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ECONOMIC STATUS AND ELECTIONS: THE VOTING BEHAVIOUR AND ECONOMIC HARDSHIP IN ROME

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Economic Status and Elections: The Voting Behaviour and Economic Hardship in Rome

Giovanni BRANCATO¹, Gabriella D'AMBROSIO², Marco PALMIERI³

Abstract

Empirical research shows the existence of a relationship between the electoral behaviour of citizens and their economic condition. The economic voting theory explains that in periods of economic growth citizens-voters reward the government considered the author of their well-being; on the contrary, in times of crisis, the population punishes it. The peculiarity of these studies, based on the analysis of secondary data designed for other primary purposes, is to have national territorial dimension, where the percentage of votes collected by government/opposition parties in political national elections is associated to the country's macro-economic indicators (for example, GDP or unemployment rate). Nevertheless, up to now, only few scholars have analysed this relationship at local level, due to the lack of local statistical data on citizens' economic conditions. This study tries to fill this gap. It is conducted in the city of Rome, to understand whether the electoral behaviour of Roman citizens changes in function of their economic hardship, in each of the 15 Municipalities of the capital city of Italy. To this end, two different data sources are integrated: Electoral Statistical Office of Rome and Italian Revenue Agency. The results offer empirical evidence to strengthen the local relation between electoral behaviour and economic conditions.

Keywords: economic voting theory, economic inequalities, local elections, voting behaviour, secondary data analysis.

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This paper is a joint work of the three authors. However, in line with standard academic practice, we indicate that Giovanni Brancato is the author of "Introduction", "Literature review" and "Conclusion", Gabriella D'Ambrosio is the author of "Methodology" and "Results and discussion – Economic status data analysis"; Marco Palmieri is the author of "Results and discussion – Electoral data analysis".

Introduction

The economic voting theory has its origins in studies of electoral behaviour and its link with the economic conditions of the country as perceived by voters. The international literature focuses on the deep relationship in modern democracies between the performance of the political class and the electoral behaviour of citizens in relation to the economic condition of the country (Campbell *et alii*, 1960; Fiorina, 1978; Kiewiet, 1983; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Duch & Stevenson, 2008). Specifically, scholars focus on the link between the performance of the incumbent to ensure or maintain the country's economic well-being and the ability of voters to exercise their democratic voting power by rewarding or punishing the governing party or coalition deemed responsible for the national economic condition (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000; 2009). Empirical studies of economic voting theory rely on aggregate data, mostly at the national level, to analyse case studies, including through a comparative approach: the votes collected by the governing/opposition parties in national general elections are correlated with indicators of the country's macroeconomic condition (e.g., GDP or unemployment rate). We also have an established field of study on the application of economic voting theory with respect to both the relationship between local economies and national elections (Healy & Lenz, 2017), and between second-order elections and national economic condition (Fauvelle-Aymar & Lewis-Beck, 2011). Nevertheless, scholars' attention seems to be growing in a research approach aimed at studying the relationship between economic status and electoral behaviour, both at the local level (Dassonneville, Claes & Lewis-Beck, 2016).

Starting from these premises, the paper aims to answer specific research hypotheses that could potentially open new research opportunities and identify interesting future applications of economic voting theory in the era of populism and sovereignty. Using indicators of the electoral outcomes and economic conditions of the inhabitants of Rome, the authors set out to investigate the potential application of economic voting theory to the analysis of electoral behaviour in local contexts, to identify its distinguishing features from its usual application in national and comparative perspectives, and the data sources that can be used for the economic analysis of electoral behaviour in local contexts.

Literature review

Assuming that the link between elections and economics constitutes empirical evidence (Anderson, 2007), the crucial role of economics in citizens' electoral behaviour clearly emerges. In this regard, however, Lewis-Beck and Nadeau (2011) argue that it is necessary to approach economic voting theory from a multidimensional perspective characterised by three factors: *valence*, *position*, and *patrimony*. Thus, the electoral behaviour of citizens is based on the evaluation

of the government's performance in relation to the national economic state, in a retrospective and sociographic perspective, but also on their political positioning with respect to welfare and economic policies, and on their personal economic status. The latter differs from the classical conception of social class, as it is based on the citizen's ability to own movable and immovable property (Stegmaier, Lewis-Beck & Park, 2017).

