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Keeping the left alive: exploring voter support for the Greens and Left Alliance (AVS) in the 2024 European elections

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Abstract. This paper explores the motivations of voters who supported the Greens and Left Alliance (Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, AVS) in the 2024 European elections in Italy. In 2024, AVS nearly doubled its national vote share compared to the 2022 general elections, with an increase of more than 600,000 absolute votes – a growth second to none among Italian parties in that election. The goal of this study is to explore the reasons that drove individuals to choose this relatively small and previously marginal alliance. We investigate whether support was primarily driven by ideological alignment, policy positions on salient issues, candidate appeal, leaders' character or other factors. Drawing on a two-step mixed-methods design, we combine data from an original post-election online survey of AVS voters with insights from semi-structured in-depth interviews. This research design mitigates common limitations in electoral studies, particularly the challenge of understanding voters' underlying motivations for their vote choice. Our findings suggest that voters were primarily motivated by AVS's perceived ideological clarity and consistency, as well as by its prioritization of workers' rights, environmental protection, and international solidarity – rather than by individual candidates or leaders. The study contributes to the understanding of the 2024 European elections and offers broader insights into Italian politics, the dynamics of left-wing and green parties, and issue-based voting.

Keywords: Greens and left alliance, European elections, Italy, survey, interviews.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the motivations behind voter support for the Greens and Left Alliance (*Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra*, AVS) in the 2024 European Parliament elections. AVS, a coalition formed by the Italian Left (*Sinistra Italiana*, SI) and Green Europe (*Europa Verde*, EV), secured 6.8% of the national vote – its strongest performance to date, marking a record gain over 2022. This growth was not only unexpected but also appears to have consolidated in the months that followed, as suggested by consistent trends in national polls. These developments indicate that AVS may become a more influential actor in Italian politics moving forward. For this reason, it is important to understand what drove voter support for the alliance in the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Electoral turnout is on a downward trend in virtually all liberal democracies around the world (Kostelka & Blais, 2021). Italy is not an exception to that trend. The 2022 national elections recorded the lowest turnout in the history of the republic (Improta et al., 2022). Participation in local elections has also reached unprecedented lows, with some provinces failing to reach 30% turnout and some municipalities approaching 15% (Gatti & Mannoni, 2023). In a political environment characterized by low turnout and widespread disaffection, understanding the motivations behind support for a relatively small left-wing alliance is a relevant and timely question. AVS entered the election as a marginal force, historically overshadowed by more established parties on the left side of the political spectrum. Voters had other progressive options such as the Partito Democratico (PD) and the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), both of which offered competing claims to represent the progressive space. This study therefore seeks to address the question: What motivated voters to support AVS in the 2024 European Parliament elections?

To address this, we adopted a multi-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative data. The first step of our research involved an original survey, allowing us to explore broad trends and assess the relative importance of different motivations. The second step consisted of in-depth interviews, which provided a more nuanced understanding of voter motivations by scrutinizing the underlying reasoning behind the responses gathered in the survey. The rationale behind this design is that, while survey data can highlight correlations and general patterns, qualitative interviews allow us to examine the thought processes of voters, thereby uncovering dynamics that might not emerge from standardized responses alone.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we provide an overview of AVS and its electoral performance in the 2024 EP elections. We then discuss the theoretical framework of vote choice determinants, contextualizing our study within broader discussions on ideology, issue voting, and electoral strategy. Next, we present our research design, detailing the data collection and analytical methods employed. The results section integrates findings from both the survey and interviews, highlighting key themes that emerged from voter motivations. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for understanding the dynamics of left-wing support in Italy.

2. BACKGROUND: AVS AND ITS PERFORMANCE IN THE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTION

AVS is a left-wing political formation in Italy, created on July 2, 2022, as an alliance between two parties:

the Italian Left (*Sinistra Italiana*, SI) and Green Europe (*Europea Verde*, EV). Bringing together democratic socialist and environmentalist ideologies, AVS positions itself as a red-green coalition that represents progressive, ecological, and social justice-oriented voters (Newell, 2024). Its political platform emphasizes environmental sustainability, social equality, workers' rights, and international solidarity. AVS is characterized by a joint leadership formed by the respective leaders of the two parties: Nicola Fratoianni of SI and Angelo Bonelli of EV.

AVS was born out of the need to unify the fragmented Italian left and provide a coherent platform to address key leftist issues. The coalition first ran in the 2022 national elections, where it secured 3.6% of the vote (Improta et al., 2022). While this result did not allow it to become a major player in national politics, especially regarding the government formation processes, it set the stage for greater visibility and political consolidation. By offering a more radical alternative to center-left-wing parties, AVS has positioned itself as an option for left-wing voters who were keen to abandon the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) (e.g. Biancalana et al., 2024).

The 2024 European Parliament elections marked a turning point for AVS, making their results worth defining as a relevant electoral success. AVS almost doubled its vote share compared to the 2022 national elections, jumping from 3.6% to 6.8%. This result is particularly notable given the broader electoral context. The party of Giorgia Meloni (FDI), for instance, while it earned nearly three percentage points from 2022 to 2024, it actually lost votes in absolute terms due to the significantly lower turnout of this election (49.7%). In contrast, AVS not only substantially increased its vote share, but also gained approximately 600,000 additional votes compared to the 2022 general elections, marking a rare and significant advance both in percentage and absolute terms. This growth was second to none among Italian parties, highlighting a significant expansion of its electoral base. Not only did AVS surpass the 4% electoral threshold required for representation – which neither AVS nor the two parties that compose it had ever reached before – but it also secured six seats in the European Parliament, increasing its presence in the European institutions (Ceron et al., 2025).

