

# The informational effect of candidate’s traits on voter behavior. A survey experiment for the municipal elections of Rome (Italy).

## PRE- ANALYSIS PLAN

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## Introduction and Motivation

Political accountability is the quintessential ingredient for a working democracy. Where political accountability is strong, citizens should be able to substantially, influence, monitor, and evaluate policies.

To be sure, this is not the case in all democracies (and, of course, authoritarian regimes).

There are several reasons that hinder full political accountability. Above all, behavioral and psychological obstacles: many citizens are simply not interested in politics or have limited cognitive and intellectual capacities to give unbiased and rational political and economic judgments (Brennan, 2016; Caplan, 2011; Leiser & Shemesh, 2018).

One of the determinants of these behaviors might be traced back to the fact that voters have often very poor information about politicians<sup>1</sup>. While politicians might have a strong incentive to cover or manipulate information that regards them.

This asymmetry in the disposal of information has driven the demand for greater *political transparency*.

There is some sense that if we provide voters with more information about representatives, increasing *political transparency*, then politicians could be held more accountable. For this reason, a variety of institutions (both governmental and non-governmental) have taken several policy initiatives intending to increase *political transparency*<sup>2</sup>.

In the last decade, an emerging academic and policy-oriented literature, mostly based on randomized control trials (RCT), has adduced evidence about the effect of political transparency on accountability (Dunning et al., 2019). While the literature is still growing, the results insofar are from being encouraging: in most of the cases the impact of *political transparency* on voter behavior is either null or small (Bank, 2016; Dunning et al., 2019). Despite these disappointing results, the literature on this topic continues to advance<sup>3</sup>.

Through a brief analysis of the literature, we can highlight two important points: first, most of this literature has focused its attention on the capability of sanctioning incumbent performance. The typical experiment regards providing voters with information on incumbent performance (legislative activity, efforts, etc...)<sup>4</sup>. Second, the bulk of the literature on this topic focused especially on developing countries, where often a general lack of freedom of expression (and transparency) makes the availability of information very limited.

While we follow this literature, we differ on two main aspects. First, we focus on the capability of voters to evaluate ex-ante candidates' potential. That is, we do not focus only on the mechanisms of “sanctioning” incumbent performance. Instead, we look at the informational effect of basic characteristics that describe the ex-

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<sup>1</sup> At times, voters even lack basic knowledge, such as how they can express their vote.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of this intervention in developing countries, see <https://epod.cid.harvard.edu/project/power-transparency-urban-municipal-elections>. In Italy we can mention at least two examples of this type of campaigns: The first is a campaign from “Riparte il Futuro” (now The Good Lobby), the second is a campaign “La carta del candidato trasparente” from Carte in regola. <https://www.thegoodlobby.it/campagne/sai-chi-voti/> <https://www.carteinregola.it/index.php/perunapoliticatrasparentedemocratica/carta-della-candidata-e-del-candidato-trasparente/>

<sup>3</sup> The literature seem to be turning into understanding the causal mechanisms and the specific context under which *political transparency* can impact politics. For instance, some information might simply not be relevant for voters, and *political transparency* should be sustained over time and not just before the election (Bhandari et al., n.d.; Grossman et al., 2020).

<sup>4</sup> This is the case for example in all the studies in the Metaketa I initiative (Dunning et al., 2019), as well in other (Bhandari et al., n.d.; Dunning et al., 2019; Pande, 2011; Pande et al., 2012, 2014)

ante candidate's potential. When we use this approach, we encompass the fact that voters might look at elections as a selection mechanism rather than a sanctioning mechanism (Ashworth, 2012; Fearon, 1999). Second, we move the lens of investigation to the municipal elections of a Western democracy (Rome, Italy), in a context where the availability of information about candidates is supposedly less scarce than in developing countries.

Specifically, we evaluate the effect of providing voters with a set of information about candidates' curriculum. The set of information is comprised of basic information deducted from candidates' curriculum (education, work, and political experience).

We believe it worthy to study these characteristics of candidates (instead of past performance) for a variety of reasons.

**First**, these characteristics (education, work and political experience) have been proven to impact voter behavior that uses these traits as shortcuts to evaluate candidates (Campbell & Cowley, 2014; Mechtel, 2014).

**Second**, the information we provide is very basic, e.g. it does not require any kind of political sophistication

**Third**, we can evaluate the impact on candidates that have no experience. It is worth mentioning that non-incumbent candidates (freshmen) are the most numerous candidates in the multi-member electoral system.

