

Populist wind and electoral behaviour. The case of the Italian constitutional referendum

Abstract: *The Italian referendum was followed closely everywhere in Europe (and elsewhere) and the fear of a potential Italian exit from Europe or the Eurozone was palpable. Yet, this scenario was and is unlikely. The fear of political instability of the government in case of a referendum rejection, and the potential risk for the stability of financial markets, which turned out to be highly overestimated, frightened the rest of the world much more than Italy itself.*

When it became known that the result of the polls was in favor of NO, national and international media began to speak of populist result. The arguments of this paper attempt to provide an analytical framework slightly more complex than this simplistic definition while recognizing that the so-called populist component has played a significant role.

Keywords: *populism, Italy, electoral behaviour, constitutional referendum.*

1. The populist wind

In recent years populist parties for the first time conquer large slices of the electorate, standing for the leadership of some of the major Western countries. Echoing to the spirit of the time, they leverage on the crisis of representation and on important structural changes in society.

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These parties have long been regarded as an insidious remnant of the past, as a spy of the hidden malaise within the established democracies. But. With the complicity of the economic and political crisis, these parties are now gaining ground in several European countries, reaching unexpected electoral results until a

few years ago. For incumbent governments, and moderate citizens, the danger of their affirmation, at the moment not realized, however, remains in ambush.

After the terrorist attack in Paris in November 2015, judged as the most serious attack suffered by the country since World War II, only the mechanism of double round could stop the advance of the ultra-nationalist National Front of Marine Le Pen's party in elections regional. At the recent Austrian presidential elections only a handful of votes have distanced the candidate of the extreme right Norbert Hofer from the conquest of the office on the ballot, after reporting a distinct advantage in the first round. In England, in the European elections of 2013, the Independence Party led by Nigel Farage gets international visibility for having won a quarter of the vote, presenting an anti-European

program. Its activists have been among the main supporters of the yes to the referendum on the exit of Britain from the European Union, to which British citizens gave positive response. In East Central Europe far-right parties have a large following: you can take the example of the Jobbik party in Hungary, whose leader Gábor Vona was a candidate for the premiership and has exceeded the 20% of the votes in the last parliamentary elections.

All this happens while in the US Donald Trump has won the American presidency setting its election campaign on populist and ultra-conservative positions. These are leaders who offer a point of reference for some Italian parties, which by the League of Matteo Salvini to the 5 Star Movement of Beppe Grillo fit well in the parterre of international radical populist parties. Italy, France, England, many countries and territories united by the revival of the populist radical right, pointing to the heart of democratic systems through the way of the ballot boxes.

If in the nineties these political formations seemed destined to consolidate the electoral and organizational level, after they have been one of the most dynamic and disruptive phenomena in European political systems. Forces that in the past reached electoral successes only to limited extent, and rather episodic, have occupied important spaces left by traditional formations.

As confirmed by one of the authors of a number of important texts on populism, we passed from a “normal pathology” of contemporary democracies to ascertain a “pathological normality” (Mudde, 2007). It is a scenario in which parties that are placed ideologically outside the classical canons of liberal democracy, and who they oppose it openly, become crucial actors in it. Especially since, in some cases, populist parties, especially the right, at both national and local level, are already participating in power, presenting a completely new and open to analysis framework (Taggart; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). They are also a “phenomenon largely new and *sui generis*”. When maintaining links with the old ideologies, they, rather than anchoring to the only nostalgia for the past, derive momentum from new issues and claims. They, therefore, constitute a true “family of parties”, with shared behaviour, such as national pride, the need for security, the hostility toward immigrants, the opposition to the European Union, the radical critique of the forms and actors of democratic politics. Therefore relate to the spirit of the time (Mudde, 2004), whose analytical constituency appeared as “define the indefinable”, for its semantic range and by the number of experiences that relate to it. But that is precisely why it is considered as one of the categories likely to capture the contemporary *zeitgeist*.

The radical right populist parties can be understood starting from an ideology that divides society into two distinct groups, almost Manichean: the “people of the pure” and the corrupt, raising a barrier between “us” and “the others”. Politics becomes the means to give voice and action to the general will of the first people, without any kind of compromise. For populism, this attitude, in stark contrast to the theory and practice of liberal democracy, is tinged with even more gloomy colours, since the notion of people is charged with nationalist meanings.

