

The politics of depoliticization? A case study analysis of nonpartisan lists in Tuscany (2008-2022)

La politica della depoliticizzazione? Un'analisi di caso delle liste apartitiche in Toscana (2008-2022)

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Abstract. Questo studio esamina le caratteristiche delle liste civiche locali indipendenti, una forma alternativa di partecipazione politica cresciuta parallelamente al disaffiezione politica e al declino dei partiti tradizionali. Nonostante la loro natura precaria, le liste civiche hanno registrato un aumento tangibile nelle recenti elezioni locali, sia in coalizioni indipendenti che legate ai partiti. L'articolo propone una tassonomia basata su sei sottotipi: liste pure, personalizzate e tematizzate, classificate come politicizzate o indipendenti. Analizzando 162 casi in 54 principali comuni toscani su tre cicli elettorali (2008–2022), lo studio verifica quattro ipotesi per chiarire la natura ambigua delle liste civiche. I risultati, oltre a illuminare le loro dinamiche nelle elezioni recenti, evidenziano il legame con i processi di depoliticizzazione e ripoliticizzazione, aprendo nuove prospettive sul rapporto tra populismo e riattivazione civica.

Abstract. This study examines local independent civic lists, an alternative form of political participation that has grown amid political disaffection and the decline of traditional parties. Despite their precarious nature, these lists have risen in recent local elections, within both party-affiliated and independent coalitions. The article proposes a taxonomy of six sub-types—pure, personalized, and thematized lists, divided into politicized or independent—and analyzes 162 cases from 54 Tuscan municipalities (2008–2022). The findings clarify the ambiguous nature of civic lists and their links to depoliticization, re-politicization, and populist civic re-engagement.

Keywords: elections, populism, local politics, depoliticization, civic lists, elezioni, populismo, politica locale, depoliticizzazione, liste civiche

Introduction

The golden years of party politics during the First Republic significantly limited the opportunities for the rise of independent political figures. However, the 1990s and the electoral reforms introduced during this period opened up a unique window of opportunity for such figures. Law 81 of 1993, commonly referred to as the Ciaffi Law (after its proponent), is particularly important as it reorganized the municipal and provincial electoral systems, allowing for the direct election of mayors and shifting local elections towards a majoritarian, essentially bipolar system. The growing prominence of the mayor's role, reinforced by broader trends of personalization in politics, coincided with the gradual weakening of traditional political parties. These parties, once seen as essential intermediaries between voters and institutions and defined as spaces for public debate, began to lose their grip on voters. As the strong connection between parties and voters gradually weakened, the resulting political space became fragmented, taking on ambiguous and ill-defined forms. This vacuum was increasingly filled by a new variety of political actors, including individuals emerging not from traditional party structures but from civil society. In other words, civic candidates began to make their gradual entry into the political scene.

However, this should not lead us to imagine an immediate transformation of the political landscape, where the loosening of party constraints immediately resulted in the widespread success of civic lists. For decades, civic lists remained marginal political actors, even after the introduction of the Ciaffi Law. Nevertheless, we can view this reform as the symbolic starting point for the weakening of party structures at the local level.

The expansion of civic movements, however, remains under-researched, both in terms of its timeline and its place within the broader local political landscape (see for exception Bolgherini & Grimaldi, 2022). This lack of attention is surprising, considering that 31 years have passed since the introduction of the Ciaffi Law, and civic lists and their candidates can no longer be considered a novelty. Although civic lists were long seen as secondary to traditional parties, existing primarily to fill a gap, their growing electoral relevance forces us to reconsider whether this understanding is still appropriate. Given the significant changes in the political and party system over the last 30 years, it seems unlikely that civic lists continue to serve the same role as before, despite the evolving context around them.

This study aims to contribute to filling the theoretical gap surrounding the phenomenon of civic lists. These latter have shown that they have the characteristics necessary to be considered a political entity, and they also provide an interesting lens through which to study processes of depoliticization, re-polit-

icization, and the populist sentiment from a new perspective. This perspective offers an alternative to the common hypothesis that voters see themselves as detached from the political sphere and act with complete indifference toward it. While the recent surge in civic movements may signal a democratic malaise, it cannot be dismissed as merely a symptom. It requires careful evaluation, considering its origins, evolution, and possible future implications.

With this in mind, this study will first explore the relationship between non-partisan actors and civic lists, themes that are generally under-researched, as well as the depoliticizing dynamics that have contributed to widening the gap between voters and elected officials, exacerbating their already difficult relationship. Contextualizing these dynamics within a specific theoretical framework will help to define the already blurry boundaries of civic lists and their actors. One of the main challenges in studying this topic is the lack of literature, which complicates efforts to define the structure and nature of these alternative political actors.

After outlining the theoretical background for our analysis, we will present the research methods, the sample selection, and the reasons for investigating this topic. The taxonomy of the different types of civic lists will be a central focus of the study, as it offers a clearer understanding of the issue. Once the various categories of civic lists are established, we will take a further step by evaluating their impact in the Tuscan context. The four hypotheses formulated in this study will serve as a guide to measure, with the necessary caution, the influence of non-partisan lists in Tuscany.

1. Framing Non-Partisan Actors: Exploring Depoliticization and Local Political Shifts.

The growing electoral fragmentation observed in recent Italian municipal elections has sparked significant scholarly interest. While much research has focused on party dynamics, the role of non-partisan actors—who have contributed substantially to this fragmentation—remains underexplored. This paper seeks to fill that gap by examining these actors within a theoretical framework grounded in depoliticization, the consequent rise of antipolitical sentiments among citizens, and the impact of these dynamics on local election outcomes.

Depoliticization, as analysed by Colin Hay (2007), refers to the gradual removal of political decision-making from traditional participatory channels, a process that has fuelled widespread disillusionment with mainstream parties. This disaffection has led to growing antipolitical sentiments, where voters increasingly turn to alternatives such as civic lists, which often emphasize pragmatism and local priorities over ideological commitments. These changes mir-

ror broader socio-cultural shifts, especially in regions like Tuscany, where the Communist Party's electoral dominance, and later that of the center-left, was once among the strongest and most enduring in Italy.

