

The ‘Dishonest Vote’ in the Italian Election of 2006

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ABSTRACT

Political leaders are increasingly perceived as dishonest by mass publics, and there are signs that voting behavior is getting affected as a consequence. A growing tendency in democratic elections is that of casting a ‘dishonest vote’ – that is, a vote casted in favor of a candidate which is perceived as dishonest by the voter himself. Our case study of the Italian election of 2006 is aimed at assessing the determinants of a form of political behavior that is likely to (further) cheapen the legitimacy of democratic institutions. The role that personal characteristics of both voters and candidates play in orienting political preference will be framed in a ‘congruency’ theory rooted in personality psychology. According to it, people tend to vote for politicians whose traits they rate as being most similar to their own. Our research hypothesizes that *the strongest determinant of casting a ‘dishonest vote’ lies in the attitudinal dishonesty of the voter himself*. In the empirical analysis of ITANES data, we operationalize voters’ attitudinal dishonesty through their level of ‘tax ethics’ (i.e., one’s willingness to justify tax evasion). By means of logistic regression analysis we demonstrate that tax ethics at the individual level is the strongest statistical predictor of a dishonest vote, even after controlling for other potential explanations such as socio-demographic characteristics, interest in politics, and pre-existing ideological orientations.

1. Introduction

In 2008 Silvio Berlusconi won the third general election of his political career. The coalition he led gained 47 percent of the popular vote. However, only 30 percent of the Italian electorate declared to consider him an honest politician (Barisione and Castellani 2008: 145). In no western democratic election a candidate prime minister (or president) was perceived so widely dishonest and nevertheless gained (re)election. When in 1996 Bill Clinton secured his second term in the White House (shortly after the Chinagate scandal) the percentage of voters perceiving him as honest was slightly higher than 38 percent (Bartle and Crewe 2002: 48). In the Italian elections of 2001, Silvio Berlusconi himself succeeded with only 34 percent of voters regarding him as honest (ITANES 2001). The fact that political candidates are (at times) able to gain the majority of votes without being perceived as honest by the majority of voters cast doubts over Edmund Burke's main assumption of representative democracy – namely, that of voters looking for “representatives whom [they] can trust” (Mondak 1995: 1045).

Aim of this paper is to assess the determinants of the *dishonest vote* (by this we refer to every vote casted for a candidate perceived as dishonest by the voter) in the Second Italian Republic. We know that the decline of cleavage voting in every Western democracy (Franklin *et al.* 1992) has resulted in an increasing importance of candidates' personalities as predictors of individual voting behavior (Clarke *et al.* 2004). Hence, next section will frame our research question within the literature dealing with the ongoing process of *personalization of politics*. If voters are increasingly relying on the personalities of political candidates in order to cast their vote, we expect them to possess a prototypical conception of the good leader's personality. Thus, we will briefly review the literature on *presidential prototypes*. The following section will be devoted to identify how these normative expectations resulted in the actual behavior of voters during the Italian election of 2006. The relationship between the dishonest vote and individual attitudes towards civic duties (e.g., taxpaying) will then be introduced. Next, rival theories for the explanation of the dishonest vote will be presented and tested through logistic regression

analysis. In the final section, our findings and their major implications will be discussed in turn.

2. The Personalization of Italian Politics after 1994

Whether or not the dynamics of parliamentary elections have become more 'presidential' (Mughan 2000; Poguntke and Webb 2005), it is hard to deny that democratic politics is now more 'candidate-centered' (Wattenberg 1991) than ever before. Third-millennium parties' profiles have become undoubtedly more personalized than they were three or four decades ago (Farrell and Webb 2000). The changing structure of mass communications has been crucial in emphasizing the role of political leaders at the expenses of parties, making the latter "more dependent in their communications with voters on the essentially visual and personality-based medium of television" (Mughan 2000: 129). Executives themselves are portrayed in a personalized fashion, being routinely labeled after the name of their leaders (Bean and Mughan 1989), and a stronger correlation overtime between prime ministerial popularity and executive's public rating was revealed in several parliamentary democracies (Lanoue and Headrick 1994; McAllister 2003; Campus and Pasquino 2006). Correspondingly, party leaders have been found to matter more in individuals' voting behavior (Butler and Stokes 1974; Clarke *et al.* 1979; Bean and Mughan 1989; Stewart and Clarke 1992; Bean 1993; Jones and Hudson 1996; Mughan 2000; Clarke *et al.* 2004; but see King 2002). According to Dalton and Wattenberg (1993), 92 percent of American electors in 1988 were in agreement with the sentence "I always vote the person I consider best, independently of the political party he belongs to" (203). To put it sharply, western electorates tend to evaluate candidates first of all as persons (Just *et al.* 1996).

