# Personalized politics in turbulent times:
## patterns of decentralized personalization in the 2022 Italian general elections

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## Abstract

One of the most significant phenomena in contemporary politics is personalization. Several studies have shown that voters are more influenced by the characteristics of leaders and/or candidates than in the past. This analysis examines the paths of personalization taken by candidates in the single-member districts during the 2022 Italian General Election, contributing to the existing knowledge on decentralized personalization in the behavioural arena. Using an original dataset on candidates from the four main coalitions participating in the 2022 General Election (centre-right, centre-left, M5S, and Azione-Italia Viva), the study aims to assess how political professionalization, localness, and affiliation with radical/extremist parties influence the share of personal votes. Consistent with the literature, the research confirms that local candidates tend to receive a higher share of personal votes, while candidates from radical or extremist parties tend to receive less. The study also finds that political professionalization is associated with a decreased share of personal votes, adding complexity to the decentralization of personalization and the transformation of Italian parliamentary representation.

## 1. Introduction

One of the most discussed subjects in contemporary political science is political personalization. Since the 1990s, numerous researchers have examined this phenomenon in Western democracies (e.g., Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; McAllister, 2007; Karvonen, 2010; Webb & Poguntke, 2013; Balmas et al., 2014; Costa Lobo & Curtice, 2015; Rahat & Kenig, 2018; Coffé & Schoultz, 2021; Garzia et al., 2022; Marino et al., 2022). From an analytical perspective, personalization can be understood as the process by which individuals gain increasing centrality in the political arena, often at the expense of parties and other collective organizations (Karvonen, 2010). The literature also distinguishes between two distinct processes of personalization, depending on whether they refer to party leaders, presidents, or prime ministers ('centralized' personalization), or individual parliamentarians and politicians ('decentralized' personalization) (Balmas et al., 2014). In terms of its impact on voting behaviour (behavioural personalization), most of the literature has focused on the centralized aspect of personalization, rather than the decentralized dimension. Specifically, there is extensive evidence on how personalization affects the balance of power in contemporary political systems and the interaction between party leaders and their organizations, but there has been relatively less inquiry into how this phenomenon

interacts with candidates and politicians at both national and subnational levels (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021).

However, in recent times, literature has shown increasing interest in studying decentralized personalization, frequently through case studies (Renwick & Pilet, 2016; Friedman & Friedberg, 2021; Bøggild et al., 2021; Wauters et al., 2021; Dodeigne & Pilet, 2021). This article contributes to this specific strand of literature by examining the patterns of decentralized personalization among candidates in single member districts (SMDs) during the 2022 Italian General Election. The research focuses on the impact of personal characteristics that have not been extensively studied in the existing literature, such as political professionalization, localness, and ideological affiliation with extremist/radical parties. This inclusion of non-political elements, alongside political factors like candidacy with radical or extremist parties, constitutes a novel aspect compared to recent research in the social sciences, which helps improve our understanding of the dynamics of personalization. Indeed, voter preferences are formed in a context where personal and political characteristics are intertwined. Furthermore, increasing ideological polarization and the emergence of radical/extremist parties may play a significant role in shaping voting orientations, potentially diminishing the significance of non-political characteristics. Specifically, this study aims to examine how various characteristics related to political professionalization, localness, and party affiliation in the SMDs influence the acquisition of personal votes. The article has a twofold aim. First, it aims to contribute to research on decentralized personalization by providing new empirical data on how these processes play out in Western European countries and by testing traditional and new variables. Secondly, it aims to illustrate how these processes unfold their effects within the Italian case, a context characterized by persistent instability, volatility and de-institutionalization (Chiaramonte, 2023). The research was carried out using a multivariate analysis applied to the candidates (N=584) in the SMDs of the four main coalitions (centre-right, centre-left, M5S and Azione-Italia Viva) including – in addition to the independent variables – some control variables.

The results partially confirm expectations, highlighting that localness is one of the most significant factors in influencing the percentage of personal votes, whereas belonging to extremist/radical parties has a negative influence. Also, the analysis reveals that increasing levels of political personalization have a negative impact on the acquisition of personal votes.

The article is structured as follows. The first section outlines the theoretical framework, introduces the research question, and presents the hypotheses that guided the analysis. The second section discusses the case selection and research method and explains variables operationalization. The third section provides descriptive statistics and discusses the results of the data analysis. The final section concludes the article.

## 2. Theoretical framework, research question and hypotheses

From a theoretical perspective, scholars have identified three different dimensions of political personalization: media, institutional and behavioural. Media personalization refers to the dominance of individual-focused coverage by mass media rather than collective organizations. Institutional personalization occurs when institutions are reformed to give individuals greater centrality compared to political groups. Behavioural

personalization relates to the increasing individualization of politicians' behaviour and the tendency of voters to base their choices on the personal characteristics of leaders and candidates (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Rahat & Kenig, 2018).

