The integrity of the 2022 Italian parliamentary election: A subjective perspective

Stefano Rombi
Fulvio Venturino
UNIVERSITY OF CAGLIARI

Abstract

Democracy is a political regime in which citizens can select their rulers through electoral procedures. Thus, effective rules and institutions are necessary for democracy to work correctly. Besides these institutional prerequisites, democracy needs attitudes and behaviors to be shared by the most relevant political actors. Among them, the losers' consent to accept an electoral defeat plays a key role and should be considered a necessary feature of electoral integrity. This paper uses survey data collected by ITANES – about 4,000 cases – to assess evaluations of the fairness of the 2022 Italian parliamentary election as expressed by a representative sample of citizens. We treat perceptions of fairness as a dependent variable, and through a series of bivariate analyses and then a multivariate regression, we research the covariates that can make sense of their distribution. Results show that the voter with the highest probability of perceiving the 2022 parliamentary election as fair is a male over 64 years old who voted for the winning parties, has a pro-democratic attitude, lives in a municipality of under 30,000 inhabitants, and has a high level of education.

1. Introduction

Free and fair elections are insufficient to underpin a fully-fledged democracy, but no one disputes that they are necessary. From this point of view, current trends concerning the correctness of electoral processes should worry all supporters of democracy. Ironically enough, while democracy and electoral practices are spreading on an unprecedented scale, the actual implementation of elections is flawed by fraud, maladministration, voter harassment, media repression, and open violence. In the case of hybrid regimes and partial democracies, these are not news. After all, the association of actual dictatorship with some forms of democracy has contributed significantly to the success of expressions such as 'electoral authoritarianism' (Schedler 2009). However, the January 6 Capitol Hill attack has clearly shown that problems of electoral fairness may also affect consolidated democracies, and related consequences may even result in extended violence.

Given the apparent relevance of the topic, political science and related disciplines have long assessed the quality of elections, and over time different methodologies have been applied. Primarily due to the impact of the electoral integrity project led by Pippa

Norris (2014; 2017), this field of research is currently dominated by the expert survey approach. The same perspective is adopted in the broader methodology Freedom House uses to assess the level of democracy in all existing polities, and some indicators utilized by Freedom House are explicitly dedicated to evaluating the correctness of the electoral process.[1] However, other scholars address the quality of elections by using aggregate data. This is the case of scholars interested in detecting fraud by election officials (Myagkov, Ordeshook and Shakin 2009) and those investigating invalid votes, namely the sum of blank and null ballots (Kouba and Lysek 2019).

Following the tradition of electoral studies, part of the research on the quality of elections is based on survey data. An important stream aims to clarify voters' motivations for casting an invalid ballot, a problem that can only be addressed through aggregate data at the peril of ecological fallacy (Moral 2016; Cohen 2018). Other scholars use individual-level data to control for the role of the perceptions of electoral integrity in satisfaction with democracy (Esaiasson 2011; Mauk 2022). In this case, voters' thoughts on election administration, public officials' honesty, candidates' fairness, and the reliability of the media report are crucial variables for explaining their attitudes towards democracy and democratic institutions.

This article agrees that the perception of electoral integrity is essential in shaping public opinion attitudes. To deal with it, we start by accepting that '… [t]he concept of electoral integrity refers to agreed international conventions and global norms, applying universally to all countries worldwide through the election cycle, including during the pre-election period, the campaign, on polling day, and its aftermath' (Norris 2023, 88). First, this definition focuses on a whole electoral cycle encompassing before, during, and after the election day, as spelled out by Van Ham (2020, 116). Second, it identifies some core standards in a series of acts issued by the international community institutions derived from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[2] Once the objective benchmark of electoral integrity is defined, the *perceptions* of electoral integrity concern citizens' thoughts about implementing the core standards in a given election.

As mentioned, the quality of elections is investigated by employing both an objective approach, based mainly on aggregated data, and a subjective one, based on experts' or voters' perceptions. Moreover, even when a survey aims to understand voters' perceptions of the quality of elections, an interconnection with the objective characteristics of voters clearly emerges. This is the case of this article, in which we will investigate how some objective characteristics of the interviewees (i.e., the party they voted for) determine – or influence – their perception of the electoral process. However, there is more: the connection between objective and subjective aspects will also concern independent variables. As anticipated, some of these will reflect the objective characteristics of the interviewees, while others, such as attitudes toward democracy, will concern their perceptions. We will then be able to understand what aspects – objective or subjective – prevail in shaping voters' opinions on the integrity of the electoral process.

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[1] Available online: freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-methodology

[2] 'The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures' (UDHR 1948, art. 21.3).

The case we examine is the Italian voters' opinions toward electoral integrity in the 2022 parliamentary election. The choice of Italy may raise some skepticism regarding its contribution to the knowledge of Western democracies from a comparative perspective. At a glance, Italy is an established parliamentary democracy, essentially similar to other European systems. Nevertheless, it features some peculiarities relevant to analyzing electoral integrity. For instance, in the nineties, its party system entered a prolonged time of deinstitutionalization, resulting in a chaotic merging and splitting of existing parties and the birth of new and often irrelevant parties (Emanuele and Chiaramonte 2020), and this organizational instability has given rise to unprecedented electoral volatility. In addition, personalization – another recent characteristic of many political systems – has reached a huge dimension in Italy, bringing about several personal and leader-based parties (Rahat and Kenig 2018, 200). Again, Italy is one of the first European countries so far to be ruled by a coalition composed exclusively of populist parties. In fact, after the 2018 general election, a two-party government was formed with Movimento 5 Stelle and Lega (Itanes 2018), changing the design common in some other countries, where populist parties have entered government as junior partners in a coalition led by mainstream parties. This may suggest a strong presence of populist attitudes in Italian public opinion, likely consequential for the formation of perceptions of the working of democracy (Zaslove and Meijers 2023). Of course, these tendencies are present by and large in all contemporary democracies, but their unusual amount may make Italy a peculiar case.