**Fourth**, in our case study, we use information that is, in principle, already available to the public. However, this information is difficult to collect and process. The high number of candidates (more than 4000) makes the use of this information quite difficult to summarize for the average voter. That is, we increase the usability of this information, and we reduce the cost of access by delivering voters an easy-readable summary.

**Fifth**, the set of information is taken from compulsory transparency requirements introduced by law against corruption recently introduced ("Legge spazzacorrotti"). This ensures the non-partisanship of information.

**Sixth**, the informational campaign we organized mimics some real examples of the campaign organized by civil society in Italy. We are thus replicating a previous real case where civil society organizations try to use *political transparency* as an instrument for influencing elections (See Note 2).

## Context of the experiment

Our case study is the election of the Mayor and the 48 members of the Council Assembly of the Rome Municipality (*Assemblea Capitolina*) that will take place in September 2021.

The electoral rules (Law 81 of 1993) establish two rounds. In the first round, voters can express a vote for a mayor and a list linked (or not) to the mayor. Within the selected lists, voters can express a maximum of two preferences (of a different gender) for specific candidates at the council assembly. If no mayor candidates obtained more than 50% of the votes, the two most voted candidates go to the runoff election in the second round. Once the winner mayor candidate is determined, the lists supporting them get at least 60% percent of the seats in the Council assembly.

In the last 2016 Elections, there were 13 candidates for mayor, 34 lists, and 1519 candidates (211 female) for the Council Assembly. The election for the mayor was won by a woman candidate, Virginia Raggi, supported by the Five Star Movement.

Turnout was 62.47 % (1.3 million voters out of 2.09 eligible voters). In total, voters expressed 286,448 preferences for candidates at the Council Assembly (0.22 preferences per voters on average), of which 30461 went to women candidates (10%).

At the time of this writing, Virginia Raggi (incumbent supported by Five Star Movement) and Carlo Calenda (supported by Azione, a small liberal party) have declared that they will surely run as candidates. The two other major coalitions (Partito Democratico and the Centre-Right coalition) still have to define their nominations.

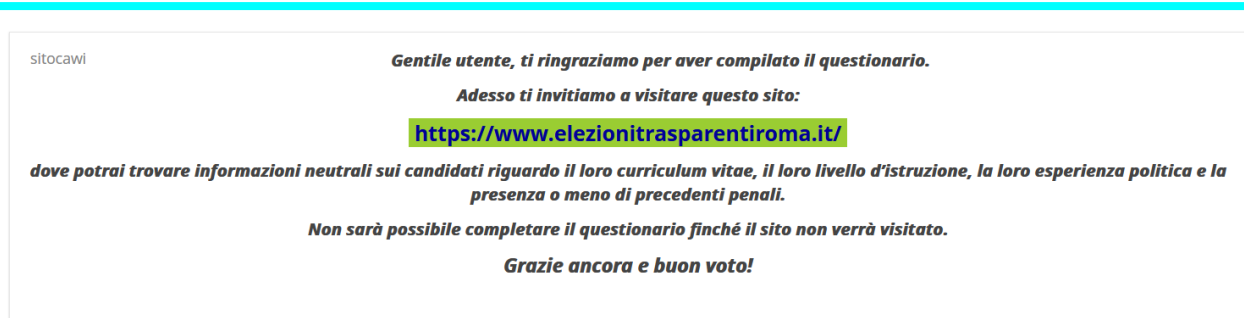
## Description of the experiment

To evaluate the impact of *political transparency* on voting behavior we organized a dedicated campaign on transparency of the candidates. The campaign reconstructs information from all curricula vitae presented by all the candidates for transparency requirements. Since the information comes in the form of long curriculum vitae, we extrapolate the more salient characteristics (education, job experience, political experience) and structure this information in a tabular format. This information is then converted into a simple and light website where the visitor can see information about the candidates ([www.elezionitrasparentiroma.it](http://www.elezionitrasparentiroma.it)). To evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign, we organized a panel survey experiment where we will expose treatment group individuals to the campaign while covering the campaign to control group individuals.

The sample of our panel survey experiment is comprised of N=1000 eligible voters in the Rome area.

We will ask respondents to fill two online questionnaires (CAWI) before and after the election day. In the first questionnaire (3-4 days before the election day) we will ask the demographical and attitude characteristics of the respondents. In the second questionnaire (a week after the election day) we will ask all respondents to report their vote choice. The core of the experiment consists of the submission of an informational treatment to a sub-sample of treated units T=500 that we will randomly select from the main sample.