In the light of the above, it appears that the economic condition perceived by the citizen at a given time seems to be the main trigger of the democratic process. But, in over 40 years of study, the attention of researchers has focused on several elements. An important element is represented by the opportunity to recognise an ideal economic situation to which this theory can be applied. Indeed, according to several authors, a difficult and complex economic condition, such as the recent Great Recession of 2008, may have played an even more decisive role in citizens' recent electoral choice (Lewis-Beck & Costa Lobo, 2017). In this regard, some studies point to an increased prominence of the economy's impact in the lives of citizens (Dassonneville & Lewis-Beck, 2014), while other studies emphasise the greater willingness of citizens to acquire information on economic issues in the country (Singer, 2011).

This has obviously represented a reinforcement of economic voting theory, especially during national and supranational elections in Eurozone countries, where in recent decades incumbent parties have mostly suffered the negative effects of that economic crisis, as they are considered either responsible for the precarious condition of the economy or incapable of managing the crisis or, in other cases, remedying it (Giuliani & Massari, 2019; Costa Lobo & Pannico, 2020). A further element of complexity in the approach of the economic theory of voting is found in its ability to be applied in different political-electoral contexts, including comparative ones. In this regard, several scholars have focused on the link between the "Responsibility Hypothesis" (Lewis-Beck & Paldam, 2000) and the attribution of political-institutional competence, which differs from one country to another, considering specific territorial prerogatives, at local or national level, as well as the organisational structure of the country's political and party system (Dorussen & Taylor, 2002).

At the same time, these critical issues seem to represent a possible solution to the lesser, and sometimes totally absent, interest in economic voting theory in some countries, such as Italy. As Bellucci (2002) noted, the classical perspective of economic voting was considered inadequate to understand the electoral behaviour of citizens in a political context characterised for over 40 years mainly by three factors: class, religion, and ideological polarisation (communism/anti-communism). This scenario underwent a radical reversal between the 1980s and 1990s. Up to that time, Italian politics was almost entirely characterised by a political affiliation based on a common ideology and shared party values (Panebianco, 1989), but later it faced a series of events that led to the transition from the First Republic to the Second one (Colarizi & Gervasoni, 2012). First, the "Mani Pulite" judicial enquiry

on the corruption in Italian politics (also known as the “Tangentopoli scandals”) that led to the breakdown of the traditional party system (D’Alimonte & Bartolini, 1997) and a spreading feeling of disaffection and malaise towards politics (Sciolla, 2004). Secondly, the Berlusconi’s “descent into the field” at the 1994 general election (Statera, 1995) with the consequent affirmation of his *personal party* (Calise, 2000). Moreover, this period was characterised by the spread of “anti-politics” (Mastropaolo, 2000), by the affirmation of populist movements and parties (Biorcio, 2015), and finally by the transition from the classical proportional electoral system to the mixed system (proportional-majoritarian), which would remain in force until 2005 (Pasquino, 2020).

It is the combination of these and other factors in the country’s political-institutional system that has allowed economic issues to have greater prominence in electoral campaigns and, therefore, subsequently have a greater impact of the economy on the electoral behaviour of Italians.

Methodology

The research method of this study is the secondary analysis of administrative data. For our research purposes, it is necessary to relate local electoral data to data on the economic conditions of Roman citizens in the city’s municipalities. To achieve this objective, two data sources are used. The first source of data is the Italian Revenue Agency. It is the tax agency of the Italian public administration under the Ministry of Economy and Finance, which performs the functions related to tax assessments and controls. In this study, aggregate data on the economic conditions of Roman citizens living in each of the 15 municipalities of the city were used; these data can be consulted in the Annual Statistical Report of the Municipality of Rome (<https://www.comune.roma.it/web/it/dati-e-statistiche-pubblicazioni-annuari.page>). The second source of data is the Metropolitan Statistical Office, which is responsible for collecting all statistics related to the Roman territory, producing data for planning activities useful to local government and the territory, and finally providing data for evaluating the effects of public administrative actions. It includes the Electoral Statistics Office, which provides election data for local elections, which can be consulted and downloaded (<http://www.elezioni.comune.roma.it/>).