Thus, framing the expansion of civic experiments requires considering not only the widespread populist sentiments at the national level but also the specific socio-cultural transformations in Tuscany. Analysing this phenomenon in the Tuscan context involves understanding the fading political subcultures. Once a stronghold of the "red subculture," defined by leftist party dominance and entrenched ideological loyalty, Tuscany has experienced a substantial decline in party influence over recent decades. Scholars such as Caciagli (2006), Florida (2010) and Baccetti (2017) have documented this erosion of political identity, noting the waning role of traditional parties and the rise of civic engagement as an alternative form of political expression. The weakening of party loyalty and the declining ideological influence in the region have opened the door for the emergence of civic lists (Di Virgilio, 1994). In this context, Vampa's work (2016) is particularly relevant, showing that voters are increasingly mobilizing around practical issues rather than traditional ideological lines. This shift aligns closely with the rise of non-partisan lists, which echo the broader anti-political sentiment spreading throughout Italy (Mete, 2022). This growing discontent has further weakened traditional party democracy, amplifying the disconnection between voters and their representatives (Mair, 2016).

To fully understand this dynamic, it is essential to consider the literature on political subcultures and social capital. Diamanti (2003) and Caciagli (2006) have examined how local political identities shape electoral competition, especially in regions like Tuscany. Their research highlights how the decline of mass parties and the rise of personalized politics have created new opportunities for civic lists, which frequently tap into local dissatisfaction with mainstream politics. McAllister (2007) posits that political personalization—where voters increasingly prioritize individual candidates over party affiliations—reflects a broader shift in political engagement.

This shift is often a response to disenchantment with party structures, as voters seek candidates they perceive as more accountable and reliable than traditional party figures, thereby boosting the appeal of civic lists as alternatives to mainstream parties.

A comprehensive understanding of civic lists also requires examining the role of social capital, as emphasized by Cartocci (2007). Social capital encompasses the networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust levels that bind communities (Putnam, 1993). In municipalities with a strong base of social capital, citizens are more likely to participate in associative and civic activities. This vibrant civic culture encourages collaboration and supports the rise of non-par-

tisan movements like civic lists. In communities with high social capital, citizens' ability to organize, participate, and hold local governments accountable increases, making civic lists a compelling alternative to traditional parties. The robust civic ethos in these areas often leads to a more engaged electorate, which views civic lists not simply as reactions to political dissatisfaction but as genuine vehicles for change.

Beyond literature focused on Tuscany's political culture, this study draws on research regarding the depoliticization of traditional political spaces and its practical consequences for political participation. This paper argues that the dual processes of depoliticization and re-politicization (Orsina, 2017; D'Albergo & Moini, 2011) are essential to understand the rise of non-partisan actors. While disillusionment with traditional parties has distanced many voters from formal politics, it has simultaneously encouraged alternative forms of political engagement, such as civic lists. Alongside studies on populism, this framework incorporates research on post-representative democracy and grassroots mobilization (Vitale, 2018; Raffini & Viviani, 2011), which explore what Sorice (2019) calls "politics beyond politics," where non-traditional forms of participation challenge established political structures.

By synthesizing these perspectives—de-politicization, re-politicization, political subcultures, and social capital—this paper aims to offer a clearer understanding of the rise of civic lists in Tuscan municipalities with over 15,000 inhabitants. In doing so, it seeks to clarify the conceptual framework for understanding civic lists, positioning them as key to interpreting the evolving landscape of local politics in Italy.

2. Unpacking Nonpartisan Lists: A Framework for taxonomy

Political disaffection is evolving: alongside traditional forms of abstention and electoral disengagement, a new type of anti-politics has emerged. Unlike past waves, this new disaffection is driven not by grassroots voters but by the political elite from above (Metz, 2022). Increasingly, political actors are compelled to adopt anti-political strategies themselves in order to maintain a certain level of support (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015). Thus, even before anti-political sentiments emerge among the public, we observe a gradual erosion of traditional spaces for interaction between representatives and voters. While political parties now play a 'minimal' role in mediation, they assume a 'maximal' role in penetrating and instrumentalizing public institutions (Cerruto & Facello, 2014).

This “political void”, described by Peter Mair (2016), suggests that the only viable means of mobilizing disaffected citizens has become the stigmatization of politics itself (Carbone, 2023). Practicing anti-politics from above—by the politicians themselves—is a risky strategy that often backfires, offering no guarantee of political survival for its proponents. Despite this, moments of populist rhetoric occasionally trigger political interest, countering the gradual retreat of the electorate from public debate. Depoliticization thus becomes a ‘successful’ policy (Orsina, 2017; Ignazi, 2021), yet it fosters a vicious cycle that flattens and drains public discourse. It’s important to emphasize that the erosion of political space doesn’t just generate populist sentiments of disaffection; it can also drive grassroots re-engagement in ways that diverge from traditional channels (such as party affiliation or electoral participation). The paradox, as Mair (2016) argues, is that anti-political sentiments are actually fuelled by the political class itself, which seeks to temporarily re-engage disillusioned voters. In attempting to reconnect with citizens through alternative forms of communication and participation, anti-politics inadvertently contributes to phenomena such as reduced voter turnout, heightened electoral volatility, and governmental instability (Mény & Surel, 2002).

With this in mind, we turn to explore where non-partisan lists fit within the erosion of traditional political spaces. In this sense, depoliticizing mechanisms can stimulate voter re-engagement, prompting a new form of re-politicization (Mouffe, 2005; Touraine, 2013). By starting our analysis with the consequences of this hollowing out—before the consolidation of populist sentiments—we examine the dual dynamic of depoliticizing and re-politicizing processes. This approach places new post-representative democratic experiences within a broad and complex phenomenon. Populism and anti-politics can thus be viewed as outcomes of depoliticizing dynamics, rooted in historical processes (D’Albergo & Moini, 2019) such as the crises in the technical rationality of liberal democracy and of neoliberal hegemony itself. Within this framework, we consider civic lists both as products of ongoing depoliticization and as tools for electoral mobilization with re-politicizing potential.

