



Understanding electoral politics in contemporary Italy: policy preferences, personalisation, partisanship and the economy

Paolo Bellucci, Diego Garzia & Michael S. Lewis-Beck

To cite this article: Paolo Bellucci, Diego Garzia & Michael S. Lewis-Beck (2017) Understanding electoral politics in contemporary Italy: policy preferences, personalisation, partisanship and the economy, Contemporary Italian Politics, 9:1, 3-7, DOI: [10.1080/23248823.2017.1284480](https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2017.1284480)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2017.1284480>



Published online: 03 Mar 2017.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 242



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 2 [View citing articles](#)

Understanding electoral politics in contemporary Italy: policy preferences, personalisation, partisanship and the economy

Paolo Bellucci ^a, Diego Garzia^b and Michael S. Lewis-Beck^c

^aDepartment of Social, Political and Cognitive Sciences, University of Siena, Siena, Italy; ^bDepartment of Political Science, University of Lucerne, Lucerne, Switzerland; ^cDepartment of Political Science, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA, USA

ABSTRACT

This introductory essay to the Special Issue presents the articles which from various perspectives – representation, personalisation, partisanship and accountability – analyse the changing relationship between parties and voters in contemporary Italian politics. This collection shows that the Italian party system appears responsive to people's demands and that public opinion holds governments accountable, and responsible for their actions. On the other hand, substantive changes have emerged with respect to the nature of partisanship, its supposed unique connection to a single party, and its determinants. Finally, as party leaders appear increasingly crucial for voter attitudes and choice, in making financial contributions, external donors pay more attention to individual politicians at the expense of their parties.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 March 2016
Accepted 29 September 2016

KEYWORDS

Italian politics;
representation;
personalisation;
partisanship; economic
accountability

This special issue aims to reassess our understanding of political behaviour in Italian elections in the light of the massive changes that the Italian party system has recently undergone in the context of the external shock provided by the 2008–13 Great Recession. A long-term dis-anchoring of voters from parties, ignited by political and economic turmoil, led to extreme party volatility in the 2013 election. In turn, this called into question the extent to which traditional determinants of voting still held. Partisanship has weakened, paradoxically ushering in both greater accountability and a greater distance of voters from electoral politics, as leaders' images appear to have gained political relevance. Incumbents, from the national to the municipal level, have had a hard time achieving re-election, underlining anti-establishment attitudes that cut across party supporters. Economic discontent has reinforced these negative evaluations, which have fed populist appeals by new and old political forces. What are the consequences of such developments? For sure these are not unique to Italy. However, only in Italy have they taken place alongside a dramatic change in the party system since the late 1990s. This collection of articles addresses these issues, providing insights into the changing relationship between parties and voters in contemporary Italian politics by looking at party-voter links from various perspectives.

CONTACT Paolo Bellucci  paolo.bellucci@unisi.it  Department of Social, Political and Cognitive Sciences, University of Siena, Via Mattioli 10, Siena 53100, Italy

© The Founding Editors, *Contemporary Italian Politics*

The first of these is the perspective of representation: anti-party attitudes have become increasingly widespread among the Italian public and all the available indicators point to a dis-anchored electorate, distrustful of political actors and of their capacity to provide policies attuned to people's demands (ITANES 2013). Populist rhetoric emphasises and claims that there is a growing distance between political elites and the people. The agendas of citizens, according to these readings, appear different to and distant from the agenda of the parties. Representation has therefore become strained, suggesting that democracy has failed to fulfil its promise that parties' and governments' preferences would reflect the preferences of the people. Against this gloomy backdrop, political-science research on the topic remains scant, particularly on Italy and other European polities. The paper by Bellucci and Pellegata, which addresses this issue, takes a step forward in filling this gap. Their results provide an unexpected assessment of representation in Italy, one which denies overly pessimistic readings of Italian democracy.

