

## **NARRATIVES, VALUES AND VOTERS: A CASE STUDY IN ITALY**

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### **Résumé**

Le but de cet article est de présenter les premiers résultats d'une recherche interdisciplinaire en cours visant à la compréhension des valeurs qui soutiennent les différents types de vote politique en Italie. Ici, l'accent sera mis sur les électeurs du parti de centre-droit Forza Italia - dont le chef est Silvio Berlusconi - puisque les entretiens avec les électeurs de l'aile de centre-gauche sont actuellement encore en train d'être recueillis.

### **Mots-clés**

Crise politique, clivages, électeurs, récit de vie

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to present the first outcomes of an ongoing interdisciplinary research aimed at understanding which values support the different types of political vote in Italy.

Here the focus will be on the voters of the centre-right party Forza Italia - the leader of which is Silvio Berlusconi - as the interviews with the electors of centre-left wing are currently still being collected.

### **Keywords**

Values, political crisis, cleavages, voters, *récit de vie*

## THE SHIFT OF THE ITALIAN RIGHT: VOTE AND VALUES

In the last 25 years the political scene of Italian parties has lived a major change. This shift - which is still in progress, though in a less marked way - began with a severe political crisis which affected Italy in the early 1990s, radically modifying its existing party system.

To understand this change better, one should call to mind the Italian political and party system of the second post-war period, which can be well described by the analytical model of Lipset and Rokkan (1967). At the end of the 1960s Lipset and Rokkan advanced the hypothesis according to which contemporary Western democracies were characterised by a structure of political-ideological pluralism rooted in their long history, namely a structure dating back to the formation of the different Nation states and which then (especially in the 20th century) got democratised with mass politics associated with male and female universal suffrage. So, the idea of these two authors is that the cleavages of political-ideological pluralism of societies and political parties (especially the European ones) took shape during the first decades of the 20th century and then have persisted in the following, as a result of their freezing.

As mentioned above, the Italian case fully belongs to the tendency outlined by this hypothesis, even though the identification of the precise phase of the Italian cleavage structure is more controversial. As a matter of fact, the Italian Republic was born after World War II and the groups belonging to the *Arco Costituzionale*<sup>1</sup> - which was overtly anti-fascist - excluded whatever right-wing political movement.

A party belonging to the *Arco Costituzionale* was Democrazia Cristiana, that was a centrist party of democratic-catholic ideology, inter-classist. Conservative but of moderate views. From the birth of the Italian Republic until the early 1990s, Democrazia Cristiana always resulted the dominant party at every national political election it stood for, with the only exception of the 1984 European Parliament Elections.

The other two major parties of the *Arco Costituzionale* were the Partito Socialista Italiano - centre-left - and the Partito Comunista Italiano - left-wing. However, the Partito Comunista became the second most popular party in every election until the 1990s.

The studies carried out by analysts of Italians' voting behaviour (e.g. Corbetta et al., 1996) proved that Italy as well corresponds to the analytical model proposed by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) since the vote distribution on the ideological-political axis has remained practically 'immobile' since the second post-war period for at least 40 years, election after election. The Italian phenomenon is thus fully ascribable to the persistence of the cleavages and the party system identified by Lipset and Rokkan for European democracies in general. In the Italian case, however, the polarization of the electorate does not move as much around the left-right axis or the State-Church axis as in other European nations, but it has established around the positions of centre of the Democrazia Cristiana and of left wing of the Partito Comunista (Galli, 1966; Sartori, 1982; Farneti, 1983; Mastropaolo, 1996).

In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the disappearance of the international political-ideological opposition, the Italian society and democracy experienced a de-freezing of the cleavages and of the party system, in such a radical way that no other European country

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<sup>1</sup> It was the political parties which had been actors in the drafting and approval of the Italian Constitution of 1948.

has ever equalled it, even when some of them showed their signs of de-freezing (Nevola, 2015). The Partito Comunista Italiano disappeared in 1991.