AVS performed exceptionally well in larger cities, exceeding 10% of the vote in urban centers such as Rome, Naples, Milan, and Turin (Newell 2024). Its rise was even more pronounced among younger voters, where it emerged as the first choice among students living away from home, gaining over 40% support in this social group¹. Notably, this result also appears to have

¹ Based on Eligendo (Italian National Electoral Archive).

consolidated its standing in national polls in the months that followed the election, suggesting that the EP election performance was not just a one-off but could be the start of a more enduring political presence.

3. DETERMINANTS OF VOTING CHOICE: A BRIEF INSPECTION OF MAIN THEORIES AND THEIR APPLICABILITY TO THE AVS CASE

Political scientists have long debated the determinants of vote choice, with several key factors emerging consistently as influential across different contexts (Budge et al., 1983). In the case of AVS in the 2024 EP elections, we explore different factors: party membership, habitual voting, ideology, leader effects, and issue voting. All this considering that the Italian context introduces some nuances and contingencies that may affect the relative importance of these factors for left-wing voters (e.g. Sandri & Seddone, 2015).

First, party membership is traditionally seen as a strong predictor of voting choice, as members are likely to support their own party due to a sense of loyalty and ideological commitment (e.g. Bartels, 2000). However, membership rates have been steadily declining across Europe, leading to a reduced impact on electoral outcomes (Van Biezen et al., 2012). In Italy, this trend is particularly pronounced, reflecting a broader crisis of party identification and organizational structures (e.g. Whiteley, 2011).

Voting out of habit, implying that voters continue to support the party they voted for in previous elections, is another relevant factor emerging in the literature (e.g., Dinas, 2012). However, this may be limited in Italy due to its high levels of electoral volatility, recorded even in recent times (Chiaramonte, 2023). Since the transformation of the traditional party system in the early 1990s, Italian voters have shown a remarkable tendency to switch voting preferences between elections (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017). This volatility reduces the predictive power of habitual voting as a determinant of vote choice for AVS, which is a relatively new political force with no established historical base. Therefore, while habitual voting can explain continuity for some established parties, it is unlikely to account for the support of AVS in the 2024 EP elections.

Ideological alignment and party identification are traditionally among the strongest predictors of vote choice (e.g. Miller, 1991). According to the spatial model of voting, individuals tend to vote for the party closest to their own ideological position on the left-right spectrum (Downs, 1957; Miller, 1991). In the case of AVS,

this would suggest a strong appeal to voters who identify as left-wing and are dissatisfied with more moderate alternatives, particularly the PD. However, in some contexts, strategic voting can override ideological alignment. Specifically, when voters believe that their preferred party is unlikely to pass the electoral threshold, they might choose a more viable option to avoid wasting their vote (Blais & Massicotte, 1996). This is particularly relevant in the context of EP elections in Italy, which use a proportional representation system with a 4% threshold. Given that AVS had never previously reached this threshold, some left-wing voters might have strategically opted for other parties perceived as more promising. This strategic consideration could moderate the impact of ideological alignment, even among voters who are otherwise ideologically sympathetic to AVS².

Leadership has become increasingly important in the era of personalized politics, where voters are increasingly influenced by leader cues and the perceived competence, charisma, and trustworthiness of party leaders (e.g. Garzia et al., 2020). However, AVS presents a unique case because it does not have a single leader but rather two co-leaders who lead two separate parties within the alliance. This dual leadership structure might dilute the impact of leader effects, as voters are not presented with a singular charismatic figure. Additionally, the preferential voting system used in EP elections in Italy allows voters to choose specific candidates, which may further diminish the importance of the main co-leaders. In this context, the personal appeal of new candidates, such as Ilaria Salis, Mimmo Lucano, and Ignazio Marino, may play a more significant role than the collective leadership of the party. The peculiarity of the leadership structure in AVS thus complicates the application of personalization theories in this case.

Finally, issue voting documents that voters support the party that aligns with their positions on key policy issues. The literature indicated issue voting as an important determinant of voting choices, yielding significant effects in explaining vote choices over multiples decades (Carmines & Stimson, 1980). When it comes to issues, AVS is notably the most pro-environmental party in the Italian political landscape (Mannoni, 2025) and is perceived as credible on environmental protection (De Sio et al., 2024). This suggests that environmental issues might have played a central role in motivating support

² It should be noted that strategic considerations may not only deter but also encourage support for some small parties, if they are polling near the electoral threshold. This may have been the case for AVS in 2024, as polling data suggested that it had a real chance of surpassing the 4% barrier. Informed and politically engaged voters may have been aware of these dynamics and motivated by a perception that their vote could make the difference in helping AVS secure representation.

for AVS. However, AVS is not solely a green party; it also addresses other issues such as social justice, peace, and workers' rights. In the 2024 EP elections, new issues like the Gaza crisis and traditional left-wing issues like workers' rights may have attracted voters with specific issue preferences, going beyond the environment. As we will observe in the results section of this paper, the qualitative analysis revealed that these issues resonated with AVS voters. Therefore, issue voting for AVS appears to be multidimensional, encompassing environmentalism, social justice, and international solidarity.