Furthermore, a second line of conceptualization refers to subjects who benefit from personalization. The literature points out that it can refer to party leaders, institutional leaders (presidents or prime ministers), and the wider category of politicians active both at the national and the local level (Zittel & Gschwend, 2008; Van Holsteyn, 2011; Kriesi, 2012). In this vein, scholars have distinguished between, on the one hand, 'centralized personalization' which affects national party leaders and institutional ones and, on the other, 'decentralized' personalization which affects single candidates and parliamentarians (Balmas et al. 2014). More specifically, centralized personalization is defined as the process by which power flows upwards from the group (e.g., political party) to a single leader (e.g., prime minister, president) (ibid.: 37). On the contrary, decentralized personalization is defined as a process by which the power flows from the group to individual politicians who are not party or executive leaders (e.g., candidates, members of parliament) (ibid.).

Although behavioural personalization is undoubtedly the most investigated personalization process (Wauters et al., 2018), researchers have mainly focused on centralized personalization (Pruysers et al., 2018; Pedersen & Rahat, 2021). It is only recently that a bourgeoning literature has started to investigate decentralized behavioural personalization (McAllister, 2015; Pruysers et al. 2018; Rahat & Kenig, 2018) and documented the diffusion of decentralized personalization practices among Western countries (Costa Lobo & Curtice, 2015; Renwick & Pilet, 2016; Wauters et al., 2018; Pedersen, 2019; De Winter et al., 2021). Understanding decentralized personalization is crucial as it sheds light on the factors influencing citizens' voting choices and provides insights into the changing nature of political parties and representative democracy.

At the same time, a growing body of research has examined how, in the context of personalization, a politician's personal traits can support forms of personal voting. Alongside traditional features such as gender (Dolan, 2004; Valdini, 2013), profession (Mechtel, 2011), or ethnicity (Fisher *et al.*, 2014), additional characteristics have been progressively explored, such as incumbency (Desposato & Petrocik, 2003; Carson *et al.*, 2007) or localness (Shugart et al., 2005; Tavits, 2010; Put and Maddens, 2015; Jankowski, 2016; Collignon and Sajuria, 2018).

As previously mentioned, this study aligns with the existing literature on decentralized personalization and the attributes associated with personal vote earnings. It seeks to explore the patterns of decentralized personalization among candidates in SMDs during the 2022 Italian General Election and particularly to investigate specific aspects such as political professionalization, localness, and affiliation with extremist/radical parties, which have received limited attention in previous research. The decision to focus on these aspects stems from the desire to explore dimensions that have not traditionally been explored in the social sciences or are still the subject of ongoing debate.

Professionalization is a widely discussed concept in contemporary social sciences. It is important to clarify its characteristics as it represents a fundamental preliminary step, because understanding the concept involves understanding 'what is important about an entity' (Goertz, 2006, 27). In modern democracies, there has been significant

attention given to the trend towards professionalization within the political class (Best & Cotta, 2000; Borchert & Zeiss, 2003; Best, 2007).

Conceptually, political professionalization refers to the process by which the role of politicians becomes an autonomous profession, transitioning from what Max Weber referred to as 'living for politics' to 'living off politics' (Weber, 1919). This shift transforms political activity from an amateur activity to a professional career (Verzichelli, 2010). The process of political professionalization, as highlighted by Best and Vogel (2018, p. 354), creates an 'insider-outsider differential' between individuals who belong to the political class (politicians) and those who are excluded (ordinary people). Moreover, due to the considerable variation in professionalization paths and political career trajectories (Putnam, 1976; Dogan, 1989; Blondel & Thiebault, 1991; Dowding & Dumont, 2009; 2014), this process leads to a growing divide between professional politicians, who have established political careers propelling them to prominent positions within their respective parties and/or national institutions, and those with less structured political careers (Verzichelli, 2010).

It is conceivable that in the context of growing personalization, where politics is increasingly perceived as a contest between individuals (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021), higher levels of political professionalization may influence the ability to acquire personal votes. Political professionalization entails the acquisition of specialized skills in political affairs, visibility, resources (including non-economic ones), and the development of political capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Gaxie, 2018), which can be reinvested in the political field and electoral competition (Bourdieu, 1991; Offerlé, 2012). As a result, voters may choose to vote based on a candidate's visibility and political career, rather than party affiliation or legislative record, aligning with a process of personalization from below (Gauja, 2018). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that candidates with longer political careers will receive a higher share of personal votes compared to candidates with shorter political careers. Building on the provided context, we can formulate the first hypothesis:

> *H1*: Candidates with high political professionalization tend to acquire a higher share of personal votes.

However, it is also possible to envision a reverse process. Part of the scholarly literature has demonstrated how the strong personalization of politics can contribute to democratic malaise. The increasing professionalization of politics implies a significant internal homogenization in terms of social background, leading to a greater disconnect from the general population (Allen, 2013; Allen & Cairney, 2017; Fawcett & Corbett, 2018). In this sense, 'professionalization has contributed to this trend by creating a self-referential and insulated elite' (Fawcett & Corbett, 2018, p. 1). Professional politicians may lose touch with ordinary citizens because they no longer resemble them, instead focusing more on their own career advancement rather than the common good or the interests of ordinary people (Wright, 2013; Allen et al., 2020).

This argument assumes particular relevance in the Italian context, which has been marked by the success of the Five Star Movement (M5S), a political party that has made the fight against the political class and political professionalization one of its distinctive themes. Empirically, this scepticism towards professional politicians can result in a lower propensity to attract personal votes. Moreover, previous research on the 2018 elections found a negative association between political experience and the acquisition of

personal votes (Pedrazzani & Pinto, 2018), with political newcomers or outsiders receiving a relatively higher share (Fruncillo & Giannatiempo, 2018).