Moreover, in the early 1990s the expression ‘Mani Pulite’ (Clean Hands) was coined. This term refers to a series of judicial investigations conducted at national level against Italian political, economic and institutional figures. These inquiries brought to light a system of corruption, bribery and illegal party financing and led to about 1,300 final sentences, convictions and plea bargains. In addition, Mani Pulite gave life to a storm of indignation in public opinion and, in fact, contributed to the crisis of Italian political scene. Historic parties like Democrazia Cristiana and Partito Socialista Italiano disappeared.

From the early 1990s onwards, Italy has therefore gone through so radical processes of political change that they have been encapsulated in expressions like ‘crisis of the First Republic’ and ‘birth of the Second Republic’.

With the decline of Democrazia Cristiana, of the ‘centre’, which had marginalised whatever right-wing political movement for years (Chiarini, 1995), an opportunity arose for the political Right to leave behind its historic condition of inert minority, also thanks to the ‘fading’ of the until then dominant ideological and value-related pillars (Chiarini, 1995; Nevola, 2003; Caciagli, 2010). In other words, what happened was the loss of immediate identification of Right with fascism, typical of the ‘First Republic’ (Gubert, 2012). The opposition between fascism and anti-fascism tends to fade away while, at the same time, the communism/anti-communism one intensified again; the main aspect emerging from the surveys of that time is exactly the significant increase of those who politically position themselves on the right (Rovati, 2000).

Following in the new footsteps already trodden by British Thatcherism and American Reaganism from the 1980s onwards, a neo-liberal Right spreads in Italy, based on a scale of values which is essentially unprecedented for Italian democracy. For instance, relevance was given to values such as the market and its deregulation, an individualistic ethic, an idea of meritocracy based on competition, i.e. values that did not belong to the catholic-demochristian and the socialist-communist subcultures (Nevola, 2015).

It is in this new political and value-related climate that the ‘political businessman’ Silvio Berlusconi promotes his party Forza Italia. By ushering in the ‘Berlusconi era’ - as it is commonly called - the Italian political system tends to bipolarism (even though not to the two-party system) and the political-ideological left/right rift attracts renewed interest in scientific analyses and in the public opinion (ITANES, 2006; Rovati, 2000).

According to Bobbio (1994), one can assert that the current distinction between left and right is not only a useful classification convention of contingent political preferences, but it also retains a deeper political and identity-related meaning, rooted in the history and the political cultures of Western political systems (Nevola, 2015). This meaning, though updated to the various epochs and/or political scenes, keeps on referring to those values which identify the different subjects of democratic pluralism (Bobbio, 1994), values which inspire and legitimize choices, decisions and political (and not political) behaviour, of either the elite or the broader society (Nevola, 2015).

Although the theme of values is a source of lively debate within the international scientific community, when it comes to defining them, “a confusion - sometimes unaware - leads people to treat them implicitly and with no distinction within the all-embracing field of the opinions expressed by social actors” (Pollini, 2012 p. 15). In this paper values are considered as symbolic-cultural elements (Parsons, 1961) acknowledged, accepted and shared by a

plurality of social actors which guide the action and the interaction and make them possible. Values therefore assume direct relevance in the study of a national society because they constitute an element of its structure (Preto, 2012a). Values are conceptions of the desirable (Kluckhohn, 1951), that is they refer to ‘what should be’ for the individual and for a plurality of individuals. In this sense, values also present a strong link to politics, since this is the sphere which organises and regulates the variety of interests, passions and ideas within a society through specialised institutions and functions (Rokeach, 1968; Berzano and Genova, 2015).

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

In the previous paragraph the evolution and change of the Italian left has not been treated deliberately since the results presented in this paper only refer to Berlusconi’s centre-right and his own figure. Nevertheless, in its overall framework the research aims at understanding the values supporting either the Partito Democratico of centre-left or the vote for Forza Italia, a centre-right party.