This study analyses the electoral data of 2013 and 2016 local elections, held for voting the new city mayor in each of the 15 municipalities in Rome. This methodological choice is based on two reasons. The first is related to the geographical area and the second to the time frame chosen for the analysis. In fact, the city of Rome is selected because it is not only the most populous and largest city in Italy but also it has the highest internal variance in socioeconomic terms. In fact, it is essential to clarify that Rome, composed of 15 areas, is characterised

by high socio-economic inequalities and several statistical indicators show specific territorial connotations (Lelo, Monni & Tomassi, 2016).

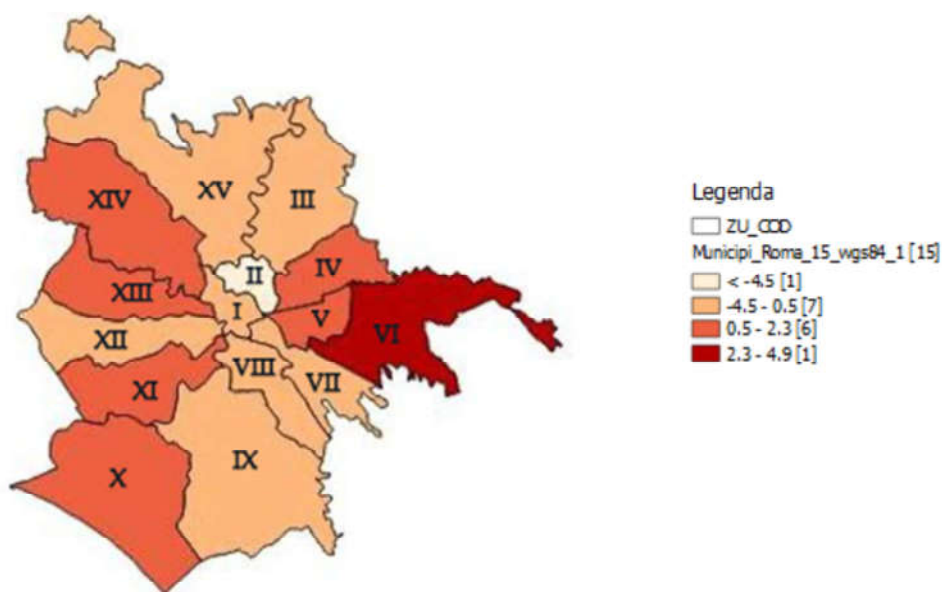
The years 2013 and 2016 are considered as time reference points, both for data on the economic conditions of Roman households and for data on local election results. This complete temporal overlap is not possible for past elections, as the availability of local data on the economic conditions of Romans is very scarce before 2013. At this regard, a very brief description of the electoral events that took place in Rome during this period is necessary. In 2013, Roman citizens are called to local elections to choose the next mayor of the city. In the previous five years, the local political situation was very troubled by the fact that the former mayor Gianni Alemanno was involved in the judicial scandal of “Mafia Capitale”, accused of being part of a criminal organisation that linked businessmen and local politicians. Despite this, the centre-right parties supported his reconfirmation as mayor of the city in the upcoming 2013 elections. In these elections, the centre-left parties presented Ignazio Marino as their candidate for mayor of the city. On that occasion, a new populist party, the M5S (Five Star Movement), appeared on the Roman electoral scene. The election was won by Ignazio Marino, and the seats in the Roman city council were taken largely by centre-left parties: all the presidents of the city councils were supported by centre-left parties. In 2016, Roman citizens are called to early local elections to appoint a successor to Marino, who led the local government for three years; he then decided to resign early, due to political pressure received from the same majority parties that supported him for three years. In this election, the centre-left parties presented Roberto Giachetti as their candidate for the next mayor of the city. The centre-right parties supported the candidacy of Giorgia Meloni. Virginia Raggi, an unknown outsider supported by M5S, was the most popular candidate in the polls, receiving widespread popular support. The election was won by Virginia Raggi, and the seats in the Roman city council were largely taken by the M5S.

To answer our research questions, the local political parties are aggregated as follows: the parties that supported the incumbent local government from 2013 to 2016 (the centre-left parties); the traditional opposition parties to the local government in Rome (centre-right parties); the main populist opposition party (Five Star Movement), presented as the new party, alternative to all traditional parties. The percentage of votes collected by the parties that won the 2013 elections (the incumbent parties) are calculated and compared with the percentage of votes they collected in the 2016 elections. Similarly, the percentage of votes collected by the parties that lost the 2013 elections (the traditional opposition parties) are calculated and compared with the percentage of votes they collected in the 2016 elections. Finally, the variation in the electoral support gathered from 2013 to 2016 by the main populist opposition party is calculated. The results of the analysis conducted on local economic and electoral data are reported in the following section.