The informational treatment is an invitation to visit a website with information about candidates through a link. This treatment is submitted just after the last question of the first survey. At that moment, the treated units will see on their screen the following message:



### \*Translation

Dear user, thank you for answering the questions.

Now we invite you to visit this site:

<https://www.elezionitrasparentiroma.it/>

On the site you will find neutral information on candidates regarding their curriculum vitae, level of education, their political experience and whether or not they have a criminal record.

The information was produced by the candidates themselves pursuant to Law 3 of 9 January 2019.

It will not be possible to complete the questionnaire until the site is visited.

Thanks again and good vote!

By clicking on the link, the respondents will enter into this website [www.elezionitrasparentiroma.it](http://www.elezionitrasparentiroma.it), which is a website constructed specifically for the experiment.

Opening the link is compulsory to complete the full questionnaire.

Each respondent will receive a unique id and a unique link:

e.g. respondents with id 1,2,3 will receive three different URLs:

- [www.elezionitrasparenti.com/homepage-1/](http://www.elezionitrasparenti.com/homepage-1/)
- [www.elezionitrasparenti.com/homepage-2/](http://www.elezionitrasparenti.com/homepage-2/)
- [www.elezionitrasparenti.com/homepage-3/](http://www.elezionitrasparenti.com/homepage-3/)
- ..etc

While all the homepages are the same, the different URL will let us track each session using google analytics.

We will measure the intensity of the treatment TI as the amount of time spent on the website.

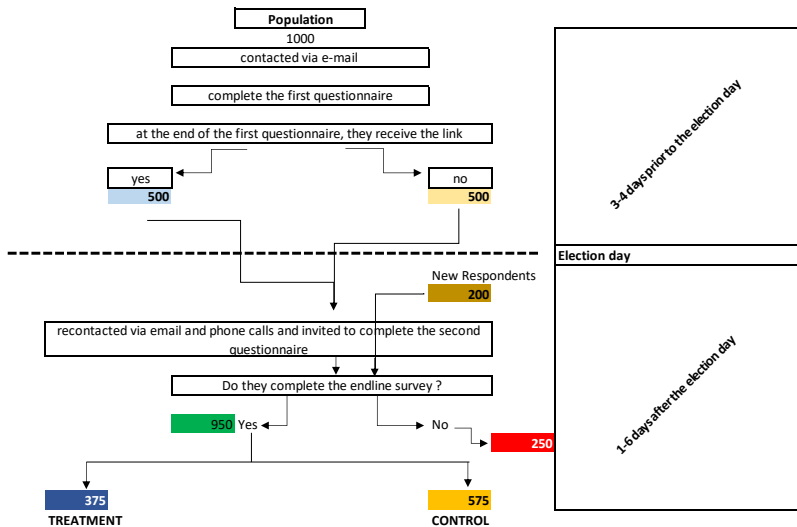
In case of a low attrition rate at the second stage, a limited number of new respondents will be asked to fill only the second questionnaire. Those new respondents will be assigned to the control group

Figure 1: Diagram of the experiment

Respondents	1000
% receive the link	50%
New Respondents	200
% attrition rate among treated	75%
% attrition rate among control	75%
% attrition rate among control (new respondents)	100%

	Respondents	New Respondents	Total
Treatment	375	0	375
Control	375	200	575

Numbers are indicative and might change based on actual behavior of respondents



## The hypothesis of the experiment

After the experiment is concluded and we will have collected all the data, we will test the impact of the informational treatment on the vote choice reported in the second questionnaire. Besides, we will also test coherence between attitude reported in the first questionnaire and actual vote choice reported in the second questionnaire.

We will estimate the models using the Logistic model when the response variable is a binary indicator.

### A – Impact on vote behavior

The impact on vote behavior will comprise a series of statistical tests where we will compare treated and untreated units' vote behavior. Vote behavior will be evaluated among several dimensions, including:

#### - A1: Turnout (vote extensity)

*we regress an equation:*

$$V_i = a_1 * T_i + u_i$$

, for each individual  $i$ , where  $T_i$  is treatment and  $V_i$  (**D2\_1**) is a dummy equal to 1 if individual  $i$  voted and 0 otherwise.

Are more informed individuals more/less likely to turn out?