Overall, the presented strands of voting choices' determinants – party membership, habitual voting, ideology, leadership influence, and issue voting – provide a comprehensive framework for understanding why voters might have supported AVS in the 2024 EP elections. However, to uncover the true drivers behind voter support for AVS, one must turn to voters themselves – through direct questioning and empirical investigation.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

In this research, we adopted a multi-method approach in a two-step analysis. We draw on both quantitative and qualitative data to support our analysis. First, we leveraged original online (computer assisted web interview, CAWI) survey data as testing ground, to determine whether our preliminary expectations are well-founded. Then, to refine the questions and gain deeper insights, we incorporated them into the semi-structured interviews and the interview guide for the second stage. In the second step, we collected more detailed qualitative evidence via in-depth interviews. Both the online survey and the in-depth interviews adopted a purposive sampling strategy (also known as criterion-based sampling), that is, participants were deliberately selected based on a specific criterion that made them particularly suitable to unveil the mechanisms we are interested in. In our case, that meant only targeting Italians who had voted for AVS in the European elections in June 2024. As Mosley (2013) notes, “statistical relationships are a good starting point, but they do not rule out alternative relationships that would generate the same statistical patterns” (p.3). In other words, correlations between attitudes and behaviors are not sufficient to identify the actual motivations underlying vote choice. To get closer to causal explanations, we need to ask voters directly – not only via structured survey items but through in-depth interviews that allow them to explain their reasoning in their own words. Hence, we consider this research design the most appropriate

for exhaustively addressing our research question, as it allowed us to overcome one of the key limitations in voting behavior research – namely, identifying why voters preferred one party or candidate over others. Rather than inferring motivations from statistical correlations between vote choice and attitudes (e.g., toward issues or leaders), we asked respondents directly to articulate their reasons for voting for AVS in their own words. This approach avoids the limitations of forced-choice survey items or ranking tasks, which can be cognitively demanding and may fail to capture the complexity of voters' reasoning.

4.1 First step: online survey

First, we collected original survey data (n=147). The data collection started eleven weeks after the election and took place from August 24 to September 5. The data was collected using snowball/convenience sample, with participants filling in the survey upon voluntary participation. The data collection process targeted a specific and relatively limited segment of the Italian population. To optimize participant recruitment, we strategically distributed the survey link and QR code³ on platforms where AVS voters were more likely to be reached⁴. Additionally, we employed a snowball sampling approach by initially sharing the survey with individuals who were likely AVS voters themselves and who, in turn, were expected to have connections with others who had also voted for AVS. In addition to employing the traditional snowball sampling technique to collect responses, we extended our outreach by posting the survey link to several Facebook groups with a clear left-wing or green ideological orientation. This approach aimed at enhancing the survey's reach within the target population. Furthermore, some individuals to whom we initially sent the link informed us that they had already encountered or received it through other channels, indicating that the survey was effectively circulating among the intended respondents.

The survey was intended to be very short, consisting of twelve questions⁵. In addition to a few socio-demographic questions designed to provide an overview of the

³ We also designed and circulated a visual infographic alongside the link, containing the QR code, to capture users attention and encourage participation (see Appendix A3).

⁴ We used platforms such as Facebook (including ideologically aligned groups), Instagram, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp to maximize engagement across demographic groups. We deliberately excluded X (formerly Twitter) from our dissemination strategy, as due to its recent transformation, the exodus of many left-leaning users led us to deem it unsuitable for reaching our target audience.

⁵ Median time for completion: 3 minutes and 22 seconds.

sample distribution in terms of gender, age, and region, respondents were asked a series of questions to explore the factors underlying support for AVS in that election. The survey began with a screening question asking whether they had voted for AVS in the European elections held on June 8–9, 2024. Respondents who answered “No” were automatically redirected to the thank-you page at the end of the survey and thus excluded from the analysis, as were those who did not answer all of the questions. This resulted in a final sample size of $n = 147$.⁶

After asking respondents whether they had voted for AVS and whether they had expressed any preference, we directly posed the open-ended question: “Could you explain why you voted for AVS?”, allowing them to elaborate freely on the reasons for supporting the alliance. Subsequently, we asked them to indicate the extent to which specific issues or events had influenced their decision to vote for AVS. To assess issue voting, we included references to the current situation in Gaza, the climate crisis, and the protection of workers’ rights. To evaluate the potential impact of personalization, we asked about the role of the party leaders Nicola Fratoianni and Angelo Bonelli, as well as the candidacy of Ilaria Salis (the most widely discussed AVS candidate in the media as having a particularly strong mobilizing potential for the party). Finally, to examine the role of ideological alignment, we included a question on leftist ideology, which we later compared with respondents’ self-placement on a left-right scale ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right).