Another factor that could possibly make Italy a deviant case is the data collection time. In the year 2022, some anti-pandemic provisions were still in operation. This exceptional condition has been demonstrated to affect political attitudes and opinions (Maggini and Vezzoni 2022). But, above all, the current political attitudes of Italian voters could be affected by the type of government formed after the last parliamentary election. From the nineties onward, Italy experienced frequent government alternation. When successful, the right-wing coalition formed governments under the leadership of Silvio Berlusconi, with moderate and centrist parties' primacy over the extreme and populist partners, such as Lega and Alleanza Nazionale. Things went differently in 2022 when the dominant party leading the right-wing coalition became Fratelli d'Italia, supposedly heir to the fascist tradition. The consequent appointment of Giorgia Meloni as prime minister emphasized the marked cleavage between fascism and antifascism, originated an unprecedented polarization, and posed a first-time problem of acceptance for the opponents. This is an issue unknown to most European political systems, where fascism is not a pervasive and durable experience, and it could make Italy a case that is difficult to compare, if not a complete outlier.

Having discussed this note of caution about the possible generalization of our work, we may add that, as mentioned above, the perceptions of electoral integrity are usually used as an independent or intermediate variable to account for satisfaction with democracy, trust for institutions, or propensity to turnout. Our approach is exploratory in principle, so we adopt a different research design where Italian voters' perceptions of electoral integrity are considered a dependent variable, and we search for factors able to explain their distribution among different individuals.

The article is organized along these lines. Section 2 presents the Italian National Election Studies (Itanes) survey data we use in the subsequent analyses and discusses the relevant variables to be chosen as covariates. In Section 3, we first present the results of the bivariate correlations between the perceptions of electoral integrity and several independent variables indicated as potentially relevant by the existing literature; we then propose a multivariate analysis using the most promising. In the final section, we summarize our results and discuss the implications for this field of research.

2. Data and Method

2.1. The dependent variable: a sketch

First, let us search for an objective benchmark for the electoral integrity of the Italian political system. As reported above, several non-governmental organizations and research groups provide yearly estimations of levels of democracy on a global scale. Among others, the abovementioned research program *Freedom in the World* has been carried out by Freedom House since 1973 to assess the conditions of political rights and civil liberties in all existing polities. As a part of a consolidated methodology, country experts use a 0-4 scale to evaluate the correctness of the presidential and parliamentary elections and election management in general. Adding this information builds a scale anchored to 0 and 12, where electoral integrity is associated with higher scores. After examining more than 200 polities in the 2000s, it turns out that from 2005 to 2015 scores were stable at about 7.5, with minor improvements due to episodes of democratization, such as the Arab Spring in 2011. However, from 2016 onward, the quality of elections steadily worsened, reaching a score inferior to 7.0 in 2022 and witnessing the existence of democratic backsliding.[3]

Of course, this trend is largely determined by the malpractices of hybrid regimes and partial democracies, where low-quality elections remain a recurrent characteristic. When the focus is on established democracies, (although negative campaigning, questioned results, maladministration, and extended post-electoral violence have recently occurred), the Italian political system is seemingly untouched by this negative trend. In order to warrant a comparison involving only veteran democracies, Figure 1 portrays the electoral integrity scores for the countries participating in the European Union, and Italy, from 2005 to 2022.[4] During this period, the averages of electoral integrity calculated for the EU members show a negative trend, but as expected, the slope is very different from the dramatic fall affecting the whole range of countries. The lowest score, registered in 2022, still achieves a satisfying 11.70 on a scale with 12 as its highest value. The scores for Italy reached the maximum assessment of 12 in all years except for a slight decrease to 11 in 2011 and 2012, a negative bump not easy to shed light on, as in those years only minor local elections unaffected by major problems took place.

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[3] Source: Freedom House, Aggregate Category and Subcategory Scores, 2003-2023.
[https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world]

[4] To calculate the averages for the EU members, the starting point takes advantage of the 2004 wave of ten new entries. Due to their late entry, Romania and Bulgaria have been considered only since 2007, and Croatia has been considered only since 2013; due to Brexit, the United Kingdom is included in the dataset until 2019.

Similarly, the recent report by Garnett et al. (2023, 6), a part of the Electoral Integrity Project, gives Italy 72 on a 0-100 scale. Thus, Italy performs better than France and the United Kingdom.

