Do Bishops Matter for Politics? Evidence From Italy

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Abstract

This paper studies whether and how religious leaders affect politics. Focusing on Italian dioceses in the period from 1948 to 1992, we find that the identity of the bishop in office explains a significant amount of the variation in the vote share for the Christian Democracy party (DC). This result is robust to several exercises that use different samples and time windows. Zooming into the mechanism, we find that two characteristics of bishops matter: (i) his political culture, and (ii) his interaction with the population—the latter being measured using text-analysis techniques.

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1 Introduction

Throughout history, the relationship between church and state has been particularly complex, with moments of crash and others of alignment between the two institutions. Even today, religious leaders often step into the political sphere, more or less openly.[1] Specifically, religious leaders may affect the political preferences and choices of their congregation, with important social, political, and economic implications. However, given the lack of detailed information on religious leaders and their characteristics, there is still scant empirical evidence on whether this happens and through which mechanism.

This paper addresses this question by focusing on one of the largest religious organizations, the Catholic Church. In particular, we investigate whether and how bishops affected electoral support for the *Democrazia Cristiana*, the Christian Democracy party (DC) in 20th-century Italy. The DC, created during WWII, was strongly backed by the Pope as an antidote against the "Communist threat", and the historical record suggests that "the Church led the electoral battle on behalf of the new Christian Democratic party" (Warner, 2000, p. 40).

To carry out the empirical analysis, we assembled a novel dataset on the universe of bishops appointed in all Italian dioceses—with detailed information on bishops' biographical characteristics— and match it with electoral results from regional, national, and European elections from 1948 to 1992 (the last electoral year before the dissolution of the DC).

First, we provide evidence that the identity of bishops matters for political outcomes. In particular, after controlling for geographical and time factors, we find that bishop fixed effects explain a significant amount of the variation in the share of votes for the DC. Ranking bishops according to the coefficients of their estimated fixed effects, we find that replacing a bishop at 25th percentile with one at the 75th percentile leads to an increae of 3 percentage points in the share of votes to the DC.

When looking at our results, one main concern is whether bishop fixed effects are capturing unobserved diocese-time variation—related, for instance, to endogenous sorting of bishops to dioceses—rather than the ability of bishops to influence political outcomes. We perform a variety of robustness checks to rule out this possibility. For instance, we do not find evidence that our results are driven by trends in political support prior to bishops' transitions or by bishops being allocated to dioceses based on their comparative advantage.

[1] In some Muslim countries, religious leaders are also officially recognized as political leaders. In Iran, for example, the Supreme Leader is the highest-ranking political and religious authority. On the other hand, in more secular societies, religious leaders may influence politics less directly.

Our results are also robust if we consider only bishops who left office for exogenous reasons or when we restrict our analysis to limited time windows around bishops' transitions, as in Fenizia (2022) or Jones and Olken (2005).

The question that naturally follows is: which bishop characteristics matter and how do those characteristics influence voters? To answer it, we relate the coefficients of the bishop fixed effects to several bishop-specific biographical characteristics, as well as to measures of activism and public engagement. The latter are constructed using novel text data from the historical archive of a major national newspaper, *Il Corriere della Sera*. In particular, relying on the Supervised Latent Dirichlet Allocation algorithm (Mcauliffe and Blei, 2007), we uncover two main topics related to the bishops' public engagement in two domains: controversial debates with members of the population and involvement in public events fostering the sense of community or celebrating new socioeconomic achievements.

First, we find that bishops' political background matters: bishops born in municipalities with a higher share of votes for the DC in 1948 (the first year the DC ran in elections) are more likely to influence voters' support for this party. Moreover, we observe that bishops involved in judicial disputes with civilians or public controversies display a lower bishop effect, suggesting that this type of activities reduces the ability of a bishop to influence voters' support for the DC. By contrast, the more bishops were involved in celebrating masses and participating in public events involving politicians and local authorities, the larger their ability to bring votes to the DC.

By analyzing how religious leaders may influence politics, this paper contributes to a vast literature on the economics of religion, starting with the seminal work of Max Weber (1905). Many authors have studied how religion may affect human capital (Becker and Woessmann, 2009; Botticini and Eckstein, 2007; Valencia Caicedo, 2019; Squicciarini, 2020), innovation (Bénabou et al., 2015, 2022), and economic growth (Barro and McCleary, 2003, 2005; Guiso et al., 2003). A related literature studies incentives and behavior of clergy. Among the others, Engelberg et al. (2016) and Hartzell et al. (2010) focus on pastors' quality and incentive compensation, Bottan and Perez-Truglia (2015) and Hungerman (2013) study the effects of clergy abuse scandals.[2] We mostly connect to the few studies analyzing how religion (and religious leaders in particular) affects political outcomes.[3] Historically, Belloc et al. (2016) show that during the Middle Ages

[2]For more details on the economics of religion, see Becker et al. (2021), Iyer (2016), Iannaccone (1991).