There is a common background to the exploit of radical populism in Europe. The word that most of all accompany their development is known to all scholars of the field and is called “crisis”. First crisis of the democratic state that has been able to secure for decades an effective exchange with the general public consensus in place of collective goods. With the so-called democratic compromise, representative democracy confirmed its legitimacy through a system that guaranteed economic development, employment, and social security protection. It promised achievements which, however, have involved an ever wider audience, resulting in a crescendo of expectations from citizens: at the beginning defence and public order, then education, social security, welfare.

The democratic pact that lasted for decades, and has made the fortune, especially in Italy, of partitocratic regimes, today has lost its driving force and it seems increasingly unsustainable, especially in the declining stages of economic development. In this way, to get up is the wind of discontent on the part of voters, easy recall of those political forces who ask to restore the centrality of the people, against its “enemies”: the so-called “caste”, Europe, immigrants but the target from time to time adopted is not as important as, instead, the need to protest.

As an alternative, citizens go to swell the vote of no party rows, which election by election gradually increase in size. Especially since now, the nation state is in trouble not only for the maintenance of the promise of prosperity, but also with respect to the functional nucleus around which it was born: the guarantee of security for the citizens. Since the collapse of the Twin Towers till the Bataclan, the Western citizen sense of vulnerability produces attitudes of closure, easily converted by populist forces in the attack on the other and the stranger.

A second boost to the expansion of populism comes from the structural change of party systems. The party systems of Western democracies have articulated for centuries around large fractures that crossed Western societies, the clash between employers and workers, the tension between church and state. All this resulted in a considerable stability, so that the main cleavages of twentieth-century politics dated back to historical macro-processes of the formation of modern States and industrialization. However, in our day, the loss of relevance of the traditional fault lines of political conflict has brought the party systems to wobble.

Furthermore, it should be added that considerably changes also the second important characteristic of party systems: its dynamic, that is to say the mutual relationships between its components. The left-right axis is less salient, so that leaders and parties are looking for a cross-party consensus that cuts across traditional political affiliations. Not by chance that political marketing orients election campaigns for all levels of government, with a very close approach to the economic theory of democracy put up by Anthony Downs (1957) for the United States in the last century, and now also perfectly applicable to the Old continent.

The crisis of traditional party systems thus opens a window of opportunity for forces that mobilize the electorate on new fronts of political and social division, such as the conflict between the people and the “Palace”, for which, according to the populists, the world of politics fits, without great distinctions, within the confines of corruption or malfeasance.

The new populisms are fed also by another form of crisis, which is expressed this time from the side of the political demand. With the recent transformation of the social structure, in fact, the electorate seemed increasingly unable to express forms of lasting aggregation. Not by chance are the leaders, rather than parties, to attract the consent of an electorate increasingly internally divided, we could say basically atomized. The only ones able to develop a new sense of identification that lends itself to be a functional replacement for the old spirit of party allegiance. Leaders no longer, as in the past, bearers of a mission, but coagulating factor of a mass people, on the basis of an effective mix of image and charisma.

Compared to this changed environment populist parties are to enjoy certain competitive advantages, they are putting to good use. They, on the basis of an organization already customized to the history and cultural setting, manage to impose strong themes, quick setting on an electorate that has lost its main collective references. With words and simple communication modules, able to speak to the man of the street and to stimulate the emotions. They also may offer to the mass ideas of “people” to which reconnect, often a people nation, as an ideal community built by history, geography and / or blood.

As seen, the strengthening of these parties comes from the transformations, we could say structural, of society and, therefore, of the policy that reflects it. Furthermore, for the first time, they are custodians of large electoral support, in many cases, with a double-digit. As democracy relies voters for choosing the rulers, these two factors are not sufficient to ensure the legitimacy of a political force. The populist parties show positions and viewpoints that contrast with the acquisitions of liberal democracy.