These are not surprising results. Although often considered a problematic democracy, Italy nowadays has a consolidated parliamentary system with frequent alternations in government. The Minister of Internal Affairs professionally manages electoral administration according to the principles of the governmental model (James 2020; James and Garnett 2023), and the unique severe contestation that happened in the 2006 election came to nothing (Lioy 2021). Considering these general conditions, the information reported in Table 1 may be entirely unexpected. It comes from the Itanes post-electoral survey administered in 2022, which featured a question about the perceived fairness of the election held on September 25: *Elections can take place more or less regularly. Thinking about the September 25 election, where would you place it on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means the election was fair, and 5 means irregular?*[5]

Figure 1. The integrity of the electoral process in the European Union and in Italy, 2005-2022
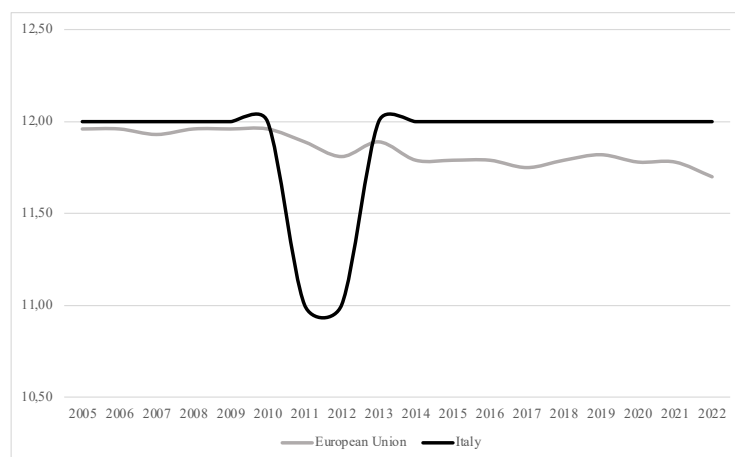
Source: Freedom House, Aggregate Category and Subcategory Scores, 2003-2023.

Taken together, the objective measures and the subjective perceptions of electoral integrity pose a puzzle. Lack of electoral integrity is a thorny problem at a global level, but only a minor one for established democracies, and, in the end, Italian politics seems to be almost untouched by it. Most Italian citizens consider the 2022 election process to be quite regular, while a notable minority consider defects to be noteworthy and presumably consequential for the election results and government formation. This case is not unique because, in other political systems, ordinary citizens have also shown exaggerated evaluations of electoral malpractice compared to other political actors (Partheymüller et al. 2022; Fisher and Sällberg 2020). However, even such an unrealistic picture of the election administration may breed a remarkably negative vision of democracy and politics in general. Nevertheless, as the reasons for accepting it have gone undetected so far, in the following section we explore the relationship between the

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[5] Q13. Le elezioni possono svolgersi in maniera più o meno regolare. Pensando alle elezioni del 25 settembre, dove le posizionerebbe su una scala da 1 a 5 dove 1 significa che le elezioni si sono svolte in maniera regolare, e 5 significa in maniera irregolare?

perceptions of election integrity and several independent variables, using both bivariate analyses and multivariate regressions.

Table 1. Perceptions of election integrity in the 2022 Italian parliamentary election

Perceptions of election integrity	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative percent
1 Election has been regular	1966	46.9	53.8	53.8
2	600	14.3	16.4	70.2
3	473	11.3	13.0	83.2
4	332	7.9	9.1	92.3
5 Election has been irregular	284	6.8	7.8	100.0
Valid cases	3656	87.2	100.0	–
I don't know	466	11.1	–	–
No answer	70	1.7	–	–
Missing cases	536	12.8	–	–
Total	4192	100.0	–	–

Source: ITANES 2022. Note: weighted cases.

To this end, the variable described in Table 1 poses some problems. It is clearly anchored to positions 1 and 5, corresponding to a perception of a completely fair and completely rigged election, but the middle positions are perhaps too nuanced and, therefore, difficult to figure out. Thus, we prefer to recode the original values in a new dichotomous variable to minimize this problem and avoid misinterpreting the interviewees' answers. Of course, this procedure requires a new choice, namely, recognizing the break-even point. Two solutions promise significant benefits. The first solution envisages a dichotomy between position 1 – corresponding to a perception of complete electoral fairness – versus positions 2 to 5. By so doing, one may exploit two major advantages. Firstly, the divide is extremely clear, with those believing that the 2022 election has been completely fair against all those thinking that the election has been even minimally biased; secondly, the sample is split into two more or less similar halves (53.8 versus 46.2 percent).

A possible inconvenience of this solution is a lack of realism. In particular, respondents choosing position 2 admit the actual existence of some minor flaws, arguably due to trivial episodes of involuntary maladministration rather than deliberate fraud; however, this is not sufficient to vitiate the whole electoral process. Accepting this assumption, we define these cases as similar to those considering the 2022 election to be fully regular so that the sample is dichotomized between those choosing positions 1 and 2 versus those choosing positions 3 to 5. Thus, in the last analysis, the dependent variable is dichotomized, identifying, on the one hand, those who believe that elections are regular and, on the other, all those who have an opposite opinion. It is coded (1) if respondents answered 1 or 2 on the five-point scale of electoral integrity perceptions and (0) if they answered 3 to 5.

As anticipated, we aim to discover the differences, if any, between supporters and critics of Italian electoral policies. To do so, we now discuss possible characteristics of the profile of both types of citizens to be investigated empirically.

2.2. Searching for independent variables: a discussion

Ascertaining how citizens accept a positive or negative vision of the electoral process in their country is quite a complex problem, and the related literature has used different approaches and several variables. Some scholars maintain that perceptions of electoral integrity are mainly a consequence of long-term individual attitudes. Among them, support for democracy has a prominent role. For instance, Flesken and Hartl (2018) use a variable named 'antiauthoritarian values' to gauge feelings toward democracy and its correlation with what citizens think about elections in their country. Our dataset features several items appropriate for tapping pro-democratic attitudes. One of them is proposed as follows: *Democracy is always preferable to any other form of government*.[6]

Interviewees could react to this item on a five-step scale: strongly agree (1), agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree (5). We prefer to reverse the scale so that high values correspond to solid support for democracy. Given this variable's orientation and the orientation of the dichotomous variable measuring the perception of electoral integrity, we expect a positive correlation between them.

