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**ELECTORAL INCENTIVES  
AND POLITICAL  
PARTICULARISM**  
A TEXT ANALYSIS APPROACH





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# CONTENTS

vii *Introduction*

1 Chapter I  
*Political Particularism*

1.1. The dilemma of representation, 2 – 1.1.1. *Constituency service and political particularism*, 3 – 1.1.2. *Representation as responsiveness*, 6 – 1.2. Re-thinking political particularism, 9 – 1.2.1. *A novel approach to political particularism*, 12 – 1.3. A new dataset on Italian deputies and legislation, 14 – 1.4. Operationalizing political particularism, 23 – 1.4.1. *Types and foci of representation*, 23 – 1.5. Methodology, 25 – 1.5.1. *The Italian way: political particularism and leggine*, 25 – 1.5.2. *Automated content analysis*, 26 – 1.5.3. *Dictionaries of particularism*, 28 – 1.6. Dictionaries validation, 38 – 1.6.1. *Manual-coded validation*, 38 – 1.6.2. *Face validity*, 46 – 1.6.3. *Variation in political particularism*, 47 – 1.7. Discussion, 53.

57 Chapter II  
*The Search for a Personal Vote*

2.1. Political actors and electoral rules, 58 – 2.1.1. *New and better proxies for the personal vote*, 61 – 2.2. The search for a personal vote and particularism, 61 – 2.2.1. *The effect of the personal vote*, 63 – 2.2.2. *The effect of localism*, 64 – 2.2.3. *Confounding factors*, 65 – 2.3. Data, methods, and variables operationalization, 67 – 2.3.1. *The context and the data*, 67 – 2.3.2. *Variables operationalization*, 68 – 2.4. Results, 72 – 2.5. Discussion, 75.

79 Chapter III  
*The Role of Electoral Rules*

3.1. Electoral systems and incentives, 80 – 3.1.1. *Electoral incentives and particularism*, 81 – 3.2. Theoretical framework, 84 – 3.2.1. *Defining particularism*, 84 – 3.2.2. *Ballot, vote, district magnitude*, 86 – 3.2.3. *Dual candidates' strategy*, 87 – 3.3. Research design, 91 – 3.3.1. *Why Italy?*, 91 – 3.4. Data and variables, 95 – 3.5. Methodology, 96 – 3.5.1. *Statistical framework*, 96 – 3.6. Analysis, 99 – 3.6.1. *Candidates' incentives*, 99 – 3.6.2. *Information, incentives, abilities*, 100 – 3.6.3. *Balance and placebo tests*, 102 – 3.6.4. *Results*, 105 – 3.6.5. *Alternative explanations*, 107 – 3.7. Discussion, 109.

113 *Conclusions*

129 *Appendix A*

153 *Appendix B*

161 *Appendix C*

# INTRODUCTION

## The perils of political particularism

In this study, I investigate the impact that the search for a personal vote has on legislators' decision to either represent the interests of localities or to safeguard those of society at large. This choice is relevant to political representation as well as to social welfare maximization. To guarantee full representation, a legislator should safeguard both national and local interests. Elected representatives, though, have limited time and resources, which means they can end up being mainly focused on local interests (Searing 1985, Shugart 2001). This is problematic, for a few reasons. Politicians who serve localities can generate an inefficient political system characterized by the provision of particularistic benefits at the expense of programmatic policymaking. The consequence is a political class that is unable to address the crucial issues that divide a society (Carey & Shugart 1995, Cox 1987). Italian legislators' inability to engage in programmatic policymaking is notorious. For years, scholars have denounced how Italian deputies, committed to proposing and discussing laws aimed at serving localities interests, have not managed to promote broader legislation like educational reforms or job acts (Di Palma 1977; Somogyi & Sartori 1963). When politicians act primarily as local representatives, they can end up generating a non-equitable and Pareto-inefficient redistribution of resources: in a nutshell, a political system characterized by discriminatory policies and overspending (Pennock 1970). The diversion of goods and services towards deputies' constituencies can generate an over provision of resources, and bring about discriminatory policies that provide benefits to local groups, while spreading the cost to the whole electorate (Pennock 1970, Weingast *et al.* 1981). Again, Italian politicians' tendency to favor small clientele's interests through taxpaying and the consequent higher than optimal budget deficits are notorious (Alesina & Perotti 1995, Putnam *et al.* 1994).

The way elected representatives manage their time and resources in national assemblies is crucial to voters' representation as well as to society's welfare. If deputies have incentives to spend most of

their time and resources to favor the interests of narrow groups of citizens, they could end up neglecting the interests of larger shares of the population. If we want to guarantee representation to the broadest possible segment of society and safeguard welfare maximization, we need to understand what are the factors that move elected representatives' attention toward parochial interests.