To be clearer, they are often irremediably unconstitutional. Both in relation to the procedures of democracy, which often despise, and sometimes trample, complaining of excessive slowness in electoral institutional mechanisms; and in terms of political content, because their attack to those who do share the same “heartland”, the place where according to the populist imagination lies the virtuous and unified people (Taggard, 2000), calls into question the validity of the rights expressed in the constitutions. For some there is no doubt that academics and commentators have prematurely celebrated the universal victory of democracy (Taggard; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). Surely populist parties threaten democracy that most of all shows yet its inherent fragility, i.e. European democracy, even late in consolidating the processes of representation and participation of citizens. To it has inflicted a heavy blow the victory of yes in the referendum on British Brexit, probably leading to a spiral of recession and perhaps to a domino effect in other countries.

It is curious to note the novelty of far-right populist parties in a continent where, less than a century ago, there was the most important authoritarian involution that history has ever known. The new right are in fact born in a very different political landscape than in the past. Leverage the emotional and often aggressive drives of a confused electorate, which is experiencing unprecedented challenges such as globalization and international terrorism.

2. Italy: a pluripopulist Country

According to some observers, populism found its “richest testing ground”, its “paradise” in Italy in the late 1990s (Zanatta, 2002). As Guy Hermet wrote, Italy “has transformed itself into the site *par excellence* of populism’s triumph over the classical parties” (Hermet, 2001).

Italy was perhaps the first to experience the rise of this type of movement that we now see in practically all democracies. We can quote four examples.

At the end of the 80’s and at the beginning of the 90’s the Northern League deployed the regionalist populism of the well to do that became soundly anchored in the richest part of the peninsula, enjoying a broad popular base (workers, craftsmen, traders and small business owners). The Northern League criticised Rome the Thief, vilified the entire political class, denounced immigrants with rare violence and, after having declared themselves pro-European, they quickly criticised the European Union. The founder, Umberto Bossi was a populist platform, who spoke crudely and rudely, his behaviour broke from traditional practices in politics, as he systematically called the people to oppose the elites. The Northern League has changed its political direction and it is now less regionalist and is trying to establish itself across the rest of the country, but its leader Matteo Salvini is a populist all the same.

As of 1994, Silvio Berlusconi invented another form of populism even though Berlusconi, which was Italy’s obsession for two decades, cannot be reduced to this only. Silvio Berlusconi was three times the President of the Council and he revolutionised communication by using his media and television group. He represented another type of populist leader, that

of the businessman who throws himself into politics pretending to embody the “new man” in contrast to the “system”, as he multiplied his contradictory promises, attacking his enemies unrelentingly (the communists and the judges) and announcing a total break from the past. In brief a forerunner to Donald Trump, The Five Stars Movement (M5S) illustrates many singular features. Its founder, Beppe Grillo, has absolute authority, and yet at the same time M5S practices a type of participative democracy via the social networks. It associates traditional left-wing proposals with post-modern left-wing themes (environment) with extreme right-wing positions, notably regarding migrants. It also attracts left and right-wing voters, as well as abstentionists. Firmly established across Italy as a whole, it attracts many young people, and the M5S remains high terms of voting intentions in spite of the problems it is encountering in Rome (where it is in charge of the town hall) for example, or because of some scandals that are now starting to emerge.

Finally, populism is contaminating the government parties in a way too, notably Matteo Renzi, who played this tune in a bid to try to provide people with a taste for politics again: hence his sometimes sweeping statements, his provocations, his wish to stand apart from the usual political classes, his bid to shake up traditional political practice, his body language and the way he dresses. This leads us to the question what kind of change and innovation Renzi was actually proposing and representing.

To start with his labour market reform, the so-called Jobs Act: here Renzi was able to do what even right wing governments were unable to achieve: the abolition of the right of new workers to be reintegrated in case of unfair firing (the so called Art. 18 of Statuto dei Lavoratori). At the same time, a system of fiscal incentives was established in order to encourage firms to hire new workers. However, it turned out that many firms were actually converting old temporary works into new ‘permanent’ jobs in order to get the incentives, with the result that the net effect on employment growth was rather insignificant. This government with the liberalization of the voucher payment system introduced a further deregulation in the labour market. Initially created to regulate seasonal jobs and to fight the black labour market, vouchers are now massively used for a wide range of jobs and have significantly increased labour precarization.