The Second Italian Republic represents in many respects a paradigm of political regime's personalization (Calise 2004). The collapse of the old *Partitocrazia* – weakened by an erosion of the stable social cleavages on which it was based (Parisi and Pasquino 1977)

and further discredited by *Mani Pulite* scandals (Gilbert 1995) – produced the most appropriate conditions for popular figures to ‘enter the field’. Moreover, the majoritarian reform of the electoral systems for both local (Fabbrini 2000) and national elections (Katz 2003) “strongly reinforced the view that people would henceforward directly decide on political outcomes” (Calise 2005: 90). If in other democracies television coverage shifted slowly towards the candidates, the entrance of Silvio Berlusconi (then owner of three out of six national TV-channels) in Italian politics resulted in an astonishingly quick change of focus (Campus and Pasquino 2006). Thanks to the success of his *media party* Forza Italia (Perrucci and Villa 2004), he made the others’ increasingly dependent from television, for it immediately “seemed clear that no party could remain in the contest without heavy use of mass communication channels” (Mazzoleni 1996: 200). The extent to which Italian electoral campaigns have become more personalized is evident from the adoption of televised election debates *all’Americana*, which were held in 1994, 1996 and 2006. Furthermore, the resilience of Silvio Berlusconi (uncontested leader of the centre-right coalition) and Romano Prodi (Prime Minister twice: in 1996-8 and 2006-8) on the political scene contributed in making the past decade “something of a duel between two leaders” (Cotta and Verzichelli 2007: 64). Accordingly, leaders’ personalities have been found to matter more in individuals’ vote choice (Venturino 2000; Sani 2002).

If Italian politics and voting behavior have become more personalized in the last fifteen years, it seems appropriate to assess *which* features of leaders’ personalities matter more (or less) for the electorate. To this is aimed the following section.

3. On Presidential Prototypes:

Voters’ Ideal-Type Conceptions of the Good Leader

According to Jean Blondel, “[i]f leaders make an impact on their societies, common sense concludes that this must be due, in very large part, to their personal qualities” (Blondel 1987: 115). And when such impact is aimed at individuals’ voting

behavior, “it is critical for politicians to convey an image of their own personality that, as far as possible, matches the desires and expectations of their potential followers, given that various voters may be sensitive to different attributes” (Caprara and Zimbardo 2004: 584). The argument is straightforward, but it leaves us with a compelling question: *what attributes are we talking about?* The early literature – as carefully reviewed by Bass (1981) – found more than forty personal (e.g., physical and psychological) characteristics associated in a way or another with leadership. Similarly, a recent volume edited by Anthony King moves from the consideration that twenty-six different attributes might have in principle a bearing on voting decision (King 2002: 9). Notwithstanding the large amount of potentially significant personal attributes of the leaders, the literature has shown that voters tend to appraise leaders’ personalities in much more simplified terms. According to Caprara and Zimbardo (2004) “such simplified perceptions of the personalities of political leaders may derive from a cognitively efficient strategy that voters adopt to cope with the massive amount of daily information to which they are exposed” (585). The first effort in this sense is an article by Miller and Miller (1976). By means of factor analysis, they reduced the thirty-four separate characteristics mentioned in the 1972 ANES survey for each of the presidential candidates into five basic dimensions, which the authors label as: competence, trust, reliability, leadership appeal, and personal appearance. As they conclude, “[p]erceived candidate competence was only one dimension used by voters to evaluate the 1972 candidates, and not necessarily the most significant one. Trust and reliability were also important” (Miller and Miller 1976, 836). Ten years after, a longitudinal study (covering all the U.S. presidential elections between 1952 and 1984) by Miller and associates finds that a five-dimensional solution provides once again the best fit to the data, thus reinforcing the conclusion that “people think about presidential candidates in terms of a limited number of broad categories rather than in terms of a multitude of discrete traits” (Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk 1986, 528). Subsequent studies in this stream of research moved forward in this simplification trend. Scholars from both sides of the Atlantic advanced a bi-dimensional model of personality-appraisal based on responsiveness and competence alone (Markus

1982; Stewart and Clarke 1992; Clarke *et al.* 2004), while a tri-dimensional solution is advanced by Pancer et al. (1999). The latter study confirms – for the first time in a comparative framework – that both in the U.S., U.K. and Canada “the dimensions of judgment with reference to political figures are relatively few in number...a common set of traits [charisma, competence and integrity] robustly summarizes the bases for political judgment in different cultural and institutional settings” (362).

Whatever one names them, it is clear that a successful leader must be perceived to possess a blend of leadership qualities and moral features. The reason is clear: politicians do in fact their job in a place and manner that are, for the vast majority of voters, hard to observe and difficult to interpret correctly. Because of these conditions, it is reasonable to expect that voters will take into account those personal characteristics of leaders related to the chances that, when elected, they will faithfully and effectively act in their (the voters’) interest. In other words, representative government works as long as voters attend to the competence and integrity of their leaders (Treneman and McQuail 1961; McCurley and Mondak 1995; Mondak 1995; Mondak and Huckfeldt 2006). On the basis of this normative contention, an important stream of empirical research has focused on the voters’ prototypical conception of the *ideal leader*. In 1964, Sigel reported that American voters “judged the following qualities to be most essential for a President: honesty (78 per cent), intelligence (55 per cent), and independence (45 per cent)” (Sigel 1964: 487). Moving from the assumption that “citizens possess (and can articulate) a conception of an *ideal president*” (Kinder 1980: 315-316), Donald Kinder and his colleagues showed that the public’s ideal president should be first and foremost honest, knowledgeable and open-minded. As Newman (2003) puts it, “it seems that the public...simply wants the country's leader to be a person of integrity, a moral example, and a trustworthy authority” (340). Yet, “[i]t is one thing to demonstrate that people possess prototypic conceptions of an ideal president. It is quite another to show that the elements of character and performance citizens emphasize in their thinking about an ideal president carry special weight in their preferences toward real presidential contenders” (Kinder et al. 1980, 321). Quite unexpectedly, their empirical analysis demonstrated that