The interview technique used in this research study is the *récit de vie* (Bertaux, 1998) which, taking into account the interviewees’ biographic experience, allows to understand the development of the action reasoning during their life, exactly as in the life story (e.g. Atkinson, 1998). It also gives the possibility to collect and examine, within every interview, both general information on the contexts and elements that characterize the interviewees, their cultural backgrounds, their relations with ‘significant others’ and with those social worlds that define roles and positions (Preto, 2013). These interviews therefore require a great degree of attention and a very careful listening on the part of the researcher (Preto, 2011a) who, according to what the interviewee says, tries to extract and/or to deepen any specific subject that the narrator may have just mentioned carelessly and which is indeed crucial for the general framework of the study. In this way, it is possible to pay special attention also to the meanings and the signals that come directly from the interviewee's reality, without being limited to the exclusive study of previously planned subjects (Marradi, 2007).

In this study all the interviews started with this input, posed by the researcher to the interviewee: “I would like you to tell me about how you formed your political views”. I decided to start with this very general input to give the interviewee the chance to talk about a period of time of his/her choice, in this way trying to obtain as much information as possible on the evolution of his/her ideas and experiences.

All the interviews analysed here were collected between December 2013 and April 2014; they were entirely recorded and transcribed to conduct a thematic analysis (Demazière & Dubar, 1997; Preto, 2011b).

I selected 5 regions - among the 20 into which Italy is divided - and I have been collecting narratives of 80 electors. As you can see below, the reason why these regions were chosen lies in the different political orientation characterising them.

- Sicily: autonomous region with special statute. After decades of votes gone mainly to the Democrazia Cristiana, in the 1990s there was a dramatic change of vote towards Forza Italia which lasted until 2012.

- Trentino-South Tyrol: autonomous region with special statute. The ‘youngest’ Italian region, since it became such only after World War I. Here as well the vote was

traditionally oriented to the Democrazia Cristiana until its collapse and, since then, it has mainly gone to the Partito Democratico (along with the strictly regional Autonomist Party of centre/centre-left).

- Veneto: the Italian region with the highest density of medium, small and very small businessmen, with some large business clusters. In 1980 the Liga Veneta was born here: it was a federalist party which led to the foundation of Umberto Bossi's Lega Nord, a right-wing party.

- Apulia: from 1995 to 2005 it was ruled by Forza Italia, while in 2005 it broke with tradition and dramatically voted for the left wing, supporting Left, Ecology, Freedom, the new left-wing party of Nichi Vendola, openly homosexual and former Communist.

- Liguria: the Five-Star Movement was born here in 2009 under the leadership of Beppe Grillo. The Movement perceives and promotes itself as neither a right-wing nor a left-wing organisation and does not label itself as a party, preferring expressions like 'free association of citizens' and 'political force'. Five-Star Movement MP was elected in Parliament for the first time in 2013, winning the second most votes.

In each region we interviewed and have still been interviewing 16 people: 8 males and 8 females (four voting for Forza Italia and four voting for the Partito Democratico, of either sex), all of them beyond 35 years old. The latter choice was taken in order to interview electors who have voted more than once and are politically 'faithful', that is they have voted for the same party for at least ten years without changing their mind. After giving precedence to Forza Italia electors' interviews, as mentioned above the interviews with 'faithful' voters of the Partito Democratico (which has a majority in the current government) have been being collected.

It should be highlighted that it was rather difficult to find women who declared to be Forza Italia electors, while the same problem has not been found with female electors of the Partito Democratico. Since the research is qualitative, this aspect cannot be generalized but it should be taken into account anyway.

In addition, the decision to give precedence to Forza Italia electors was due to a further research question: with regard to these electors, I also wondered why they keep on voting for Berlusconi despite all the scandals in which he has been involved and which led to such a crisis to the extent that he resigned as Prime Minister in November 2011.

## **THE VOTE FOR BERLUSCONI'S PARTY AFTER THE CRISIS OF THE 1990s**

Among the different topics dealt with in the interviews, hereafter the motivations will be presented on the basis of which the interviewees chose to vote for Forza Italia and which values this party represented and still represents.