Another milestone for Renzi’s government was the school reform, strongly contested by trade unions, teachers and students. Indeed, the so called “Buona Scuola” reform, is now producing its effects in terms of chaotic misallocation of teachers across schools all over the country and obscure models of ‘dual education’, where the alternation of study and job experience for high school students has been introduced without the definition of the actual value of such experience. To illustrate this with an example: the Minister of Education recently signed an agreement with Mc Donald’s.

Even regarding universities and research, the government was not able to be the innovative force it pretended to be. A characteristic episode in this respect was the statement of the Minister of Labour Poletti, whose answer to researchers and PhD students asking for unemployment subsidies, that research does not constitute a job.

Consistent with this view, the guide “Why invest in Italy” on the website of the Minister of Economic Development, states that one of the advantages of investing in Italy is the presence of “hourly labour costs below the eurozone average”. What the pamphlet does not mention is that the source of this “cheap labour” is not high productivity growth or technological investment, but essentially stagnant wages.

These examples show that Renzi, the leader of the biggest left-wing party of the country, was running a government which embraces a neoliberal ideology, even if pretending to act for the wellbeing of the nation.

3. The constitutional referendum

In this context on December 4th 2016, Italians have been asked to vote on a referendum about constitutional reforms. This was the third referendum of its kind in Italy, with the other two held in 2001 and 2006. The two options presented to voters this time were related to the approval or rejection of the reform promoted by Matteo Renzi's government and his centre-left parliamentary majority. However, several Democratic Party's MPs decided not to support Renzi's position, and used the ballot as a tool to oppose their leader due to different visions of the party, the government, policies, and the reform itself. An absolute majority in both houses of parliament approved the reform earlier, but the proposed changes required a two-thirds majority in parliament in order to be implemented without a referendum according to the Italian Constitution (art. 138.3). Since this threshold was not met in parliament, the referendum was called (by the Government) by collecting the required number of voter signatures, as stated by the art. 138.2, while the opponents to the reform were not able in getting the minimum number of required signatures (500.000).

The precise language of the December 4, 2016 referendum was as follows:

"Do you approve the constitutional bill concerning the proposals to overcome perfect bicameralism, to reduce the number of members of the Parliament, to reduce the operating costs of said institutions, to abolish CNEL and to revise Title V of the 2nd part of the Constitution, which was approved by the Parliament and published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* n. 88, on April 15, 2016?"

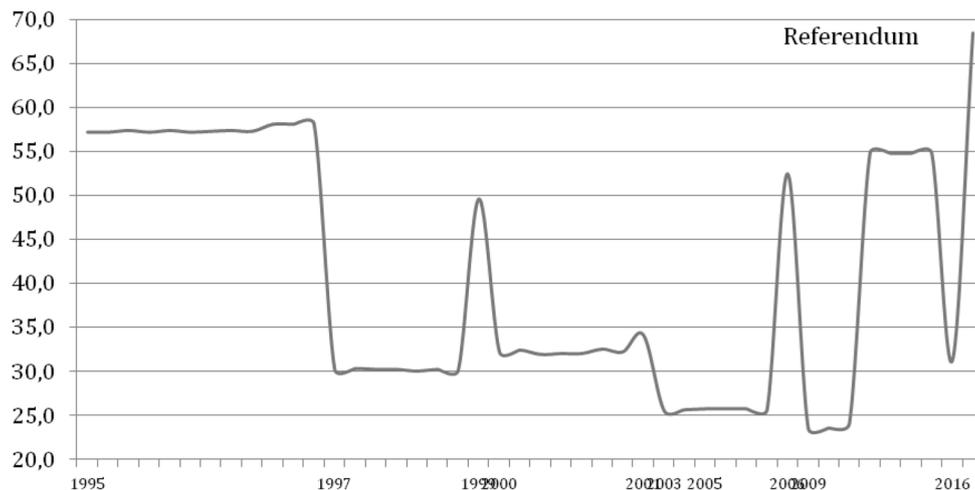
What was really at the stake beyond this question? Although the reform modified the text of 46 of the 138 articles of the Italian Constitution, the "real" changes were far fewer and included minor "revisions" as a consequence of double references (here the text of the reform). In fact, the most significant of the proposed reforms were centred on two key issues: eliminating Italy's "symmetric bicameralism", and reforming the Italian senate.