The open-ended question was deliberately placed before the battery of items selected by us to prevent priming respondents to attribute greater importance to factors that we had anticipated as influential in their vote choice. This approach is also aimed at minimizing social desirability bias, which occurs when participants under- or over-report certain responses based on what they perceive as socially expected (Fisher & Katz, 2000). In this case, had respondents first encountered references to issues such as Gaza, climate change, or workers’ rights, they might have assumed that these factors were expected to have influenced their vote for AVS. Such an order could have led to biased responses and reduced the variation in the open-ended answers, which we were able to capture by structuring the survey differently.⁷

Lastly, we asked the respondents which party they had voted for in the previous national election held on

September 2022, to possibly distinguish those who had voted already in the recent past for AVS and those who had not.⁸ At the end of the survey, one last question asked the respondents whether they would be willing to give their availability for a follow-up in-depth interview, to be held in person or online, to discuss about the issues just covered in the survey. In order to protect and guarantee the anonymity of the answers provided in the survey until then, if respondents answered “Yes”, they were redirected to a different survey where they could insert their contact details. More information on the retention rate can be found in the section below.

4.2 Second step: in-depth interviews

As stated by Della Porta (2014: 230), “qualitative interviews are particularly useful for understanding the meaning that actors attribute to their actions”. Therefore, after analyzing the survey data, we developed the interview guide and proceeded to contact respondents who had expressed willingness to participate in a follow-up in-depth interview. A total of 61 respondents agreed to be interviewed, resulting in a retention rate of over 40%. We believe that this figure, combined with the relative ease of collecting survey data despite the limited target population, may indicate a strong level of enthusiasm and willingness to have their voices heard and actively contribute. This level of engagement appears characteristic of the AVS electorate, as evidenced in the qualitative interviews.

While conducting in-depth interviews immediately after the online survey would have allowed us to capitalize on the momentum, our objective in the second phase of the analysis was also to examine potential shifts in voters’ motivations over time. Specifically, we aimed to assess whether the factors respondents initially cited as reasons for their vote remained salient several months after the election, once the enthusiasm surrounding AVS’s unprecedented results might have started to fade. For this reason, we waited for a few months before reaching out to those who had indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview.

In mid-December, we began randomly selecting small groups of contacts from our list and emailing them, spacing out our invitations over several days to allow time for responses and the scheduling of interviews. As expected, only a subset of those contacted ultimately agreed to participate. In total, we reached out to 25 respondents, of whom 7 agreed to be interviewed,

⁶ The original number of collected responses before removing the invalid ones was 183.

⁷ The questionnaire was programmed so that each question appeared on a separate page, and respondents were required to answer the question on the current page before proceeding to the next. This design choice ensured that participants could not preview or skip ahead to later questions.

⁸ A copy of the whole questionnaire is available in the Supplementary materials.

resulting in a 28% response rate. We stopped sending invitations once we determined that we had reached a saturation⁹ point, as additional interviews were no longer yielding new insights.

To meet the interviewee's preferences and due to logistic constraints since they were spread all over the country, the interviews took place online.¹⁰ All interviews were conducted in January and February 2025. To minimize variation attributable to interviewer effects, all interviews were conducted by the same interviewer. Their content was transcribed using MAXQDA.

4.3 Sample

Our sample consisted of 52% male, 47% female, and 1% non-binary voters. This quite aligns with gender distributions of AVS voters in the most recent EP elections as resulted in other surveys¹¹. It includes voters ranging from 20 to 86 years old. Voters under 45 years old constitute 47% of our sample. Regarding the geographical distribution, we have an over-representation of regions in the center¹² accounting for slightly more than 70% of the respondents, and less people from Northern¹³ or Southern regions (around 20% and 10% respectively)¹⁴. Regarding the distribution of vote and political preferences, most respondents claimed to have expressed at least one preference for a candidate in the election (87%). A majority of approximately 65% reported they had already voted for AVS in the last national elections held on September 2022 – the remaining 35% was distributed mostly between the Democratic Party (9%), Five Star Movement (7%), or a combination of AVS and either Democratic Party or Five Star Movement, voting two different parties at the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (5%). Consistently with such party prefer-

ences, the ideological self-placement of respondents is substantially on the left. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicated the left and 10 the right, our sample's mode self-placement value was 1, and the average value 1.3. No respondents located themselves at points further to the right than 5.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Results from first step: online survey

Survey data revealed a clear hierarchy of motivations behind voting for AVS, emphasizing ideological alignment and programmatic issues over personal leadership. As the figure below evidently shows, left-wing ideology and the protection of workers' rights stand out as the most relevant reasons among the options offered. As per the left-wing ideology, 61.9% of respondents considered it crucial and an additional 28.6% very relevant as a reason for voting AVS. This confirms that AVS is perceived primarily as an ideological choice, appealing to voters seeking a consistent and coherent left-wing alternative. The qualitative analysis supports this, showing that many voters view AVS as the only authentic left-wing option, emphasizing its radicality and alignment with their political values.

Programmatic content plays a rather significant role. Beyond workers' rights, climate change and Gaza emerge as rather relevant in the decision to support AVS. Climate change follows closely, with 50.3% of respondents considering it crucial, underscoring AVS's identity as an environmentally focused party. Gaza, while slightly less prominent, still holds substantial relevance, with 44.2% of respondents rating it as crucial. The distribution patterns for these three issues are remarkably similar, reflecting AVS voters' shared commitment to social justice, environmentalism, and solidarity, and international solidarity. The graph comparing these three motivations visually supports this interpretation, showing the close alignment in how voters prioritize these issues.