[3]Little is known about the role played by religious leaders for political outcomes (Iyer, 2016). Within the political science literature, Hazelrigg (1970) and Norris and Inglehart (2011) study the correlation between religiosity and left-to-right orientation. Ignazi and Wellhofer (2017) study regional differences of DC support in different time windows (1953–1972 and 1972–1992). None of these studies provides causal estimates on the effects of religious leaders on political outcomes.

municipalities with a bishop delayed their transition to communal governance. In a more recent context, Spenkuch and Tillmann (2018) document that German districts with a larger share of Catholics had fewer votes for the Nazi party, but to a lower extent when local bishops looked favorably on Hitler. Our paper is closest in spirit to Pulejo (2022), who shows that DC political candidates connected to a native bishop obtained higher within-party preferences during the national elections. Contrary to Pulejo (2022), we study how bishops affected the share of votes for the DC, i.e., the final outcome of the elections, rather than local within-party preferences for a specific candidate. In addition, we shed light on the mechanism, by testing which bishops characteristics and types of behavior may have played a role in influencing voters' behavior.

Moreover, this paper contributes to a vast literature studying how leaders affect economic outcomes. For instance, research in economics and finance has investigated the role of political leaders for growth (Jones and Olken, 2005; Besley et al., 2011) or the impact of CEOs on organizational performance in the private and public sectors (see, among others, Bertrand and Schoar, 2003; Fenizia, 2022). We contribute to this literature by focusing on religious leaders and studying their role in politics.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 illustrates the historical background. Section 3 describes the data. Section 4 presents the empirical results. Section 5 concludes.

2 The Catholic Church and Italian Politics: Historical Background

The Christian Democracy (DC) party was created in 1943 by Alcide De Gasperi, a former member of the first Italian party of Catholic inspiration (the Italian People's Party, or *Partito Popolare Italiano–PPI*). As with the PPI, the Pope strongly backed the DC to the extent that Italy was defined "the Papal State of the Twentieth Century" (Webster, 1959, p. 214).

The Church's involvement in Italian politics naturally stemmed from three main factors (Warner, 2000). First, Rome has been the center of Western Christianity since the Middle Ages, and the Vatican has eversince "conflate[d] its temporal location with its religious mission" (Warner, 2000, p. 43).[4] Second, proximity of Italian dioceses to the Vatican allowed its "palpable presence throughout Italy" (Warner, 2000, p. 45). Third, the hierarchical and granular structure of the Catholic Church in Italy crucially fostered its influence within society. While the pope was directly responsible for the policy response to the secular state's actions,

[4] As the archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Schuster, said shortly after WWII: "God has so linked the political destiny of Italy to its religious conditions that, after so many centuries, it is no longer possible to untie the knot tightened by the very hand of the Almighty" (June 1946, in Durand (1991, p. 522)).

the over 300 bishops and 65,000 clergy in 320 dioceses and 24,000 parishes preserved the capillarity of the Catholic network, as well as the ability to mobilize voters and monitor and sanction noncompliance (Pollard, 2008, p. 122).

Note that the appointments of bishops by the Pope have always displayed a strong regional pattern, which can be traced back to the legacy of pre-unification regional states (D'Angelo, 2003) and to the importance of the ecclesiastical regions (roughly corresponding to the territory of Italian regions) in the Italian context (Feliciani, 2000). Moreover, the bishops in the same ecclesiastical region have a direct role in the process of appointing a bishop to a diocese.[5]

Between 1945 and 1958, Catholicism had its best chance to accomplish Pius XI's project of a "Christian restoration of Italian society," and bishops were at the frontline in its implementation. For instance, in the Lazio region some bishops blessed or consecrated the DC flags during population gatherings (Baris, 2014), and in the Lombardo-Veneto region "[bishops] chose the leaders and other organisers of the various Catholic lay associations [...], guided the work of the organisations [...] [and] gave the imprimatur to the selection of leaders of the Christian Democrats and even its local councillors and parliamentary candidates" (Pollard, 2008, p. 122).

Beginning in the late 1950s, the "economic miracle" and Anglo-Saxon influences fostered a wave of secularization in the country (Romano, 2005), that culminated with the second Vatican council (Pollard, 2008, p. 138).[6] Bishops, however, did not stop interfering in Italian politics and "still seemed to move in the name of contiguity with the "Christian party" (Santagata, 2013, p. 66).[7] Similarly from 1978 onward, despite his non-Italian nationality, Karol Wojtyla—John Paul II—still paid a lot of attention to Italian political matters, for example, by openly taking a position against abortion in the national referendum of 1981. Moreover, by employing "a succession of leading Italian cardinal archbishops" such as "Siri of Genoa and Poletti and Ruini, cardinal vicars of Rome, as president of the CEI, the Vatican maintained a tight control over the Italian Church" (Pollard, 2008, p. 153). Although the DC often attempted to disengage from the dirigism of the Church, it could not ignore the position of the Pope and his bishops, for fear of repercussions

[5]The Pope typically chooses the new bishop from a list of three candidates indicated by the *Apostolic Nuncio* after consultation with the outgoing bishop (if alive), the other bishops in the same ecclesiastical region, and the president of the national Episcopal Conference (Art. 377 of Canon law).

[6]During the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), Pope John XXIII "[made] it clear that Italian churchmen had to hold back from dictating to Italian politicians, even Christian Democratic politicians" (Pollard, 2008, p. 138).

[7]In 1968, the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) issued an official document titled "The Christians and Public Life," in which bishops emphasized that "it was the duty of the Catholic hierarchy to enlighten the consciences of the faithful on the problems of public life, even when they did not directly concern the religious field, but involved moral problems that engaged the conscience." The document underlined "how the [religious and political] realities were called to collaborate."

on electoral outcomes (Romano, 2005; Canavero, 1991).