A remarkable stream of literature argues that the so-called winner-loser gap prominently influences several types of voters' attitudes and opinions (Anderson et al. 2005). For each voter, the status of winner or loser is simply a consequence of voting for a party winning or losing a given election. In turn, a party is said to be a winner when, after the election, it enters the next government. At the same time, a losing party is relegated to opposition or eventually excluded from parliament. During the 2022 parliamentary election, four parties – Fratelli d'Italia, Lega, Forza Italia, and Noi Moderati – participated in the right-wing electoral coalition and then formed the incumbent government; thus, they are the winners according to the above criteria. The definition of the status of the losing party is a little more complicated because of party fragmentation and some characteristics of the mixed electoral system. Four parties – Partito Democratico, Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, Più Europa, and Impegno Civico – joined a left-wing coalition and were defeated, and three out of these are currently in the parliamentary opposition. At the same time, Impegno Civico did not win any seats. Movimento 5 Stelle and Azione-Italia Viva did not join any coalition, entered the parliament, and are now in opposition. Sud chiama Nord is a local party that fielded candidates only in Sicily, gained a single seat, and its sole representative is now in the opposition. All other parties were unable to surpass the electoral threshold in the proportional competition or win a single-member district race. Therefore, they are excluded from parliament and, by definition, cannot enter or support the incumbent government.[7]

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[6] Q04a. La democrazia è sempre e comunque preferibile a qualsiasi altra forma di governo.

[7] Most of the parties out of parliament are left-wing; thus, their supporters add the frustration of loser's status to ideological aversion for the incumbent government. This is not true for Italexit and Vita, two small right-wing parties advocating Eurosceptical and no-vax positions. It is plausible that their voters are satisfied with the government. However, this is a different attitude from the perception of electoral integrity we are focusing on, so we maintain them in the losers' camp.

In our dataset, we have recoded voters as winners (1) or losers (0) according to their answers to the question: *For which of the following parties did you vote in the Chamber election held last September 25?*[8]

In the same mood as the advocates of the winner-loser gap, we claim that the psychological satisfaction bred by the electoral victory of the supported party produces a sense of appreciation for the electoral process, while disappointment due to defeat drives losing voters to question the correctness of the election administration. Given the orientation of the involved variables, we anticipate a positive relationship between the winner-loser status and the perception of election integrity.

Citizens' levels of information and political competence change with their use of mass media. Both common sense and research agree that 'mediavores' with frequent media use develop a more accurate picture of political affairs (Coffé 2017). Of course, current media fragmentation offers citizens several opportunities to approach domestic and international politics, and the problem arises of the outlets to be considered for correctly representing media effects on public opinion. In addition, the Itanes dataset features several items to grasp traditional and new Internet-based media. Referring to the former, we prefer to concentrate on television. Although current conventional media also include radios and newspapers, we maintain that television is still the more familiar source of information for most citizens; thus, focusing on it allows us to provide a realistic and parsimonious picture of media consumption. The Italian system is partitioned into public and private media firms, each having a clear political standing and a well-entrenched relationship with segments of voters. Accordingly, we use two different items to identify voters' television use and preferences: *During the last election campaign, in a typical week, how many days a week did you:* 1. *watch the news on RAI channels?* 2. *watch the news on a private network (Mediaset, La7, Sky, etc.)?*[9]

These variables are calculated using an 8-point scale from 1 (no use of television) to 8 (used every day). Scholars investigating the consequences of television watching are divided into pessimists fearing growing cynicism (Putnam 2000; Sartori 1989) and those arguing that attention to the news reinforces civic disengagement instead (Norris 2000). Our items deal with serious politics rather than tabloidization or infotainment. Thus, we expect frequent watchers to develop a more accurate perception of electoral administration, and the expected correlation with our dependent variable is positive.

Besides traditional media such as television, new social media are becoming increasingly important in political communication. Our dataset contains some items dedicated to them, and we have selected the following: *And during the last electoral campaign, in a typical week, how many days a week did you use social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.) to follow news on parties and candidates?*[10]

The respondents' answers are collected utilizing the same 1-8 scale to assess television use. Yet, in this case, we have no clear expectations about the likely correlation with the dependent variable. Social media are valuable tools for acquiring a high level of

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[8] Q10LHb. Per quale dei seguenti partiti ha votato alla Camera lo scorso 25 settembre?

[9] Q02. Durante la scorsa campagna elettorale, in una settimana tipo, quanti giorni a settimana lei ha: Q02a. Guardato il telegiornale sui canali RAI? Q02b. Guardato il telegiornale su una rete privata (Mediaset, La7, Sky, etc.)?

[10] Q02f. E durante la scorsa campagna elettorale, in una settimana tipo, quanti giorni a settimana lei ha utilizzato i social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.) per seguire le notizie su partiti e candidati?

information. However, due to warranted open access, they are also an instrument for vehiculating fake news and distorting knowledge. Thus, their impact on voters' perceptions of electoral integrity is unclear.

2.3. Control variables

Besides the critical variables discussed above, we also use some standard control variables that are, in principle, capable of influencing voters' perceptions. The first set of control variables captures voters' political characteristics. Interest in politics is measured on a 4-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much). We expect that interested citizens will be more involved and knowledgeable; therefore, they will develop an accurate point of view about the integrity of the 2022 parliamentary election, and the correlation with the perceptions of electoral integrity will be positive.