such normative prototypes failed to provide standards by which real candidates were evaluated. A tentative explanation draws on Nisbett and Wilson's argument (1977): in telling us about an ideal president, the authors argue, respondents rely primarily upon the cultural mythology of the American Presidency. That is to say, a conception of the ideal president reveals what the culture honors, not what the actual voter consult in his judgment of a real candidate. These arguments seem perfectly in line with what happened some fifteen years later, when Bill Clinton gained reelection in spite of his widely-perceived lack of integrity. As Edwards (2000) advanced, the public's dismissal of honesty assessments may well reflect a progressive "lack of weight people seem to give the president's integrity in their overall evaluation" (Edwards 2000: 42). In 1972 for example, the winning candidate – Richard Nixon – succeeded in spite of the widespread perception of his dishonesty (Rokeach 1973). Similar conclusions are reached in studies conducted in parliamentary democracies in Europe such as Germany (Brettschneider and Gabriel 2002) and Italy (Barisione 2006). In two pre-electoral surveys conducted in these countries (the German in 1997, the Italian in 2001) a wide majority of the sample regarded honesty as *the* characteristic to possess. Nonetheless, the winners in the subsequent elections were respectively Gerard Schroeder and Silvio Berlusconi (both candidates being lower than their counterpart in honesty).

4. The 'Honest Vote' in the Italian Election of 2006

In 2006 the Italian electors were looking – in depicting their own *presidential prototype* – for candidates that were first of all honest and trustworthy persons (Barisione 2006). Drawing from a post electoral survey conducted by ITANES (Italian National Election Study) between April and June of 2006 (nationally representative multistage sample conducted through face-to-face interviews/CAPI; n=1377), we have the chance to identify how these normative expectations resulted in the actual electoral behavior of voters. In this survey respondents were asked whether, in their opinion, main coalitions'

leaders (e.g., Silvio Berlusconi and Romano Prodi) possessed or not the following characteristics: competence, honesty, strong leadership, likeability, trustworthiness and ability to understand people’s problems. Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents perceiving the six characteristics under analysis to be possessed by each leader.

Table 1 – % of respondents perceiving Prodi and Berlusconi as...

	Prodi	Berlusconi	[P – B]
Honest	58	24	+ 34
Understand People’s Problems	63	37	+ 27
Trustworthy	50	37	+ 13
Competent	61	54	+ 7
Pleasant	44	42	+ 2
Strong Leader	44	89	- 45

The data show an unambiguous trend: centre-left leader Romano Prodi is perceived better than his opponent on five dimensions out of six, while Berlusconi emerges as *the* strong leader – with roughly 90 percent of the respondents perceiving him as capable to exert a strong leadership. Indeed, Prodi is especially recognized for his superior honesty (+34 points). This overwhelming gap with respect to a crucial trait of the presidential prototype of the day (e.g., honesty), hand in hand with the strong personalization of campaigning, should have assured an easy victory for Prodi’s coalition. Quite to the contrary, the election of 2006 was decided in his favor by less than twenty-five thousand votes (roughly half percent of the total vote). Curiously, that year saw the public perception of Silvio Berlusconi’s honesty at its lowest ever. Yet it was also the year featuring the best electoral performance of a centre-right coalition in the history of the Second Italian Republic (49,7 percent of the total votes).

A potential explanation for such discrepancy between “the real and the ideal” (Kinder et al. 1980: 332) might lie in the fact that many voters could not find the ‘ideal’ characteristic in any of the ‘real’ candidates. Table 2 presents the percentage of voters that report to have voted for a candidate they did not recognize as possessing each of the characteristics presented – regardless of who this candidate is.

Table 2 – % of respondents who voted for a candidate they considered *not...*

Strong Leader	18%	(n=195)
Pleasant	14%	(150)
Competent	12%	(126)
Understand People’s Problems	11%	(114)
Trustworthy	11%	(115)
Honest	10%	(106)