H<sub>0</sub>: No,  $a_1 = 0$

H<sub>1</sub>: Yes,  $a_1 \neq 0$

#### - A2: Expression of a preference for *councilor candidate* and *mayor candidate* (vote intensity)

*we regress an equation:*

$$P_i = a_2 * T_i + u_i,$$

for each individual  $i$ , where  $T_i$  is treatment and  $P_i$  (**D2\_3**) is a dummy equal to 1 if individual  $i$  expressed a preference and 0 otherwise.

Are more informed individuals more/less likely to cast a preference vote?

H<sub>0</sub>: No,  $a_2 = 0$

H<sub>1</sub>: Yes,  $a_2 \neq 0$

#### - A3: Characteristic of the candidates that received the preference (vote choice): (**D2\_2-D2\_4**)

We will compare voter preferences of treated and untreated groups across several dimensions of the candidates, including:

-Gender, education, experience and, ideology.

*we regress a set of equations  $V_i = a_3 * T_i + u_i$ , for each individual  $i$ , where  $T$  is treatment and  $V$  can be Gender, Education, Experience and Ideology (party membership) of the candidates voted by the individual (both for mayors and councillors).*

Do more informed individuals more/less likely to cast a preference vote for a Women/Educated/Experienced candidate?

H<sub>0</sub>: No,  $a_3 = 0$

H<sub>1</sub>: Yes,  $a_3 \neq 0$

Mayors and councilors characteristics will be measured as follow:

-Gender (Female=0; Male=1)-Education (University Degree=1; Else =0)

-Experience (At least one previous political experience =1; Else=0)

-Ideology (Left (PAP, PRC and others at the left of PD); Centre-Left (PD and civic lists supporting Gualtieri ); 5 Star Movements; Centre-Right and Right)

We will explore the heterogeneity of the treatment effect along several dimension including:

-Political participation (party-member), civic participation (a member of the activist group), education level. **(D1\_6, D1\_7, D1\_3)**

*we regress a set of equations:*

$$V_i = b_1 * T_i + b_2 * P_i + a_4 * P_i * T_i + u_i,$$

*for each individual  $i$ , where  $T$  is treatment and  $V$  can be Gender, Education, Experience and Ideology (party membership) of the candidates voted by the individual.  $P$  can be the level of political participation, civic participation, or education level of the individual.*

Does a prior level of political participation influence the informational effect of casting a preference vote for a Women/Educated/Experienced candidate?

H<sub>0</sub>: No,  $a_4 = 0$

H<sub>1</sub>: Yes,  $a_4 \neq 0$

## B – Attitudes and vote behavior

The second part of the results will analyze voters' perception about transparency and demand for candidates' quality and their actual voting behavior. We will thus carry a series of statistical tests comparing answers reported in the first survey compared to answers reported in the second survey.

- B1 - Ideal Candidate and vote behavior

We will compare the matching between:

-the profile of the ideal candidate reported by the interviewer and the actual preference expressed.

we regress an equation:

$$AC_i = b_1 * T_i * AI_i + b_3 * AI_i + u_i,$$

where  $AI$  (**D1\_11**) is the attribute of the ideal candidate as reported by the individual  $i$ . And  $AC$  is the same attribute of the candidate voted by the individual. The attribute can be the level of education or the level of experience. For example, we compare how the individual responds to the following question “Do you think the ideal candidate should have at least a university degree?”, and compare their answer with the level of education of the candidate for which they voted. Or, for example, we ask “Do you think women should be more represented in Politics?” and compare if the voter actually expressed a preference for a women candidate.  $T_i$  is a dummy if the individual belongs to the treated units.

Does the informational effect influence the matching between preference expressed and actual vote behavior?

H<sub>0</sub>: No,  $b_1 = 0$

H<sub>1</sub>: Yes,  $b_1 \neq 0$

Does preference expressed predict actual vote behavior?

H<sub>0</sub>: No,  $b_3 = 0$

H<sub>1</sub>: Yes,  $b_3 \neq 0$

B2 – Demand for transparency and use of transparency.

We will compare the matching between

-the demand for transparency expressed by voters and the actual use of the information.

we regress an equation:

$$R_i = b_2 * D_i + u_i,$$

where  $D$  is the answer of the individual to the question “are you interested in political transparency”, “do you think political transparency is important” (**D1\_16**), and  $R$  is a dummy on whether the respondent opened the link with the information set.

Does the revealed demand for transparency predicts the use of transparency?