The elimination of Italy's "perfect" or better symmetrical bicameralism was central to the reform because the risk of different majorities in the two branches has over time increased due to differences in how and who selects deputies (e.g., minimum voter age is 18 years), and senators (e.g., minimum voter age is 25 years). These different electorates have divergent electoral behaviours that are further accentuated by the regional allocation of seats for the Senate versus the national allocation for the Chamber. Therefore, the "electoral geography of Italian politics" plays an important role in the allocation of parliamentary seats with increased party and voter volatility.

The collapse of the pre-1989 party system opened the door to more opinion-based electoral behaviours, together with new parties that were not linked to historical political traditions. The success of the Five Star Movement in 2013, attractive to younger voters (about 44% according to the main polling institutes), and the Northern League since 1992-1994, that is/was especially settled in northern regions, highlight the need for parties to focus on a few regions where the number of seats allocated to the Senate was bigger, as in Lombardy, Campania, or

Veneto. This was particularly true for the Senate and especially after 2005. According to those campaigning in favour of the referendum, abandoning the system in which both chambers have equal powers, not only in terms of confidence in a government but also in legislative terms, would have yielded a more efficient and effective government.

Graph 1. Turnout rate in Italian referendum.



Source: elaboration on data Istat, Electoral Statistics – Ministry of Interior.

Nonetheless, on Sunday 4th December 59 per cent of Italians rejected the constitutional reform strongly proposed by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. Considering the high turnout rate (68,5 per cent of Italian voters) the result is particularly significant. Undoubtedly the most significant phenomenon of this consultation was the broad participation of citizens in the voting, unusual for a referendum and comparable to political consultations (see Graph. 1).

Italians so have grasped the significance of this vote. From one side for the constitutional implications (the passing of a law that would have profoundly changed the functioning of the Chambers) on the other for the political implications (made absolutely clear by the personalization on the Prime Minister). Although it is tempting to argue that the referendum result was an anti-EU vote or a victory of the populists, this interpretation seems exaggerated. To understand such wide rejection of the constitutional reform, one must look at more systemic factors.

There is no doubt that P.M. Renzi was the victim of his own plot. He decided to politicise the referendum, transforming it into an unnecessary political vote on himself despite clear signals warning against such choice. This last aspect has undoubtedly favored a vote “against”. Analyzing the vote flows (see table 1) appears a very close correlation between political vote and referendum vote. With some “betrayals”: if the voters of the Democratic Party have in very large part converged on yes, was not the case for centrist voters (Nuovo Centro Destra), while on the other side it emerges also a non secondary propension for the yes among voters of Forza Italia.

Table 1. Voting flows in the constitutional referendum for voters of the main parties at the European elections (2014).

													
YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO								
69%	17%	39%	41%	20%	65%	10%	83%	9%	76%	15%	78%	9%	86%

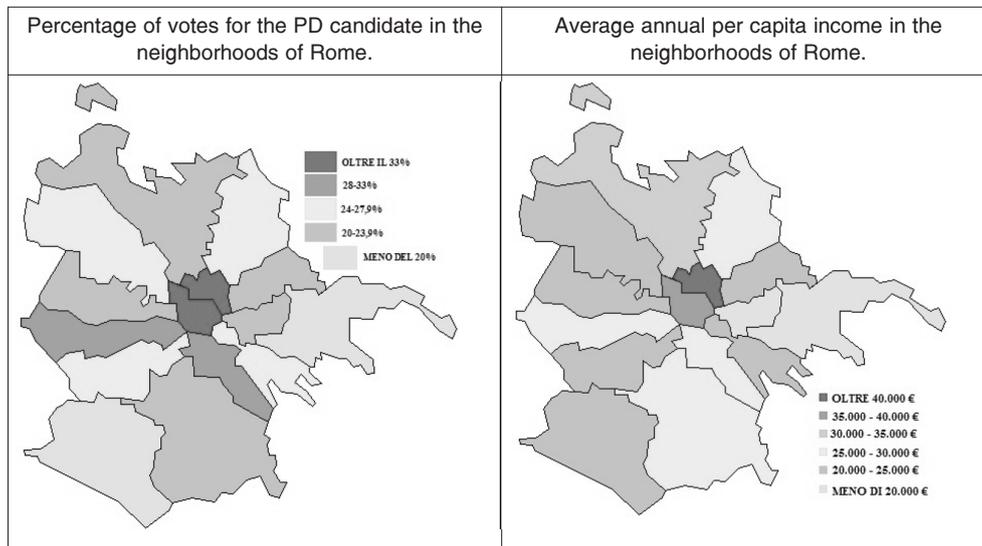
Source: Ipsos Public Affairs.

