to Equation (1).

### 2.3 Data

Our data cover the 48 contiguous U.S. states from 1996 to 2012. Data on naturalization per state and year are available from the *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service* issued by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Table 1 reveals that, on average, more than 11,000 immigrants obtain citizenship per state and year. There is large variation across states, with very high levels of naturalizations in states with large immigrant populations such as California, Florida, and New York. The data on election dates and outcomes were gathered from the Federal Election Commission and Beyle, Niemi, and Sigelman (2002). Based on these data, we constructed indicators for presidential and state (midterm) elections as well as for the party of the incumbent president and governor. We use data on population, educational attainment (percentage of total population 25 years and over with a high school diploma or a higher degree), and the stock of migrants from the U.S. Bureau of the Census (Statistical Abstracts). Data on per capita income (measured in 2000 dollars) was collected from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Table 1 shows that the two major parties are almost equal in terms of presidential incumbent years, whereas there are slightly more Democratic than Republican governors during the time period considered. According to our definition, roughly half the states are classified as contested in presidential election years.

[Table 1 about here.]

## 3 Results

In the first set of regressions we investigate whether presidential elections influence the number of naturalizations in U.S. states. Table 2 displays the estimation of Equation (1) using a fixed effects model including election period effects. We find clear evidence of an

electoral cycle, that is, there is an increase in naturalization during election years, and for partisan effects, that is, there is a higher level of naturalization under Democratic presidents. These results are significant at the 1% level (standard errors clustered by state) and highly stable across different specifications (Columns (1) to (3)). Our estimates suggest that the number of naturalizations is around 6.8% larger in election years and around 9.4% larger under Democratic presidents. Column (1) displays a baseline specification controlling for time-varying variables at the state level. As expected, there is a strong and highly significant relationship between size of the population and naturalizations as well as between stock of migrants and number of naturalizations. Differences in income and educational attainment do not seem to matter much (coefficients not reported). When controlling for midterm election and the party of the incumbent state governors in Column (2), our main results remain unchanged. In line with our conjecture that (due to the institutional setting) state governments are not able to influence the number of naturalizations, we find no evidence that state politics matters in analysis. If our findings were demand driven, state elections should influence the decision of immigrants to apply for citizenship - even though such an effect might be less pronounced at the state level. Finally, Column (3) shows the results of interacting the presidential election year indicator with the identity of the party in power. We find that there is a considerable difference in the presidential election year effect depending on which party is in power: with a Democratic incumbent, the number of naturalizations is around 13% larger than in a usual year, whereas there is basically no difference in the case of a Republican incumbent. However, this effect is significant only at the 10% level.

[Table 2 about here.]

Table 3 reports the estimation results when accounting for the salience of contested states in the U.S. presidential election system. In Column (1) we test whether there is a general difference between safe and contested states. Our evidence suggests that both types of states contribute equally to the electoral-cycle effect on naturalizations. Because we split the presidential election year indicator, the two resulting dummies have less statistical power, but the sign remains fully consistent with our previous findings. Most importantly, we analyze whether the differential behavior of the two major parties is more pronounced in contested states, as suggested by our theoretical considerations based on probabilistic voting theory (electoral college). Therefore, we include interactions between the presidential party indicators and the contested/safe state indicator as outlined in Equation (2). Interestingly, only the combination with contested states is significant. This suggests that Democratic and Republican presidents pressure federal immigration agencies to put special emphasis on the states that will be more politically relevant. Albeit a bit less precise than our main results, it seems that the effect for a Republican incumbent in contested states becomes even slightly negative, whereas the impact of a Democratic incumbent can be as high as a 16 % increase in naturalization



compared to non-presidential-election years and safe states. As evident from Column (3), political factors at the state level do not influence the number of naturalizations, thus confirming our previous findings.

[Table 3 about here.]

## 4 Robustness

To control for potential dynamics underlying naturalization patterns across time, we specify a simple dynamic panel model with the lagged dependent variable as an explanatory variable. Columns (1) and (2) of Table 4 support the idea that current levels of naturalization depend on past levels. Nevertheless, all the results are closely in line with our previous findings.