H<sub>0</sub>: No,  $b_2 = 0$

H<sub>1</sub>: Yes,  $b_2 \neq 0$



## Representativity of the sample

We will analyze and discuss the representativity of the final sample (respondent of the first and second questionnaire) for:

- Sample of all the respondents of the first questionnaire
- Total population of Rome (using the survey “Aspetti della Vita Quotidiana” from the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) that contains the same questions)

The analysis will comprise balance tests and computation of selection propensity score (probability of being in the final sample) among sex, age, Education, Area of residence (Municipio), Political Participation, Participation in the electoral campaign (**D1\_1 to D1\_9** of the baseline questionnaire).

After having computed the propensity scores we will repeat and provide results of testing the hypothesis of the experiment using the propensity scores as weight in the regression models (as suggested by Stuart et al. 2011).

We will additionally investigate the heterogeneity of the treatment effects for all hypotheses using treatment intensity TI measured as the amount of time spent on the website (see *Description of the Experiment* section above)

## Statistical power analysis

We conduct a statistical power analysis for our hypothesis using priors based on the results of the last elections or we create our estimates when information is missing.

Table 1 reports the Minimum Detectable Effect (MDE) for the industry-standard level of 80 percent power at a 5 percent confidence interval. We tailored the power analysis based on a sample of N=1000 individuals and a 60% attrition rate (final sample N=600). We also report figures of the MDE for different sample sizes.

Table 1: Minimum Detectable Effect

Hypothesis	Variable of Interest	Source for the prior	Prior Probability	Minimum Detectable effect (80% power, 5 % C.I.) <b>Percentage</b>	Minimum Detectable effect (80% power, 5 % C.I.) <b>The difference in Percentage Points</b>
A1	Turnout	Election results 2016	62.47 %	18%	11 (73.47%)
A2	Preference	Election results 2016	13.68 %	65%	9 (22.5%)
A3	Gender of candidate	Election results 2016	1.45%	293%	4.5 (6%)
A3	Education of candidate (University Degree)	Author's estimate	10.00%	80%	8 (18%)

A3	Experience of the candidate (political experience)	Author's estimate	5.00%	125%	6 (11%)
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Figure 2: Sample Size and Statistical Power for different hypothesis

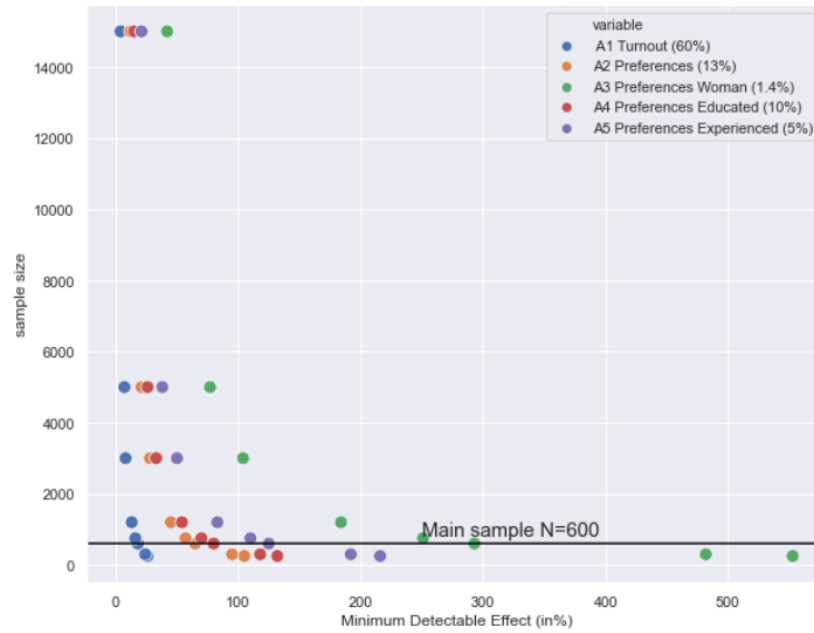


Figure 3: Statistical Power for multiple proportional effect and different prior probability (based on sample size  $N=600$ )

