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

PRE- ANALYSIS PLAN

Contents

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[1] . 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*[2].

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[3].

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…)[4]. 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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[1] At times, voters even lack basic knowledge, such as how they can express their vote.

[2] 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/

[3] 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).

[4] 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). 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 questionnaires 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:

> *Gentilissima/o, ti ringraziamo per aver completato il questionario. Adesso ti chiediamo gentilmente di visitare questo portale dove potrai vedere tutte le caratteristiche dei candidati al consiglio comunale di Roma per le prossime elezioni. Su questo sito potrai trovare le informazioni sui candidati riguardo la loro esperienza lavorativa, il livello di istruzione, l'esperienza amministrativa e l'eventuale presenza di precedenti penali. Tutte queste informazioni sono state tratte in modo neutrale dai curriculum dei candidati, presentati ai sensi della normativa vigente sulla trasparenza politica*.*
>
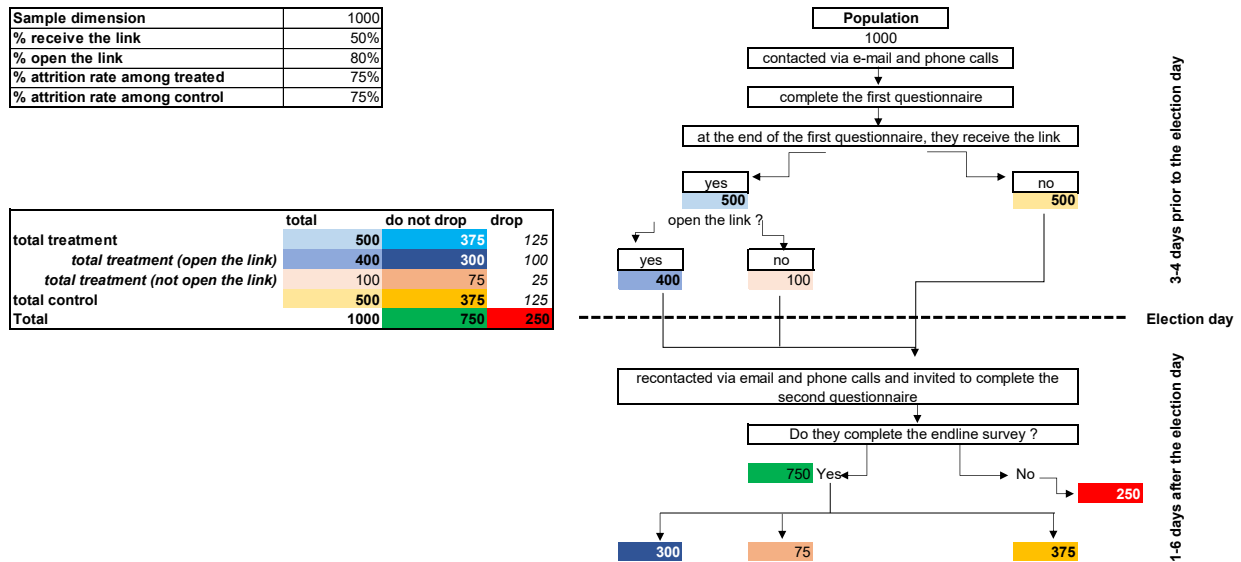> PER VISITARE IL PORTALE CLICCA QUI
>
> **Translation*
>
> Dear Sir or Madam, thank you for completing the questionnaire. Now we kindly ask you to visit this portal where you can see all the characteristics of the candidates for the city council of Rome for the next elections. On this site you will find information on candidates regarding their work experience, level of education, administrative experience and any criminal record. All this information was drawn in a neutral way from the candidates' curriculum vitae, submitted in accordance with the current legislation on political transparency.

By clicking on the link, the respondents will enter nto this website www.elezionitrasparentiroma.it, which is a website constructed specifically for the experiment.

As not all respondents might decide to click on the link, we decided to track if visitors effectively opened the link by creating a personalized URL for each respondent. This personalized URL will be tracked using google analytics.