Finally, we check whether our results are robust to changes in the specification of our main variables. Specifically, we use the absolute number of naturalizations per state and year as the dependent variable and adjust the remainder of our model accordingly. Columns (3) and (4) of Table 4 indicate that all our main results remain qualitatively unchanged. However, this model no longer supports our hypothesis that contested states receive more attention, a finding that might be due to the increased influence of outliers and large states.

[Table 4 about here.]

## 5 Conclusion

Naturalization is an important element of U.S. immigration policy, and an issue over which the two major parties are clearly in disagreement. Using a panel of naturalizations in U.S. states from 1986 to 2012, we empirically analyze the impact of presidential elections on the number of naturalizations. We find a strong presidential election year effect as well as considerable partisan effects. The number of naturalizations is considerably larger in presidential election years and under Democratic presidents. Moreover, the evidence suggests that the partisan effect is mainly driven by politically salient contested states.

Our results clearly indicate that the incumbent president makes use of his power to influence the working of federal (immigration) agencies to improve his chances of reelection. While there is ample evidence of electoral cycle and partisan effects in government spending, this is one of the few papers to provide evidence that governments directly intervene in the working of (federal) agencies for their own purposes. Our findings thus suggest that focusing on de jure institutional provisions, such as existing laws, is not sufficient when analyzing changes in government activities such as immigration policies.

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**Table 1: Summary statistics**

| Variable                              | Obs  | Mean     | Std. Dev. | Min     | Max      |
|---------------------------------------|------|----------|-----------|---------|----------|
| Naturalizations                       | 1261 | 11197.33 | 29442.15  | 62      | 378014   |
| Presidential election year            | 1261 | .246     | .431      | 0       | 1        |
| Presidential incumbent party          | 1261 | -.055    | .999      | -1      | 1        |
| State election year (midterm)         | 1261 | .187     | .39       | 0       | 1        |
| State incumbent party                 | 1261 | .113     | .994      | -1      | 1        |
| Contested states                      | 1261 | .123     | .328      | 0       | 1        |
| Safe states                           | 1261 | .123     | .328      | 0       | 1        |
| Contested state x Pres. incumb. party | 1261 | -.006    | .351      | -1      | 1        |
| Safe state x Pres. incumb. party      | 1261 | .026     | .35       | -1      | 1        |
| Stock of migrants in 1,000s           | 1261 | 619.786  | 1386.951  | 7.647   | 10150.43 |
| Income in 1,000s                      | 1261 | 27.489   | 5.046     | 15.985  | 46.392   |
| Population in 1,000s                  | 1261 | 5828.19  | 6192.267  | 453.69  | 37999.88 |
| Urbanization in 1,000s                | 1261 | 4552.518 | 5621.872  | 177.783 | 35373.61 |
| Education                             | 1261 | 80.857   | 6.374     | 60      | 92.3     |

Note: US states between 1986 and 2012.

**Table 2: Main results**

|   | (1)                 | (2)                  | (3)                 |
|---|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Dependent variable: Naturalizations (log) |                     |                      |                     |
| Presidential election year                | 0.0683***<br>(2.76) | 0.0682***<br>(2.75)  | 0.0674***<br>(2.76) |
| Presidential incumbent party              | 0.0937***<br>(6.18) | 0.0936***<br>(6.05)  | 0.0799***<br>(4.50) |
| Pres. elec. year x Pres. incumb. party    |                     |                      | 0.0669**<br>(2.40)  |
| State election year (midterm)             |                     | -0.000555<br>(-0.03) | 0.00360<br>(0.18)   |
| State incumbent party                     |                     | 0.00257<br>(0.20)    | 0.00328<br>(0.25)   |
| Stock of migrants (log)                   | 0.445***<br>(3.74)  | 0.445***<br>(3.74)   | 0.448***<br>(3.77)  |
| Population (log)                          | 0.781***<br>(2.70)  | 0.784***<br>(2.71)   | 0.788***<br>(2.71)  |
| Constant                                  | -5.908<br>(-1.11)   | -5.960<br>(-1.11)    | -5.848<br>(-1.09)   |
| Election period effects                   | yes                 | yes                  | yes                 |
| State effects                             | yes                 | yes                  | yes                 |
| Other control variables                   | yes                 | yes                  | yes                 |
| Observations                              | 1261                | 1261                 | 1261                |

Note: Estimation via OLS with robust standard errors clustered by state. Other control variables include educational attainment and per capita income. t-statistics reported in parentheses. Significance levels: \*\*\* 1%; \*\* 5%; \* 10%.