However, the situation is more complex. Renzi's defeat at the referendum is part of the legitimacy crisis plaguing traditional left wing parties in Europe. This is not to say that Renzi has no responsibility, being at the wrong time in the wrong place. On the contrary, the key point is that Renzi, his ministers, party colleagues and advisers were not (and still are not) aware of the causes and implications behind the decline of left-wing parties and rise of populist forces in Europe.

Instead of addressing issues like rising inequality or precarious work conditions, Renzi's government implemented a labour market reform (the "Jobs Act") enhancing business' capacity to fire employees and extended indiscriminately the use of vouchers, institutionalising precarious labour relations. The rhetoric used by the government in support of the constitutional reform added fuel to fire. Given the Italian economic situation, arguing that the reform would bring better health care, public transports and education, turning Italy into the Promised Land, was complete folly.

The 2013 political elections and the 2016 administrative elections showed that citizens are fed up with slogans and easy promises. In June 2016, the Five Star Movement won almost every municipality, whilst the PD lost as many cities as it could. It is emblematic in this respect the case of Rome, where the candidate of the five-star movement has defeated so striking the one of the Democratic Party. What emerged from the result of the Roman administrative vote is the paradoxical situation where the candidate of a "center-left" party wins only in the central districts characterized by high income while the rest of the city (especially the suburbs) voted overwhelmingly for the candidate of a populist party (see Map 1). This situation says a lot about the inability of the Italian left to understand the social malaise becoming its interpreter. Although that electoral disaster signalled wide dissatisfaction with the policies of the executive, party members and academics close to the Prime Minister argued that such outcome was the fault of local candidates and too timid leadership from Renzi. The prime minister followed that approach, polarised the referendum and committed political self-suicide.

Map 1. Comparison of the votes for the center-left candidate and the average disposable income in the neighborhoods of Rome. Elections for Mayor in 2016.



Source: Termometropolitico.it.

It is not a coincidence that in those areas where unemployment rate was high the No vote prevailed, whilst where unemployment was lower it was the other way around. It is not a coincidence that the No vote came also from those groups that this government decided to ignore and leave behind: the declining middle class, the unemployed, the bottom 30 per cent of income distribution. Hence, arguing that it was a populist vote to defeat Renzi is simply not correct. In particular, looking at the data in Table 2 it is possible to detect a certain degree of correlation between the effects of the economic crisis and the electoral behaviour. Although the correlation is not direct if not in the case of a few regions, it is however clear that, where the impact of the crisis and economic downturn have been higher, and then people's discontent is higher, the higher is the propension to a vote of protest that, however, not necessarily has to be labelled as populist in its intentions. Such comparisons carried out in the context of other European countries lead to similar conclusions, namely that over the last decade, economic variable is the one that most affects the behaviour of increasingly large segments of the electorate.

So what can be learned from the results of this referendum? We might see two major lessons that go beyond the Italian borders.

First, if one analyses the 1115 days of the Renzi government it becomes evident that there was no political vision behind the different policies and reforms implemented, including the constitutional reform itself. There was, at least in some policies (e.g. the Jobs Act), the intention to modernise Italy making it converge towards the Anglo-Saxon neoliberal model. One could question whether this is the most appropriate model for modernisation, and whether it is sensible for Italy to become more like England whilst being in a monetary union with Germany. But that would go beyond the scope of this contribution. The crucial point is that, despite his rhetoric of innovation and change, Renzi did not articulate and did not offer any new political project. Instead, echoing Blair's New Labour, he put in place a formidable electoral machine that, in the end, conducted him to a disastrous defeat.

Table 2. Ranking of the Italian regions according to changes in GDP (2008-2014) and voting percentages for NO in the constitutional referendum 2016.