Based on these considerations, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

*H1-bis*: Candidates with high political professionalization tend to acquire a lower share of personal votes.

Additionally, scholars have highlighted the role played by localness in obtaining personal votes (Tavits, 2010; Fisher et al., 2014; Jankowski, 2016; Collignon & Sajuria, 2018).

Academic studies suggest that candidates with a stronger local profile tend to be more successful in elections (Lewis Beck & Rice, 1983; Arzheimer & Evans, 2012; Gorecki & Marsh, 2012; Roy & Alcantara, 2015; Jankowski, 2016) and attract more personal votes compared to candidates without or with limited local attributes (Tavits, 2010; Put et al., 2019). In this perspective, characteristics that highlight the candidate's strong local roots, such as being born in the candidate's constituency and/or having held or currently holding political office, can favour the exercise of descriptive representation, thus increasing the number of personal votes. This phenomenon is referred to as 'behavioural localism' (Campbell et al., 2019). Essentially, the presence of these territorial roots serves as a cognitive shortcut for voters (Popkin, 1994), directing them to infer greater knowledge and attentiveness to the issues of their community. As a result, voters are inclined to support candidates with local attributes because they believe they are better at advocating for their interests in national institutions.

However, despite the vast array of research on the topic, limitations persist in a scholarly understanding of the dynamics of localness, primarily due to the lack of reliable data on defeated candidates (Tavits, 2010).

Regarding the Italian context, recent research has highlighted the widespread prevalence of previous local political experience among both the parliamentary class (Tronconi & Verzichelli, 2019) and the pool of candidates (Boldrini, 2020), as well as its relative importance as a personal vote earning attribute (Boldrini, 2023), albeit with variations across different political coalitions.

Based on these findings, it is possible to introduce the second hypothesis:

*H2*: Candidates with high localness tend to acquire a higher share of personal votes.

Finally, the last hypothesis is linked to the nature of the party to which candidates belong. As briefly mentioned, personal and political characteristics interact in shaping voters' voting orientations. Western countries are experiencing a growing wave of political polarization, characterized by an increasing ideological distance between parties and the emergence of new radical and extremist parties (Hansen, 2016; Somer & McCoy, 2018). As some literature has pointed out (Kal Munis, 2021), enhanced electoral polarization may lead to a greater influence of partisan loyalty in shaping voting orientations, thereby diminishing the relevance of non-partisan characteristics. Also, particularly concerning radical/right-wing extremist political parties, national leadership plays a central role and acts as a key factor in driving support for these parties (Michel et al., 2020), thereby limiting the potential for personal voting based on individual candidates' characteristics. This does not imply that candidates from radical/extremist parties receive fewer votes overall, but rather that they receive fewer personal votes. Strong

polarization can lead to a mobilization focused more on party proposals than on the personal characteristics of the candidate, thereby favouring party voting over the development of a distinct personal vote. It must be emphasized that this does not necessarily imply that voters are aware of the candidate's party affiliation, but rather that the candidacy of a radical/extremist party fosters polarization, which in turn leads to mobilization along party lines rather than based on personal characteristics. As a result, the party's influence may overshadow the individual candidate. To some extent, this lower competitiveness of radical and extremist candidates has also been empirically observed in the Italian context. Previous research on Italian elections (Bartolini & D'Alimonte, 1995; D'Alimonte & Bartolini, 1997) has shown that candidates belonging to radical/extremist parties have lower competitive capacity. Essentially, belonging to a radical/extremist party can have a 'repulsive' effect on voters compared to belonging to a moderate party. It can be hypothesized that this effect also extends to the ability to mobilize personal votes, with voters being less inclined to vote for a candidate (regardless of their personal characteristics) simply because they belong to radical/extremist lists. Based on this, it is possible to formulate the third and final research hypothesis:

> *H3*: Candidates from radical/extremist parties tend to acquire a lower share of personal votes.

## 3. Case selection, data, and methods

As mentioned earlier, this article examines the paths of decentralized personalization by analysing candidates in SMDs during the 2022 Italian General Election. Therefore, the study can be considered as case study research, adopting an interpretative-explorative perspective (Yin, 2018). The decision to conduct a case study-based analysis was driven by the nature of the research topic. The variation in electoral laws across countries makes it challenging to conduct direct comparisons, particularly in relation to majoritarian systems where operationalizing personal votes becomes difficult. Moreover, data on defeated candidates (those who were not elected) are often scarce in different countries, making their collection and reliability more challenging. For these reasons, the case study approach was deemed the most appropriate for this type of analysis. From this perspective, the 2022 Italian General Election provides an interesting case to investigate. A first interesting feature relates to the characteristics of the mixed majoritarian and proportional electoral law, the Rosato law, approved in 2017. Under this law, one-third of MPs are elected in SMDs, while the remaining two-thirds are elected in multi-member districts (MMDs) with closed lists. However, the two tiers are connected, with candidates in the SMDs linked to a list (or a coalition of lists) in the MMDs through a fused vote (Chiaramonte & D'Alimonte, 2018).

