

BOOK REVIEW

Autopsia Di un Diritto Politico. Il Voto Degli Italiani All'estero Nelle Elezioni del 2018

Edited by Simone Battiston, Stefano Luconi and Marco Valbruzzi. Il Mulino: Bologna, 2022. 320p. €25,00

Stefano Camatarri*

Centre de science politique et de politique compare, Catholic University of Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

*Corresponding author. Email: stefano.camatarri@uclouvain.be

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‘Can overseas voting help us understand domestic politics in Italy and its changes?’ (p. VII). Such is the ‘leit motif’ of this ambitious book, whose purported aim is to shed light on a too often overlooked aspect of political and electoral studies, that is electoral behaviour within so-called emigrant constituencies, with a focus on the Italian case. Alongside several other examples, indeed, Italy is today one of the many countries granting external voting rights to its (non-resident) citizens. Despite the global scope of such phenomenon, however, only a small number of scholars has systematically enquired into its causes and consequences so far. This is especially the case for Italy, whose approximately 5 million citizens residing outside of the national boundaries make it, without any doubt, a reference case in Western Europe and beyond. In this sense, the effort of the authors to build a first well-rounded analysis on how Italian emigrants behave at homeland elections certainly needs to be praised by itself.

The book, which is a collective volume edited by two scholars with a significant track record on this topic, Simone Battiston and Stefano Luconi, is overall structured in eight chapters. Each of them aims at dealing with a specific country-level scenario where non-resident Italian citizens are allowed to cast their vote at homeland elections. The main starting points, as one can easily guess, are the two most recent electoral events of the Italian political system, that is, the results of the Constitutional Referendum in December 2016 and the results of the General Election of March 2018.

Against such background, the book immediately taps into two recurrent issues of the Italian overseas voting system. The first one is the constantly lower electoral participation abroad, decreased from 38.9% in 2006 to 29.8% in 2018, coupled with public and media’s carelessness towards the vote of Italians abroad. Hence the idea of a substantively ‘dead’ political right (at least in the minds of voters and academic or political observers) and for this reason in need of an autopsy, rather than an anatomy, as the authors themselves suggest in the book’s title. The second one, on the other hand, is the notable resume of Italian emigration over the last years, that is, a figure in stark contrast to the previous one. This latter makes it reasonable to wonder whether the layering of ‘old’ and ‘new’ emigrants, with their heterogeneous needs, ideas and identities, could somehow

explain variations in election results abroad, and particularly the local fortunes (or failings) of specific parties nowadays.

The combination of these two interesting elements definitely represents an inspired idea, allowing the authors to set up a convincing framework for analysis for the succession of case studies presented in the following chapters. Battiston and Luconi anticipate these contents in an effective way within their introduction alongside with further aspects, such as the birth of the voting rights in Italy, its evolution over time and its strain to persist as a topic deserving attention in public debate and in the academia.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the overall background against which the authors could have tried to give further relevance to these issues. Sometimes, indeed, the impression is that they value the issue of external voting in Italy as relevant per se, without convincingly justifying it under a broader perspective. Yet, as mentioned at the beginning, the extension of voting rights to citizens residing abroad is a process involving many countries worldwide. So, what makes a focus on Italy important nowadays, compared to other contexts? Moreover, why caring about external voting rights at all? Addressing these questions more clearly would have been an additional asset in order to better argue the relevance of this work in front of a potentially international audience. This notwithstanding, the contents presented throughout the different chapters are definitely of relevance for future studies, either comparative or not.

In this respect, what the authors offer is a focus on the voting behaviour of Italians in countries characterised by either older or newer emigration patterns, supposedly affecting the electoral success (or not) of different types of parties. An interesting example of the first kind is the French one. This is mainly described as a long-standing country of working-class based immigration where, apparently not without reason, leftist parties are generally the most successful at National Elections, while the centre-right and new anti-establishment options, such as the 5 Star Movement, perform relatively poorly. Interestingly, a similar outcome characterises also a country affected by a newer and larger-scale pattern of Italian immigration, that is, the UK.

The authors partially explain such finding as the result of marked pro-European sentiments broken out following the Brexit referendum in 2016. Yet, as they themselves admit, 'further research would be needed in order to understand what demographic and socio-economic factors influenced vote choice for one or the other party among UK residents' (p. 68). As for countries such as the United States and Argentina, on the other hand, it is definitely a different story. These latter are indeed bastions of the so-called 'conservative' vote, where electoral choices are mainly driven by particularistic issues, and expressed through support to local lists and/or candidates reflecting their emigrant interests more than their general political orientation. Amongst other things, such territorial differences in voters' characteristics create also room for interesting considerations about the strategies of political elites. In terms of candidate selection, in particular, the authors mention how in Latin American constituency parties tend to opt especially for experienced candidates, securing stronger connections with a community of long-standing (and sometimes even second or third-generation) emigrants.

In summary, the book provides a rich overview on the already mentioned and further case studies (Brasil, Dominican Republic and Australia, to be exact). The fact that the authors' argument is constantly based on easily comprehensible empirical contents is undoubtedly a plus. On the other hand, the lack of individual statistical data entails a serious limitation on the possibility of validating

certain authors' hypotheses about the motivations driving voters' decision-making. In other words, the presumed pro-European and/or conservative orientations underlying overseas citizens' political choices remain for now only reasonable intuitions, but still in need of further study. In any case, this work already represents a first necessary contribution in this direction, if only for its attempt to systematically look at what is usually believed to be inscrutable, that is the milieu of citizens' profiles and interests in overseas constituencies. As for the Italian case, in particular, the substantial obscurity of citizens' political orientations abroad – mainly blamed on the dispersion of potential electorates across too huge and heterogeneous constituencies – has so far constituted a relevant unknown both for scholars and political actors aiming to elaborate their own political strategies abroad. Against this scenario, the added value of this book is to start sketching out such piece of reality and drop a first anchor in it. Finally, this sounds rather promising for both the advancement of empirical research on this topic and for improving the understanding of those emigrant interests by political elites themselves.