Examining this phenomenon in such a way challenges the notion that citizens are inherently indifferent toward politics. In this regard, it is useful to refer to the concept of “counter-democracy” developed by Rosanvallon (2006). In fact, it is unlikely that contemporary, educated, and independent voters would willingly exclude themselves completely from public decision-making spaces. We argue that, more probably, these spaces no longer adequately address the evolving needs of voters. Depoliticization highlights the growing anti-political sentiments among citizens who increasingly feel deprived of traditional political spaces, while anti-politics itself generates new demands and re-politicizing pressures. This dual movement between depoliticization and re-politicization

fosters alternative forms of political activism (Hay, 2007) that remain largely unexplored.

An important aspect here is the phenomenon of grassroots participation, which seeks to fill the gap left by traditional political parties. During the era of mass politics, parties actively promoted national agendas at the local level (Vampa, 2016), fostering a strong link between national, regional, and local governance. However, from the latter half of the 20th century onward, this connection weakened, leading to political disconnection across government levels and supporting increased autonomy for both parties and local actors. This shift aligns with the phenomenon of party cartelization (Katz & Mair, 2006), which has softened the rigid party constraints that characterized mass politics. As a result, political actors have moved beyond simply rejecting party-imposed boundaries; they have redefined the forms, timing, and logic of political action. New mechanisms for political participation—broadly accessible and often cross-cutting—have encouraged party disintermediation, creating more open pathways for civic engagement.

This study aims to account for both the re-politicizing and depoliticizing dynamics that emerge from these political formations. On the one hand, grassroots initiatives can stimulate civic engagement, foster community cohesion, and bring specific public issues to light. On the other hand, a sole focus on their re-politicizing effects may obscure their role in fragmenting political options and perpetuating the trend of eroding traditional political space. Although territorial in nature, civic lists often concentrate on single issues, narrowing political horizons and mobilizing only specific segments of the electorate. As a consequence, they limit opportunities for political compromise, restrict citizen dialogue, and contribute to fostering populist attitudes.

The personalization of local political leaders represents a key trend in understanding the spread of civic lists. Since the enactment of Law 81 in 1993, the role of mayors has expanded significantly, making them quasi-independent political figures (Montesanti, 2007). This shift has enhanced mayoral autonomy to such an extent that mayors now operate almost as political entrepreneurs, building and sustaining their own support bases (Freschi & Mete, 2020). The new institutional framework was designed, among other goals, to strengthen the role of the mayor while reducing the influence of political parties and their representatives in city councils (Turi, 2007). While the increased prominence of mayors has provided greater independence in political decision-making, it has also heightened accountability expectations for these local leaders. In this context, citizens—perceiving a closer, more direct connection to local leaders—tend to appeal directly to mayors and other city officials, further fuelling the trend of party disintermediation.

Directly elected mayors, buoyed up by personal popularity, can partially offset the declining legitimacy of parties. However, while this re-politicizing dynamic encourages citizens to seek accountability in their leaders, it also introduces depoliticizing effects, notably in the rise of demagogic rhetoric. The persistent need for mayors to maintain personal support and the reduced capacity for dialogue with political parties seem to contribute to the ongoing hollowing out of traditional political spaces.

Another relevant trend is the localization of voting patterns, a phenomenon that contrasts with the Second-Order Election (SOE) model (Reiff & Schmitt, 1980). This gradual return to local voting strengthens the autonomy of local governments over national ones. While the nationalization of voting translates party systems into broader voting models (Bolgherini; Grimaldi & Paparo, 2021), localization results in more heterogeneous electoral behavior. The re-localization dynamic, born from a legitimacy deficit, highlights the aforementioned re-politicizing trend, making civil society responsible for compensating the void left by traditional politics.

Together, these shifts have created a context ready for a definitive departure from traditional political structures. Municipal elections are increasingly shaped by highly localized political realities that diverge from established party models. These new forms—explicitly nonpartisan—take on different characteristics depending on the spaces in which they arise (Biffi, 2023). They include civic lists, protest movements, associations, committees, and even mobilizations centered around personal support for specific individuals.

Understanding the diversity of these new political participation forms is a precondition to defining them as clearly as possible. Consequently, a closer analysis of nonpartisan lists is essential. The rise of these entities marks the culmination of a form of political engagement that bypasses traditional party mediation entirely (Vampa, 2016). Given the profound changes in the political landscape and the increasing importance of nonpartisan lists, the lack of research on this topic is notable. Often vaguely labelled as ‘others,’ ‘outsiders,’ or ‘independents,’ civic lists suffer from definitional ambiguity. This paper seeks to clarify their structural characteristics and propose a conceptual framework to better position these political realities within the broader landscape, offering insight into their potential future trajectories.

In existing literature, Vampa (2016) provides one of the few comprehensive analyses of the rise of civic lists, illustrating how the destabilization of Italy’s traditional parties created space for their proliferation. Vampa categorizes nonpartisan lists into two broad types: *political lists*, which align with mainstream parties, and *independent lists*, which maintain no direct or indirect association with any party.

Building on Vampa's foundational distinctions, this study introduces a more detailed taxonomy of nonpartisan lists. We view 'civic' as an umbrella term encompassing a variety of distinct civic realities. We will consider politicized and independent civic lists as two categories operating at a primary level, within which we identify three additional criteria: purity, personalization, and thematization. This further distinction results in a total of six types of civic lists: pure politicized, personalized politicized, thematized politicized; pure independent, personalized independent, and thematized independent. This framework provides a basis for examining the diversity within these political entities. Notably, nonpartisan status does not imply apolitical intentions; rather, purely apolitical candidates are likely in the minority. Examining the nuances of 'civic candidacy' reveals their motivations and appeal in specific electoral contexts.

This article proposes a taxonomy of civic lists based on their origins and electoral objectives. At the primary level, Vampa's distinction between independent and politicized lists is employed to classify these entities according to their affiliations with, or separation from, structured political parties. As Vampa observes, independent lists are entirely detached from national parties, embodying a form of pure civic activism. Conversely, politicized lists are integrated into larger coalitions that involve one or more national parties or affiliated candidates, reflecting a type of civic engagement that complements traditional party dynamics.