In terms of voting structure, voters have three different choices. Firstly, they can vote for a single list supporting a candidate in the proportional part. In this case, the vote is counted for the party and automatically transferred to the linked candidate in the SMD. Secondly, voters can cast a vote for the candidate in the SMD. The vote is then counted for the candidate and automatically transferred to the supporting list or coalition *pro quota* based on the votes obtained in the MMD. Lastly, voters can vote for both a candidate in the SMD and a list in the MMD, and in this case, the vote is counted for both.

These voting possibilities point in two directions: one guided by the preference for the list and the other by the preference for the candidate (Pedrazzani & Pinto, 2018). The capacity to distinguish between voting for the candidate and voting for the list provides a valuable opportunity for this investigation. Although there is no real personal vote due to the fused vote mechanism, the 'only candidate' vote can demonstrate the candidate's ability to attract votes independently of the supporting lists, especially in the presence of a coalition (Fruncillo & Giannatiempo 2018). Thus, votes cast solely for the candidate can be considered a form of personalized voting, allowing for the exploration of their distribution between different candidates and the factors that contribute to their collection (Pedrazzani & Pinto, 2018, p. 406).

Moreover, the 2022 Italian General Election is an interesting case due to specific features of the political system. Italy has often been cited as one of the clearest examples of political personalization among European countries (Karvonen, 2010; Calise, 2010; Garzia, 2011; 2017; Bordignon, 2013; Musella, 2014; 2020; Marino et al., 2022). However, while some research has emphasized the relevance of personalization processes even within political parties (Musella, 2014; 2018; Calise, 2015; Marino et al. 2022), most studies have focused on the centralized dimension of personalization rather than the decentralized one. Also, the 2022 Italian General Election is an interesting case in terms of its outcome. As widely known, the elections were characterized by the dominance of the centre-right coalition and the significant rise of Fratelli d'Italia, which experienced a remarkable increase in vote share from 4.4% in the 2018 general elections to 24.4% (Garzia, 2022), marking one of the largest electoral growths among Western European countries (Emanuele et al., 2022). Additionally, the elections were marked by historically low voter turnout (Improta et al., 2022) and high levels of electoral volatility, ranking among the highest in Western countries (Emanuele et al., 2022), indicating the persistent instability and de-institutionalization affecting the Italian political system (Chiaramonte, 2023). Examining the 2022 election allows us to explore the pathways of decentralized personalization in a context of high instability, providing valuable insights from a cross-national comparison with other European contexts.

The analysis focuses on examining candidates from four different parties and coalitions in SMDs: the centre-left coalition, the centre-right coalition, the Five Star Movement (M5S), and the Azione - Italia Viva list (AZ-IV).[1] The choice to limit the analysis to major coalitions was made to ensure comparability of results and data reliability. The inclusion of smaller parties, which lack parliamentary representation and have limited or no chances of electing MPs, would have compromised the robustness of the analysis.[2] Moreover, in order to enhance comparability of results, and considering the specificity of the European Upper Chambers, it was decided to exclude candidates in the

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[1] Although only two are actual coalitions (the centre-right and centre-left), while the others are parties (the M5S and AZ-IV), for the sake of simplicity, the term 'coalitions' will be used to refer to all of them.
[2] As is known, the election was won by the centre-right coalition, which obtained a 43.8% share of the votes in the Chamber of Deputies. The centre-left coalition received 26.1%, the M5S 15.4%, and Azione - Italia Viva 7.8%. In terms of SMDs, the centre-right won 121 districts, the centre-left 12, the M5S 10, and Azione - Italia Viva none. Two districts were won by the Sudtiroler Volkspartei, and one by the Sud chiama Nord list.

Senate and focus solely on candidates in the Chamber of Deputies. Therefore, the sample consists of 584 candidates.[3]

To test the initial hypotheses, a linear regression with Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) was conducted, with the candidate's share of personal votes as dependent variable. Consistent with previous literature (Pedrazzani & Pinto, 2018), the share of personal votes was operationalized as the total number of 'only candidate' votes (i.e., votes received exclusively by the candidate in each district, excluding party list votes) divided by the overall votes received by the party or coalition in each district. This variable ranges from 0 (no 'only candidate' votes in addition to party votes) to 1 (all votes received by the candidate are 'only candidate' votes). Data on 'only candidate' and party votes were extracted from the transparency portal of the Ministry of the Interior website.

The independent variables included in the analysis are level of political professionalization, level of localness, and affiliation with a radical/extremist party. Political professionalization was operationalized by focusing on the number of political positions held at the national and European levels. The choice to link political professionalization to high specialization political positions, although a necessary simplification, (Vercesi, 2022), follows the traditional approach employed in investigating political professionalism (Bakema & Secker, 1988; Borchert & Zeiss, 2003; Verzichelli, 2010; Best & Higley, 2018). To provide a more nuanced representation of professionalization, an index of political professionalization, derived from the literature (Muller-Rommel & Vercesi, 2017), was applied with slight adaptations for this research. The index focuses on three dimensions commonly used by scholars (Blondel, 1980) to examine political careers: serving as a parliamentarian, serving as a minister, and serving as a national party leader. The index ranges from zero (for candidates with no previous political experience) to three (for candidates with a high level of professionalization, having held the positions of MP, minister, and party leader). The index used in this study does not encompass the full complexity of political professionalization, particularly in omitting sub-national experience that may be significant in the career paths of many parliamentarians. However, its simplicity and accessibility make it highly practical for this investigation, enabling its application in various contexts and facilitating comparability of results. Data on previous national careers were obtained from multiple sources, including the websites of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, the candidates' CVs on the transparency pages of the Ministry of the Interior, and the official websites of individual candidates, when accessible.