*I7: "... the right was and is the antagonist of the left, of communism, which I absolutely never recognized"*

*I22: "Forza Italia stood on sharp contrast with the left, with communism, let's say... even though this is a concept which has been diluted in the course of time because, let's say, communists are now an endangered race in Italy"*

As mentioned above, in spite of the fading of old left-wing and right-wing ideologies

(Chiarini, 1995; Nevola, 2003; Caciagli, 2010), the opposition between communism and anti-communism still persists (Rovati, 2000) and some of our interviewees adduce it as a motivation for their vote choice in favour of the right. From the interviews it emerges that, with respect to the past, today's distinction between left and right is perceived in a different way in regard to some particular aspects: according to some interviewees, the line between the two sides has become even 'fine'. As a matter of fact, the opinion was expressed according to which once people went into politics motivated by ideals, while today they do it for money, a greed common to many politicians of all orientations. So, also that which once believed to be left's 'moral superiority' seems today to have dimmed towards a moral flattening, perceived on either side. As a consequence, although the desire to vote for the centre-right to differentiate oneself from the left still persists, a climate of general mistrust of political parties has emerged. This trend has been recently observed also by Gubert (2012) by analysing the data of the 2009 European Values Survey: the steady reduction in members of political parties since 1981 (almost -50%) signals not only decrease in political militancy but it is also symptomatic of a growing distrust of political groups.

Nevertheless, we have come across the relics of old ideologies: for our interviewees who explicitly refer to Catholic values the following equation is still strong: the left is an enemy of the Church and its values, while the right is its bulwark.

I23: *"...left parties don't recognize the Pope, the Church... no, it is not good for me"*

I32: *"...the right has always had more respect for those which are my values... that are the values of the Catholic Church, you know"*

Although the interviewees do not homogeneously identify the Church and its teachings as a reference point for their values, this institution is always seen favourably and there are never critiques and/or negative opinions of it. Nevertheless, for some interviewees the teachings of the Catholic Church are a constant that have permeated their life since they were children and have been assimilated and experienced within their families. In this regard many claimed that they take their electoral decisions on the basis of their religious values.

I17: *"... to have my vote a party has to defend the values in which I believe: human life from conception to natural death, family based on marriage between a man and a woman, freedom of education, peace, solidarity among peoples, et cetera"*

Since its birth, Berlusconi's party has always detected and interpreted those socio-economic, political and cultural changes already foreseen by the Socialist leader Craxi between the 1970s and the 1980s: the decline of the working class and the emergence of a new middle class, the spread of acquisitive individualism and of the idea of citizens as 'consumers of politics', the primacy of the private and the weakening of civic virtues, anti-statism, openness to the 'new' and a pressing need for leadership (Nevola, 2015). Thanks to his narrative and his own personality, Berlusconi has managed to give room and importance to a 'new right' and to put it in line with some major trends emerging in the era of the 'new modernity' (Schiavone, 2009).

I14: *"... at the time, he was a new person and wanted to represent and unite all the various forces, from the liberal ones to demochristians, in a new vision... so it was a new form of doing politics"*

The thing for which Berlusconi is most frequently given credit is to be an “excellent communicator” (a recurrent term in the interviews) and to have revolutionized politicians’ way of presenting: he is praised for filling the gap existing between electors and the political class who preceded him and used to speak in a language which was obscure to most Italians. Indignant and tired of the scandals in which traditional parties were involved, Forza Italia electors have also appreciated that he had no past political experience, an aspect which, according to some interviewees, let him to remain independent and “*not to be forced to ask or return favours to former politicians*”.

Berlusconi’s experience as a businessman is another recurring topic. This is a further aspect which differentiates him from former politicians, whose only experience was in politics and did not know anything else. On the contrary, Berlusconi seemed to be more able to promote economic growth and help entrepreneurs, as he was one of them. In the interviewees’ narratives the term “empire” frequently recurs to identify the businesses he has founded. He is praised for being a self-made man, a further aspect that characterizes his determination and his commitment in the working environment. In this regard, the interviewees frequently talk about his previous jobs before being a businessman, because - coming from a modest family - he had to work hard to gain every single cent.