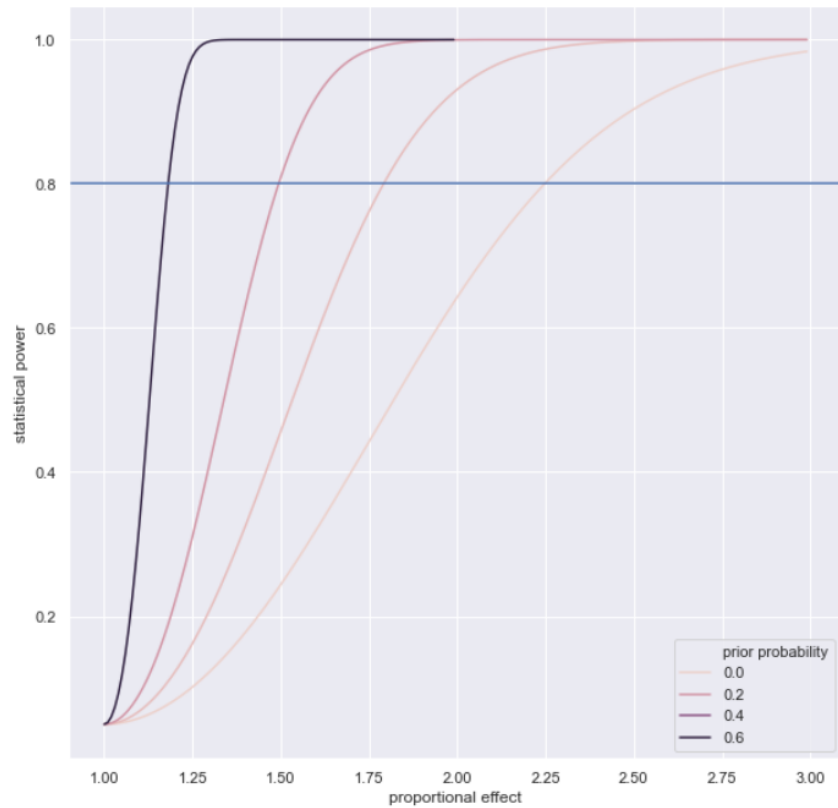


Figure 4- Results of Rome 2016 elections

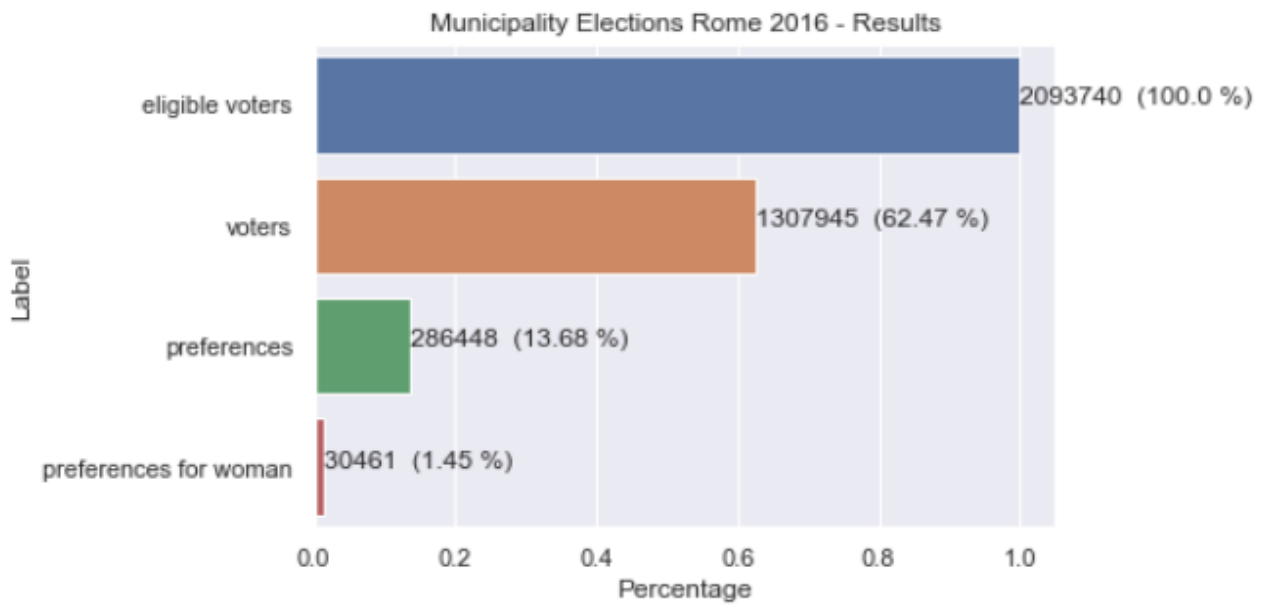


Table 2: Results of 2016 elections

Group	Variable of Interest	Source for the prior
Eligible voters	2093740	100%
Voters	1307945	62.47 %
Preferences	286448	13.68 %
Preferences for Woman	30461	1.45%



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