Bishops' activities could be either favorable or detrimental to DC electoral support. For instance, in the run-up to the 1948 parliamentary elections, bishops' direct engagement in the political campaign and public endorsement of DC candidates contributed to the DC victory (see Romano, 2005, pp.102–103). Similarly, bishops used to lend support to the DC by praising DC-led public works—as in the inauguration of new stretches of highway (see *Corriere della Sera*, January 28, 1960) and the opening of new firms in low-industrialized regions (see *Corriere della Sera*, June 17, 1966)—or by acting as mediators between the population and politicians during periods of economic or social strain.[8]

But there were also episodes that go in the opposite direction. For instance, during the campaign for the referendum on the divorce law, Bishop Ferrari of Mantua sent a letter to all diocesan members to vote against this law. This generated public discontent, as many perceived the bishop's intervention as "going against freedom of conscience and fundamental human rights" (see *Corriere della Sera*, April 19, 1974). Similarly, when the tribunal of Florence obliged Bishop Fiordelli of Prato to pay a fine for defamation of a couple whom he publicly called "concubinaries" for not getting married in the Church, the debate mounted against DC politicians not defending the lay institution of civil marriage (see *Corriere della Sera* March 4, and October 3, 1958).

Disillusioned by the party's "association with clientelism and corruption," after the *Tangentopoli* ("Bribesville") scandals in 1992, many Catholics turned to other political parties putting an end to the life and political hegemony of the DC (Pollard, 2008, p. 159).

3 Data

We assembled a rich dataset from several primary and secondary sources. We now briefly describe the geographical units at which the analysis is carried out and the variables used. Appendix A provides details on data construction and summary statistics for all variables.

[8]Examples are the visit of bishop Cocolin of Gorizia during the occupation of a bankrupted plant and when Bishop Mazzola of Cefalù publicly scolded the local politicians against corruption, spurring them to behave in the name of law (see *Corriere della Sera*, July 11, 1976, and August 10, 1990, respectively).

3.1 Constructing Diocese Boundaries

We conduct our analysis at the Italian diocese level during the period from 1948 to 1992. In 1948, Italy was divided into 273 dioceses across 20 regions and 107 provinces.[9] Italian dioceses are smaller territorial units than Italian provinces—and they are also smaller than other dioceses worldwide. The 1984 revision of the Concordat between the Italian government and the Catholic Church redefined the exact administrative boundaries of dioceses,[10] unifying several of them and leading to a total of 223 from 1987 onward.

To construct the diocese boundaries over time, we proceed in two steps. First, we track the evolution of the name of each Italian diocese from its birth up to the present day based on a digital version of the Pontifical Yearbook.[11] Then, we build a comprehensive dataset on diocese boundaries throughout the 1948–1992 period. In particular, starting from the 2017 diocese shapefile, we manually revise backwards the set of municipalities included in each diocese.[12]

3.2 Share of Votes for the DC

Data on electoral results are from the Italian Ministry of Interior. We aggregate the municipal-level voting outcomes at the diocese level and compute the share of votes for the DC party.[13] We consider all available elections within the 1948–1992 period, i.e., from the birth of the Italian Republic to the dissolution of the Catholic Party, for a total of 19 rounds of elections distributed as follows: 11 rounds of parliamentary elections, 5 rounds of elections for regional councils, and 3 rounds of elections for members of the European parliament.

3.3 Bishops

For each bishop in office, we collect several pieces of personal information. In particular, we know the bishop's year and place of birth, the year of his ordination as priest or member of a religious congregation,

[9] In 1948, the geographical distribution of dioceses in Italy was as follows: 24% of the dioceses were located in the North, 31% in the Center, and 45% in the South.

[10] For details on the redefinition of diocese boundaries and the underlying criteria, see Appendix Section A.2.

[11] This is to correctly identify the same diocese over time, even when the name changed. Name changes occurred 55 times during the 1948–1992 period. For instance, in 1986 the diocese of Adria changed its name to Adria-Rovigo to acknowledge the importance of Rovigo as provincial capital and usual place of residence of the bishop. See https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/. Data were retrieved in March 2020.

[12] This is based on a variety of sources, including the Acta Apostolicae Sedis (available at https://www.vatican.va/archive/aas/index_sp.htm), and the historical section of each diocese's website. For the 2017 shapefile, see https://www.danieledapiaggi.it/z011702-dataset-1-diocesi-italiane.html.

[13] These data are available at https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/.

the year of appointment to each bishop (and non-bishop) office, and his participation in the Second Vatican Council.[14] For bishops who passed away, we also know the death date. All these data are from the Pontifical Yearbook (available at https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/). Finally, using data from Sportelli and Vian (2019), we construct a dummy equal to one for bishops who had been the national president or general ecclesiastical assistant of the Catholic Action, the major Catholic lay association in Italy, during the 1948–1992 period.[15]

Next, to build measures of bishops' involvement in society and to grasp which bishops' activities may have influenced voters, we rely on data from the historical digital archive of the Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*.[16] In particular, we perform a text analysis on 2,297 documents reporting on bishops and identify two main topics: bishops' public engagement in society, and controversies bishops were involved in.[17]

When no bishop is in office in a given period, the diocese is considered *Vacant*.[18] We drop from the sample the electoral years in which dioceses were vacant.