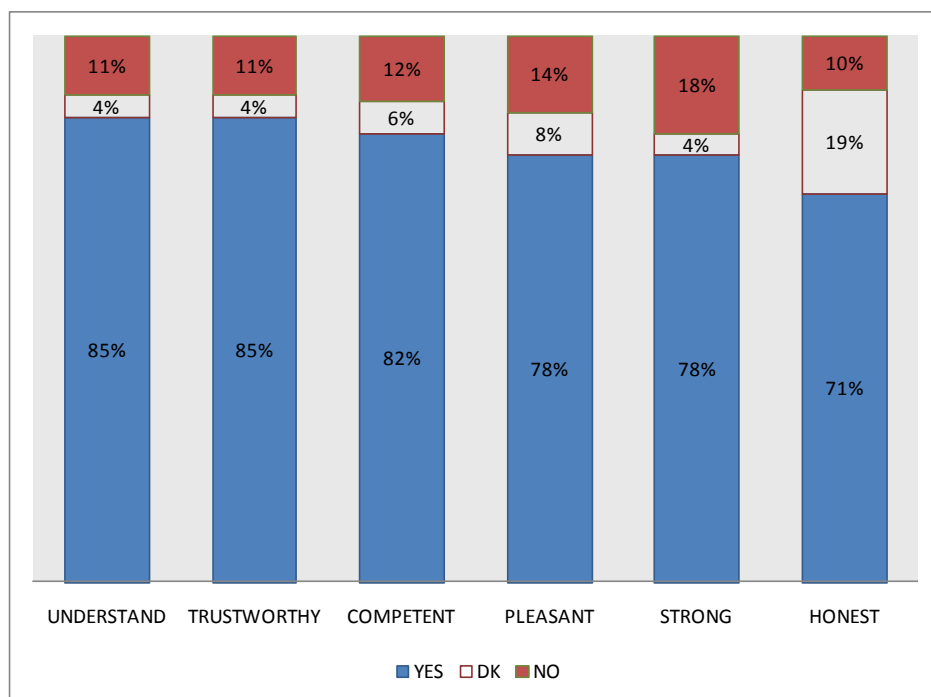
As we can see, the table closely resemble the normative rank of relevant traits previously outlined: honesty and trustworthiness in particular are at the bottom. That is to say, voters were more likely to give their vote to a person they did not consider strong or competent than to candidates they perceived as dishonest or trustworthy. Then where is the problem? A brief look at the other side of the coin can prove extremely helpful. Table 3 shows the percentage of voters that declared to have voted for a candidate they *did* recognize as possessing that particular characteristic:

Table 3 – % of respondents who voted for a candidate they *did* consider...

Understand People’s Problems	85%	(908)
Trustworthy	85%	(912)
Competent	82%	(881)
Pleasant	78%	(837)
Strong Leader	78%	(838)
Honest	71%	(760)

As one could expect, the higher a trait was scored in the first table, the lower it is scored in the second. However, something seems wrong with the trait of honesty, that scores at the bottom of both tables. How do we explain this? Simply, the respondents answered “Don’t Know” with reference to their favorite candidate’s honesty four times as much (in average) as they did with regard to every other trait under investigation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Voters’ perception of the candidate they voted for (Aggregate)



The first consideration that arises is that – contrary to the profile of the ideal president – among the traits under investigation, that of honesty resulted as the *less essential* in determining actual voting behavior. A consistent part of the sample (almost thirty percent) declared in fact to have voted for a candidate they did not consider explicitly honest. Drawing from a philosophical argument, we might advance that through an escape mechanism – which may in its initial stages be consciously employed – “responses in which one is dishonest to himself may become habit” (Punke 1944, 145). Since for every other candidate’s traits the degree of uncertainty is five percent in average, the fact that it raises to almost twenty percent with regard to honesty looks, at least, suspicious.

Would it be hazardous to hypothesize that a good deal of uncertainty is due to a psychological mechanism of escape from an inner (and in this case, negative) belief? Unfortunately, a post-electoral survey is not the proper instrument to provide a definitive answer to such question. Nevertheless, I will assume that these respondents (or at least a substantial part of them) are hiding their real opinion about their favorite candidate's honesty to the interviewer (and possibly to themselves). Or, if the reader prefers, I can simply argue that the 'uncertains' did not explicitly express in favor of their preferred candidate's honesty. Hence, the most logical solution is to consider them as every other respondent who did not find the trait of honesty in the candidate (s)he voted for. Table 4 presents the percentage of 'honest votes' controlled for standard socio-demographic variables and long term political attitudes (e.g., left-right self placement).

Table 4 – % of respondents that casted an *honest vote*
(controlled for sociodemographic variables and long-term political attitudes)

AGE GROUP	<i>Honest Votes</i>	GENDER	<i>Honest Votes</i>	REGION OF RESIDENCE	<i>Honest Votes</i>
18-24	69%	Male	71%	North	67%
25-34	63	Female	71	Centre	74
35-44	72			South	73
45-54	71				
55-64	68				
65+	81				

EDUCATION LEVEL	<i>Honest Votes</i>	LEFT/RIGHT ID.	<i>Honest Votes</i>
Elementary	76%	Left	86%
Middle School	74	Centre-Left	83
High School	66	Centre	48
College Grad.	74	Centre-Right	58
		Right	67