Figure 1: Diagram of the experiment

Sample dimension	1000
% receive the link	50%
% open the link	80%
% attrition rate among treated	75%
% attrition rate among control	75%

	total	do not drop	drop
total treatment	500	375	125
total treatment (open the link)	400	300	100
total treatment (not open the link)	100	75	25
total control	500	375	125
Total	1000	750	250

Population
1000
contacted via e-mail and phone calls
complete the first questionnaire
at the end of the first questionnaire, they receive the link
yes — 500 / no — 500
open the link ?
yes — 400 / no — 100

3-4 days prior to the election day

Election day

recontacted via email and phone calls and invited to complete the second questionnaire
Do they complete the endline survey ?
750 Yes / No — 250
300 / 75 / 375

1-6 days after the election day

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.

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 is a dummy equal to 1 if individual i voted and 0 otherwise.

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

H0: No, $a_1 = 0$

H1: 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 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_0: No, $a_2 = 0$

H_1: Yes, $a_2 \neq 0$

- A3: Characteristic of the candidates that received the preference (vote choice):

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.

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

H_0: No, $a_3 = 0$

H_1: Yes, $a_3 \neq 0$

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.

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_0: No, $a_4 = 0$

H_1: 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 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?

H₀: No, $b_1 = 0$

H₁: Yes, $b_1 \neq 0$

Does preference expressed predict actual vote behavior?

H₀: No, $b_3 = 0$

H₁: 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", 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?

H₀: No, $b_2 = 0$

H₁: Yes, $b_2 \neq 0$

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.) **Percentage**	Minimum Detectable effect (80% power, 5 % C.I.) **The difference in Percentage Points**
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%)

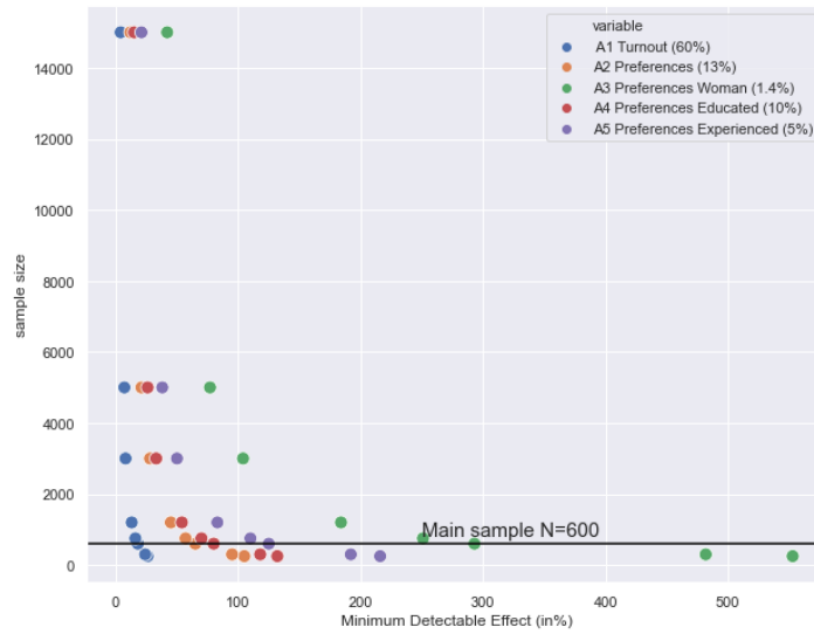Figure 2: Sample Size and Statistical Power for different hypothesis