4 Empirical Analysis

We first provide evidence that bishops significantly influence the share of votes for the DC. Then, we employ different empirical strategies to deal with identification concerns. Finally, we shed light on the mechanism and suggest that bishops' personal traits and activism are key to affect voters' behavior.

4.1 Did Bishops Affect Support for the DC?

To investigate bishops' relevance in support for the DC, we estimate the following equation:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_b + \beta_i + \gamma_t + \delta \mathbf{X}_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}. \qquad (1)$$

where Y_{it} is the share of votes for the DC party in diocese i in electoral year t, α_b is a set of bishop fixed effects, β_i represents a set of diocese fixed effects, γ_t are year fixed effects, $\mathbf{X}_{it}$ is the vector of time-varying diocese-level controls, and ε_{it} is the error term. As control variables, we include the (log) number of electors

[14] Non-bishop offices include, among others, serving as the Pope's personal secretary, and serving as an apostolic administrator or nuncio.

[15] See Appendix A.1 for details.

[16] https://archivio.corriere.it/Archivio/interface/landing.html.

[17] See Appendix Section A.7 for details on the newspaper data and text analysis.

[18] According to the canon law, vacancies are exceptional events that may occur when a bishop dies, retires, or resigns.

and dummy variables for the type of elections (national, regional, European).

The interpretation of the bishop fixed effects as a proxy for bishop's ability to influence elections relies on the assumption that the coefficients α_b are not capturing any other diocese-period unobservables. Indeed, if bishops never leave a diocese throughout their career, their effect cannot be disentangled from the diocese-period fixed effect (due to perfect collinearity).[19] Following Bertrand and Schoar (2003), we consider the *restricted* sample of dioceses where at least one bishop can be observed in at least one other diocese for at least three years —excluding 18% of the dioceses.[20] This allows us to exclude those dioceses for which all the bishop effects would overlap with diocese-period effects.[21]

Since bishops' appointments are often based on geographical considerations (see Section 2) and the quality of the bishop-diocese match may be higher when bishops have stronger personal ties with the assigned diocese, we explicitly control for the (log) distance between the bishop's birthplace and the diocese headquarter.[22] This allows to explicitly account for the possibility that we are capturing the quality of the diocese-bishop match rather than the effect of intrinsic characteristics of the bishops. Let us stress, however, that given our fixed effect estimator, we are not concerned by bishops' assignments based on the permanent component of bishops' ability, α_b, or the permanent component of dioceses' political behavior, β_i. For instance, a systematic allocation of bishops with stronger ability to influence elections to dioceses intrisically more favourable to the DC party would not represent a violation of our identification assumption.[23]

[19] Period represents those years in which the bishop was in office in that diocese.

[20] This is to ensure that bishops have the chance to "imprint their mark" on a given diocese. Three years corresponds to the 10th percentile of the distribution of the number of years a bishop stays in office (the median is 9, and the average is 11 years).

[21] See Appendix A.3 for further discussion.

[22] Based on the full (restricted) sample, 45.07% (42.71%) of the bishops is born in the same region where the diocese of appointment lies.

[23] See Card et al. (2013) and Fenizia (2022) for related discussion on endogenous mobility of workers.

Table 1: Bishops Affect Support for the DC

Dependent Variable	Share Votes DC				
Sample:	Restricted	Restricted	Restricted	Dead	Restricted
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Election Type FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Diocese FE	✓	✓		✓	✓
Bishop (All) FE		✓		✓	✓
Bishop (All)-Diocese FE			✓		
Bishop (Mover) FE					✓
Joint significance of bishop effects					
N. Constraints		604		215	182
P-value		0.000		19.270	0.000
Observations	3,794	3,794	3,794	992	3,794
Adj. R-Squared	0.869	0.923	0.924	0.907	0.882

Notes: OLS estimates. Observations are dioceses in national, regional, and European election years in the 1948–1992 period, excluding years in which the diocese was vacant. The dependent variable is the share of votes for the Christian Democracy party (DC). Restricted sample of diocese-election years where at least one bishop can be observed in at least one other diocese for at least three (actual) years in all columns except 4 where the sample includes all diocese-election years in which a diocese was ruled by a bishop who subsequently died while in office. All specifications control for the (log) number of electors, the (log) distance from the bishop's birthplace to the diocese headquarter, and year and type of election fixed effects. All columns except 3 include also diocese fixed effects. Columns 2 and 4 include bishop-specific fixed effects, while column 3 includes bishop-diocese fixed effects. Column 5 controls for a dummy for each bishop who can be observed in at least two dioceses for at least three years (labelled *Mover*). See the text and the Appendix for details on all variables and samples. Standard errors in parentheses. Below columns 2, 4, and 5, we report the number of constraints and the p-value of the F-tests for the joint significance of the bishop fixed effects included in the specification. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 1 reports the results. We start by estimating equation (1) without the bishop dummies (column 1); these are added in column 2. The adjusted R^2 increases from 0.869 (column 1) to 0.923 (column 2), suggesting that the identity of bishops explains a non-negligible amount of the variation in the share of votes for the DC party.[24] In line with this, the F-test rejects the null hypothesis that all bishop-fixed effects are zero (the p-value is equal to 0.000 in column 2).