A second perspective is that of personalisation. Weakening party structures; the growing role of prime ministers within executives; mediatisation of political communications: these are all well-established features of contemporary democracies that have prompted researchers to debate the extent and the consequences of personalisation (McAllister 2007). Personalisation in election campaigns, especially with regard to voters' choices, has attracted research attention, although there is no consensus on the importance of party leaders as cues to voters (King, 2002; Bittner 2011; Garzia 2013). Whether voters choose the leaders of their preferred parties or choose the parties of their preferred leaders is not an easy conundrum to solve (Bellucci, Garzia, and Lewis-Beck 2015). But its solution, especially in Italy, has important consequences both for the understanding of voting behaviour and for the comprehension of parties' development (Barisione, Catellani, and Garzia 2013). The electoral successes of new and old parties – Forza Italia in 1994; the Five-star Movement in 2013; the Democratic Party in 2014 – have been associated with new leaders. Whether the new parties have been able to establish roots in society, as well as whether a new leader can reinvigorate old parties, are, and will be, debatable. Is the role of leaders volatile, for both parties and the electorate? Or is it rather a strategic resource for party restructuring and voter choice? The contribution by Diego Garzia squarely addresses the relationship between leaders' images and partisanship, analysing their reciprocal dependence and providing a methodologically thoughtful assessment of the importance of leaders as cues to voters' allegiance to parties.

A neglected dimension of personalisation – taken up in the paper by Chiara Fiorelli – is political financing. To the extent that leaders and candidates take centre stage in politics, are we likewise seeing a personalisation of political financing at the expense of parties? As individual politicians gain media attention, it seems likely that private external donors may choose them as preferred targets of financing, in order to elicit their attention to policy issues or simply to gain access to the political arena. This fundamental concern for democratic politics has not received much attention in Europe. Due to the prevalence, outside the US, of the public funding of political parties, we know little about the resources directly available to individual candidates, the origins of such contributions, or their impact on policy making. Such lack of knowledge appears a special worry in Italy, where a new law enacted in 2014 – one sustained by widespread anti-party sentiment – will move party financing from state to private sources starting in 2017. Fiorelli's research sheds light on this previously uncharted territory.

Since leaders' personalities may foster the development of people's partisanship, the nature of partisanship as a political allegiance is called into question, especially in multiparty systems like Italy's where people may have multiple allegiances to different parties (Pappi 1996). Once a kind of 'social identity' embedded in cleavage-based parties, partisanship may now be conceived as an attitude, a kind of political predisposition open to adjustment and modification (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009). De Sio and Paparo's contribution analyses the possibility of multiple partisan allegiances in Italy and tests the usefulness of a novel measure of partisanship based on the propensity to vote (PTV) gap – i.e., the gap in PTV scores between the first- and the second-placed party – as a potential transatlantic measure for comparative studies of partisanship (Paparo, De Sio, and Brady 2015). They do so via a comparison with the traditional measure of 'closeness to party' routinely employed in European election studies, showing the PTV gap to be a productive tool for comparative research.

The last perspective explored in this special issue is that of economic voting as an accountability mechanism. Talving and Braghiroli provide a comparative assessment of the importance of economic evaluations for voters in Italy across the Great Recession crisis. They explore the electoral consequences of the economic shock by observing the stability of economic effects over time, contrasting Italy with other Southern European countries that in recent years have witnessed similar economic and political fluctuations (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2012). Retrospective evaluations are correctly assumed to exert an accountability check on governments, with blame sustaining government alternation. However, the spread and severity of the crisis may paradoxically have undermined such a process of accountability, since the electorate was overwhelmingly negative in their economic evaluations and, further, the EU rather than the national government may have been identified as the culprit. Findings suggest such a constraining effect to have occurred, although the impact of retrospective evaluations has clearly remained.

The four perspectives explored in this special issue thus tap key dimensions of electoral politics in Italy (and elsewhere): representation, personalisation, partisanship and accountability. We do not wish to spoil the readers' pleasure by revealing here the details of the research findings reported in this special issue of *Contemporary Italian Politics*. We shall thus merely outline them, highlighting the observed continuities and changes in Italian electoral politics. Overall, amid a continuous transformation of the Italian political system, we have uncovered a few strengths (and continuities) which we deem important and reassuring. First of all, and in contrast with populist readings, the Italian party system appears responsive to people's demands. Public opinion moves over time between left and right positions. Governments, and to a lesser extent parties, adapt their preferences to a changing public opinion. This was true during the so-called First Republic, and it appears true to an even greater extent in the post-1994 political system. Public opinion also acts as a thermostat, according to a 'balancing public' model, i.e., it demands 'more' or 'less' policy activity in response to different governments' policy outputs. All in all, a working democracy is sustained by iterative interactions between public opinion and political representatives. Second, public opinion also holds governments accountable, and responsible for their actions. Over time it is shown that economic circumstances have conditioned incumbent support, even during the Great Recession when Italian voters placed less blame for economic

conditions on national governments than before. This was, however, compensated by increased prospective voting, rewarding Renzi's executive when associated with the belief that his policies would bring about economic improvements.