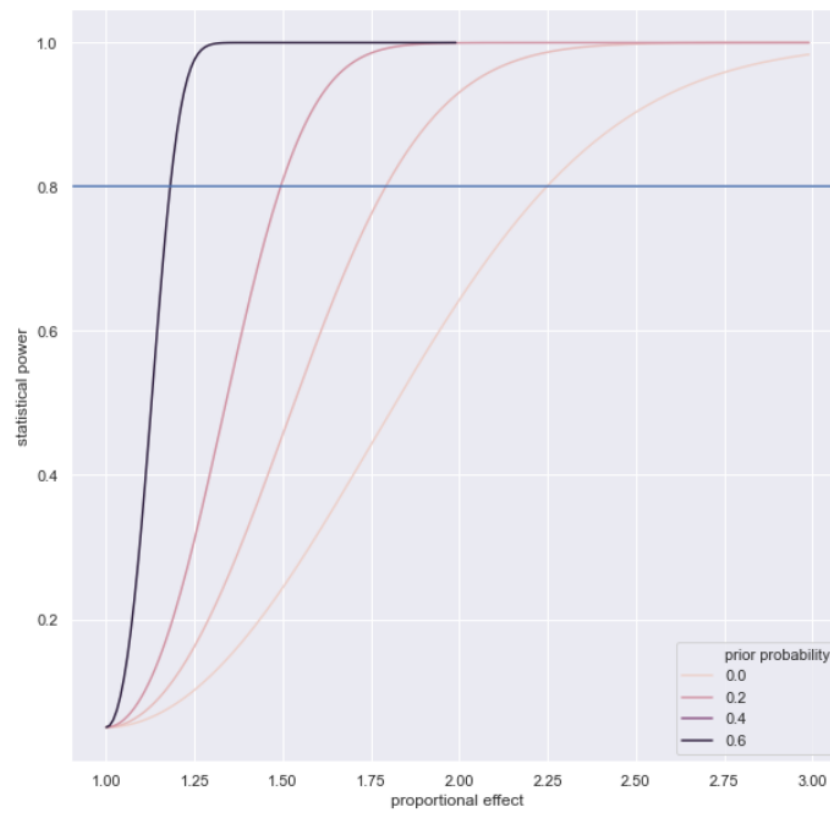Figure 3: Statistical Power for multiple proportional effect and different prior probability (based on sample size N=600)