Within this primary criterion, additional subdivisions emerge, determined by the following factors: the "purity" of their partisan affiliation or independence; personalization (whether the list explicitly bears the name of the mayoral candidate); and thematization (whether the list is centered on a specific issue, such as hunters' rights or neighborhood concerns). The concept of purity refers to the degree to which a civic list maintains a clear and unambiguous alignment—or lack thereof—with established political parties. A "pure" politicized list is explicitly tied to one or more traditional parties without blending its identity with personalized or thematic elements. Drawing from the dataset, examples of politicized pure lists include '*Firenze al Centro*,' which was part of the broader center-left coalition supporting the PD candidate Dario Nardella in the 2014 Florence municipal elections. Conversely, a "pure" independent list completely avoids formal connections to political parties, presenting itself as a vehicle of grassroots or community-driven activism. In this case, an example of an independent pure list is '*Uniti per Campi*' a list that ran in the 2008 Campi Bisenzio municipal elections outside the coalitions involving political parties.

This criterion thus distinguishes lists that retain a singular focus—be it partisan or independent—from those that incorporate more complex or hybrid characteristics, such as the explicit personalization of a candidate or the focus on a specific issue. This means that the main categories, "Politicized" and "In-

dependent,” are mutually exclusive, as a list cannot simultaneously belong to both categories. Each list is uniquely defined in relation to these two primary criteria. However, within each main category the subcategories of “Purity,” “Personalization,” and “Thematization” are also mutually exclusive, as per the initial classification principles. Consequently, a politicized (or independent) list cannot simultaneously be both personalized and thematized. Thus, the taxonomy ensures that every civic list belongs to:

- One primary category (either Politicized or Independent).
- One and only one subtype, based on the criteria of Purity, Personalization, or Thematization.

Personalized lists often emerge from anti-party sentiment, driven by a prolonged legitimacy crisis within traditional party politics, making personalization an almost inevitable trend (Garcia, 2017). These lists are distinctively identifiable, frequently named after the candidate, and centered around their individual identity and appeal.

Thematized lists, by contrast, typically originate from NIMBY (“Not In My Backyard”) movements, which intensify around specific local grievances. Examples include protest committees opposing development projects such as incinerators, airports, or other infrastructure perceived as environmentally harmful. These lists usually focus exclusively on challenging particular administrative decisions (Gibson, 2005).

Pure civic lists (pure politicized and pure independent), on the other hand, represent the majority of cases identified in the dataset. This category encompasses all civic lists that are neither personalized nor thematized but are simply classified as politicized or independent. Thanks to this taxonomy, all 741 civic lists identified in the study can be included into a specific category, avoiding conceptual overlaps and contributing to the broader goal of bringing greater clarity to this subject.

Figure 1. Taxonomy of civic lists.

General Category	Type	Criterion	Subtype
Civic List	Politicized	Purity	Politicized Pure
		Personalization	Politicized Personalized
		Thematization	Politicized Thematized
	Independent	Purity	Independent Pure
		Personalization	Independent Personalized
		Thematization	Independent Thematized

3. The Case Selection

Italy is particularly well-suited for a study related to nonpartisan and civic lists. Historically in, Italy parties have predominantly focused on national representation, as local dynamics essentially mirror those at the national level. In particular, throughout the 20th century, Italian politics was predominantly interpreted through organized political parties, a structure that led to the nationalization of local politics, flattening regional nuances and integrating them into national representation (Duverger, 1972; Caramani, 2004). Since the 1990s, however, the party system has experienced a crisis, and the introduction of the direct election of mayors has progressively eroded parties' integrative capacity, resulting in substantial growth in party-independent lists (Magnier, 2004; Vampa, 2016). Theoretically, civic lists are also closely linked to the concept of social capital as developed by Putnam (1993): trust, norms of coexistence, and networks of civic associations that enhance the efficiency of social organization. Given Putnam's focus on Italy—characterized by profound political, cultural, and social differences—it offers an interesting case for studying civic list evolution.

While literature on associationism, political culture, and post-representative democracy exists, far less attention has been directed toward civic lists, which intersect with each of these theoretical realms. This study thus aims to demonstrate two points: first, civic lists, despite their variability and structural weaknesses, have sufficient defining characteristics to warrant a clear theoretical delineation, and second, they can be contextualized within the broader contemporary political landscape to assess their actual impact in local elections. Only a focused analysis treating the phenomenon as crucial—not merely as a byproduct of political dissatisfaction—can show the real capabilities and limitations of these entities.

In this light, Tuscany offers a compelling case study due to the resilience of its political culture, namely the red sub-culture. The historical strength of the Communist Party and, later, center-left parties, has traditionally hindered the spread of civic lists more than in other regions. Observing the extent of civic lists' current influence provides a valuable gauge of the anti-party sentiments within a region traditionally dominated by party loyalty. To this end, this study adopts a cross-case methodology focusing on cases with large populations, where the primary goal is internal case analysis rather than cross-regional comparison.

Data in this study represents a specific territory and a timeframe, by examining civic list dynamics in Tuscany between 2008 and 2022. The selected 14-year period is notable for several transformative events in Italy's cultural and political landscape: from the rise of Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement

(M5s) to the “electoral earthquake” of 2013 (Chiaramonte & De Sio, 2013), from austerity policies affecting regional governments to the COVID-19 management policies impacting local administrations—particularly mayors. Furthermore, this period saw the amplification of populist, anti-political, and anti-party sentiments fuelled by persistent, and seemingly irreversible, distrust in mainstream politics (Mair, 2016). Focusing on a specific territory allows for a more controlled analysis, minimizing distortion and maximizing data reliability.

The dataset comprises 162 cases drawn from 54 Tuscan municipalities with populations exceeding 15,000 inhabitants, spanning three electoral cycles. Limiting the analysis to larger municipalities ensures data reliability, as in municipalities with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants mayoral candidates are legally required to present one list (that is almost always an independent list), complicating the distinction between genuine civic movements and mandatory independents (Pritoni, 2014; Vampa, 2016). The study examines the evolution of civic lists across three periods—2008-2012, 2013-2017, and 2018-2022—to capture potential temporal trends.

Within these 162 cases, a total of 741 civic lists were identified. Each list was categorized as either politicized or independent, and subsequently included into one of three subcategories: pure, personalized, or thematized. This taxonomy provides a clear picture of the structure and use of civic lists in municipal elections in Tuscany. It highlights the relative preference for one category over another while also illustrating how these trends have evolved over time.