The bivariate analysis presented above show little divergences in the percentage of honest votes among the various categories of our socio-demographic variables. There is no difference at all between males and females: 71 percent of both groups casted an 'honest vote' (plainly, this is the mean value in the sample). With respect to age, we find the higher distance from the mean among the 24-34 years (minus 8 percent) and the 65+ years (plus 10 percent) groups, but in the other categories the percentage is fairly close to the sample mean. Territorial differences bear a moderate impact, with the lower percentage of honest votes among residents of the northern regions (67 percent). Also educational levels seem to play little part in the explanation of the honest vote. Curiously though, high school graduates casted less honest votes than both more and less educated. What seems to make a difference is indeed the individuals' self placement on the left-right dimension. Survey respondents were asked to place themselves on a five-point scale featuring: left, centre-left, centre, centre-right, and right. The crosstabulation between this variable and the 'honest vote' variable show a clear cleavage between left/centre-left voters and centre/centre-right voters (while the percentage of honest votes among the right-wing identifiers stands pretty close to the mean value). Honest votes among the former are 12 to 15 percentage points above the mean, while among the latter the distance from the mean value ranges between 13 percentage points (centre-right identifiers) and 23 (!) percentage points (centre-wing identifiers). Given the wide perception of the centre-right leader's dishonesty, we could easily imagine the percentage of dishonest votes to concentrate among the centre-right identifiers. But while this group is undoubtedly casting less honest votes than the mean, what surprises is that the lowest percentage of honest votes is to be found among voters placing themselves at the centre of political spectrum. In a sense, political attitudes explain the 'honest vote' better than sociological predictors such as gender, age, education, and so on. Yet the relatively narrow gap between left-of-the-centre and right-of-the-centre groups, as compared with that between each of these groups and the 'equidistants' group, hints us at the fact that better explanations must (and can) be found out.

5. Tax Ethics, Taxpayer Attitudes and the ‘Honest Vote’: Towards a Model of Leaders-Voters Congruency?

In their quest for a political culture that ‘fits’ the democratic political system, Almond and Verba (1963) found that the spread of a particular kind of political culture is responsible for different stages of democratic development. This kind of political culture is what they call the *civic culture*, which is characterized by (1) most citizens’ acceptance of the authority of the state, and at the same time (2) a general belief in participation in civic duties. Although Almond and Verba do not test directly the argument, they find reasons to believe that “political elites share the political culture of the nonelite: that in a society with a civic culture they, as well as nonelites, hold the attitudes associated with it” (352). This argument has been recently brought forward by a group of scholars in personality psychology who have recently framed it into an empirical model of *leader-voters congruency*. Its proponents believe that “a powerful congruency principle is functioning in the personalization of politics. Voter–politician congruency operates as the humanizing glue linking affect, cognition, and action at different stages of political transactions” (Caprara and Zimbardo 2004, 590). As their reasoning commences, “[w]e want to trust competent leaders, but we also want to like them personally, and this is easier when they are perceived as essentially similar to us. The extent to which voters perceive their leaders’ personalities as similar to their own is critical in humanizing abstract icons and endorsing politicians’ efforts and claims” (*ibid.* 590). A substantial amount of research has already corroborated the hypothesis that individuals are most attracted to others who they perceive as similar to themselves (Newcomb 1961; Byrne 1971). A classic social psychological explanation is that “being attracted to others because of actual or perceived similarities may meet a variety of needs, such as personal coherence, belonging, and control over the environment” (Caprara *et al.* 2007, 610). Caprara and associates demonstrated that in 2006 “there was a reasonable agreement in appraising Silvio Berlusconi as more active, energetic, happy, determined, and dynamic than Romano Prodi; center-right voters scored higher in Energy/Extraversion than center-left voters

and similarity between Berlusconi and his voters was particularly high in markers of Energy/Extraversion. Similarly, there was a certain agreement in appraising Romano Prodi as more friendly than Silvio Berlusconi; center-left voters scored higher in Agreeableness than center-right voters, and similarity between Prodi and his voters was particularly high in markers of Agreeableness” (Caprara et al. 2007, 628). The personality traits on which this analysis is based are the so-called ‘Big Five’ (Caprara et al. 1993). Given the high level of abstraction of this classification (which is intended to capture one’s personality in only five components), it is not surprising that a very specific trait such as honesty has been overlooked.

Yet, the findings from personality psychology give us the chance to assess the relationship, if any, between leaders’ honesty and voters’ honesty. In other words, we hypothesize that *a plausible explanation for the ‘honest vote’ lies in the congruency between leaders’ and voters’ (dis)honesty*. A definite obstacle comes to sight as soon as we look for a direct quantification of voters’ dishonesty. Nonetheless, we can make use of an indirect measure such as individuals’ attitudes towards a fundamental civic duty: paying taxes. Song and Yarbrough (1978) define these attitudes as a citizen’s *tax ethics*, which they partition in two main dimensions: the ‘attitudinal’ (that is, the normative attitudes of taxpayers with regard to their tax obligations) and the ‘behavioral’ (by this meaning tax ethics as reflected in taxpayer compliance activities). These authors measure the former through the respondents’ “ethical predisposition toward tax obligations...Since it would be not only embarrassing but probably futile to ask respondents whether they intentionally violated tax laws, we asked respondents to guess what proportion of other taxpayers commit each of the following acts...” (Song and Yarbrough 1978: 444-5). Most importantly, their analysis demonstrates that the attitudinal dimension and the behavioral dimension of tax ethics are strongly correlated. Hence we would be content enough if we could find in our data even an attitudinal measure alone for tax ethics. Luckily, ITANES questionnaire of 2006 featured the following question:

“Can you please tell us...if, according to you, tax evasion is always justifiable, or is never justifiable or if you think that it depends on the circumstances? In this case, please use an intermediate position where 1 means never justifiable and 10 means always justifiable”.