Figure 4- Results of Rome 2016 elections

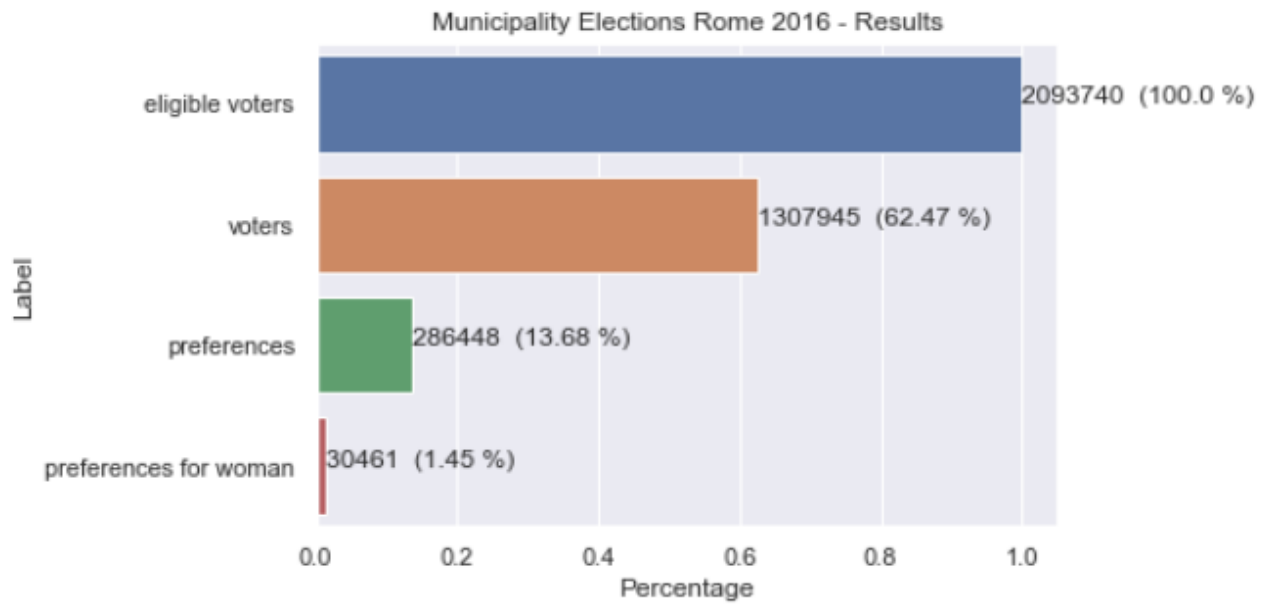Table 2: Results of 2016 elections

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%

Questionnaire

Codice domanda istat (Aspetti della vita quotidiana)	Codice Domanda	Tema	Testo domanda	tipologia risposta (U=unica, M=multipla)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
		demografia											
1	1	Sesso		U	maschio	femmina	preferisce non descrivere	preferisce descrivere					
2	2	età		U	numero								
3	3	Livello d'istruzione		U	media	superiore	laurea	master	dottorato				
4	4	Quartiere/Municipio di residenza		U									
		partecipazione politica											
20,1	5	5	con quale frequenza le capita di parlare di politica	U	tutti i giorni	qualche volta alla	Una volta alla	Qualche volta l'anno	Qualche volta	Mai			
20,2	6	6	è iscritto a:	U	partiti politici	Organizzazioni sindacali (sindacati con-federali, autonomi,	comitati di quasi associazioni o gruppi di volontariato per i diritti civili, per la pace	associazioni ecologiste, per l'ambiente	associazioni culturali, ricreative o di altro tipo	associazioni professionali o di categoria	Associazioni		
		campagna elettorale											
20,4	7	7	Negli ultimi 12 mesi:	M	ha partecipato a un comizio	ha partecipato a un corteo politico	ha sentito un dibattito ad una cena/aperitivo	ha partecipato a un partito (per cena/aperiti sottoscrizione.	ha dato soldi (per attività gratuita per associazioni o gruppi di	Ha svolto attività gratuita per associazioni una associazione	ha svolto attività gratuita per un partito	ha svolto attività	
20,7	8	8	In che modo si informa dei fatti della politica italiana?	U	internet	radio	televisione	quotidiani	settimanali	amici	parenti	conoscenti	
20,10	9	9	Quali sono i motivi prevalenti per cui non si informa mai di politica	U	non mi interessa	non ho tempo	è un argomento	sono sfiduciato	altro				
		competenza dei candidati											
10	10	10	Alcuni studi, ritengono che la competenza dei rappresentanti politici, in termini di livello d'istruzione, esperienza professionale/amministrativa ed esperienza politica, possa avere un impatto benefico sull'amministrazione delle città. Quanto è d'accordo con questa affermazione ?	U	molto	abbastanza	poco	per niente	non saprei				
11	11	11	Quale dei seguenti fattori secondo lei un candidato ideale dovrebbe avere:	M	un alto livello d'istruzione	un alto livello di esperienza politica o forte	un ideologia ed una visione politica forte	un'alta capacità di comunicare	un etica incorruttibile	una fedina penale pulita	altro: (specificare)		
		scelta di voto											
12	12	12	Ha già deciso per quale candidato sindaco votare, se sì quale ?	U	candidato 1	candidato 2	candidato 3	ancora non	non andrà a				
13	13	13	Ha già deciso se esprimere anche una preferenza per i candidati al consiglio comunale ? Se sì quale	M	candidato 1	candidato 2	candidato 3	non					
14	14	14	Conosce almeno il nome di un candidato al consiglio comunale ?	M	candidato 1	candidato 2	candidato 3	non conosco					
		priorità											
15	15	15	Secondo lei, quali sono le priorità che i candidati dovrebbero risolvere ?	M	parcheggio e traffico	sicurezza	immigrazione	pulizia delle strade e raccolta dei rifiuti	decoro urbano (parchi, strutture abbandonat	tasse	corruzione	economia e lavoro	inquinamento atmosferico o ambiente
		trasparenza											
16	16	16	Quanto riterrebbe utile avere delle norme che obblighino i partiti ad adottare maggiore trasparenza ? Ad esempio pubblicare i curriculum dei candidati, conflitti di interesse, dichiarazione dei redditi e patrimoni, etc...	U	Molto utile	Abbastanza utile	poco utile	inutile					

Questionario round 2

Scelta di voto

#							
1	Scelta voto candidato sindaco	candidato 1	candidato 2	…	non ha votato		
2	Scelta voto candidato consigliere	candidato 1	candidato 2	…	non ha espresso scelta di preferenza		

raccolta di informazioni

#							
3	Ha visitato il sito elezionitrasparentiroma.it ?	Sì	No				
4	Ha ritenuto utili tali informazioni ?	Sì	No				
5	Se ha espresso un voto di preferenza per un candidato consigliere, può gentilmente dirmi come è venuto a conoscenza della sua candidatura ?	Conoscevo personalmente il candidato	Conoscevo il candidato tramite amici e/o famigliari	Conoscevo indirettamente ad un comizio/incontr o con il	Ho partecipato candidato su di un comizio/incontr o con il	Ho letto il nome del candidato su di un manifesto e/o volantino	Ho raccolto informazioni sul candidato su internet
6	è soddisfatto del suo voto (soddisfazione) ?	Molto	abbastanza	poco	per niente		

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