In contrast, the personal component is noticeably less relevant. Both the party leaders (Bonelli and Fratoianni) and the candidacy of Ilaria Salis show a reversed pattern, with most respondents rating them as either irrelevant or not so relevant.¹⁵ This suggests that AVS

⁹ One may question the adequacy of a small-N interview sample. However, in line with standard practices in qualitative research, we followed a thematic saturation logic. As shown in the benchmark study by Guest et al. (2006) even six to twelve interviews can be sufficient to identify stable, recurring themes in relatively focused populations. While our interviewees reflected a reasonable degree of variation across key socio-demographic dimensions (see Appendix A1), we acknowledge that such a small sample may not fully capture the diversity of the entire AVS electorate.

¹⁰ To ensure data protection, all participants received and signed a written consent form and notification of voluntary participation before the in-depth interview.

¹¹ In the post-electoral CISE Telescope (De Sio et al., 2025) survey, the gender distribution was 56% male and 44% female among AVS voters.

¹² Mostly Tuscany.

¹³ Mostly Lombardy.

¹⁴ It should be noted that AVS performed best in the Central Italy district (7.6%), which includes Tuscany, followed by North-West Italy (7.2%), which includes Lombardy. It performed worst in Southern Italy (5.7%) and Insular Italy (6.2%).

¹⁵ While Salis did not emerge as a primary motivation in our data, it is possible that her candidacy had an indirect effect by signaling electoral viability, as some voters may have perceived it as a factor that could increase AVS's chances of surpassing the 4% threshold. In such cases, the presence of a high-profile candidate, may have reinforced a strategic or expressive vote, even if not explicitly acknowledged by voters as decisive.

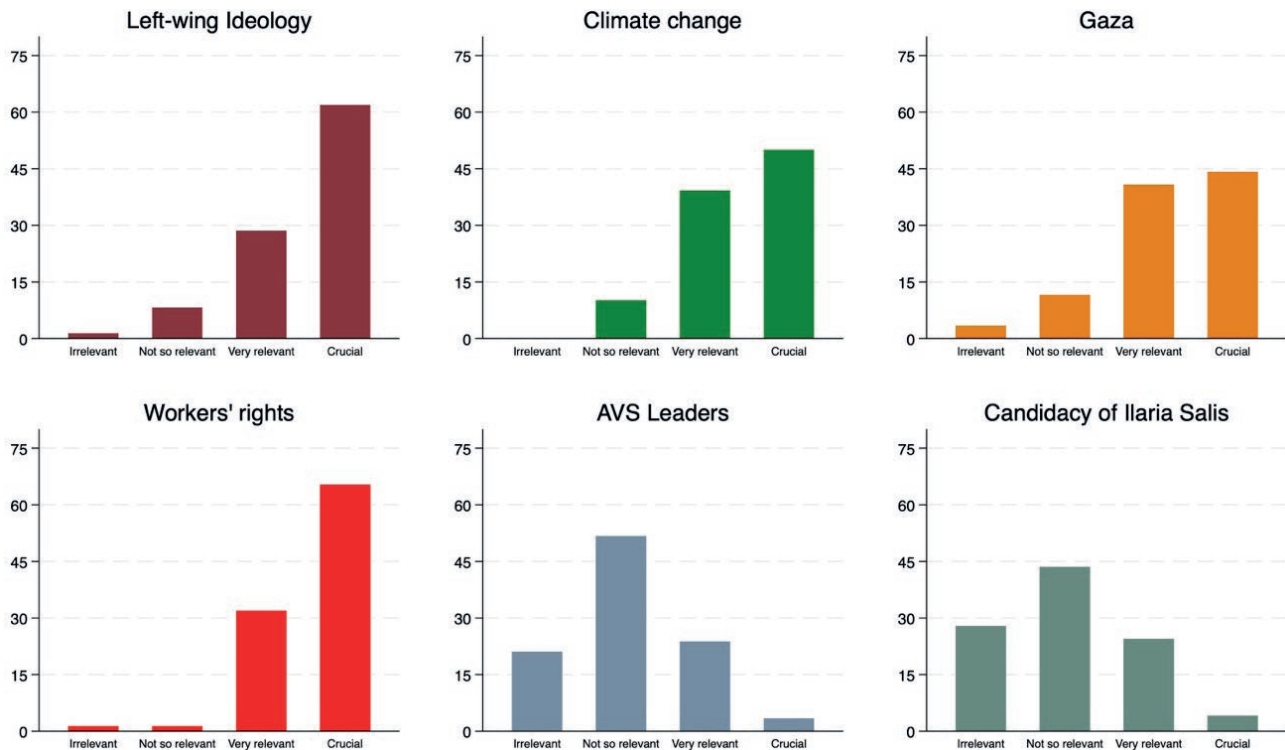


Figure 1. Reasons for voting AVS. The numbers on the y-axis express percentages. The bars display shares of respondents selecting that answer to the question “How much did the following factors influence your decision to vote for AVS in June?”.

voters are primarily motivated by ideological and programmatic considerations rather than by personal leadership. The qualitative analysis reinforces this finding, indicating that while trust and respect for candidates exist, they are linked to the candidates’ experience and alignment with the party’s values rather than their personal charisma or leadership. The graph on leadership personalities illustrates this lack of importance, supporting the interpretation that AVS voters seem to prioritize ideas over individuals.