**Table 3: Contested states**

|   | (1)       | (2)       | (3)       |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Dependent variable: Naturalizations (log) |           |           |           |
| Contested states                          | 0.0660*   | 0.0712**  | 0.0722**  |
|   | (1.94)    | (2.05)    | (2.06)    |
| Safe states                               | 0.0706**  | 0.0678**  | 0.0685**  |
|   | (2.11)    | (2.21)    | (2.24)    |
| Presidential incumbent party              | 0.0936*** | 0.0800*** | 0.0799*** |
|   | (6.08)    | (4.52)    | (4.47)    |
| Contested state x Pres. incumb. party     |           | 0.0914**  | 0.0918**  |
|   |           | (2.31)    | (2.33)    |
| Safe state x Pres. incumb. party          |           | 0.0413    | 0.0415    |
|   |           | (1.16)    | (1.17)    |
| State election year (midterm)             |           |           | 0.00342   |
|   |           |           | (0.17)    |
| State incumbent party                     |           |           | 0.00362   |
|   |           |           | (0.28)    |
| Stock of migrants (log)                   | 0.445***  | 0.449***  | 0.450***  |
|   | (3.75)    | (3.82)    | (3.82)    |
| Population (log)                          | 0.782***  | 0.779***  | 0.787***  |
|   | (2.71)    | (2.72)    | (2.74)    |
| Constant                                  | -5.920    | -5.726    | -5.944    |
|   | (-1.11)   | (-1.08)   | (-1.11)   |
| Election period effects                   | yes       | yes       | yes       |
| State effects                             | yes       | yes       | yes       |
| Other control variables                   | yes       | yes       | yes       |
| Observations                              | 1261      | 1261      | 1261      |

Note: Estimation via OLS with robust standard errors clustered by state. Other control variables include educational attainment and per capita income. t-statistics reported in parentheses. Significance levels: \*\*\* 1%; \*\* 5%; \* 10%.

**Table 4: Robustness**

|  | (1)                   | (2)                 | (3)                             | (3)                |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
|  | Naturalizations (log) |                     | Naturalizations per mill inhab. |                    |
| Naturalizations in year t-1            | 0.234***<br>(4.61)    | 0.233***<br>(4.58)  |                                 |                    |
| Presidential election year             | 0.0824***<br>(2.94)   |                     | 0.192***<br>(3.26)              |                    |
| Contested states                       |                       | 0.0761*<br>(1.93)   |                                 | 0.165*<br>(1.95)   |
| Safe states                            |                       | 0.0951***<br>(2.83) |                                 | 0.219***<br>(2.98) |
| Presidential incumbent party           | 0.0810***<br>(4.61)   | 0.0806***<br>(4.56) | 0.0565**<br>(2.24)              | 0.0557**<br>(2.18) |
| Pres. elec. year x Pres. incumb. party | 0.0382<br>(1.39)      |                     | 0.224***<br>(2.99)              |                    |
| Contested state x Pres. incumb. party  |                       | 0.0624*<br>(1.68)   |                                 | 0.221**<br>(2.37)  |
| Safe state x Pres. incumb. party       |                       | 0.0107<br>(0.28)    |                                 | 0.221**<br>(2.37)  |
| Stock of migrants (log)                | 0.333***<br>(3.82)    | 0.336***<br>(3.93)  |                                 |                    |
| Migrants per population                |                       |                     | 24.16***<br>(7.47)              | 24.25***<br>(7.51) |
| Population (log)                       | 0.692***<br>(2.72)    | 0.698***<br>(2.77)  |                                 |                    |
| Constant                               | -8.967*<br>(-1.72)    | -9.198*<br>(-1.77)  | 0.830<br>(0.80)                 | 0.822<br>(0.79)    |
| Observations                           | 1182                  | 1182                | 1261                            | 1261               |

Note: Estimation via OLS including a constant (coefficient not reported) and robust standard errors clustered by state. t-statistics reported in parentheses. Sample ranges from 1986 to 2012. Significance levels: \*\*\* 1%; \*\* 5%; \* 10%.