Tax evasion is – by definition – a dishonest behavior, for it consists in deliberately misrepresenting or concealing the true state of affairs to the tax authorities in order to reduce one’s own tax liability, and it is usually pursued through dishonest tax reporting. At a fast sight, one might argue that a problem arises from the use of respondents’ opinion on tax evasion as an objective indicator of dishonesty. This measure yields in fact the substantial disadvantage of not representing necessarily a dishonest behavior. However, it would be odd to imagine an exemplar taxpayer who is willing to justify tax evasion. What is more, this is probably the best (not to say the only) measure of attitudinal propension towards dishonesty at the individual level we can find in a post-electoral survey – and we know from the literature of the strong correlation between attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of tax evasion.

As said, respondents were asked to score the justifiability of tax evasion on a scale from 1 to 10. For analytical clarity, I decided to recode this variable as dummy, with on one side all the citizens scoring tax evasion with 1 (never justifiable), and on the other every respondent who declares a willingness to justify tax evasion at any degree (scores from 2 to 10). This analytical strategy, which may appear over-simplistic to some, is mainly due to the assumption that tax evasion *is* never justifiable – in the sense that, as every other legal obligation, it (should) command unconditional respect. I recognize the difference between those who are ‘almost always’ unwilling to justify tax evasion and those who would ‘never’ be unwilling to justify that. But from a legalistic perspective, and in the light of the connection between attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of tax ethics, it makes no difference between paying taxes ‘almost always’ and ‘never’: in both cases it represents a dishonest, illegal behavior. Using this coding strategy, only two thirds (65 percent) of the respondents have a positive level of tax ethics. If this does not impress, we can put it the other way around: *in 2006 roughly a third of Italian voters was willing to justify*

(at whatever rate) *tax evasion*. At this level tax ethics should be taken as “symptomatic of a disease seriously threatening the moral fiber of society and the viability of the democratic system” (Song and Yarbrough 1978: 451). Table 5 presents the percentage of respondents with a positive score on our ‘tax ethics’ variable, controlled for standard socio-demographic variables and long term political attitudes (e.g., left-right self placement).

Table 5 – % of respondents high on *tax ethics*
(controlled for sociodemographic variables and long-term political attitudes)

AGE GROUP	<i>Tax Ethics</i>	GENDER	<i>Tax Ethics</i>	REGION OF RESIDENCE	<i>Tax Ethics</i>
18-24	62%	Male	65%	North	62%
25-34	61	Female	66	Centre	72
35-44	61			South	63
45-54	62				
55-64	69				
65+	75				

EDUCATION LEVEL	<i>Tax Ethics</i>	LEFT/RIGHT ID.	<i>Tax Ethics</i>
Elementary	62%	Left	73%
Middle School	67	Centre-Left	70
High School	66	Centre	63
College Grad.	61	Centre-Right	59
		Right	57

As it was the case with respondents that casted a ‘honest vote’, controlling for socio-demographic variables bear a modest explanation for the level of ‘tax ethics’. Males and females high in tax ethics are almost in the same proportion. Residents in the central regions of the country are somehow higher in tax ethics, while oldest stands much higher in comparison with every other age class. The impact of education level is the less clear, with the lower percentages of tax ethics among the less and the best educated (e.g., elementary and college graduates respectively). Once again, a more consistent pattern

emerges controlling our ‘tax ethics’ variable with the respondents’ self-placement on the left-right scale. In fact, the percentage of respondents high on tax ethics constantly decreases every step forward to the right. While 73 percent of left-wing identifiers scores high on this variable, the score goes relentlessly down to 70 (centre-left), 63 (centre), 59 (centre-right) to get to 57 percent within the right-wing identifiers. These data cast serious doubt over the long-standing assumption of right-wing identifiers as those more sensitive to ‘law and order’ issues. Yet there seem to be nothing wrong, in principle. As in every other European welfare state, the Italian taxation is higher in comparison with more liberal economies such as the United States. In this light, our finding does not come as a surprise: willingness to justify tax evasion might be more accentuated on the right side of the spectrum for the simple reason that every liberal platform in Western Europe is based on the principle ‘less state, more market’ (and hence, less taxes). The linearity of the pattern looks as a *prima facie* confirmation of this hypothesis.

Table 6 – The relationship between *tax ethics* and the *(dis)honest vote*
(sum of column percentages equals 100%)

Respondent's <i>Tax Ethics...</i>	Respondent casted a...	
	<i>Honest Vote</i>	<i>Dishonest Vote</i>
Low	25,2% (n=237)	35,9% (133)
High	74,8% (523)	64,1% (176)

Table 6 presents the simple crosstabulation of our ‘honest vote’ and ‘tax ethics’ dummy variables. The percentage of respondents low in tax ethics among those who voted for an honest candidate is only 25 percent, but it rises up to 36 percent among those who casted a ‘dishonest vote’. The relationship is rather weak (Pearson’s $r = .11$)

but statistically significant (p value $< .001$ two-tailed), and its direction is as expected (that is, voters higher is tax ethics are less likely to cast a dishonest vote).