Results and discussion

Economic status data analysis

The data of economic condition of Roman citizens and local elections in the years 2013 and 2016 are analysed, considering the peculiarities of each municipality. In this regard, the social and economic hardship index, a measure of the socio-occupational criticality of a Roman neighbourhood, highlights the different levels of potential exposure to situations of social hardship and economic marginality. In statistical terms, this index is the weighted average of the standard deviations of specific indicators (unemployment rate, employment rate, youth concentration rate, education level) calculated in specific areas of Rome and compared with the corresponding average values for the city. Data are collected from the last population census in 2011. The index shows the extent to which a neighbourhood differs (in positive or negative terms) from the average values calculated for the entire city. A value greater than 0 means that the local level of socio-economic deprivation is higher than the average value for Rome.



Source: Elaboration of the Rome Statistical Office on data from the last Census of 2011

Figure 1. Index of social and economic hardship in the city of Rome (year 2011)

Looking at *Figure 1*, there is evidence to suggest that the Municipality of Rome has considerable internal economic variability and inequality: the socio-economic conditions of people living in the peripheral districts of the eastern part of the city are worse than the socio-economic conditions of people living in the central districts.

To understand how economic inequalities have changed over time, we analyse the indicator of the average per capita income of Roman citizens, residing in each of the city's 15 municipalities, in the years 2013 and 2016 (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Average per capita income by municipality in 2013 and 2016

Municipality	Average per capita income in 2013 (in EUR)	Average per capita income in 2016 (in EUR)	Variation 2013-2016 (in EUR)
I	36,675.73	39,050.07	+2,374.34
II	40,655.89	40,798.12	+142.23
III	25,329.73	25,513.28	+183.55
IV	21,285.33	21,365.19	+79.86
V	18,939.65	18,900.15	-39.50
VI	17,069.33	17,218.33	+149.00
VII	24,058.55	24,202.83	+144.28
VIII	28,065.81	28,116.16	+50.35
IX	29,558.44	29,563.75	+5.31
X	22,970.15	22,996.65	+26.50
XI	21,374.94	21,468.43	+ 93.49
XII	27,262.96	27,723.11	+460.15
XIII	23,831.40	23,933.47	+102.07
XIV	24,833.90	24,716.95	-116.95
XV	30,736.74	30,507.77	-228.97

The city's central municipalities, Municipality II (about 40,000 euros) and Municipality I (about 36,000 euros), record the highest per capita income values in the two years covered by this study, highlighting an uneven distribution of income among Rome's municipalities. In fact, the municipalities located in the eastern suburbs (Municipality VI, Municipality V and Municipality IV) record the lowest values. Moreover, the swing from 2013 to 2016 also confirms this trend: in fact, the average per capita income increases in the municipalities located in the city centre, especially in the Municipality I, which includes the historic centre of the Capital and the urban areas adjoining Vatican City; on the contrary, the average

per capita income remains quite stable, from 2013 to 2016, in the districts located in the eastern area of the city: it increases very slightly in the Municipality IV and the Municipality VI, and decreases in the Municipality V, where the average per capita income was already very low.

Electoral data analysis

From an electoral point of view, we also calculate the swings in electoral consensus gathered by the parties from 2013 to 2016 elections in each municipality of Rome. It should be noted that Italian electoral law states that the candidate who obtains an absolute majority of valid votes (>50%) is proclaimed mayor of the city. If no candidate obtains an absolute electoral majority, there must be a runoff between the two most voted candidates, and whoever receives the highest number of valid votes in the second round is proclaimed elected Mayor. Thus, our analysis refers to the results of the first round of the above-mentioned local elections for the mayor of the city, where the parties challenge each other.