4. The Empirical test and Hypotheses

The four hypotheses in this study provide valuable insights into both the evolution of civic lists over time and their potential connection to anti-political sentiments. Throughout the rest of the paper, we will denote the three election cycles considered as E.I (2008–2012), E.II (2013–2017), and E.III (2018–2022). Each cycle encompasses the full range of local elections that occurred across the municipalities in the dataset during these specific periods. In other words, for each municipality in the dataset, three distinct election cycles are considered. This categorization ensures that each municipal election round falls clearly within one of these periods, allowing for a clear and non-overlapping analysis of electoral trends across time. Such grouping strategy allow us to analyze all municipal elections within each period, regardless of the specific year in which each municipality held its election. This approach is necessary because municipal elections do not always occur at

fixed intervals; elections may take place outside the regular schedule due to factors like government dissolution or commissionership. By structuring the electoral rounds as E.I, E.II, and E.III, we encompass all the administrative elections conducted by the 54 municipalities over these five-year periods.

Between 2008 and 2022, a total of 741 civic lists were presented across the 54 municipalities. Table 1 summarizes the diffusion of these lists. During this period, politicized pure lists accounted for 44.8% of all civic lists, while independent pure lists represented 35.9%, confirming their greater prevalence compared to the remaining four categories. Additionally, Table 1 illustrates the trends in their diffusion across the three electoral cycles, with the total number of lists increasing from 183 in E.I to 293 in E.III. Notably, the most significant growth occurred between E.I and E.II, during which the number of lists nearly doubled (from 183 to 265). The less widespread categories include politicized thematized lists (3.1%), independent personalized lists (3.9%), and independent thematized lists (2.4%). However, the politicized personalized lists showed notable growth between E.II and E.III, ultimately accounting for nearly 10% of the 741 submitted lists between 2008 and 2022. Table 1 also provides a detailed breakdown, showcasing the prevalence and diversity of civic lists over the study period.

Table 1. Classification of list types between 2008 and 2022.

Type of Civic List	Politicized Pure	Politicized Personalized	Politicized Thematized	Independent Pure	Independent Personalized	Independent Thematized	Total
2008-2012	72	17	8	69	9	8	183 (24.7%)
2013-2017	125	17	3	108	6	6	265 (35.7%)
2018-2022	135	39	12	89	14	4	293 (39.5%)
Total	332 (44.8%)	73 (9.8%)	23 (3.1%)	266 (35.9%)	29 (3.9%)	18 (2.4%)	741 (100%)

Source: Author's elaboration on data from the Ministry of the Interior.

Building on the literature, it is possible to investigate if and to what extent the phenomenon of civic lists is related to specific factors such as municipal size, electoral strength, ideology and incumbency.

As far as municipal size is concerned, previous studies emphasize that smaller communities are more inclined to mobilize through civic lists, possibly due to fewer established political structures and a stronger focus on localized issues (Vampa, 2006). If this holds true, I will expect that:

H1: *The smaller the municipalities the higher the number of civic lists, the larger the municipalities the lower the presence of civic lists.*

As far as electoral performance is concerned, research on the personalization of politics points out that voters are likely to shift their support from parties to specific candidates basing their choice on specific personal traits such as image and rhetoric (Mair, 2013; Poguntke & Webb, 2005). Moreover, notwithstanding opinion voting has increased after the collapse of mass parties, single-issue lists are not likely to gain high electoral support. This aligns with studies highlighting that such lists often fail to appeal to a broad electorate, as their narrow focus tends to alienate voters seeking more comprehensive policy platforms (Garzia, 2012; Gibson, 2005). Furthermore, thematized lists often emerge as reactive rather than proactive entities, limiting their ability to mobilize sustained electoral support (Mény & Surel, 2002).

Thus, I can hypothesize that:

H2: *Among civic lists, personal lists (both politicized and independent personal lists) are more likely to perform better than thematized lists (both politicised and independent thematized lists) in electoral terms.*

Shifting to ideology, I base my consideration on the persistent legacy of the red sub-culture in Tuscany. In particular, I try to figure out whether the two main political coalitions—centre-right and centre-left—use civic lists differently to support their political goals. I focus on three potential scenarios: first, it is likely that *political lists* are primarily adopted by the centre-left, given its longstanding dominance in Tuscany; second, it is likely that *personal lists* are more common within the centre-left due to the stronger local connections of its parties and leaders; and third, that *thematized lists*, often emerging from discontent, are more prevalent within the centre-right, traditionally the opposition in this region.

Thus, I expect that:

H3a: *Political civic lists are more likely to be found within centre-left coalitions in comparison to centre-right coalitions.*

H3b: *Personal lists are more widespread among centre-left coalitions than centre-right coalitions.*

H3c: *Thematized lists are more widespread among centre-right coalitions than centre-left coalitions.*

Finally, I focus on the impact of incumbency and coalition alignment on the performance of personal lists used by mayoral candidates. While existing studies often highlight the importance of personalization in local politics, few have comprehensively analyzed how the interaction of incumbency

and coalition affiliation directly affects the electoral strength of these lists, especially in Italian local elections. This study seeks to address this gap by focusing on how the unique factors of incumbency and coalition alignment shape electoral outcomes for personal lists.

Examining this connection is especially relevant given the monocratic role of the mayor, which, following the 1993 reforms, has become increasingly central in local governance, often overshadowing party dynamics (Sergio, 2001). Re-election, in this context, becomes an appealing prospect, given that Ministry of Interior data suggest high re-election rates, especially for first-round winners and center-left incumbents, who show 83% re-election rate compared to 63% for the center-right ones. As a consequence, I expect that

H4: *Incumbency has a greater impact on the personal lists of centre-left mayoral candidates.*

5. Findings

5.1. Testing the Relationship Between Municipal Size and the Number of Civic Lists.

To investigate the influence of municipal size on the prevalence of civic lists, we categorized municipalities into four classes based on the number of eligible councillors: Class 1 (16 councillors), Class 2 (24 councillors), Class 3 (32 councillors), and Class 4 (36 councillors). This data enables us to examine whether smaller municipalities exhibit a higher propensity to present civic lists—a relationship previously explored in the literature by Vampa (2016) regarding territorial size and list proliferation in local elections. This hypothesis, therefore, forms a foundational element of the study, anchoring our analysis in an established framework and providing a starting point for examining the distribution of civic lists in relation to municipal size.