Voters' self-location on the left-right continuum is collected on a 0-10 scale, with a low score corresponding to left-wing and a high score to right-wing positions. We do not have a theory-driven expectation about its correlation with the perceptions of electoral integrity. However, some researchers have found that 'voters for right-wing parties may be more concerned with electoral fraud than voters for left-wing parties' (Fisher and Sällberg 2020, 408). Thus, we predict a negative relationship between self-location and visions of electoral integrity.

By political efficacy, scholars mean that, in citizens' views, participation is relevant to drive government decisions and that individuals matter in politics. This concept may be split into two components: voters experiment with external efficacy when they think the political system is open to their requests and the political authorities are influenced by their opinions; instead, voters experience internal efficacy when they are confident in their skills for understanding political affairs. The questionnaire administered by Itanes in 2022 included items tapping both dimensions, but for our goals, we prefer using only the question referring to internal efficacy: *Do you feel you understand what the most important political issues are in the country?*[11]

The item for external efficacy focuses on clearly alternative political offers by parties instead of overlapping programs. Thus, it seems especially tailored to predict political alienation and propensity to turnout. Having to do with the perceptions of electoral integrity, the just reported item is more promising because it may be considered a proxy for political involvement and political competence in addition to measuring internal efficacy. Interviewees may answer using a five-step scale anchored to 'strongly disagree' (1) and 'strongly agree' (5). As may be inferred from Karp, Nai and Norris (2018), we expect a positive relationship with the variable measuring the perceptions of electoral integrity.

The second set of control variables includes voters' sociodemographic characteristics. Age distinguishes six groups, with the youngest voters aged 18, the minimum age required for voting according to the Italian electoral legislation. As Cantú and García-Ponce have found that 'older citizens are more likely to have positive perceptions about the integrity of the election' (2015, 10), we suppose there will be a positive relationship with our dependent variable.

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[11] Q03. Lei sente di capire quali sono i temi politici più importanti nel paese?

Gender is a dummy, scoring (0) for women and (1) for men. As Cantú and García-Ponce (2015, 9) have discovered that women are less confident than men, we anticipate a positive relation between gender and perceptions of electoral integrity in our data. Education is a three-mode variable: less than primary, primary, and lower secondary (1); upper secondary and post-secondary (2); tertiary education (3). In general, educated people are more sophisticated and able to reach a correct vision of politics; therefore, we expect a positive correlation with confidence in electoral fairness. Income partitions voters into five classes, with the lowest echelon grouping those with an income from 0 to 19,990 euros and the highest with those earning more than 80,000. Extending the logic of modernization theories, Frank and Martínez i Coma (2017) find that developed countries have a higher electoral integrity. Moving to the individual level, we suppose that wealthier individuals may have greater confidence in election integrity, creating a positive correlation with the dependent variable. Among other things, income is often related to other relevant variables, such as education. Finally, we use two contextual variables. City dimension is a 6-class variable, with the smallest towns having up to 5,000 inhabitants and the largest having more than 250,000. The variable 'macroregion' acknowledges the importance of territorial differences by partitioning Italy into five geopolitical zones. In both cases, we have no expectations about the likely effect of these variables.

3. Results

3.1. Bivariate analysis

This section examines the bivariate relationships between the dependent variable measured as a dummy and the several independent variables discussed in the above section. To begin with, Tables 2 to 4 present the frequencies of each independent variable in relation to the perception of electoral integrity.

Table 2 shows a linear relationship between pro-democratic attitudes and the perceptions of electoral integrity: as the intensity of pro-democratic attitudes increases, the perception of the regularity of the election grows. The figures in Table 3 are equally clear. Those who voted for a winning party are over-represented among those who perceive the election as regular (+5.8 percentage points); conversely, those who voted for the losers are underrepresented (-3.3 percentage points). Thus, electoral integrity perceptions are influenced by long-lasting attitudes about democracy and short-term factors due to election results.

Table 2. Pro-democratic attitudes per perceptions of electoral integrity

Democracy always preferable	Irregular election	Regular election
Strongly disagree	45.7	54.3
Quite disagree	44.6	55.4
Neither agree nor disagree	44.0	56.0
Quite agree	34.1	65.9
Strongly agree	20.9	79.1
All voters	29.6	70.4
N	1063	2533

Source: own elaboration of ITANES 2022. Note: percentual values.

Table 3. Winner-loser status per perceptions of electoral integrity

Winner-loser status	Irregular election	Regular election
Losers	25.3	74.7
Winners	16.2	83.8
All voters	22.0	78.0
N	578	2047

Source: own elaboration of ITANES 2022. Note: percentual values.

Table 4. Media use per perceptions of electoral integrity

Media use per week	Public television use		Private television use		Social media use	
	Irregular elections	Regular elections	Irregular elections	Regular elections	Irregular elections	Regular elections
Never	29.4	70.6	30.9	69.1	19.6	80.4
One day	35.1	64.9	42.8	57.2	31.7	68.3
Two days	37.6	62.4	39.6	60.4	43.8	56.2
Three days	39.7	60.3	47.2	52.8	40.8	59.2
Four days	40.1	59.9	35.5	64.5	46.4	53.6
Five days	30.6	69.4	22.6	77.4	36.4	63.6
Six days	26.7	73.3	24.6	75.4	32.7	67.3
Every day	19.1	80.9	17.7	82.3	24.4	75.6
All voters	29.6	70.4	29.8	70.2	29.8	70.2
N	1066	2531	1074	2528	1051	2470

Source: own elaboration of ITANES 2022. Note: percentual values.