Then, as a further test to rule out the possibility that bishops were systematically appointed to dioceses where they are more likely to influence the share votes for the DC—so that the coefficients of the bishop fixed effects would be capturing the quality of the match between the bishop and the diocese— we estimate equation (1) including bishop-diocese fixed effects (rather than bishop and diocese effects separately). If

[24]Note that the magnitude of this increase is comparable to that reported by Bertrand and Schoar (2003) and Fenizia (2022).

the match components played a crucial role in explaining election results, we would expect the resulting R^2 to be higher than the one in the baseline specification.[25] Column 3 of Table 1 shows that the fit improves only marginally with respect to column 2, with an adjusted R^2 increasing from 0.923 to 0.924. Next, to mitigate the concern of endogenous end of term, we restrict our attention to bishops who exit the sample for exogenous reasons. In column 4 of Table 1, we test the joint significance of the bishop effects, focusing on bishops who died while in office—thus excluding those who retired or resigned. The p-value of the F-test is still significant at the 1% level.

Finally, in column 5, we perform a more demanding exercise and only include dummies for bishops who moved across dioceses (182 out of the 604 bishops considered in column 4). The advantage of this approach is that it removes all bishop effects that overlap with the diocese-period effect. On the other hand, the number of bishop effects estimated is considerably reduced. Looking at the regression results, we still safely reject the hypothesis that bishops are equally good, and we observe an increase in the adjusted R^2 with respect to column 1. This increase is obviously smaller than in column 2, as we are now considering only one-third of the bishops in the sample.

To assess the magnitude of the observed differences between bishops, we compute the twenty-fifth percentile and the seventy-fifth percentile of the bishop effects estimated in column 5. Replacing a bishop at the 25th percentile with one at the 75th percentile increases the DC votes share by 3 percentage points (the average share of votes for the DC is 40%)—suggesting that bishops exert a sizeable effect on the DC votes share at the diocese level.

4.2 Robustness

To further rule out that the bishop effects are spuriously picking up diocese-time unobserved factors, we first investigate whether the allocation of bishops to dioceses is related to trends in political support and then we perform two more-general exercises focusing on restricted time windows.

First, if high-quality bishops were systematically appointed to dioceses where support for the DC is increasing, their effect would be correlated with dioceses' political trends and our model would overestimate their ability to influence elections. To mitigate this concern we focus on transition years, i.e., those electoral years in which the bishop in office is different from the one in the previous electoral year for the same type

[25] The match component would represent a differential increase in the DC share of votes that depends on the specific role of bishop b in diocese i ($\phi_{b,i}$) and that is in addition to the separate bishop and diocese effects ($\alpha_b + \beta_i$).

of election.

Table 2 reports the results: column 1 focuses on transition years involving the entire set of bishops included in column 2 of Table 1; column 2 focuses on transition years involving bishops that moved between dioceses (whose fixed effects are estimated in column 5 of Table 1). In both specifications we control for region and connected-sets fixed effects. Connected sets are clusters of dioceses that were ever administered by the same bishop; we include them because the bishop effects are separately identified only within the set of dioceses that are connected by bishop mobility.[26] In both cases, we find no evidence of bishops sorting on trends in the growth rate of the vote share for the DC.[27] [28]

Next, we perform two exercises to check the robustness of our findings when zooming into limited time windows. These further help attenuate the possibility that previous results were capturing time-varying diocese-level omitted variables. We first focus on a period that includes transition years—for which we observe a change in bishop quality ($\widehat{\Delta B_i} = \hat{\alpha}_{i,incoming} - \hat{\alpha}_{i,outgoing}$)—and the two preceding and the following electoral years (a transition period henceforth). We classify transition years in two groups, based on the median of the change in bishop quality: (i) from a high- to a low-quality bishop and (ii) from a low- to a high-quality bishop. Then, using an event-analysis approach, for each of the two groups identified we plot the residuals obtained after partialling out the transition, year, and type of election fixed effects from the DC share votes, against the actual number of years from the transition year.

The results are displayed in Figure 1; panel (a) focuses on transitions occurring between bishops considered in specification 2 of Table 1; panel (b) considers only transitions between the set of movers. Two main observations stand out: (i) there is a positive jump when moving from low- to high-ability bishops and, viceversa when moving from high- to low-ability bishops; (ii) the magnitude of the effect of the two opposite changes (from below median to above median and viceversa) is very similar, suggesting that a model with additive bishop and diocese effects may be a good approximation of reality.

[26] See Abowd et al. (1999) and Abowd et al. (2002) in the context of firm and worker mobility.

[27] We also control for a set of diocese-specific measures, including baseline levels of religiosity. Although the latter is significant, it does not represent a threat to our empirical strategy as the main specifications control for dioceses fixed effects.