A significant portion of respondents expressed support for AVS due to ideological alignment and shared values, particularly with left-wing ideologies, socialism, and environmentalism. This reflects a perception of AVS as embodying principles and ideals that resonate with voters’ personal beliefs. For example, respondents who made use of the open-ended text box noted that “it was the party that most aligned with my ideals”, mentioned the “shared values”, and emphasized that “their values and principles reflect mine”. Others expressed that “their political values align with mine” and appreciated the “radicality of content” and “consistency and radicality”. A common sentiment was that AVS represented “a true left-wing force, structured, coherent in choices and behaviors”.

Respondents also emphasized the importance of AVS’s programmatic content, especially its focus on environmentalism and social justice. Many were drawn to AVS’s strong emphasis on environmental issues, climate justice, and sustainability, expressing support for their “environmental commitment” and agreeing that “environment is an urgent issue and should be a priority in political agendas”. Others saw AVS as advocating for “ecology, peace, redistribution”. In addition to environmentalism, social justice and equality were pivotal for many voters, who supported AVS for its stance on “social and environmental justice”, “social justice, equality, and freedom”, and “social justice and fight against tax evasion”. The party’s anti-militaristic stance and critique of specific international organizations also resonated, with voters supporting AVS “for votes in parliament against arms”, “for the commitment to peace”, and for its “critical stance towards NATO, EU, and the US regarding the war in Ukraine”.

The identity of AVS as a genuine left-wing party, contrasted with the perceived lack of authenticity in other political options, was a decisive factor for many. Respondents emphasized that “it is the only left-wing party available”, noted the need for “genuinely left-wing political formations”, and saw AVS as “the only left-wing

party likely to surpass the electoral threshold". A sense of strategic positioning also emerged, with some voters arguing that "there was no party that reflected my views, and this one was the least distant". Several respondents identified as members or activists within AVS or its affiliated organizations, indicating a strong identification with the party's grassroots movement. They stated, "I am a member", "I am a member of the Italian Left¹⁶", and "I am an activist and their program represents my ideals".

Moreover, some respondents expressed confidence in "high-profile candidates" and said, "I believe in their programs and trust the people", while others cited trust in the leadership at the local level in their city. The party's candidate selection process was perceived positively, emphasizing a commitment to values and inclusivity. Respondents appreciated the "candidate selection and call for left-wing unity" and the way the "candidate selection combined party logic with the desire to include young candidates from activism".

For some voters, supporting AVS was a strategic choice or a calculated political decision. They explained their choice "by exclusion and possibility of 4%", and admitted it was "the least bad option". Notably, someone explicitly mentioned voting for AVS to send a signal to the PD, suggesting a strategic decision to influence political dynamics on the left side of the political spectrum.

Emotional attachment to left-wing identity and symbolic representation of political ideals also played a role in voting choices. This was evident in statements like "I still hope for the true left", "I believe in the values of the left", and "because they stand for peace". Many voters also expressed a sense of hope and optimism about the future, seeing AVS as embodying a vision of progress and renewal. Words such as "hope", "future", and "change" were frequently mentioned, reflecting a desire for transformative political action and a better society. This emotional and symbolic attachment highlights how AVS represents not only a political choice but also an aspirational vision for many of its supporters.

The qualitative analysis of survey data suggests that the primary motivations for voting AVS revolve around ideological alignment, particularly with environmentalism, social justice, and left-wing values. AVS is seen as the only genuine left-wing option by many, contrasting with other political options. The party's coherence, radical stance, and trust in candidates further bolster its appeal. Several respondents were party members; some voters made a strategic choice or aimed to send a political signal to PD, showing a nuanced political calculus.

¹⁶ It should be reminded, as stated in previous sections, that AVS is not a party per se and, as such, citizens cannot be members of AVS but rather members of either Italian Left or the Greens.

Emotional identification with leftist ideals and symbolic representation was also recurrent.

5.2 Results from second step: in-depth interviews

While survey data provided an initial indication of which factors mattered most, qualitative interviews allowed us to better explore the underlying reasoning behind vote choice and identify additional dimensions that could not emerge from standardized and more limited survey items.

The analysis of the interviews confirmed the combination of ideological commitment and issue-based considerations. While respondents differed in the specific concerns they prioritized, their pathways to AVS show a high degree of internal consistency. AVS was rarely perceived as a first-choice party in absolute terms but rather as the only viable option within the existing political landscape.¹⁷ A recurring theme across the interviews was the perception that AVS remained the only political force in Italy that still adhered to leftist principles without compromise. For most, voting for AVS was not necessarily an enthusiastic endorsement of its leadership or electoral prospects, but rather a deliberate decision to support the last remaining expression of a genuine left-wing alternative. We made sure the interviewees elaborated on this point in the conversations, and in doing so they mainly focused on the PD and the M5S. The PD was widely rejected, with respondents arguing that it had progressively abandoned any meaningful connection to the left, becoming "unelectable" (Int.6). Some had initially placed hope in Elly Schlein's leadership, but ultimately felt that she had been unable to shift the party toward a more progressive stance. Even among those who had participated in the PD primaries, the perception was that the party's internal contradictions prevented it from offering a clear ideological direction, making it an unsuitable option for voters looking for coherence in left-wing politics.

A similar reasoning applied to the M5S, which respondents overwhelmingly dismissed as excessively ideologically flexible. The volatility of M5S's leadership and its frequent shifts in policy positions led to a general lack of trust in the party. Some respondents acknowledged that M5S had, at times, aligned itself with progressive positions in line with theirs, but argued that it was unreliable and unpredictable, making it an unviable choice for those looking for long-term political consistency.