Table 2. Swing (2013-2016) of the % of votes collected by incumbent parties, traditional opposition parties and the main populist opposition party - in the first round, by municipality

Municipalities	Incumbent parties % Swing 2013-2016	Traditional opposition parties % Swing 2013-2016	The main populist opposition party % Swing 2013-2016
I	-10.2	-28.4	+15.3
II	-8.3	-25.4	+15.0
III	-17.6	-24.5	+21.9
IV	-21.7	-25.3	+24.7
V	-22.4	-22.6	+23.9
VI	-21.9	-15.7	+27.6
VII	-19.2	-26.2	+23.7
VIII	-17.2	-30.3	+20.6
IX	-14.1	-19.6	+22.7
X	-19.9	-22.6	+26.4
XI	-19.2	-22.5	+23.3
XII	-16.2	-30.1	+20.5
XIII	-14.6	-17.7	+21.4
XIV	-16.6	-19.4	+23.7
XV	-6.8	-10.9	+19.4

This Table shows that the electoral consensus of incumbent parties registered a general decline across the city (on average -17%) from 2013 to 2016, but this decline has a different level of intensity among Rome's municipalities. The biggest reduction is recorded in Municipality V (-22.4%), in Municipality VI (-21.9%), and in Municipality IV (-21.7%), which are the local districts with the highest level of economic hardship in Rome. On the other hand, the smallest electoral decline of the incumbent parties is registered in Municipality II (-8.3%) and in Municipality I (-10.2%), which are the districts with the lowest level of economic deprivation. Thus, the greatest reduction in the electoral support of incumbent parties is recorded in municipalities with severe economic hardship. In contrast, the electoral decline of incumbent parties is less extensive in municipalities with the lowest degree of economic hardship.

It should be noted that the electoral decline of the incumbent parties was not balanced by the rise of the traditional opposition parties, which similarly lost electoral support across the city. Instead, this finding is balanced by the remarkable, almost plebiscitary, support received by M5S, the new populist party, which was considered the main opposition party in the 2016 elections. The electoral consensus of the main populist opposition party increased from 2013 to 2016, registering a general electoral appreciation (+22%). However, a detailed analysis shows an uneven distribution across the city. In fact, the most significant electoral increase of the main populist opposition party is recorded in Municipality VI (+27.6%), in Municipality X (+26.4%), in Municipality IV (+24.7%) and in Municipality V (+23.9%), which are the districts with the highest level of economic hardship in Rome. On the other hand, the least significant electoral increase of the main populist opposition party is recorded in Municipality II (+15%) and Municipality I (+15.3%), which are the local districts with the lowest level of economic hardship. Thus, the greatest increase in the electoral support of the main populist opposition party is observed in the municipalities of Rome with severe economic hardship; instead, its electoral appreciation is less extensive in the municipalities with the lowest degree of economic hardship.

To sum up, the incumbent parties that supported the local government of Rome from 2013 to 2016 are punished by Roman citizens in the upcoming mayoral elections, but they are punished more strongly by voters living in neighbourhoods with more severe economic distress. Thus, the hypothesis of relationship between economic status and voting behaviour in Rome is confirmed. In addition to the analysis concerning the swing of the electoral consensus recorded by the incumbent and the opposition parties, the variation of the turnout and on the blank and void votes in each municipality of the city are also calculated and compared between the years 2013 and 2016.

Table 3. Swing (2013-2016) of % electoral turn out, voided and blank ballots - in the first round, by municipality

Municipalities	Electoral turn out % Swing 2013-2016	Voided Ballots % Swing 2013-2016	Blank ballots % Swing 2013-2016
I	+1.1	+0.51	-0.32
II	+1.3	+0.28	-0.64
III	+3.9	-0.08	-0.27
IV	+3.0	-0.07	-0.40
V	+4.9	+0.04	-0.46
VI	+4.5	-0.79	-0.95
VII	+3.4	+0.22	-0.23
VIII	+3.8	+0.35	-0.26
IX	+2.7	+0.13	-0.24
X	+1.5	+0.14	-0.88
XI	+4.5	-0.31	-0.47
XII	+2.9	+0.07	-0.45
XIII	+0.4	-0.05	+0.20
XIV	+3.9	+0.08	-0.35
XV	+3.8	-0.06	-0.74

The *Table 3* shows that the general voter turnout increased from the 2013 local elections to the 2016 local elections (+3.2%), although this growth is not uniform across the city. The largest increases are recorded in Municipality V (+4.9%), in XI and VI (+4.5%); on the other hand, the voter turnout increases very slightly in Municipality I (+1.1%) and in Municipality II (+1.3%). Overall, the swing of electoral turn-out is associated with the level of economic hardship of Roman municipalities: the electoral turn-out increased more strongly in areas with higher economic hardship. This can be considered another valid indicator of how the electoral participation changes according to local economic conditions: citizens living in the most economically backward areas of the city are determined to go and vote, driven by the desire to change local government and their own economic condition.