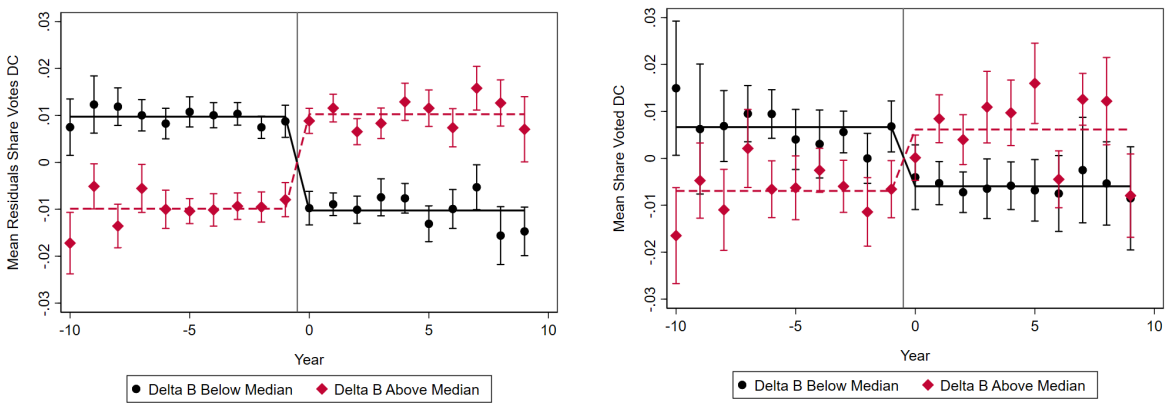
[28] Appendix Table A2 shows that there is no correlation between the likelihood of observing a bishop change and: (i) the electoral result of the DC in the previous elections (odd columns), and (ii) the electoral result of the DC in the next elections (even columns).

Table 2: Diocese-Specific Observables and the Incoming-Bishop Fixed Effect

Dependent Variable	Estimated Bishop FE	
Sample Restricted	All Bishops	Movers
	(1)	(2)
Growth rate sh. votes DC -1	0.002	0.025
	(0.021)	(0.016)
Lag sh. votes DC	0.076	0.005
	(0.055)	(0.039)
Distance to Rome	-0.012	-0.007
	(0.022)	(0.009)
Archdiocese	0.006	0.002
	(0.010)	(0.006)
Unified or split diocese	-0.003	0.001
	(0.008)	(0.005)
Sh. Catholics in 1950	-0.113*	0.030
	(0.067)	(0.044)
N. Parishes per 1K Catholics in 1950	0.012	0.001
	(0.014)	(0.009)
Priests per 1K Catholics in 1950	0.009	0.005
	(0.007)	(0.008)
Connected Set FE	✓	✓
Region FE	✓	✓
Observations	703	218
Adj. R-Squared	0.334	0.123

Notes: OLS estimates. Starting from the restricted sample, the dataset includes all election years in which the bishop in office in a given diocese is different from the bishop who was in office in the previous election year (within type of election, i.e, national, regional, and European) in the 1948–1992 period. We exclude events for which we cannot calculate the growth rate of the share of votes for the DC in previous periods, either because of limitations in the time span covered by the sample, or because the incoming bishop is preceded by a vacancy. The dependent variable in column 1 and 2 is the bishop effect estimated in column 2 and column 5 of Table 1, respectively. *Growth Rate Share Votes DC -1* is the growth rate in the share of votes for the DC between the electoral year preceding the event and the previous electoral year, while *Lag share votes DC* is the share votes for the DC in the previous electoral year. *Distance to Rome* is the distance between the diocese headquarters and Rome (in log). *Archdiocese* and *Unified or split diocese* are dummy variables tracking the most important dioceses and dioceses that ever changed boundaries during the sample period, respectively. Then, we account for the following measures of religiosity in 1950: Share of Catholics, as well as the number of parishes and of priests for 1000 Catholic members of the population. All specifications control for connected-set fixed effects and for the region where the diocese is located. Standard errors (clustered at the diocese level) in parentheses. *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$.

Figure 1: Mean Residuals Share of Votes for the DC for Dioceses Experiencing a Change of Bishop Classified Based on the Median Bishop Effect



(a) All Bishops

(b) Movers

Notes: The figure plots on the *y-axis* the residuals from a regression using as dependent variable the DC share votes controlling for the (log) number of electors, the (log) distance from the bishop's birthplace and the diocese headquarter, year and type of election fixed effects, and transition fixed effects. Each transition in the sample includes the transition electoral year, the two preceding and the following electoral year. Since transitions may occur in the period between two electoral years (typically 5 years), we plot residuals based on the effective year of transition. We classify observations based on the type of transitions: from a high- to a low-quality bishop (black circle) and from a low- to a high-quality bishop (cranberry diamond). Panel (a) focuses on all transitions occurring in the restricted sample (from column 2 of Table 1), whereas panel (b) considers only transitions between bishops that move across dioceses using estimates from column 5 of Table 1.

Finally, we perform a last exercise in line with Jones and Olken (2005) and focus on the entire set of bishops who died while in office. As explained above, this attenuates the selection problem that could occur if bishops change diocese in reaction to transitory shocks. As in Jones and Olken (2005), we estimate the following model:

$$Y_{izt} = \lambda_z^{PRE} PRE_{zt} + \lambda_z^{POST} POST_{zt} + \beta_i + \gamma_t + \delta \mathbf{X}_{it} + \varepsilon_{izt} \qquad (2)$$

where all terms are defined as in equation (1), but instead of including the bishop fixed effects (α_b), for each bishop who died in office, we include a separate set of dummies, denoted by PRE_z and $POST_z$. z indexes the exogenous transitions, PRE_z is a dummy equal to 1 in the T years before the bishop z's exogenous transition in that diocese, and $POST_z$ is a dummy equal to 1 in the T years after bishop z's exogenous transition. We exclude the actual death year from both dummies to avoid capturing changes specific to that year.[29] For each bishop's death z, we estimate separate coefficients for λ_z^{PRE} and λ_z^{POST}. After estimating (2), we compute a