I'm afraid there's a fundamental inconsistency, you know? They've moved from one side to the other, which makes

¹⁷ One of the interviewees referred to it as a "residual choice" (Int.6).

it hard to trust. Even if they now claim to take firm positions that align more with where you stand, you still wonder: okay, but how much can I really trust that this is how it will stay and that it won't change again tomorrow? (Int.2)

It's like, with the M5S, which one? Which Movement? Which people? Which historical phase? (Int.6)

It's also difficult for me to even have a dialogue with someone like Conte, who goes around saying "we're not leftist, we're progressive", like he said the last time. (Int.7)

In other words, the PD was rejected due to inconsistencies within the party; the M5S due to inconsistencies over time, and not being reliably left-wing. In this context, AVS was seen as the only remaining political actor that still reliably held onto fundamental leftist values, even if its electoral potential remained limited compared to the PD and the M5S. Indeed, interviewees acknowledged that while they would not welcome potential party merging with either one of them, they would see it strategically useful to consider the possibility of the progressive camp (the so-called "*campo largo*"), including both Schlein and Conte's political formations. While some were more skeptical of the former and others of the latter due to the concerns described above, there was unanimity in clarifying that the inclusion of Carlo Calenda's Action or, even more adamantly, Matteo Renzi's Italy Alive would be a no go:

I would not want Renzi in the way. (...) everyone knows he's a schemer, always looking out for himself... he's never really been capable of anything other than dismantling things. But when it came to actually putting things together, he was never a particularly constructive person. (Int.4)

I would really struggle to accept Calenda, but let's see on what terms. I mean, I think Calenda himself would understandably struggle to be with us. For example, on nuclear energy, we have very different positions. Calenda is a neo-liberal. (...) Being liberal, that I can deal with. The real no, the absolute veto, is Renzi. (Int.7)

Beyond ideological positioning, several policy concerns emerged as decisive factors in voters' choice. The number one first key issue was the protection of labor rights and redistribution of wealth. The discussion on economic justice, fair wages, and housing affordability was perceived as lacking in the programs of mainstream parties, whereas AVS was seen as more radical and direct in its commitment to these matters. Secondly, but not unrelatedly, the interviewees viewed AVS as the only party that took the climate crisis seriously, rather than treating it as a secondary or symbolic issue. Other parties were perceived as addressing environmental matters in a superficial way, often framing them as a secondary

concern rather than an existential challenge requiring immediate action, or even denied the existence of climate change:

I prefer who anyways has the idea that that's a problem and therefore it must be faced, rather than those who want to deny. I mean, here we have denialists for everything. There were denialists of Covid, (...) and so we have denialists of climate change. (Int.3)

Environmental protection was never framed as the single most important issue, but rather as an essential component of an broader vision of society where no one is left behind, and linked to the interest in welfare policies and redistribution mentioned above.

I actually voted for AVS more because of their economic policies. But, of course, the environmental component was also very present. However, I don't see it as separate from the issue of social rights and redistribution, because it's also connected to jobs in the green transition and so on. (Int.6)

As such, it was seen as an essential programmatic element that could never be dropped by the Left even in the scenario in which the Greens and the Left were to split in the future. Furthermore, it was interesting to notice how, from the interviews where the topic was brought up, it did not emerge a clear stance on the recent wave of climate protests by Last Generation targeting artwork. Some interviewers said they shared the goal but not the means, others were surprised by how much people would care about art in the face of climate change. These divergences are consistent with the debates that several interviewees reported they had with people close to them as well as with the position reported by one of the interviewees who mentioned they were at first critical of these protests, but after debating over the issue with people with different views, they came to not only understand them, but also support them.

Moreover, foreign policy considerations, particularly regarding the situation in Gaza, also emerged as having an important role. It emerged that AVS was the only Italian party to use the word genocide in their program, distinguishing it from other that had either remained silent or had adopted different terminology. From the interviews it emerged how this issue is an example of the consistency of the party with its values over time, as some recalled past instances of pro-Palestinian solidarity activism in which the parties that now form AVS had been actively involved.

There has always been quite a strong focus from their side on that. I remember the last pro-Palestine demonstration I attended (...) and they were there. You didn't really

see many parties or party representatives, you know, but there were some of theirs. They have always been there. I remember the demonstrations; I remember the Greens when we were in high school. It was always them (...). That's consistency. And clearly that for people like me, that pays you back, because it's difficult to be consistent. (Int.1)

In this sense, AVS's foreign policy stance was perceived not as an opportunistic reaction to current events but as a continuation of its broader political identity, which made its position more credible than that of other parties, on an issue that for some emerges as a non-negotiable:

...I wouldn't want a government that, as a response to a serious act, then carries out massacres like what's happening in Palestine. This, luckily, I feel like I can find here. If I didn't find it anymore, I'd say goodbye to Fratoianni. If Fratoianni were to say tomorrow that bombing Gaza is justified... if he were to say that, I couldn't be on that side anymore. (Int.3)

While not among the most discussed issues, immigration was raised by some, either as something AVS seems to care about, hence strengthening the choice to vote for them, or an issue on which other parties or leaders had not done enough in the past, making it too difficult to vote for them now.