On the other hand, this special issue also underlines substantive changes with respect to the nature of partisanship, its supposed unique connection to a single party, and its determinants. The (quasi) natural experiment carried out on the occasion of the investiture of two new leaders in 2013 shows clearly that leaders do shape partisanship at the expense of parties. Exploring the role of leadership and party-denomination change on individuals' feelings of closeness to parties reveals that leader evaluations are at the core of these feelings. Finally, as party leaders appear increasingly crucial for voter attitudes and choice, external donors have been hypothesised to pay more attention to individual politicians at the expense of their parties. This 'personalisation-of-financing' hypothesis has indeed received support, a likely harbinger of further changes to come.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Paolo Bellucci is professor of Political Science at the University of Siena. His research interests are in comparative political behaviour and Italian politics. He is the president of ITANES- Italian National Election Studies

Diego Garzia is Senior Research Fellow at the University of Lucerne. His current research project "Personalization of Politics between Television and the Internet", funded by an AMBIZIONE Grant of the Swiss National Science Foundation, investigates the extent to which political leaders have come to affect voters' choices as well as the role played by old and new media in driving this development across time. He is a member of the Scientific Council of the Italian National Election Study (ITANES) and he is a co-convenor of the ECPR Research Network on Voting Advice Applications.

Michael S. Lewis-Beck is F. Wendell Miller Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Iowa. His interests are comparative elections, election forecasting, political economy, and quantitative methodology. Professor Lewis-Beck has authored or co-authored over 270 articles and books, including *Economics and Elections*, *The American Voter Revisited*, *French Presidential Elections*, *Forecasting Elections*, *The Austrian Voter* and *Applied Regression*. He has served as Editor of the *American Journal of Political Science* and of the Sage QASS series (the green monographs) in quantitative methods. Currently he is Associate Editor of the *International Journal of Forecasting* and of *French Politics*. In addition to his position at Iowa, he has held various positions abroad including, more recently, Paul Lazarsfeld University Professor at the University of Vienna; Visiting Professor at the Centre for Citizenship and Democracy, University of Leuven (KU Leuven), Belgium; Visiting Professor at LUISS University, Rome; Visiting Senior Scholar, Political Science, University of Aarhus, Denmark.

ORCID

Paolo Bellucci  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4825-4520>

References

- Barisione, M., P. Catellani, and D. Garzia. 2013. *Alla Ricerca Di Un Leader*, 147–157. In ITANES (Ed.) *Voto amaro. Disincanto e crisi economica nelle elezioni del. Bologna, Il Mulino*
- Bartle, J., and P. Bellucci, eds. 2009. *Political Parties and Partisanship: Social Identity and Individual Attitudes*. Vol. 57. Routledge.
- Bellucci, P., D. Garzia, and M. S. Lewis-Beck. 2015. “Issues and Leaders as Vote Determinants: The Case of Italy.” *Party Politics* 21 (2): 272–283. doi:10.1177/1354068812472583.
- Bittner, A. 2011. *Platform or Personality? the Role of Party Leaders in Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Garzia, D. 2013. “The Rise of Party/Leader Identification in Western Europe.” *Political Research Quarterly* 66 (3): 533–544. doi:10.1177/1065912912463122.
- ITANES. 2013. *Voto Amaro*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- King, A., ed. 2002. *Leaders’ Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis-Beck, M. S., and R. Nadeau. 2012. “PIGS or Not? Economic Voting in Southern Europe.” *Electoral Studies* 31 (3): 472–477. doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2012.02.008.
- McAllister, I. 2007. “The Personalization Of Politics.” In *The Oxford Handbook Of Political Behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Paparo, A., L. De Sio, and D. Brady. (2015). “Propensities to Vote: Investigating the Properties of a New Measurement for Partisanship”. Paper presented at the MPSA Annual Conference, Chicago, April 16.
- Pappi, F. U. 1996. “Political Behavior: Reasoning Voters and Multi-Party Systems.” In *A New Handbook of Political Science*, edited by H.-D. Klingemann, 255–275. Oxford: Oxford University Press.