[29] As in Jones and Olken (2005) we set T=5 and correct standard errors for macro-region-specific heteroskedasticity and a macro-region-specific AR(1) process based on election years of the same type. We consider three macro-regions, South, Center, and North.

chi-squared test, using the Wald statistic J to test the null hypothesis that the difference in the share of votes for the DC before and after the transition is zero. In other words, the test verifies the equality of the effect of two consecutive bishops before and after an exogenous transition in a particular diocese.[30]

Table 3: Significant Changes in the Share of Votes for the DC Before and After Random Transitions

Timing	Num. Bishops	J-Stat	P-Value
	(1)	(2)	(3)
t	196	1.216	0.021
t+5 (placebo)	179	1.010	0.449

Notes: Each row reports the results from performing equation (2) based on a different definition of the periods before and after a random bishop transition (a death while in office). In *t*, we consider the share of votes for the DC within five years before and after the year of transition (that falls within the control group), while in *t+5*, we present a placebo exercise in which we shifted the transition year backward for five years and compute the PRE and POST dummies as in t thereafter. Under the null hypothesis, the DC vote share is similar during election years that occur within 5 years before and after a random bishop transition. Column 1 reports the number of random events that enter into each regression, column 2 reports the *J*-statistic presented in appendix A.6, and column 3 reports the p-value of the probability that the null hypothesis is true.

Table 3 presents the results. Column 1 reports the number of deaths, column 2 presents the *J*-statistic discussed above, column 3 presents the *p*-value of the *J*-statistic. The two rows report different specifications, involving different timing of the *PRE* and *POST* dummies. The first row reports the results using the baseline timing: the p-value suggests that we can safely reject the null hypothesis. The second row presents the *p*-value of a placebo test in which we pushed the *PRE* and *POST* dummies back five years, thus simulating the bishop's death earlier in time. Consistently, we cannot reject anymore the null hypothesis at conventional levels of significance (*p*-value = 0.45).

These last two exercises on restricted time windows corroborate our main findings, suggesting that bishop effects are not capturing diocese-time unobservables.

4.3 Mechanism: Bishop's Characteristics

So far, through a series of exercises, we have established that bishops' identity does affect the share of votes for the DC. The next question is: which bishop characteristics are particularly relevant?

We answer this question in Table 4.[31] In particular, we regress our estimated bishop fixed effects on several observable bishop characteristics, always controlling for connected-sets fixed effects and for the

[30] See Appendix A.6 for the formulation of the J statistics.

[31] In this section we focus on the larger set of bishops (see column 2 of Table 1) to maximize the variation used and have a meaningful text analysis exercise.

bishop region of birth fixed effects.

Column 1 includes a bishop's year of birth, a dummy equal to one if he was born abroad, and the 1948 DC share of votes in his birth municipality. The latter is a proxy for bishop's political culture and it is positively and significantly associated with a bishop's ability to affect DC share of votes. This suggests that a bishop born in a "DC-friendly" municipality manages to attract more votes for this party.

Columns 2–4 account for a set of variables related to a bishop's career, such as his age at ordination to priesthood, as well as dummies for his membership in a religious order, for his participation in the Second Vatican Council, and for his appointment to non-bishop offices involving strict collaboration with the Pope. The latter variable is related to a higher bishop effect, possibly because of his popularity or experience in dealing with politically-relevant issues.

Finally, in columns 5–7, we construct measures of bishops' activism in society, based on articles from the national newspaper *Il corriere della Sera* from 1948 to 1992. We use as our reference corpus the set of documents that mention one of the bishops in our sample. Using the supervised LDA algorithm, we identify two main topics running through the corpus, which describe, respectively, a positive and a negative form of activism in society. The first topic is about bishops' positive engagement within society, which includes participation in public events, such as masses and inaugurations of public places, while the second topic concerns bishops' conflicting relationship with members of their congregations or with public authorities and politicians.

Table 4: Correlates of Bishop Fixed Effects

Dependent Variable	Estimated Bishop FE						
Activism (Documents)					Dummy	Number	Share
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Year Born	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000*	0.000	0.000**
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Foreign	-0.004	0.004	0.004	0.003	0.002	-0.002	-0.005
	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.044)	(0.040)	(0.039)
DC Vote Share in Birthplace (1948)	0.045**	0.047**	0.045**	0.045**	0.041**	0.041**	0.034**
	(0.019)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Age Ordained Priest		-0.001	-0.001	-0.000	0.000	-0.001	-0.000
		(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Religious Order		-0.017*	-0.015	-0.015	-0.011	-0.016*	-0.011
		(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)
Participated CVII		-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.000
		(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Pope-related offices			0.086***	0.086***	0.082***	-0.006	0.062***
			(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.009)	(0.051)	(0.014)
CEI President/Secretary			0.003	0.004	0.004	0.003	0.004
			(0.018)	(0.019)	(0.017)	(0.018)	(0.016)
Other Offices			-0.009	-0.009	-0.008	-0.008	-0.008
			(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Catholic Action				-0.009	-0.001	-0.015	-0.006
				(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.017)
Topic Public Engagement					0.029***	0.003***	0.035***
					(0.006)	(0.001)	(0.007)
Topic Controversies					-0.035***	-0.002***	-0.048***
					(0.006)	(0.001)	(0.008)
Region of Birth	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Connected Sets	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	605	605	605	605	605	605	605
R-Squared	0.132	0.132	0.137	0.135	0.185	0.171	0.231