Consistently with the findings from the survey, interviews confirmed that candidates and leaders were not key reasons for supporting AVS. Some respondents pointed to specific candidates – particularly Mimmo Lucano, the former mayor of Riace known for his pro-migrant policies – as reinforcing their choice. However, given that Lucano was not on the ballot in all regions, his impact was largely symbolic rather than directly influential. Some mentioned Ilaria Salis, Ignazio Marino (former mayor of Rome), as well as less popular names which were nevertheless more known and appreciated at the local level. In any case, while some viewed some of those more popular candidacies positively, some were also skeptical about them, and the interviewees generally indicated that their decision to vote for AVS was already made before the candidacies were announced. While AVS voters acknowledged that there might have been a candidate-effect for some acquaintances of theirs, who might have been persuaded to vote for AVS because of some of those candidacies, they declared it was not their case. Similarly, the interviewees showed various degrees of appreciation for the two leaders of AVS, Nicola Fratoianni and Angelo Bonelli, who are described as experienced politicians, reliable because consistent over time and loyal to their stances, and with concrete but

not oversimplistic agendas. Yet, the general feeling that emerged from the interviews was that the personalities did not even get close to having the same importance in the choice to vote for AVS as its values and positions. Interestingly enough, where some linked this to the widespread lack of charisma of current left wing leaders, others emphasized the asset of having in AVS the maintenance of “bottom-up processes” (Int.7) and a more collectively oriented leadership style within an increasingly personalized party system.

I'm definitely the kind of voter who didn't vote for the left because of the people – I mean, not because of the candidates, not because of the leaders. (...) When Berlusconi died, I thought: is there anyone on the left who could fill a square for their funeral? I couldn't think of a single name. (Int.6)

Let's say that, from my point of view, it's important to have this idea that the party is something collective, something shared, that belongs to everyone, and that when we are there, we feel at home. Now, of course, that doesn't mean that if there's a strong leader, we can't stand them – let's be honest, that can be useful. I mean, if you've had Togliatti, Berlinguer, all those figures... But there's a way of interpreting politics – I'm speaking about Fratoianni now, whom I know better – a way of interpreting politics where, even though he's clearly the face of the party, since he's our secretary, that doesn't speak of 'me', but of 'us'. And that's important. Of course, these things have to go hand in hand. Actually, I think that important leaderships, like Berlinguer's, were not just the result of personal qualities – though obviously the fact that he was a serious person mattered – but rather the outcome of a collective effort. He represented something much bigger than himself. The two things can coexist. What doesn't work today, though, is this total fixation on the 'I' and nothing else, on the person and nothing else. And that's a situation I don't feel comfortable in. (Int.5)

Voting for AVS was about more than policies or candidates – it was an act of political identity. Several interviewees framed their vote as a means of keeping left-wing politics visible, even if AVS had limited electoral weight.

You vote for them and you know it's just twenty of you, so no, I wouldn't had much hope. What matters to me, what was more important, was consistency. Then, of course, you always hope, otherwise, you wouldn't even go vote. You hope they grow, that more people vote for them, but still (...) this is a process that requires time. (Int.1)

In this sense, vote choice was not merely a pragmatic assessment of electoral potential but rather a symbolic reaffirmation of political values, and an endorsement to an idea of society more than to single specific policy

goals. In “a system which makes you believe that if you want, you can. If you believe in it, you can” (Int.7), voting for AVS substantially emerged as an act of holding the ground on welfare policies for a more equal society, both domestically and globally.

6. CONCLUSION

The 2024 EP elections resulted in a surprising rise in support for the AVS in Italy – even considering the growing abstention rates recorded in the country. While AVS had not previously surpassed the electoral threshold required for European representation, its ability to do so in 2024 suggests a shift in voter preferences that deserves attention. This led us to address an important question: What led people to support AVS in 2024? This study thus examined the motivations behind AVS’s support, combining survey data and qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influenced AVS voting. While our sampling strategy likely attracted respondents with higher-than-average political interest and ideological commitment, thus limiting the statistical generalizability of our findings, the study nevertheless provides meaningful insights into the motivations that may have led individuals to vote for AVS.

The findings suggest that support for AVS was primarily driven by the perception of AVS as the only remaining party consistently adhering to left-wing principles, distinguishing it from the PD and the M5S, both of which were frequently criticized for ideological ambiguity or strategic shifts over time. Workers’ rights, environmental sustainability, and international solidarity emerged as additional factors, with AVS being regarded as the most credible advocate for these causes. Moreover, while personal leadership played a limited role in shaping voter preferences, certain candidates – such as Ilaria Salis and Mimmo Lucano – along with the experience and consistency of AVS leaders Nicola Fratoianni and Angelo Bonelli, reinforced existing political leanings rather than serving as primary motivations for support. Therefore, AVS’s electoral success cannot be solely attributed to the strategic selection of well-known candidates. Finally, considerations regarding AVS’s electoral limitations did not influence respondent’ vote choices, as they viewed their support for the party as a meaningful and necessary expression of their leftist identity and values. Their decision was not merely strategic but rather a way to uphold a vision of society that, in their view, risked being extinguished.

Although AVS remains a minor player in Italian politics, its performance in these elections suggests an

opening for more radical left-wing positions within the Italian party system. Whether this momentum can be sustained in future national elections will depend on AVS’s ability to consolidate its support base and attract new voters, particularly those encouraged by its recent electoral gains.

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