The relationship between media use and the dependent variable is less linear, although some trends can be seen in Table 4. Firstly, among those who never watch the news on TV – public or private – the share of those who trust the regularity of the elections is higher than those who follow the information occasionally (from one to four or five days a week). Secondly, when TV news is followed with some regularity – starting from four times a week – there is a growing trend in the percentage of those who perceive elections as fair. The same trend also affects social media users. In short, whether it is news from TV or social media, people who never seek information and those who often do so have a positive attitude toward the electoral process.

How can we try to explain this apparent paradox? Firstly, it should be noted that those who never seek information through TV have a sociodemographic profile similar to the rest of the sample. Therefore, we can exclude the fact that the trend of this relationship is due to the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. Conversely, a further explanation can be sought in the high age of those who have never used social media as a source of information. In fact, according to our dataset, 79.2 percent of those over 64 years old believe that the elections were held fairly. This percentage is the highest of the six age groups into which the sample is divided.

That said, exploring their respective association through a correlation matrix seems appropriate to assess if and to what extent the selected variables are related (see Table 2A in the Appendix). Concerning the key variables, all correlations are statistically significant except for the relationship between 'perceptions of electoral integrity' and 'social media use'. However, none has particularly robust coefficients, suggesting that multicollinearity problems should not affect the multivariate model. In particular, the

strongest correlation is between the use of public television and the use of private television. However, the coefficient is somewhat limited, being equal to 0.367. Regardless of the sign of the relationship, all the others are between 0.018 and 0.248: very low values. Given the bivariate analysis results, we can introduce all key variables into multivariate models. The only exception is social media use, which, as anticipated, is not correlated to the dependent variable.

Multicollinearity does not regard control variables either, as there are no robust coefficients concerning their mutual correlations or their relationship with the dependent and independent variables. In only five cases, the coefficient is greater than 0.3: internal efficacy and interest in politics (0.375); pro-democratic attitudes and internal efficacy (0.338); social media use and interest in politics (0.323); age and education (-0.316); winner-loser gap and left-right self-location (0.307).

3.2. Multivariate analysis

As a preliminary point, it has to be noted that the number of cases in the logistic regression is less than the total number of cases. This is because if there is a missing value for any variable in the model, the entire case is excluded from the analysis.

The logit models in Table 5 show that some key variables have a statistically significant relationship with the dependent variables. Looking at Model 1, which was run without control variables, a positive relationship emerges, as expected, between the dependent variable and the pro-democratic attitude. In other words, people who support democracy think the 2022 Italian election was regular. For example, respondents who do not have a pro-democratic attitude, compared to strongly pro-democracy people, have a lower probability (-50,1 percent) of evaluating the elections as regular.[12] With few differences, the trend is the same for those who have a less hostile attitude towards democracy but are not firmly in favor of it. Moreover, looking at Model 2, introducing political, sociodemographic, and contextual control variables is essentially irrelevant to the relationship between pro-democratic attitudes and evaluating the fairness of elections.

Our expectations are confirmed concerning another key variable: the winner-loser gap. Both models show, without particular differences, that those who voted for a losing party have a much lower probability of perceiving the elections as fair than those who voted for a winning one. The introduction of control variables, while reducing the gap between the two groups of respondents, does not alter the statistical significance of the relationship.

The last two critical independent variables concern the frequency with which respondents gather information about collective issues. As anticipated, regression models do not include the use of social media but only the frequency with which voters watch news on public television and private networks. The relationship between the variable 'public television use' and the dependent variable is not statistically significant and, in any case, the coefficient is close to 1, which implies a zero effect. Conversely, the 'private television use' variable has a statistically significant coefficient in both models.

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[12] The exponentiated coefficient, which in this case is equal to 0.499, is an odds ratio and can be easily transformed into a percentage variation, according to the following expression: (0.499-1) X 100 = -50.1.

Although the relationship is positive, its intensity is very close to 1; therefore, there is no relevant effect on the dependent variable.[13]

Although control variables are not reported in Table 5, it is worth looking at them more closely. A comparison between Models 1 and 2 shows that adding them to the basic model – where only the key variables are used – does not alter the results. However, while political variables – interest in politics, internal efficacy, and left-right self-positioning – only sporadically achieve statistical significance, their inclusion reduces the probability of perceiving the election as fair by 39 percent, almost ten percentage points less than Model 1.[14]

Unlike political predictors, sociodemographics significantly correlated with the dependent variable. However, their introduction does not affect the impact of key independent variables on the perceptions of electoral integrity. Focusing on age, it emerges that, other things being equal, younger age cohorts, compared to those over 64, are less likely to perceive the 2022 election as fair. As expected, a positive relationship exists between age and the perception of electoral integrity. While being male or female makes a somewhat limited difference in the perception of the integrity of elections, education level is quite relevant. All other things being equal, those with primary rather than university education are about 50 percent less likely to perceive elections as fair. Conversely, income is not statistically significant, although the sign of the relationship goes in the expected direction.