Notes: OLS estimates. Observations are the estimated bishop fixed effects from column 2 of Table 1. All specifications control for the bishop's year of birth, a dummy taking the value 1 if the bishop was born abroad, dummy variables tracking the bishop's region of birth if born in Italy, the DC share votes in 1948 in the bishop's municipality of birth, and connected sets fixed effects. Column 2 adds the age of ordination to priesthood, a dummy taking value 1 if the bishop was part of a religious order, and a dummy taking the value 1 if the bishop participated to the Second Vatican Council. Column 3 also controls for *Pope-related offices*, that is a dummy taking value 1 if the bishop collaborated with the Pope as his personal secretary, secretary of State, or head of Vatican press, *CEI President/Secretary* that is a dummy taking value 1 if the bishop has ever been the president or secretary of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), and *Other Offices* that is a dummy tracking the bishop's appointment to any other non-bishop office within the Church. Column 4 includes a dummy taking value 1 if the bishop has ever been the president of the lay association *Catholic Action*. Columns 5-7 add to the specification two variables that define the bishop's activity in two domains (topics): participation to public events and controversies with civilians and public authorities, based on the text analysis of newspaper articles mentioning bishops. For each topic the bishop involvement is defined based on: a dummy taking value 1 if the bishop has ever been mentioned by a document related to either topic in column 5, the number of documents in column 6, and the share of documents in column 7. See the text and the Appendix for details on all variables. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

We classified newspaper articles into two main groups, based on which topic is prevalent within the article according to the algorithm. Given this document classification, we build three sets of bishop-specific

measures of activism. First, for each form of activism, we build a dummy variable taking the value one if the bishop was mentioned in at least one document classified in the related activism topic. Second, for each bishop, we look at the number of documents related to a specific form of activism. Third, for each bishop, we compute the share of documents related to a specific form of activism over the total number of documents mentioning the bishop.[32]

Regardless of how we measure bishop activism, we find that bishops involved in controversies display a lower bishop effect, while bishops engaged in public events display a higher bishop effect. Given the broad content of the two topics, these results suggest that not only a bishop may have a direct effect on voters' choices by directly supporting or publicly praising the DC, but also an indirect effect. The extent to which voters appreciate a bishop's behavior may ultimately be likely to affect their support for the DC, pointing to underlying voter association between Catholic leaders and the "party of the Catholics."

5 Conclusion and Discussion

Do religious leaders matter for politics? To answer this question, in this paper we have empirically studied whether and how Catholic bishops influenced voters' support for the Christian Democracy party in Italy from 1948 to 1992. We find that bishops affect the share of votes for the DC. Through a variety of econometric exercises, we show that this result is unlikely to be driven by diocese-period-specific unobservables such as bishops' endogenous mobility. Importantly, we shed light on two mechanisms through which bishops influenced voters: (i) the bishop's political culture, and (ii) different types of bishop's direct interaction with the population.

The political context of 20th-century Italy—a country where religion and politics have historically been interconnected—share important similarities with how religious leaders intervene in the political sphere in many societies today.

In Italy itself, even after the dissolution of the DC and the progressive secularization of the country, bishops have continued to step into politics. Before the most recent parliamentary election, in September 2022, the Italian Episcopal Conference invited all electors to turn out and "[evaluate] the various political proposals in the light of the common good" to build a more just society and "leaving no one behind."[33] More

[32] We set these variables to zero if bishops are never mentioned. Results, however, are robust to the replication of the analysis on the subsample of bishops that are mentioned at least in one article (see Appendix Table A3).

[33] For instance, in 2018, Bishop Cantoni of Como contested the Northern League secretary at the Ministry of Interior

broadly, spiritual leaders across the world and from different religious organizations continue to express their views on several political matters, possibly affecting voters' behavior.[34] Our findings suggest that the factors affecting electoral results go beyond voters' political and economic considerations. They instead point to religious leaders as important actors in shaping voters' political preferences.

for his abrupt decision to close a local migrant shelter camp and asked the electorate to avoid voting for the populists (see https://archivio.corriere.it/Archivio/interface/view.shtml#!/NTovZXMvaXQvcmNzZGF0aW1ldGhvZGUxL0AzNTE0NTk%3D and https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/vescovo-como-cantoni-scende-campo-votare-populisti-peccato-1479478.html). See https://www.agensir.it/italia/2022/09/21/appeal-of-the-italian-bishops-for-the-upcoming-elections-not-opportunisms-but-visions-italy-needs-responsibility-and-participation/ on bishops' appeal to citizens to vote in 2022.

[34]This happens in different degrees depending on how secular a society is. For instance, recent abortion restrictions in Arizona and Ohio renewed the debate over abortion rights in the US, with the US Conference of Catholic Bishops proposing to prevent pro-abortion politicians from receiving the holy communion (see https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57531070). Christian voters across US states seem to have been influenced by the abortion debate during the 2022 midterm elections (see https://apnews.com/article/christian-voter-trends-2022-midterm-elections-0377eed4eed23d5356c29b10af9f6f69).

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