Table 2 shows the absolute number of civic lists across three electoral periods (E.I, E.II, and E.III) for each municipal class. A clear trend emerges: smaller municipalities (Class 1) consistently display the highest number of civic lists, for a total of 305 lists. Furthermore, the data indicate a steady increase in civic list submissions over time, rising from 183 in the first electoral round (E.I) to 292 in the third (E.III). This upward trend in civic engagement across electoral periods highlights an expanding role for civic lists in local elections.

Interestingly, our analysis reveals an inverse relationship between municipal size and the tendency to present civic lists: as municipal size increases,

the presence of civic lists declines. This pattern aligns closely with Vampa's (2016) findings, which suggest that smaller communities are more inclined to mobilize through civic lists, possibly due to fewer established political structures and a stronger focus on localized issues. The bivariate analysis of total list submissions by municipal class and average lists per municipality further corroborates this trend, unveiling that smaller municipalities provide fertile ground for the growth and influence of civic lists in the political landscape.

Table 2. Absolute number of civic lists submitted by municipal class.

	Number of civic lists presented				
	Municipal class				
	1	2	3	4	Total
2008-2012	65	52	59	7	183
2013-2017	107	67	80	11	265
2018-2022	133	69	83	8	293
Total	305	188	222	26	741

Source: Author's elaboration on data from the Ministry of the Interior.

To further clarify the relationship between municipal size and the number of civic lists, we consider an additional factor: the implicit threshold for representation, namely the minimum percentage of votes required to secure a council seat (excluding the legal 3% threshold for single lists not part of a coalition). This threshold decreases as the size of the municipality increases, potentially encouraging more civic lists in larger municipalities. The threshold by class is as follows:

- Class 1: 6.25%
- Class 2: 4.16%
- Class 3: 3.12%
- Class 4: 2.77%

We find a strong inverse correlation between this representation threshold and the number of civic lists presented in the 54 municipalities, across each election round:

- E.I: $r = -0.613$
- E.II: $r = -0.721$
- E.III: $r = -0.584$
- Combined (2008–2022): $r = -0.603$

These results confirm that as the threshold for representation decreases in larger municipalities, the number of civic lists increases, supporting the hypothesis that smaller representation thresholds in larger municipalities encourage greater civic engagement. While Table 2 reveals a greater absolute number of civic lists in Class 1 municipalities, Table 3 shows that this result is due to the fact that Class 1 includes the majority of municipalities (59%). Smaller municipalities, therefore, have more lists overall, but it is actually the larger municipalities (Class 4) that present the highest average number of lists per municipality (8.66, compared to a total average of 6.31). This upward trend across classes aligns with the positive correlation found in our analysis.

The factors behind this trend are complex and varied. One explanation could be that larger municipalities—characterized by a more diverse civil society and a higher concentration of individuals with substantial social capital—show a greater tendency toward political independence. In contrast, smaller municipalities might have fewer individuals and organizations with high social capital, leading to a more stable alignment with traditional party structures.

As a consequence, our expectation is partially contradicted by in-depth analysis.

These findings complement and deepen Vampa’s analysis, which also links municipality size to the presence of civic lists. By incorporating both absolute and average values related to lists as well as the threshold for representation, I provide a more nuanced understanding of how and why civic engagement through independent lists flourishes differently across municipalities of varying sizes.

Furthermore, Tables 2 and 3 illustrate a tendency among the eight provincial capitals (all classified as Class 3 municipalities) to make greater use of civic lists. The final municipal class includes only the city of Florence. Florence presents an interesting case: over the 14 years analyzed, a total of 26 civic lists were present, making it the municipality with the highest proportional presence of civic lists. This data raises an intriguing question: are Florence’s numerous civic lists simply a result of its larger population, or does its status as the regional capital create a particularly favorable environment for civic list development?

Further studies will be needed to address this intriguing question, potentially through in-depth qualitative analysis, to better understand whether Florence’s numerous civic lists are driven by its larger population or by its status as the regional capital.

Table 3. Average absolute number of lists presented by municipal class.

Average of the lists presented					
Municipal class					
	1	2	3	4	Total
2008-2012	2.0	4.3	6.5	7.0	5.0
2013-2017	3.3	5.5	8.9	11.0	7.2
2018-2022	4.1	5.7	9.2	8.0	6.7
Total	3.1	5.2	8,2	8.6	6.3

Source: Author’s elaboration on data from the Ministry of the Interior.

5.2. Testing the relationship between different types of civic lists and electoral performance.

The second hypothesis explores the distinction between the perceived and actual effectiveness of different types of civic lists in elections. To assess their actual effectiveness, we calculated the average electoral performance of each type of list, measured in terms of the percentage of votes received, over the entire dataset (2008–2022) to establish a general trend. Subsequently, we repeated the analysis for each of the three election rounds to capture any changes in electoral success over time.

Table 4. Average Electoral Results for Each Category of List Between 2008 and 2022.

	Politicized Pure	Politicized Personalized	Politicized Thematized	Independent Pure	Independent Personalized	Independent Thematized	Total
2008-2012	5.3%	6.4%	1.2%	6.0%	3.1%	2.4%	4.1%
2013-2017	5.4%	9.5%	3.6%	5.0%	6.6%	3.0%	5.5%
2018-2022	5.1%	11.4%	3.6%	4.4%	4.8%	2.0%	5.2%
Total	5.2%	9.1%	2.8%	5.1%	4.8%	2.4%	4.9%

Source: Author’s elaboration on data from the Ministry of the Interior.

Table 4 offers a detailed analysis of the electoral performance of the six civic list types across the three electoral cycles (E.I, E.II, and E.III), providing a nuanced understanding of their dynamics. Personalized civic lists, partic-

ularly politicized personalized lists, stand out as the most significant trend, demonstrating remarkable growth in both their presence and electoral performance. The average result for politicized personalized lists increased from 6.4% in E.I to 11.4% in E.III, reflecting their rising appeal among voters. Similarly, independent personalized lists achieved notable results, peaking at 6.6% in E.II before stabilizing at 4.8% in E.III. These findings align with existing literature emphasizing the rise of personalized politics, where individual leaders become central figures in campaigns, leveraging their personal appeal to connect with voters disillusioned by traditional party structures (Mair, 2013; Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Garzia, 2017). Personalized lists capitalize on this dynamic, presenting themselves as credible alternatives that resonate with an electorate increasingly oriented toward individual leadership over party ideology.