Referring to localness, the literature has traditionally operationalized it in a dichotomous manner, considering whether candidates possess characteristics that denote local roots (e.g., being born in the district, holding or having held local government positions). However, this operationalization has been criticized for its simplicity and limited consideration of the multidimensional nature of localness (Marangoni & Tronconi, 2009; Boldrini, 2020). To address this limitation and provide a more comprehensive operationalization, an index of localness derived from the literature (Marangoni & Tronconi, 2009) was utilized. The index ranges from 0 to 3 and is constructed by assigning a point for each of the following: being born in a city included in the SMD, holding

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[3] Due to the unique characteristics of the local political system, candidates from the Aosta Valley were also excluded.

positions in a local institution (municipality, province, or region) partially or fully included in the SMD, and holding such positions at the time of the election[4]. For instance, a candidate who has never held local government positions and was not born within the district would have a score of zero, while a candidate born in the SMD, who has held local government positions and was in office at the time of the election, would receive an index of three. Data on previous political positions held at the local level were obtained from the National Registry of Local and Regional Administrators, available on the Ministry of the Interior website.

Lastly, radical/extremist party affiliation was operationalized as a dichotomous variable, with a value of 1 assigned if the candidate belongs to a radical/extremist party. To determine whether a party is considered radical/extremist, the research relied on the 'PopuList' project (Rooduijn et al., 2019) and its updates, which categorize the following parties as far-right and far-left: Brothers of Italy, the League, and the united list Greens-Italian Left Alliance. Other parties not included in this list are considered non-radical/extremist.[5]

To increase the robustness of the analysis, several control variables were included: gender (value 1 if the candidate is female), education (categorized as junior high school or below, high school diploma, or degree or higher), SMD geographic location (divided into North, Red Belt, and South), and original profession, categorized into three groups: politicians, entrepreneurs/managers; professionals (such as lawyers, journalists, and doctors); and clerks and other professions (encompassing all other professions not previously mentioned). Data on profession and education were extracted from the official CVs available on the transparency pages of the Ministry of the Interior.

## 4. Data analysis and results

Before delving into the results of the multivariate analysis, it is useful to provide a brief overview of the descriptive statistics.

Regarding the distribution of personal votes, there is a noticeable asymmetry. The centre-right coalition tends to receive fewer personal votes compared to the other coalitions. Most centre-right candidates have a personal vote share ranging from approximately 1% to 5%, with a few outliers. The mean value of personal vote share for centre-right candidates is 2.75%, with a median value of 2.72%.[6]

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[4] For the purposes of the research and to address the limitations imposed by Italian law, which requires mayors of cities with over 20,000 inhabitants and presidents of regions to resign within seven days from the dissolution of the chambers, candidates were considered in office at the time of the elections if they held a position until the day of parliament's dissolution (July 21).

[5] The data in the PopuList database cover all active Italian parties as of January 1, 2020. Parties or coalitions of parties founded later, such as former Minister Di Maio's Impegno Civico or Maurizio Lupi's Noi Moderati, were considered as 'non-radical/extremist' since they emerged from splits of non-radical/extremist parties.

[6] The centre-right candidates with the highest share of personal votes include Gianfranco Rotondi in the Avellino district (6.2%) and Giorgia Meloni in the L'Aquila district (5.5%) but also Giulio Tremonti (around 5%) in the Lombardy 1-09 SMD (MILANO: NIL 21 - BUENOS AIRES - VENEZIA).

**Figure 1.** Share of personal vote by coalition at the 2022 Italian general elections[7]
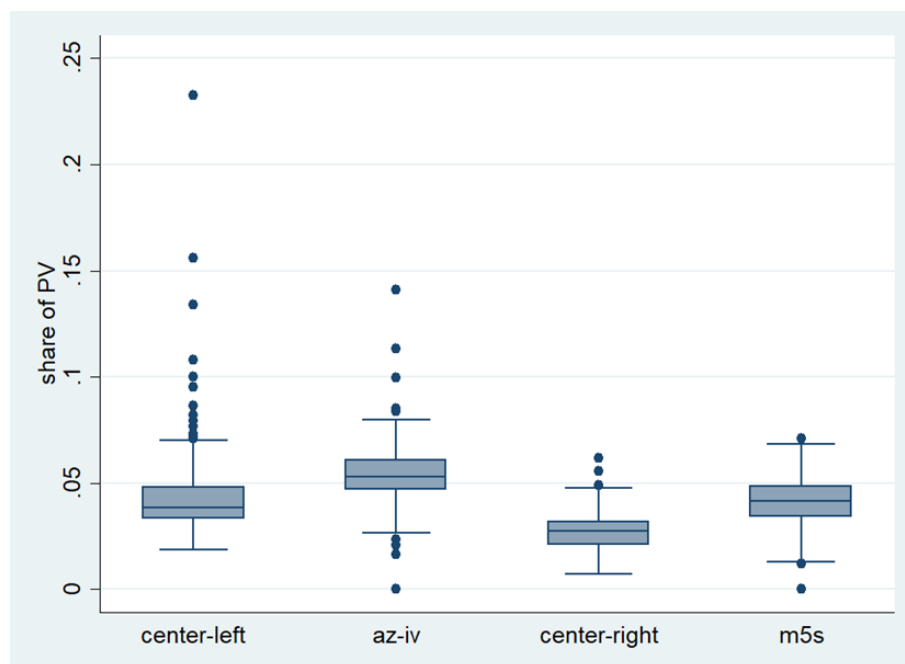


Source: author's elaboration based on data of the Ministry of the Interior.