Table 7 – Partial correlations (Pearson’s r) between *tax ethics* and the *honest vote* (controlled for sociodemographic variables and long-term political attitudes)

AGE GROUP	<i>Pearson's R</i>	GENDER	<i>Pearson's R</i>	REGION OF RESIDENCE	<i>Pearson's R</i>
18-24	.03	Male	.10 *	North	.17 *
25-34	.21 **	Female	.13 **	Centre	.15 *
35-44	.22 **			South	.02
45-54	-.01				
55-64	.12				
65+	.01				

EDUCATION LEVEL	<i>Pearson's R</i>	LEFT/RIGHT ID.	<i>Pearson's R</i>
Elementary	.03	Left	.14
Middle School	.13 *	Centre-Left	.08
High School	.14 *	Centre	.04
College Grad.	.10	Centre-Right	.05
		Right	.15

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 7 provides a measure of association between our dependent and independent variable (again, Pearson’s r) after the effect of other variable is controlled for, so as to assure that the relationship remains statistically significant within every category of our control variables. Admittedly, this is not the case. In some instances the correlation coefficient loses its statistical significance, and in particular within several age categories (the relationship holds only among the ‘25-34’ and ‘35-44’ groups), among the southern regions’ residents and both the lower and higher educated (that is, elementary school and college graduates). Nonetheless, the sign of the relationship remains positive each and every time. That is to say, *people lower is tax ethics is in every case more likely to cast a dishonest*

vote. Interestingly though, neither controlling our hypothesized relationship for the respondent's self placement on the left-right scale does change the direction of it. In this case however, and only in this case, not even one partial correlation coefficient remains statistically significant. This finding warns us of the fact that introducing such control variable may have shown the spuriousness of our hypothesized relationship (although the signs of the coefficients are still positive). To assure that this is not the case, next section will present a logistic regression model aimed at assessing the validity, as well as the relative weight, of our predictors (e.g., tax ethics and left-right self placement, plus political interest) as determinants of one casting a 'dishonest vote'.

6. The Determinants of the 'Dishonest Vote'

By means of logistic regression analysis (instead of OLS regression, since our dependent variable is dichotomous) we can assess at once the simultaneous impact of several potential explanatory variables. The dependent variable of the analysis is a dummy coding 0 those who casted a 'honest vote' and 1 every respondent who declared to have voted for a candidate they did not perceive to be honest (that is, the 'dishonest vote'). Our main predictor is 'tax ethics': again a dummy variable, coding 0 the respondents high in tax ethics (that is, individuals unwilling to justify tax evasion at any degree) and 1 those with a low score on this indicator. The second predictor included in the model is the respondent's self-placement on the left-right scale (coding: 1-left; 2-centre-left; 3-centre; 4-centre-right; 5-right). The following control variables are included: age (in years), gender (coding: 1-males; 2-females), education level (coding: 1-elementary; 2-middle school; 3-high school; 4-college), region of residence (coding: 1-residents of Val d'Aosta, Piemonte, Liguria, Lombardia, Veneto, Trentino Alto-Adige, Friuli Venezia-Giulia; 2-residents of Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, Marche, Umbria, Lazio, Abruzzo; 3-residents of Campania, Molise, Basilicata, Puglia, Calabria, Sicilia, Sardegna).

The multivariate nature of this analysis also offers the opportunity to verify the role of voters' political interest as a determinant of the 'dishonest vote'. The literature is in fact sharply divided with respect to the relationship between voters' political sophistication and their perception of leaders' personality traits. On the one hand, Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk (1986) argued that "[c]ontrary to the common assumption by those who view personality as irrational, schema theories suggest that more politically informed voters will be the most likely to make comments about the candidates' inner dispositions and behaviors" (524). Although the authors refer to "making comments" only, the reasoning clearly shows their expectation of consequential differences in the use of candidates' traits with respect to candidate evaluation and vote choice. That is to say, the higher the level of political information available, the higher the impact of candidates' personality traits on candidate evaluation. Moving from a similar assumption, Glass (1985) found indeed little differences in the reliance on candidate traits by individuals with different levels of political sophistication. Contrary to these studies, Pierce (1993) advanced that "more politically sophisticated individuals should be *less* likely to rely on candidate traits in forming their candidate preferences...Candidate traits need not be related to politics, whereas parties, ideologies, and issues are inherently political; thus, candidate traits require less sophistication to understand and incorporate into the voting decision" (24). This argument is similar to that presented by Sneiderman *et al.* (1991): in their opinion, more sophisticated voters base their vote choice on a wider range of considerations than less sophisticated voters do. That is to say, those with a higher interest in politics develop a more articulated mental image of the candidates. They look at "everything and the kitchen sink" (cited in Barisione 2006: 102): from private life to the communicative style, from the face to the political manifesto, and so on. According to this stream of research then, more politically sophisticated individuals are able to evaluate candidates on a wider range of considerations, hence making their assessment of candidates' personalities less 'central' within their voting choice. In order to assess which of these theories is right (at least for the case at hand) we will include in the regression model a measure of political sophistication, operationalized as the respondent's level of

political interest (coding: 1-not at all; 2-not much; 3-fairly much; 4-very much). Table 8 presents the regression estimates.