GDP			VOTE		
Rank	Regions	GDP decrease	Rank	Vote for NO	Regions
1	MOLISE	-22,8	1	72,2	SARDEGNA
2	BASILICATA	-16,3	2	71,6	SICILIA
3	CAMPANIA	-14,4	3	68,6	CAMPANIA
4	UMBRIA	-13,7	4	67,2	PUGLIA
5	SICILIA	-13,7	5	67,0	CALABRIA
6	MARCHE	-13	6	65,9	BASILICATA
7	PUGLIA	-12,6	7	64,4	ABRUZZO
8	PIEMONTE	-12	8	63,3	LAZIO
9	SARDEGNA	-11,9	9	62,0	VENETO
10	LAZIO	-11,4	10	61,0	FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA
11	CALABRIA	-11,4	11	60,8	MOLISE
12	LIGURIA	-10,5	12	60,1	LIGURIA
13	VENETO	-8,3	13	56,8	VALLE D'AOSTA
14	FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA	-7,6	14	56,5	PIEMONTE
15	TOSCANA	-6,9	15	55,5	LOMBARDIA
16	ABRUZZO	-6,9	16	55,1	MARCHE
17	VALLE D'AOSTA	-5,4	17	51,2	UMBRIA
18	EMILIA ROMAGNA	-5,4	18	49,6	EMILIA ROMAGNA
19	LOMBARDIA	-3,8	19	47,5	TOSCANA
20	TRENTINO ALTO ADIGE	2,6	20	46,1	TRENTINO ALTO ADIGE

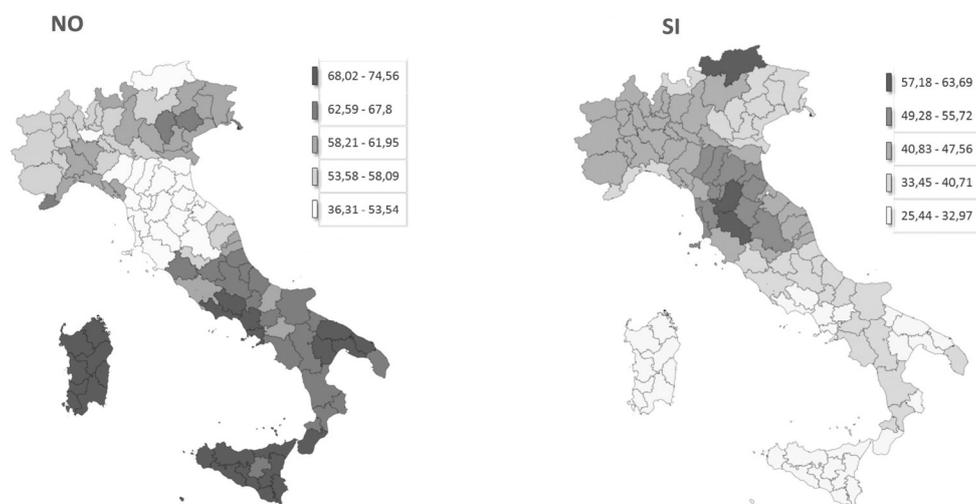
Source: elaboration on data SVIMEZ (2015) and Ministry of the Interior.

However, this is not an Italian peculiarity. The rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe is the consequence of two factors. On the one hand, it is the legacy of 30 years of unregulated capitalism characterised by high inequality, stagnating wages and public bailouts of troubling financial institutions. On the other hand, populist parties are filling a political vacuum left available by social democrats' movement towards centrist politics. Given that today's European social democracy stands for no values and has no political alternative project to offer, it comes as no surprise that social democrats' traditional constituencies vote for Alternative für Deutschland, Marine Le Pen or the Austrian Freedom Party. Given Renzi's policy agenda and the narrative put in place in support of the government and the constitutional reform, neither the Prime Minister nor those academics close to him understood what was (and still is) at stake.

The second lesson is that, for the social democrats, playing centrist politics is self-defeating. Since he overthrew his party colleague Enrico Letta as prime minister, Renzi engaged in an unnecessary fight against trade unions, repealed the Article 18 of the labour code (a symbol of the Italian Left) to secure business support, and abolished (on paper) the public agency "Equitalia" to gain confidence of tax evaders. Nevertheless, none of those groups supported him in the referendum.