Values from other coalitions are substantially higher. Centre-left and M5S candidates have a similar distribution of personal votes, between 1% and 7% (mean value 4.5% and 4%, median value 3.8% and 4.2% respectively for the centre-left and for the M5S), even though the centre-left has a remarkably higher number of outliers (in one case collecting more than 20% of personal votes).[8]

Finally, AZ-IV – which did not exist in the previous elections – constitutes the coalition that, overall, managed to make the best use of personal votes. In fact, its candidates collect higher percentages of personal votes, generally ranging between 2% and 8%, with an average value of 5.4% and a median value of 5.3%.[9] Overall, the personal votes distribution among coalitions does not differ significantly from that observed in the 2018 General Election (Pedrazzani & Pinto, 2018; Fruncillo & Giannatiempo, 2018). Use of the personal vote seems substantially limited (although not irrelevant) and seems to be less widespread on the right than in the other coalitions, especially in reference to the centre-left coalition and to AZ-IV.

Moving on to levels of political professionalism (Figure 2), the asymmetry between the centre-right coalition and the other coalitions persists. Centre-right candidates in

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[7] In the data of the Ministry of the Interior, there are four candidates who obtain zero personal votes (two from AZ-IV and two from the M5S) in the two districts of Naples 1-02 and Naples 1-03. Given the general diversity compared to the other data, it is possible that they are a compilation error by the Ministry. However, the data have been retained for completeness (pending further verification) and they do not affect the regression model.

[8] In the centre-left, the absolute champion of personal votes (over 20%) is Franz Ploner, regional councillor of the party only active in the Province of Bolzano Team K, candidate in the Brixen constituency.

[9] Among the candidates who obtained a higher share of personal votes were the National Secretary of the Italian Liberal Youth, Giulia Pantaleo (14.1%), candidate in the Marsala SMD, and the former Minister for Regional Affairs, Enrico Costa (11.3%), candidate in the Cuneo SMD.

the SMDs have higher levels of political professionalization than others. The centre-right is the only coalition in which more than half of the candidates (63%) have some level of professionalization, of which almost half (48%) have a low level of professionalism, while only 14% have a medium and high level of professionalism.

**Figure 1.** Level of political professionalization by coalition at the 2022 Italian General Election
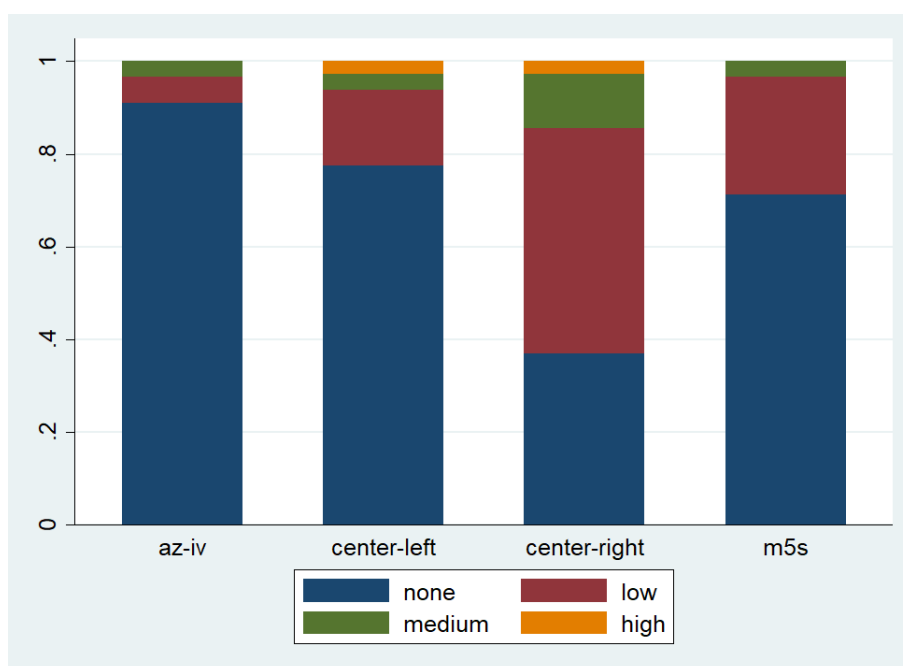


Source: own elaboration.