TABLE 8 – The Determinants of the ‘Dishonest Vote’
(Logistic Regression estimates)

	B	S.E.	Sig.
<u>Controls</u>			
Gender	-.025	.150	.866
Age	-.006	.005	.213
Education Level	.195	.097	.051
Region	-.144	.086	.094
<u>Predictors</u>			
Tax Ethics	.390	.151	.010
Left-Right Orientation	.361	.056	.000
Political Interest	-.363	.102	.000
<i>Constant</i>	<i>- 1.170</i>	<i>.572</i>	<i>.310</i>
<u>Cox & Snell R-squared</u>	.11		

Cox & Snell square is admittedly small (.11), and hints at the poor predictive value of the model. Yet this was not our primary aim. The model has been in fact conceived to assess the *relative weight* of different potential explanations for the phenomenon under analysis, and we can appreciate the fact that all our predictors (e.g., tax ethics, left-right self placement, and political interest) are statistically significant while none of the socio-demographic controls is. Most importantly, our ‘tax ethics’ variable emerges as the strongest predictor (standardized coefficient $B=.39$) of the ‘dishonest vote’ among the three included in our regression analysis. With respect to left-right self placement ($B=.36$) the estimates’ sign clearly show that being placed more to the right increases the

likelihood of casting a dishonest vote – yet, not as much as being low on tax ethics. With respect to political sophistication, the higher one’s political interest, the lower the chances to cast a dishonest vote ($B=-.36$). In other words, more politically sophisticated individuals seem to pay more attention to the personal qualities of the candidates, consistently with schema theories and contrary to the “common assumption by those who view personality as irrational” (Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk 1986: 524).

7. Discussion and Conclusion

From 1994 on, Italian electorate has been provided with the unprecedented chance to vote almost *directly* for their preferred candidate to the premiership. This fact, together with the evidence presented in the first section of this paper, points clearly toward the increasing role of leaders’ personalities in structuring political competition and communication (what we called the ‘personalization of politics’). In this context, it is clear that candidates’ personalities exert a growing role also on individuals’ voting behavior. We then asked whether voters have a ‘prototypical conception’ of the ideal leader’s personality, and found out that Western democracies’ electorates are unanimous on *the* characteristic to possess: that of honesty. This was the case as well in the Italian election of 2006. However, our analysis showed that some thirty percent of the electorate casted a vote for a candidate they did not perceive as honest. In our attempt to assess the determinants of such a high number of ‘dishonest votes’, we found that people lower on tax ethics (that is, voters who are attitudinally willing to justify tax evasion) are more likely than those higher on this attribute to cast a dishonest vote. Knowing from the literature that attitudinal dishonesty is highly correlated with behavioral dishonesty (Song and Yarbrough 1978), we framed our findings into a model of ‘leader-voters congruency’ (Caprara and Zimbardo 2004), hypothesizing that the strongest determinant of the ‘dishonest vote’ lies in the voters’ (dis)honesty. We tested this hypothesis through logistic regression and found out that ‘tax ethics’ explains dishonest voting behavior better than

long-term political attitudes (e.g., self placement on the left-right scale) and political sophistication (e.g., the respondents' level of interest in politics).

Two final points are in order. The first relates to the higher likelihood for 'right-of-the-centre' voters to cast a dishonest vote. On the one hand, we know that a long term political attitude such left-right orientation stands among the strongest determinants of vote choice, and it is hence mathematically obvious that the higher number of dishonest votes is to be found among the supporters of the coalition led by a leader (e.g., Silvio Berlusconi) widely perceived as dishonest even among his voters. On the other hand, we must note that these voters are also lower in tax ethics as compared to left-wingers. This can be due, as said, to their different ideological orientation toward taxes. Yet one should not overlook the possibility that the level of centre-right voters' tax ethics is (at least in part) a cause of their congruency¹ with a leader who had no difficulties in declaring that:

"C'è una norma di diritto naturale che dice che se c'è uno Stato che chiede un terzo di quanto guadagni allora la tassazione ti appare una cosa giusta. Ma se ti chiede il 50-60% di ciò che guadagni, come accade per le imprese, ti sembra una cosa indebita e ti senti anche un pò giustificato a mettere in atto procedure di elusione e a volte anche di evasione"

(Silvio Berlusconi, April 2nd 2008)

Keeping in mind that "a tax system not reflective of the desire of the people is essentially no different from a system of 'taxation without representation'" (Song and Yarbrough 1978: 451), we should also be bold in underscoring how dangerous would be to turn a democratic election into a way of obtaining 'no taxation *through* representation'.

I would like to conclude this paper with a reflection on the most (and probably only) encouraging finding of this analysis. In the previous section we should have made clear that more politically sophisticated individuals pay more attention to the personal qualities of the candidates. As predicted by modernization and cognitive mobilization

¹ It would seem that the first to believe in a congruency between him and his supporters is the Italian President of Minister's Council himself, who recently declared that "the majority of Italians wish intimately to be like me; they identify with me and the way I behave" (Silvio Berlusconi, September 7th 2009).

theories (Dalton 1984; Inglehart 1990), the number of sophisticated voters in advanced industrial democracies should increase constantly thanks to the dramatic spread of education along with the lessened cost of political information due to the ‘information explosion’ experienced by these societies. We remain confident in this process, for nowadays the growth of politically sophisticated citizens looks as the only force able to counterbalance the spread of a perilous phenomenon such as the ‘dishonest vote’.

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