I37: “ *...he worked on cruise ships... and this intrigued me so much... he was very young... and before he had worked door to door, he proposed appliances* ”

Berlusconi is seen as a bearer of a double complex of values in the sphere of work: on the one hand, those values - typical of industrial modernity - which emphasize the relevance of the economic growth, the accumulation of wealth and the ‘material success’ arising from work. At the same time, he also represents the values of post-industrial societies in which work no longer represents simply a requirement to ensure security<sup>2</sup> and the satisfaction of basic needs; rather, it appears to be a means for self-realization and self-development (Yankelovich 1985, Pretto, 2012b; Pretto & Gaio, 2012).

Berlusconi is also praised for the thousands of jobs he created. It is curious that this last aspect is highlighted by interviewees as an act of generosity and not as a necessity, since businesses need employees to work and grow.

Also Berlusconi's decision to go into politics is seen by interviewees as an act of generosity, a choice motivated by altruism, to be at Italy’s disposal. As a matter of fact, “*being already rich*”, it was not for money that he took such a difficult path which, instead of satisfaction, has brought him many problems.

## **VOTING FOR BERLUSCONI DESPITE ‘HIS’ CRISIS**

In our interviews with the electors of Forza Italia and its leader we could not avoid dealing with the issue of the legal troubles in which this politician has been involved. As is common knowledge, over the years Berlusconi has been accused of many crimes, the list of which cannot be reported here because of limited space.

On 1st August 2013 the Court of Cassation confirms the sentence of the Court of Appeal regarding the ‘Mediaset trial’ (tax fraud): four years, of which the last three years are

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<sup>2</sup> Maslow (1954) already included ‘employment’ among the other requisites (physical, moral, family, health, and property) at the second level concerning ‘safety’ in his pyramid of needs.

automatically pardoned. It is the first time that Berlusconi has been definitely convicted. This is the reason why priority was given to the interviews with his electors: we wanted to know on what pillars the continuity of the political support to Berlusconi rests, in spite of these legal troubles. All interviewees expressed their opinions about the crimes of which Berlusconi have been accused without any specific input: in my view this was due to the temporal proximity between the and the collection of the interviews.

Interviewees' statements about the crimes with which Berlusconi was charged have enabled me to divide them into two groups: guarantists and relativists.

The first firmly believe that Berlusconi has never committed any crimes and that all those charges are the outcome of a political conspiracy supported by the Magistracy, accused of being controlled by the left. These interviewees frequently use the term “*persecution*”.

I6: “*..it's by no means true... they have invented everything... the Magistracy, let's be clear, frowned upon the right, because they are also very politicised, they have never been so ruthless with the worst of the criminals as they were with Berlusconi*”

According to the interviewees, the politically biased Magistracy, in accord with the left, has persecuted Berlusconi to “*get rid of him*” by resorting to judicial means, since they were unable to achieve the same goal politically. It is emphasized that Berlusconi’s expulsion from Senate over his conviction for tax fraud was the only way to get rid of a politician who has always been praised by the people, who keep on trusting him. Moreover, they argue that 2008 Berlusconi’s cabinet was the last one democratically elected, as the following Letta and Renzi cabinets are the results of President of the Republic’s appointments. The interviewees have frequently used the term “*ad personam laws*”, a too odd locution to be accidental. So, this is probably due to the fact that the interviewees use the same media to inform themselves. Then guarantists also identify Berlusconi’s wealth as further evidence of his innocence.

I15: “*...in short, it is impossible that he stole or cheated because he is so rich that he doesn't need other money... he has always been attacked... it is a judicial persecution against him organised by the left*”

From the perspective of acquisitive individualism (e.g. Münch, 2010), it should come as no surprise to learn that wealth becomes a value to the extent that not only is it a goal but also a goal that, once pursued, enables people to have a satisfying life, free from unlawful behaviour. Even though relativists do not speak out against the Magistracy and admit that “*he could have done something wrong*”, they find it strange, however, that this man has been at the centre of so many trials. In fact, relativists’ opinion about Berlusconi are quite tolerant: some say that the accusations certainly contain a kernel of truth, since committing some crimes is “*inevitable*” when occupying certain positions. Others think he has been stupid because he got caught committing certain crimes. There are also interviewees who consider those crimes “*ridiculous*”, not that serious as to justify the persecution mentioned above.