The geography of votes is very interesting in this regard. On the one hand, Renzi lost much support within left-wing traditional constituencies (see Map 2). The case of traditional social democratic regions like Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, Piemonte and Marche is self-revealing. The Yes vote prevailed in the first two by a tiny margin: 50.4 per cent and 52.5 per cent respectively. In the last two, the No vote won significantly: 56.5 per cent and 55 per cent respectively. In both cases the turnout was higher than 70 per cent. This becomes more evident if one considers that at least 15 out of the 21 Italian regions are governed by the centre-left and only in three of them the constitutional reform was approved.

Map 2. The consistency of the vote in favor of NO and YES at the provincial level.



Source: elaboration on data Ministry of the Interior.

On the other hand, Renzi did not secure enough support from centre-right voters. The case of regions like Veneto and Lombardia, and cities like Padova, Venezia, Mantova and Milano is straightforward. Veneto and Lombardia are traditionally governed by the centre-right and 62 per cent and 55 per cent of the population rejected the reform respectively (turn-out higher than 70 per cent). The mentioned cities used to be left-wing fortresses in these right-wing regions. With the exception of Milano and Mantova, where the Yes prevailed at a narrow 51 per cent and 52 per cent respectively, in the other cities the No won by safe margins. Hence, Renzi's ambition of shaping the Democratic Party into a centrist, 40 per cent strong "Party of the Nation" was self-defeating. Thus, probably, playing centrist politics is, for the Italian social democrats, political suicide.

When people vote on crucial reforms they do not do so as if they were isolated in an ivory tower. On the contrary, right or wrong, the context matters. Southern Europe is stuck in its sixth year of recession. Parliaments and governments take reforms and decisions. If the political elite is not credible, reforms lose credibility as well. With the side effect that, in difficult times, this paves the way to populist right-wing parties. From dubious politicians someone cannot expect too much. From academics "borrowed to politics", and from a Prime Minister so eager to present himself as the last chance for Italy, someone would have expected more analytical lucidity, a less confrontational tone, and a broader vision. It must be noticed with regret that these qualities have been missing in the Prime Minister himself.

4. Some conclusions

Undoubtedly the most significant phenomenon of this consultation was the broad participation of citizens in the voting, unusual for a referendum and comparable to political consultations. Italians so have grasped the significance of this vote. From one side to the constitutional implications, the approval of a bill that would have profoundly changed the functioning of the chambers, the other for the political implications, made it absolutely clear from the personalization on the Prime Minister.

The Yes vote has had its strengths in the higher age groups, including pensioners and voters with low qualifications, but with a higher consensus, although not the majority, among the graduates. In essence, the profile is the classic PD electorate after the European effect loss, which in turn reproduces the profile of the electorate of the Olive and even before DS and Margherita. With three important differences: the low proportion among the middle classes, a sign of a distancing of a segment that feels impoverished and in need, a very low appeal among civil servants. Here also signal a change, now stabilized, of the reference area of the center left. Instead, the vote for the NO is a youth vote and popular: the highest peaks are among the unemployed and among the workers. The same territorial differentiation highlights these aspects: the massive vote for the NO in the South, with a participation in these areas especially high, confirms this interpretation.

It is The proven rift that is taking shape between the people and the elite, which we saw at work recently with Brexit and in American elections. The social segments most affected by the crisis, the slices of the electorate disappointed by the government's policy, have largely determined the outcome of the vote. Without detracting from the elements of substance, the social distress and anger issues were prevalent. It was a social voting, not just political.

This, basically, seems to be the byproduct of substantial homologation, in terms of policies, between the center-right and center-left parties. At least in Italy, the feeling is that the vote of the electors is channeled towards the populist political formations as the political offer of the traditional parties fails to capture the demands that come from the electoral base. The latter, therefore, is moving towards the new political movements not for a radical conviction but for the simple lack of credible alternatives. The proof of this is the gradual increase in the proportion of electors abstained at the political elections which, in a country of traditional and massive political participation as Italy, is the most symptomatic indicator of the malaise.

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