Conversely, thematized civic lists—both politicized and independent—consistently demonstrate weak electoral performance, highlighting their limited appeal. Politicized thematized lists averaged 2.8% across all cycles, while independent thematized lists performed slightly worse, averaging 2.4%, though their performance declined to just 2% in E.III. These results suggest that while thematized lists may successfully mobilize niche electorates around specific issues, their narrow focus inhibits broader voter support, aligning with broader research on issue fragmentation and its impact on voter alignment (Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2011). Their limited ability to capture widespread voter attention reflects the challenges of sustaining electoral relevance with single-issue platforms.

Politicized pure and independent pure lists remain the most prevalent types, accounting for 44.8% and 35.9% of all civic lists, respectively. However, their electoral performance shows little variation over time, with politicized pure lists averaging 5.3% and independent pure lists 5.1% across all cycles. Despite their frequency, these lists exhibit electoral stagnation, a trend that may be explained by the concept of “voter fatigue” (Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2011). As these types of lists dominate the electoral landscape, their repetitive presence diminishes their innovative appeal, leading to a steady yet unremarkable performance. This static trend highlights the waning ability of politicized and independent pure lists to engage voters over time, reinforcing the need for adaptive strategies to maintain electoral relevance.

Overall, the data reveal a clear hierarchy in the effectiveness of different list types. Personalized lists emerge as the most dynamic and electorally viable category, underscoring the growing importance of individual leadership in contemporary politics. In contrast, thematized lists consistently underperform, struggling to attract broad voter support. Politicized and independent pure lists, while numerically dominant, show signs of stagnation, reflecting

the challenges of maintaining voter interest in the face of an increasingly fragmented and personalized political landscape. These findings provide valuable insights into the evolving role of civic lists in local elections, shedding light on the interplay between voter behavior, list strategy, and political personalization. All in all, our second expectation is confirmed.

5.3. Testing how centre-right and centre-left coalitions rely on civic lists in Tuscany.

The third hypothesis examines the use of politicized, personalized, and thematized lists by centre-right and centre-left coalitions in Tuscany between 2008 and 2022.

Table 5. Use of politicized, personalized and issue-centered lists among centre-right and centre-left coalitions between 2008 and 2022

	Center right	Center left	Total
Politicized Pure	114 (26.4%)	217 (50.0%)	331 (76.7%)
Politicized Personalized	36 (8.3%)	41 (9.5%)	77 (17.8%)
Politicized Thematized	13 (3.0%)	10 (2.3%)	23 (5.3%)
Total	163 (37.8%)	268 (62.2%)	431 (100%)

Source: Author's elaboration on data from the Ministry of the Interior.

The data in Table 5 support our expectation regarding political lists: centre-left coalitions predominantly relied on politicized pure lists, with 217 cases (50% of the total), compared to 114 cases (26.45%) for centre-right coalitions. This confirms the greater use of politicized pure civic lists by the centre-left coalition, as anticipated by H3a (politicized pure civic lists are more likely to be found within centre-left than in centre-right coalitions). This substantial proportion highlights both the entrenched presence of the centre-left in Tuscany and an underlying identity crisis, which has pushed these parties to explore new configurations over time (Hazan & Rahat, 2010).

The data also confirms the clear dominance of pure lists (in this case, politicized pure lists) over personalized and thematized categories. In total, the two coalitions used politicized pure lists in 76.7% of cases across the three electoral cycles, while politicized personalized lists accounted for 17.8% and politicized thematized lists represented just 5.3%.

Regarding politicized personalized lists, these were employed almost equally by both coalitions, with 41 cases (9.5%) for the centre-left and 36

cases (8.3%) for the centre-right. The near parity between the two coalitions challenges the initial hypothesis (H3b). However, the steady growth in the use of these lists over time (as shown in Table 5) suggests that the phenomenon of increasing political personalization is cross-cutting and not attributable to one coalition more than the other. This perspective invites an interesting reflection on the broader trend towards personalization in politics, where individual leaders increasingly overshadow party identity, irrespective of political alignment (Poguntke & Webb, 2005). Moreover, this surge aligns with broader theories of populism and the personalization of politics, where candidates leverage civic platforms to connect directly with voters, bypassing traditional party structures (Mair, 2013).

Table 5 also highlights the peripheral role of thematized lists, which account only for 5.3% of all civic lists presented between 2008 and 2022 across the two coalitions. The consistently poor electoral performance of these lists, coupled with their limited presence over time (as shown in Table 1), suggests that thematized lists, while slightly more prevalent within the centre-right, remain marginal overall. The disaggregated data reveal that, between 2008 and 2013, thematized lists were more commonly used by the centre-right as anticipated (H3c), supporting the view that these lists are often vehicles for opposition voices rather than central electoral strategies.

One of the most notable trends concerns personal lists, which show significant growth both in frequency (Table 1) and electoral impact (Table 4), reflecting the increasing trend toward personalization in Italian politics (Calise, 2000; Musella, 2018). This phenomenon aligns with Musella's analysis, which highlights the progressive shift from collective political identities toward leader-centric dynamics, where individual candidates increasingly dominate the political scene, particularly in local governance. In terms of electoral strength, politicized personal lists have consistently gained ground, with their average results rising from 6.4% to 11.4% over the three electoral cycles (Table 4). Centre-left candidates, in particular, achieved greater personal support in between 2018 and 2022, with politicized personal lists averaging 12.7%, surpassing many mainstream party results. Specifically, it is worth noting that the province of Lucca stands out for its proportional use of personal lists and their electoral strength, with an average of 9.8% across its 19 politicized personal lists. Even more striking is the case that occurred in 2021 in Altopascio (Lucca), where a personal list ("*Sara d'Ambrosio Sindaco*") obtained 34% of the vote—a result rarely achieved by mainstream parties.