In this case as well, the distribution of political professionalization among the M5S and the centre-left coalition is similar, with over two-thirds of the candidates lacking professionalization (77.4% for the centre-left and 71.2% for the M5S). However, a notable difference exists between the two coalitions in terms of candidates with medium and high levels of professional qualifications, comprising approximately 10% of centre-left candidates and only 3% of the M5S (partly due to the complete absence of highly professionalized candidates). On the other hand, AZ-IV stands out as the coalition with the lowest level of non-professionalization, with 91% of candidates lacking professionalization, 3% possessing medium professionalism, and no candidates with high professionalization. It can be hypothesized that the distribution of professionalization levels is influenced by the specific conditions of the 2022 elections. The centre-right coalition's significant advantage and the high probability of winning in most SMDs attracted numerous highly professional politicians who saw their election as highly likely. Conversely, the other coalitions, facing lower chances of victory in SMDs, had fewer national politicians as candidates in those districts, instead focusing on the proportional part of the elections. AZ-IV is an emblematic case, as the remote likelihood of winning SMDs resulted in a strong presence of candidates with no previous national political experience in those districts.

**Figure 3.** Level of localness by coalition at the 2022 Italian General Election
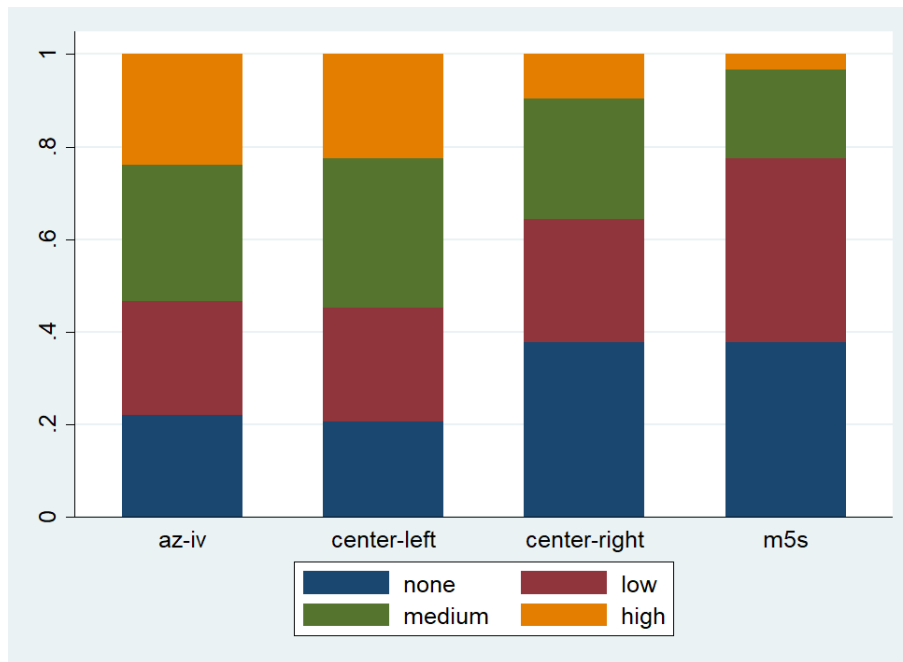


Source: own elaboration.

The distribution of localness levels exhibits a more balanced pattern (Figure 3). The centre-right and M5S coalitions have the highest number of candidates without localness (55% for both). However, the M5S has a larger proportion of candidates with low localness (39.7%) and a lower proportion of candidates with high localness (3.4%) compared to the centre-right coalition (which has 26.7% and 9.6% of candidates with low and high localness, respectively). On the other hand, in the centre-left and AZ-IV coalitions, candidates with medium and high levels of localness constitute the majority (54.8% and 53.4% of the total, respectively), with a significant presence of candidates with high localness (22.6% and 24%) and a lower presence of candidates without localness (20.5% and 21.9%). These findings align with the observations made for the 2018 elections (Boldrini, 2020). Due to the low likelihood of victory in many SMDs, the centre-left coalition and AZ-IV seem to have favoured the candidacy of 'local' personalities. In contrast, the centre-right coalition, benefiting from its advantage, opted for a less 'local' recruitment strategy with a focus on national politicians. The M5S represents a unique case. However, it should be noted that the party's limited success in local and regional elections (Veltri & Montesanti, 2015) limits the presence of candidates with high localness as operationalized in this research.

Regarding the effects of the independent variables on the share of personal votes, the results of the multivariate analysis are presented in Table 1. The first column displays the non-standardized regression coefficients (b coefficients), while the second column contains the standardized beta coefficients. To simplify the interpretation, the localness and political professionalization indices have been treated as continuous variables. Also, standard errors were clustered at the district level.

**Table 1.** Effect of personal-votes attributes in determining the share of personal votes of SMDs candidates

| | Share of personal votes | |
|---|---|---|
| | b | beta |
| *Independent variables* | | |
| Index of political professionalization | -0.00243* | -0.082* |
| | (0.00120) | (0.00120) |
| Index of localness | 0.00351*** | 0.188*** |
| | (0.000729) | (0.000729) |
| Radical/extremist | -0.0158*** | -0.323*** |
| | (0.00189) | (0.00189) |
| *Control variables* | | |
| Female | -0.00145 | -0.037 |
| | (0.00149) | (0.00149) |
| University degree | 0.000367 | 0.008 |
| | (0.00182) | (0.00182) |
| Age | 0.0000867 | 0.049 |
| | (0.0000675) | (0.0000675) |
| Original profession (Base category: politicians, entrepreneurs, managers) | | |
| Professionals | -0.000486 | -0.012 |
| | (0.00201) | (0.00201) |
| Employees | -0.00186 | -0.044 |
| | (0.00210) | (0.00210) |
| Other professions | -0.00277 | -0.032 |
| | (0.00354) | (0.00354) |
| SMD geographic localisation (Base category: North) | | |
| Red Belt | -0.00645** | -0.127** |
| | (0.00208) | (0.00208) |
| South | -0.00815*** | -0.208*** |
| | (0.00162) | (0.00162) |
| _cons | 0.0431*** | |
| | (0.00437) | |
| N | 584 | |
| R-sq. | 0.206 | |

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001.