Then, in regard to the “*Ruby process*” proceeding (child prostitution and abuse of office) relativists claim that (provided of course the whole affair is true) those facts pertain only private life, non the political sphere, and should remain as such. Curiously, almost nobody mentions that Berlusconi arranged to have the girl released from police detention in his political role (and as an ordinary citizen).



With regard to tax fraud crimes, several interviewees think that when a business pays hundreds of millions in taxes, a bit of tax evasion is acceptable.

The charges of mafia association have been mentioned in few cases and opinions are not unanimous: there was no clear stance and the interviewees expressed themselves with some “*I don’t know*” and “*I don’t know what to think of it*”. Maybe because this is one of the topics that had the lowest media coverage in Italy.

I36: “*...I think he was stupid due to some choices... he is a powerful man and I think that there must be some truth... I don't believe in simplicity, in the ease... for creating such an empire from scratch... over the years he could have committed some crimes... but this is normal*”

I13: “*...who cares, at a certain point, if he goes with girls but he still defends the value of family as a union between a man and a woman, and he defends life and says Eluana Englaro is a life and you can't remove the artificial feeding. Then, I tell myself, who cares if he has also 300 girls*”

The relativists admit that some crimes have been committed (especially sex crimes, tax fraud and corruption), but are ready “*to forgive him*” because “*nobody is infallible*” and “*also Mussolini and Kennedy did it*”. For these people Berlusconi remains respectable and trustworthy.

Lastly, guarantists and relativists believe that the accusations against Berlusconi, be they true or false, should be confined to the private sphere and not be connected with the political role of Berlusconi, who anyway remains the only leader who defends those values in which our interviewees believe.

Politically speaking, Berlusconi and his cabinets are highly regarded and, with regard to possible broken election promises, interviewees are indulgent, stating that his numerous trials have taken up his time, diverting him from Italy’s rule. Some also claim that it was his Ministers (and therefore the democratic system itself) that have limited in that sense.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Interviewees argue that Berlusconi’s fall from his political role does not undermine his trustworthiness as a political leader and a key figure in Italian politics over the last twenty years. As a matter of fact, according to many of them since 1994 left have not existed anymore, ‘Berlusconians’ and ‘Anti-Berlusconians’ have. Current left’s weakness lies therefore in the lack of positive and proactive themes, since they are too concentrated on the negative theme: Berlusconi’s defeat.

In spite of the events that led to Berlusconi’s fall, it seems that nobody among his electors wants to renounce him as a politician. His coherence and determination are two of his recognized qualities. In fact, in such unstable world, Berlusconi seems to keep on being the only constant to which they can refer.

His legal woes have apparently not undermined his trustworthiness, which has even increased according to some people. As a matter of fact, his reputation as a “*victim of political persecution*” has guaranteed him votes more than once; also when he was defeated in elections (2006), it was just by a narrow margin. It does not matter, whether they believe him

innocent or forgive him: for centre-right electors Berlusconi has represented the only credible alternative in the last twenty years.

With regard to the specific field of values, a sort of incoherence emerges among our interviewees. As a matter of fact, in spite of claiming to share Catholic values, many interviewees do not follow them entirely, arguing that in some special cases “*exceptions are allowed*”. These positions emerge when talking about abortion, common-law marriage, same-sex marriage and euthanasia, all issues to which the Church has been always opposed. This incoherence is more visible in those interviewees who first argue to share “*non-negotiable*” values (defined such by Pope Benedict XVI), but then allow behaviour exceptions in special cases.

Some incoherence is also found in those interviewees who, outside the set of Catholic values, claim that solidarity among peoples is a value but then line up against immigration. Still others support the value of honesty, but then tolerate tax fraud.

Basically, we find what Bertelli (2012) defines as ‘moral relativism’ through which individuals tend to relativise both values and the norms regulating them. They continue to reinterpret them on the basis of the context, the situations and circumstances. In doing so, the behaviour related to a specific value can become renegotiable.

By the way, as I wrote above, values are conceptions of the desirable, are ‘what should be’ for the individuals. So, having a political representative that defends certain values is more important than his or her coherence with those same values.

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