Finally, the data suggest a localistic orientation in the use of personal lists: the correlation between electoral performance and municipal class ($r = -0.1662$) indicates that these lists perform better in smaller municipalities. This finding aligns with Vampa's (2016) observations, which emphasize

the limited reach of civic lists as municipal size increases, highlighting their rootedness in addressing local issues.

Overall, the analysis reveals that while both coalitions use civic lists in various ways, personal lists stand out as particularly significant. This reflects broader trends in Italian politics toward localism and individual-driven representation. Such developments illustrate not only the flexibility of civic lists as political tools but also their potential to reshape local political dynamics in the coming years.

5.4. Testing the influence of incumbency and coalition on the electoral performance of mayoral personal lists.

Table 6. Relation between political coalitions, condition of incumbency and personalized civic lists

	Incumbency		Total
	Yes	No	
Centre-right	7 (6.8%)	30 (29.4%)	37 (36.2%)
Centre-left	14 (13.7%)	26 (25.5%)	40 (39.2%)
Civic	0 (0.0%)	25 (24.5%)	25 (24.5%)
Total	21 (20.6%)	81 (79.4%)	102 (100%)

Source: Author's elaboration on data from the Ministry of the Interior.

In this analysis, data from Table 6 reveal that out of the 102 mayors with personalized civic lists (independent and politicized combined), 21 (20.6%) were incumbents, and notably, none of these were independent candidates. This underscores a trend where the role of incumbency appears predominantly tied to political coalitions rather than independent movements. A striking example comes from the municipality of Viareggio, where the incumbent mayor Giorgio Del Ghingaro—originally elected as an independent candidate in 2015—run for the centre-left coalition in the 2020 elections. His personalized list, “Del Ghingaro,” achieved an impressive 26.4% of the vote, enabling his re-election under the center-left banner. This highlights how incumbency, when coupled with coalition support, can substantially enhance electoral viability.

Disaggregating data by coalition, we see that 14 of the centre-left mayors with personal lists were incumbents, representing 13.7% of the total sam-

ple, compared to just 7 cases (6.85%) among centre-right incumbents. This disparity reflects the continued influence of the left-leaning political culture in Tuscany, which provides stronger local networks and organizational support for incumbents within the centre-left coalition. This finding aligns with broader research on the incumbency advantage, which highlights the benefits of name recognition, resource access, and established networks for re-election campaigns (Hogan, 2004; Cox & Katz, 1996). Moreover, the interplay between incumbency and personalized politics reinforces the trend of voters increasingly prioritizing individual candidates over party affiliation, particularly in local governance (Poguntke & Webb, 2005).

As indicated in Tables 1 and 4, the 2018-2022 electoral cycle (E.III) saw a significant increase in both the prevalence of personalized civic lists (both politicized and independent) and the average vote share achieved by politicized personalized lists. While politicized personalized lists showed strong growth in performance, averaging 17.8% of the vote, independent personalized lists experienced a decline in electoral success over the same period. This divergence highlights the dual importance of incumbency and political alignment in amplifying the attractiveness of personalized lists, reinforcing the broader trend of political personalization.

The data indicate that 16 incumbent mayors with personalized civic lists were re-elected in E.III, achieving an average vote share of 17.8%. For the center-right, this translated into a mean result of 15.25%, with notable examples including: *Ale Tomasi Sindaco* (17.3%), Pistoia; *Vivarelli Colonna Sindaco* (17.25%), Grosseto; *Lista Mallegni* (15.5%), Pietrasanta.

Similarly, the center-left demonstrated even stronger results, with personalized lists averaging 18.2% of the vote. Exceptional performances include: *Sara D'Ambrosio Sindaco* (34.0%), Altopascio; *Del Ghingarò* (26.4%), Viareggio; *Falchi Sindaco per Sesto* (22.8%), Sesto Fiorentino.

Interestingly, the data reveal that personalized lists (both politicized and independent) associated with non-incumbent mayors averaged only 5.9% of the vote, unveiling substantial advantage provided by incumbency in local elections. This suggests that incumbency serves not only as a resource for leveraging name recognition and political networks but also as a critical factor in maintaining voter trust and legitimacy.

In conclusion, Hypothesis 4 is strongly supported by the findings. These findings enhance our understanding of localized electoral dynamics and suggest that incumbency and personalization are increasingly interdependent in shaping electoral outcomes, with significant implications for future administrative elections.

Conclusions

This study advances the understanding of civic lists by proposing a refined taxonomy that classifies these entities into six distinct categories: independent pure, politicized pure, independent personalized, politicized personalized, independent thematized, and politicized thematized lists. By addressing longstanding conceptual ambiguities, this taxonomy provides a systematic framework that captures the diversity and complexity of civic lists, offering an essential tool for future research on this phenomenon.

The findings reveal significant patterns in the evolution and performance of civic lists. Personalized lists stand out for their growing prevalence and electoral success, especially in contexts where candidates leverage personal appeal to bypass traditional party structures. Conversely, thematized lists remain marginal in both diffusion and electoral impact, reflecting their limited resonance with voters. These results underscore the dual nature of civic lists: as products of anti-party sentiments and as vehicles for political engagement in increasingly localized and candidate-centered political environments.

By clarifying the role and categorization of civic lists, this study provides a robust theoretical and methodological foundation for examining their impact on municipal politics. Moreover, the findings contribute to broader debates on the decline of traditional party systems and the rise of alternative forms of political participation. Civic lists emerge not as peripheral actors but as key components of contemporary political dynamics, particularly in regions with historically strong political subcultures like Tuscany.

Future research should explore how civic lists operate in diverse institutional and cultural contexts, focusing on their long-term viability and their capacity to influence governance. Additionally, comparative studies could test whether similar patterns of civic engagement and personalization are observable beyond the Italian context. By doing so, scholars can further unravel the conditions that foster the success or decline of civic lists, contributing to a richer understanding of grassroots political movements in modern democracies.

In conclusion, this explorative study underscores the value of a precise and comprehensive taxonomy in advancing research on civic lists. It highlights their potential to reshape local political dynamics while raising critical questions about their role in the broader trajectory of political change. Civic lists, far from being a transitory phenomenon, represent a dynamic and evolving political reality that demands continued scholarly attention.

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