The last group of controls consists of context variables, whose introduction does not substantively impact the relationship between independent variables and the perception of electoral integrity. Only the demographic size of the municipality of residence has a relevant impact. Compared to those who live in large cities, those who reside in municipalities with up to 30,000 inhabitants have a much higher probability of perceiving the 2022 parliamentary election as fair. In light of what has been said about education levels, this finding seems counterintuitive as the incidence of people with high levels of education is higher in larger cities. However, it can be explained by considering the role played by the interaction of gender and education. Firstly, it must be considered that women in small municipalities, compared to those living in cities over 30,000, are more likely to consider elections as fair. Therefore, including 'gender' in the equation contributes decisively to determining the negative relationship between the size of the municipality of residence and the propensity to perceive elections as fair. Of course, it is not so much gender that is relevant, but its interaction with the level of education. We know that women are underrepresented in the upper secondary and tertiary levels of education. We also know this is due to the limited percentage of women with high

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[13] Negative odds ratios can only vary between 0 and 1, and positive odds can take any value greater than 1, which suggests caution when comparing odds greater than 1 to less than 1. According to some scholars (Pisati 2003), a positive odds ratio equal to v has the same intensity as a negative odds ratio equal to $1/v$. This further reduces the impact of the positive coefficient associated with the variable 'private television use'.

[14] A full presentation of the multivariate models, including all the control variables, is reported in Table 3A in the Appendix.

education levels (upper secondary and tertiary) in municipalities under 100,000 inhabitants.[15]

To sum up, according to the results of the multivariate analysis, the voter who has the highest probability of perceiving the elections as fair has a pro-democratic attitude, supports a winning party, does not show any peculiar media exposure, and is a male over 64 years old, living in a municipality of under 30,000 inhabitants, and with a high level of education.

Table 5. Determinants of perceptions of electoral integrity

	Model 1		Model 2[(a)]	
	S.E.	Exp (B)	S.E.	Exp (B)
Pro-democratic attitudes Reference: strongly agree				
Strongly disagree	0.403	0.499*	0.436	0.542
Quite disagree	0.329	0.507**	0.373	0.445**
Neither agree nor disagree	0.187	0.377***	0.205	0.463***
Quite agree	0.133	0.463***	0.145	0.478***
Winners and losers Reference: winners				
Losers	0.131	0.504***	0.184	0.610***
Public television use during the campaign	0.023	1.004	0.025	0.985
Private television use during the campaign	0.024	1.097***	0.026	1.114***
Constant		5.638		5.030
N		2311		2311
Nagelkerke R square		0.074		0.130

Source: own elaboration of ITANES 2022. Note: * = p<0.1; ** = p<0.05; *** = p<0.01. Note: * = p<0.1; ** = p<0.05; *** = p<0.01.
Notes: (a): control variables are: interest in politics, internal efficacy, left-right self-positioning, age, gender, education, income, city dimension, and area.

4. Conclusion

The quality of the electoral process can be examined from an objective point of view, using expert judgments and election results, and from a subjective one, using the perceptions of the voters, the elected representatives, and practitioners. Assuming the latter perspective, in this article, we have examined the quality of the 2022 Italian parliamentary election, taking into account the voter perceptions reported in the post-election survey conducted by Itanes.

The empirical analysis has highlighted two relevant findings. The first certifies the existence of a strong relationship between the idea that democracy is always preferable to any other form of government and a high perception of electoral integrity. From the theoretical point of view, we have assigned to this relationship a causal mechanism,

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[15] While, overall, 39.6 percent of women have an upper secondary education level, in municipalities up to 5,000 inhabitants this is 33.9; 32.0 in the range 5,001-10,000; 40.5 in the range 10,001-30,000; 38.2 in the range 30,001-100,000; 48.1 in the range 100,001-250,000; 44.1 over 250,000. Women who have a tertiary education equal 16.7 percent overall. In the six bands of municipalities, the percentage is 13.0 percent up to 5,000 inhabitants.; 12.1 in the range 5,001-10,000; 10.8 in the range 10,001-30,000; 14.7 in the range 30,001-100,000; 23.1 in the range 100,001-250,000; 26.0 over 250,000.

according to which the first variable impacts the second. The other – and more relevant – finding shows how the perception of the quality of elections is strongly influenced by satisfaction with the election result. Therefore, those who voted for the competition's winners are more likely to consider the election fair than those who voted for the losers.

The first result has no particular implications. It would indeed be rather curious to discover that a voter has an appreciation for democracy and at the same time perceives elections – that is, the main instrument of the democratic method – to be unfair or irregular.

Conversely, the second finding is much more important and has implications for future research. Although a plurality of both winner and loser voters are confident that the election has been conducted fairly, there are substantial differences between these two groups. Compared to the former, we know that the latter are less likely to consider the elections fair. This means that electoral outcome strongly affects voters' perceptions of electoral integrity. Therefore, this approach seems too context-dependent to ensure a reliable measure of electoral integrity. However, knowing that it also depends on the election's outcome is still essential as it sheds light on the volatility of perceptions and helps us to be very cautious in generalizing the results.

Moreover, we must remember that this exploratory analysis concerns only one country and one election. To strengthen the findings of this research, it is urgent to extend the number of cases by increasing the number of elections and including countries other than Italy in the analysis.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Table 1A. List of the independent variables and their expected correlation with the dependent variable

Status	Name	Expected correlation
Key variables	Pro-democratic attitudes	Positive
	Winner-loser	Positive
	Public television use	Positive
	Private television use	Positive
	Social media use	Unclear
Political control variables	Interest in politics	Positive
	Left-right self-location	Negative
	Internal efficacy	Positive
Sociodemographic control variables	Age	Positive
	Gender	Positive
	Education	Positive
	Income	Positive
Contextual control variables	City dimension	Unclear
	Macro region	Unclear