This consideration is also supported by the swing of the voided ballots. On average, the general percentage of voided ballots does not change in the years considered (swing = +0.03%) but *Table 3* shows different evidence. In detail, the percentage of the voided ballots increases in Municipality I (+0.51%) and in Municipality II (+0.28%), while it decreases in Municipality VI (-0.79%),

remaining stable in the other districts of the city. Overall, the variation in the number of voided ballots is associated with the level of economic hardship in the Roman districts: the number of voided ballots decreases in the municipalities with a high level of economic hardship. This hypothesis also seems to be confirmed by the variation of blank ballots. In this regard, looking at the average values, the general percentage of blank ballots decreases from the 2013 to the 2016 elections (swing = -0.43%), even if there is a non-uniform situation across the municipalities. In fact, the most relevant decrease is recorded in Municipality VI (-0.95%), the district with the highest level of economic hardship; on the contrary, the reduction of blank ballots is less relevant in Municipality I (-0.32%) and Municipality II (-0.64%).

The territorial subdivision of Rome into 15 municipalities, as shown in Figure 1, has some aspects of great importance and specific characteristics useful for the purposes of this work. The complex nature of the process leading to the voting choice in an electoral round plays an essential role in a local context, especially if it is as articulated as the one analysed here. The division of the city's territory into "slices" seems to suggest a transversal approach in the analysis of data on the economic hardship of Roman citizens but, nevertheless, the analysis conducted reveals several results that recommend an approach based on the hypothetical centre-periphery axis. This assumption is confirmed by the analysis of the data on the 2013-2016 variation in average per capita income, as shown in Table 1, which highlights an unequal distribution among the various municipalities, excluding the Municipality I. In particular, the amount of average per capita income increased, from 2013 to 2016, more significantly in the most central municipality (+ 2,374.34 euros) than the trend recorded by the other 14 Roman municipalities.

Moreover, the data on the swing (2013-2016) of the percentage votes collected by the incumbent parties, the traditional opposition parties, and the main populist opposition party - in the first round, by Municipality - as shown in Table 2, highlights that the most relevant results refer more precisely to these municipalities that do not fully respect the sliced division of the territory of the Municipality of Rome. We refer to the data from the two municipalities that are in the central part of the city of Rome (i.e., I and II Municipalities), and to the data from two municipalities that are mainly located in the periphery (i.e., VI and X Municipalities). Further evidence is provided by the analysis of the data on the variation of percentage turnout, voided ballots, and blank ballots.

As shown in Table 3, overall turnout seems to be associated with the level of economic deprivation and the territorial location of the districts. Municipalities with greater economic deprivation and located in the periphery recorded the largest increase in turnout; municipalities with less economic deprivation and located in the city center showed smaller variations in turnout. The same trend emerges with reference to the analysis of the data on blank and void ballots. Although the data do not show deep variations, it is possible to highlight that their reduction is less relevant where the municipalities are more central and where the level of economic

hardship is less pronounced, while it is more relevant in the more peripheral areas and with the highest level of economic hardship.

Conclusion

The analysis of the data confirms not only the central argument of the economic voting theory, but also the possibility of applying it in local contexts, even if there are some critical points. For the most part, experts in the study of electoral behaviour agree that the economy is a key factor in voting choices. This does not mean that the basis of economic voting is the most important aspect of electoral behaviour, but rather that it is one of several factors that lead a voter to decide whether to vote for or against the incumbent political force. On the one hand, a composite approach applied to the perception of personal economic status certainly supports an economy-based electoral vote, but on the other hand, there is also the perception of the economic context in which people live.

Considering, in fact, that the economy is a crucial element in the framework of electoral behaviour, at the same time this does not mean affirming its uniqueness as a key factor in activating the processes that play a role in voters' voting choices. In this regard, in this case study some key elements that characterise social and political science research on economic voting theory emerge. Hence, we conclude that it seems to be empirically possible to implement new lines of inquiry to test the economic voting theory in local contexts.

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