### **A new approach to the study of political particularism**

In this work, I propose an approach to the study of political particularism based on the idea that a politician can conceive her constituency in a multitude of ways: as a geographic entity, as a set of functional groups, or as a collection of individuals. To this aim, I build on Eulau & Karpis (1977)'s theory of *styles* and *foci* of "representation as responsiveness". Styles of responsiveness define the way in which a legislator represents her voters. Policy responsiveness pertains to a legislator who represents her voters by sustaining their policy orientation. Service responsiveness pertains to a legislator who represents her voters by offering them non-legislative services, like casework or resolution of grievances. Symbolic responsiveness pertains to a legislator who represents her voters by generating and maintaining a relationship of trust and support with them. Allocative responsiveness pertains to a legislator who represents her voters by providing them goods and services. Foci define the way a legislator perceives her constituency. A legislator who conceives her constituency in terms of territorial levels has a geographic focus. A legislator who conceives her constituency in terms of a set of functional groups has a group-related focus. A legislator who conceives her constituency in terms of a collection of individuals has an individual focus.

Political particularism pertains to distributive policies, and thus it constitutes the main means through which an elected representative guarantees allocative responsiveness to her constituents. While all legislators with an allocative style of representation will engage in political particularism, legislators with a different focus will engage in a different type of particularism. Geographic particularism is the act of distributing goods and services to a deputy's constituency, conceived as a unique geographic entity; a typical example would be an infrastructural intervention, like the construction of a bridge or of a car park. Sectoral particularism is the act of distributing goods and services to functional groups determined by



sectors of the economy; a typical instance would be the distribution of subsidies to the tourism sector, or the institution of an award for the urban and architectural sector. Individual particularism is the act of distributing goods and services to individual constituents; a typical example would be the distribution of jobs in the public sector via patron-client relationships.

Contrary to what I propose, most of the literature describes political particularism as a purely geographical phenomenon. In other words, scholars usually define an elected representative's constituency only in terms of its geographic location: the electoral district. Only a few authors have described elected representatives' willingness to serve the interests of narrower entities inside their constituency, like a social group, a company, or even a single individual (e.g. Di Palma 1977; Pedrazzani & Zucchini 2013). Still, these scholars do not formalize elected representatives' willingness to serve these interests in a comprehensive theory of political particularism, nor they connect it to politicians' necessity to cultivate a personal vote. This book aims to offer theoretical background and empirical evidence of legislators propensity to favor the interests of diverse clientele residing in their constituency. Legislators in search of a personal vote do not simply divert goods and services to their districts, they also target the interests of specific economic sectors or professional categories residing in their constituencies. Even though national parliaments are elected through a geographically-based mechanism, parliamentarians do not necessarily perceive their electoral constituency as a geographic location corresponding to their electoral district.

## Why Italy?

To examine the connection between politicians' search for a personal vote and political particularism, I analyze the legislative behavior of Italian members of parliament, as a case study of how this causal mechanism works. A frequent issue that arises when performing single country analysis is that of limited generalizability. This is often the consequence of choosing a context that is carefully selected to bolster a particular standpoint. However, the choice of the Italian case constitutes quite a different circumstance. First, anecdotal evidence of a strong presence of particularistic policymaking in Italy has been reported by many scholars (e.g., Di Palma 1977). Anecdotal accounts of high levels of political particularism' in the

Italian political scenario set the stage for a more in depth analysis, that aims at providing compelling empirical evidence. Simply put, we would like to be reasonably confident that we are choosing a country/state/region where the phenomenon we want to analyze actually manifests itself.

Moreover, by focusing on an in-depth single country analysis, I have been able to produce a proxy of political particularism that displays levels of measurement validity not feasible when performing cross-national analyses. To study political particularism, I have developed four dictionaries of Italian particularism, and I have validated them with the help of Italian-speaking individuals. Using this procedure, I have been able to construct a measure of political particularism that was tailor-made for the Italian case. Better attuned measures lead to better findings, because they are specifically conceived for capturing the phenomenon we want to analyze.

Finally, focusing on one country enabled me to offer an analysis of political particularism that goes as deep as the individual level. Many cross-country analyses end up being merely correlational, when they study causal relationships that cannot be directly inspected or measured at the national level. On the contrary, single-country studies can achieve greater rigor in analyzing causal mechanisms that occur at the sub-national level, like the electoral connection, exactly because they more easily produce individual-level analyses (Golden 2005).

## **Automated text analysis of proposed legislation**

To study the electoral connection, I employ automated text analytic techniques. Political actors produce a great amount of written documents: bill proposals, electoral manifestos, parliamentary questions, blog posts and many more. Content analysis gives us the opportunity to study politics beyond surveys or elections. By producing fine-grained analyses of politically relevant texts, we can get insights into legislative behavior, public opinion, and many other politically relevant topics. Previous studies used manual content analysis to inspect texts. These analyses were either limited to short periods of time, or required prohibitive levels of resources to be accomplished (e.g., Gamm & Kousser 2010). Thanks to automated text analysis and natural language processing techniques, we can now scale up the content analysis of documents and produce more detailed and comprehensive studies that span longer periods of time.