Source: own elaboration

Table 2A. All variables, matrix of correlations

Variables	Perceptions electoral integrity	Pro-democratic attitudes	Winner-loser	Public television use	Private television use	Social media use	Interest in politics	Internal efficacy	L-R self-location	Age	Gender	Education	Income	City dimension	Macro region
El. Integrity perceptions	1														
Pro-dem attitudes	0.184**	1													
Winner-loser	-0.184**	-0.248**	1												
Public television use	0.078**	0.110**	-0.096**	1											
Private television use	0.141**	0.078**	-0.048**	0.367**	1										
Social media use	-0.018	0.660**	-0.133**	0.129**	0.165**	1									
Interest in politics	0.084**	0.201**	-0.224**	0.174**	0.190**	0.323**	1								
Internal efficacy	0.134**	0.338**	-0.141**	0.081**	0.117**	0.173**	0.375**	1							
L-R self-location	0.023	-0.197**	0.307**	-0.076**	0.064**	0.044**	0.066**	-0.12	1						
Age	0.130**	0.090**	-0.029*	0.154**	0.092**	0.090**	-0.019	0.055**	0.064**	1					
Gender	0.070**	0.063**	-0.096**	-0.024	0.024	0.026	0.210**	0.114**	0.009	0.066**	1				
Education	0.053**	0.084**	-0.108**	0.019	0.019	0.098**	0.216**	0.100**	-0.099**	0.316**	0.046**	1			
Income	0.087**	0.056**	-0.035*	0.057**	0.086**	0.068**	0.164**	0.053**	0.040*	-0.030*	0.138**	0.278**	1		
City dimension	-0.014	0.060**	-0.420**	0.037**	0.021	0.045**	0.066**	0.055**	-0.050**	-0.021	0.026	0.151**	0.068**	1	
Macro region	-0.048**	0.022	-0.021	0.054**	0.007	0.059**	0.037**	0.040**	-0.017	-0.048**	0.037**	0.061**	-0.138**	0.013	1

Source: own elaboration of 2022 ITANES data. Note: ** $p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; coefficients are Kendall's tau-b.

Table 3A. Determinants of perceptions of election integrity

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	S.E.	Exp (B)	S.E.	Exp (B)	S.E.	Exp (B)	S.E.	Exp (B)
Pro-democratic attitudes (Ref. cat. = strongly agree)								
Strongly disagree	0.403	0.499*	0.425	0.483*	0.432	0.542	0.436	0.542
Quite disagree	0.329	0.507**	0.362	0.409**	0.366	0.454**	0.373	0.445**
Neither agree nor disagree	0.187	0.377***	0.199	0.403***	0.202	0.459***	0.205	0.463***
Quite agree	0.133	0.463***	0.138	0.436***	0.143	0.496***	0.145	0.478***
Winners and losers (Ref. cat. = winners)								
Losers	0.131	0.504***	0.179	0.609***	0.182	0.621***	0.184	0.610***
Public television use during the campaign	0.023	1.004	0.024	1.006	0.025	0.984	0.025	0.985
Private television use during the campaign	0.024	1.097***	0.025	1.099***	0.025	1.102***	0.026	1.114***
Interest in politics (Ref. cat. = very interested)								
Not at all			0.505	1.830	0.512	1.932	0.513	2.030
A little			0.203	1.097	0.213	1.268	0.216	1.330
Somewhat			0.162	1.277	0.166	1.339*	0.169	1.351*
Internal efficacy (Ref. cat. = strongly agree)								
Strongly disagree			0.641	0.486	0.653	0.442	0.656	0.487
Quite disagree			0.347	1.460	0.351	1.475	0.358	1.330
Neither agree nor disagree			0.205	0.781	0.209	0.786	0.212	0.753
Quite agree			0.168	1.182	0.171	1.113	0.173	1.052
Left-right self-positioning			0.027	1.049*	0.027	1.042	0.028	1.036
Age (Ref. cat. = over 64)								
18-24					0.254	0.525**	0.256	0.521**
25-34					0.215	0.424***	0.216	0.434***
35-44					0.205	0.487***	0.206	0.495***
45-54					0.190	0.590***	0.192	0.556***
55-64					0.189	0.670**	0.191	0.657**
Gender (Ref. cat. = male)								
Female					0.124	0.790*	0.126	0.801*
Education (Ref. cat. = tertiary education)								
Less than primary, primary, and low secondary					0.196	0.648**	0.200	0.592***
Upper secondary and post-secondary					0.169	0.764	0.172	0.730*
Income (Ref. cat. = over 80,000)								
0-19,990					0.361	0.805	0.365	0.765
20,000-39,990					0.353	1.096	0.355	1.052
40,000-59,990					0.366	1.059	0.369	0.997
60,000-79,990					0.458	1.544	0.461	1.526
City dimension (Ref. cat. = over 250,000)								
Up to 5,000							0.245	2.504***
5,001-10,000							0.214	1.605**
10,001-30,000							0.188	1.576**
30,001-100,000							0.174	1.130
100,001-250,000							0.228	1.382
Area (Ref. cat. = islands)								
North-west								1.244
North-east								1.215
Center								1.394
South								1.222
Constant		5.638		3.183		7.388		5.030
N		2311		2311		2311		2311
Nagelkerke R square		0.074		0.088		0.114		0.130

Source: own elaboration of 2022 ITANES data. Note: * = $p<0.1$; ** = $p<0.05$; *** = $p<0.01$. Logit model. Dependent variable: 1 = 2022 parliamentary election has been regular; 0 = 2022 parliamentary election has been irregular.