On a general level, the model confirms the influence of the independent variables considered, all of which are statistically significant. Regarding political professionalization, the model shows a negative correlation between professionalization and the percentage of personal votes acquired (standardized coefficient value -0.082). This means that as political professionalization increases, the share of personal votes obtained decreases, contrary to expectations. Therefore, hypothesis 1 *bis* is confirmed.

Regarding localness, the model shows a positive effect on the share of personal votes (beta coefficient 0.188), which aligns with expectations and the literature. This means that as the candidate's localness increases, the percentage of personal votes obtained also increases. Thus, the model highlights pathways of decentralized personalization focused on the local dimension of politics for candidates in SMDs, whereas political professionalization has a negative influence.

Finally, regarding membership in extremist/radical parties, the model demonstrates a strong negative correlation between the percentage of personal votes obtained

and affiliation with these parties. This confirms hypothesis 3, as candidates from radical parties receive a lower percentage of personal votes.

An additional interesting finding from the analysis relates to the control variables. Contrary to that historically stated in the literature (which noted a higher propensity for personal voting in southern constituencies), the analysis shows a statistically significant negative influence of SMDs in the South (and to a lesser extent, in the Red Belt) compared to the North, used as the reference category. This suggests a stronger effect of party mobilization in these regions, particularly in favour of the centre-right, which further limits the development of a strong share of personal votes.

The results presented here align only partially with the findings of previous research on vote personalization in the 2018 elections. Consistent with the literature, the research confirms the importance of local roots in acquiring personal votes (Boldrini, 2023) and the negative effect of political experience (Pedrazzani & Pinto, 2018), indicating that political outsiders tend to gather more personal votes compared to individuals with greater political professionalism (Fruncillo & Giannatiempo, 2018). However, unlike previous research, no statistically significant effect of gender is observed, and the geographical variable exhibits a statistically significant but opposite effect, with candidates from northern regions receiving a higher percentage of personal votes than those from the South. These findings highlight the significant upheavals that have occurred in the country during these elections; however, they are provisional and require further empirical investigation, to verify if this trend will be confirmed.

## 5. Conclusions

This research explored decentralized personalization patterns of candidates through the examination of a case study, identified in the Italian General Election of 2022. More specifically, this research investigated how specific personal characteristics, including the level of localness, level of political professionalization, and affiliation to a radical/extremist party, influence the acquisition of personal votes. The study aimed to contribute to the scientific literature on personalization in Western countries, but also to explore how these processes play out within an increasingly volatile and deinstitutionalized political environment such as that of Italy's last elections. The research results have implications from both an empirical and a theoretical point of view.

From an empirical point of view, the analysis shows a statistically significant influence of all the independent variables examined, with a positive effect for localness and a negative effect for political professionalization and radical/extremist party membership. Specifically, the research highlighted that local roots matter in influencing the acquisition of personal votes. This contributes in part to explaining the diffusion of candidates with high localness in the SMDs in certain coalitions (i.e. the centre-left and AZ-IV). Because of the starting disadvantage and difficulty in winning SMDs, these two coalitions recruited personalities with high localness to try to gain a competitive advantage over other coalitions. The M5S, instead, seems to maintain its specificity, with a mechanism for selecting candidates and reproducing its ruling class that is different from other parties.

From a theoretical perspective, the research suggests that local roots play an important role in candidates' decentralized personalization, whereas political professionalism seems to have a negative impact on this process. As previously

mentioned, these findings contradict prior expectations and may be attributed to the specific context of the 2022 Italian General Election and the candidate selection strategies of political parties. Observing the results of the analysis, it emerges that, despite the greater number of available resources that political professionalization guarantees (economic, relationships, knowledge, but also the possibility of media exposure) they do not influence the development of personal votes, which instead seems to follow patterns more related to territorial roots. However, these results need further investigation in the future, to explore whether they are an anomaly related to the particular characteristics of the 2022 General Election and the effect of variables that could not be included in this analysis, related, for example, to type of career, its length, and the different positions held.

Finally, the results lead to some further considerations on the evolution of Italian democracy. Previous research has already pointed out the instability and volatility of the Italian political system, in which, on a large scale, there is considerable fluidity in voting orientations, with voters shifting rapidly and massively from one party to another and punishing parties in government. However, this research points to the presence of a second, smaller trend in which local politicians are privileged subjects of personal consensus mobilization during electoral competition. These trends could significantly alter the type of representation and increase the weight of local issues and local political figures in the national political sphere. Future studies will be necessary to determine if these trends persist, what their interactions are, and what direction they will take the Italian political system in the wake of these turbulent times.

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