

BOOK REVIEW

Cittadini oltre confine. Storia, opinioni e rappresentanza degli italiani all'estero

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

Stefano Camatarri*

Department of Political Science and Public Law, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Bellaterra, Spain.

*Corresponding author. Email: Stefano.camatarri@uab.cat

Keywords: transnational politics; political participation; overseas constituencies; emigrants; electoral behaviour; political attitudes; Italy

*This is the preprint (accepted) version of an article published by Taylor & Francis on *Contemporary Italian Politics* on January 19th, 2024, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2024.2305995>

At a historical juncture when public debates in many Western countries strongly focus on the issue of foreign immigration and its consequences for receiving societies, shedding light on Italy as an emigration country undoubtedly brings a broader perspective to transnational mobility dynamics. *“Cittadini Oltre Confine”* deserves praise for its valuable contribution in this regard. Following other significant book projects on the topic published over the last decade, such as Tintori’s *“Il Voto degli Altri”* (2012) and Battiston and Luconi’s *“Autopsia di un diritto politico: il voto degli italiani all’estero nelle elezioni del 2018”* (2019), this new volume presents a skillful blend of wide-ranging historical reconstruction, documentary analysis, comparative assessments of voting systems, and data analysis. Drawing on both aggregate and individual-level original survey data, the authors provide readers with a clear overview of Italians abroad to date – both from a socio-demographic and political-attitudinal perspective – and how they perceive, interact, and engage in the political life of their home country.

The book is structured into a total of 10 chapters, organized across three main sections. The first section (chapters 1 to 3) comprehensively sets the scene for Italian political participation from afar, exploring its origins, characteristics, implications, and framing it in a comparative perspective *vis-à-vis* other relevant examples of external voting systems worldwide. The central contributions (chapters 4 to 7) complement this picture with valuable – though never overly sophisticated – behavioral and attitudinal information. These chapters delve into both macro-level voting patterns of Italians abroad and micro-level characteristics regarding their socio-demographic and political-attitudinal profiles. To complete the picture, chapters 8 and 9 aim at assessing the evolution and performance of the Italian external voting 'experiment,' both in general and by focusing on the role of migrant associations. This assessment comes at a time of increasingly complex emigration dynamics and profiles.

The first contribution, authored by Stefano Luconi, sets the scene for the general “Italians beyond borders” topic by offering a very detailed account of the genesis of Italy as a land of “emigration” (before the 2nd World War, after, and in recent times) and the various factors triggering movements of people toward other countries. Despite increasing immigration over the last few decades, the

chapter sheds clear light on how outbound fluxes have remained constant until recently, with the COVID years serving as a clear exception. As the author nicely concludes, " *the current presence of Italians abroad is the result of the dual component represented by the descendants of historical migrations and the protagonists of ongoing flows*" (p.41).

Against such background, Chapter 2, written by Giovanni Tarli Barbieri, focuses more specifically on the process leading to the regulation of external voting and establishment of overseas constituencies in the country, which see their cornerstones in the constitutional laws 1/2000 and 1/2001. This contribution has the merit of meticulously going through the tortuous processes underlying the establishment of the external voting framework in Italy. A journey that started with divergent opinions within the early republican parliaments, then weakened toward the end of the 20th century. The 13th legislature (1996-2001) provided indeed the pathway toward the recognition of a system of special representation for Italians abroad, with overall 20 emigrant-specific representatives elected across four voting constituencies (i.e., Europe; North and Central America; South America and Africa; and Asia, Oceania, and Antarctica - AAOA).¹

Marta Regalia expands even more this perspective in Chapter 3, by putting the Italian voting system in comparison with other countries with respect to granting and extent of external voting rights across different types of elections. From an institutional perspective, this contribution represents a particularly valuable piece if contrasted to the highly case-oriented literature that has been produced so far. Regalia's comparative analysis clarifies that similarities (and differences) in external voting systems can be identified across three relevant dimensions: *the right to vote* (who has the right to vote or be voted and what are the requirements to access it), *political representation* (for what type of elections is it possible to vote and how are votes counted) and voting procedures (how and where is it possible to express one's vote). Based on this general scheme, the chapter provides a comprehensive overview of potential profiles of voters abroad (ranging from all citizens residing in another country to only very specific categories), types and extent of elections involved and procedures, including in-person, postal, delegated, and electronic vote. Table 1 and Table 2 provide a valuable summary of how different countries figure under each of these dimensions/characteristics (elaborated by the author based on International IDEA data).

Chapter 4, authored by Rinaldo Vignati, provides an insightful overview of the electoral dimension by discussing aggregate participation trends (turnout) and preferences collected by different political actors in abroad constituencies. In this respect, the comparative approach between election results at home and abroad, as well as the exploration of different trends across different overseas constituencies, offer a valuable systematic addition to the extant literature. Overall, the Italian electorate abroad appears predominantly oriented towards the center-left, but with significant geographical differences, particularly between Europe and South America. The author even proposes a very relevant voting incongruence index (calculated as the semi-sum of the absolute differences between the vote percentages that the different party lists obtained in the national territory and abroad at a given election). South America emerges as, by far, the region where the voting outcomes are most dissimilar compared to the homeland. Nevertheless, the fact that not all parties ran everywhere and that several constituencies tend to be characterized more than others by emigrant-specific lists, needs to be factored in this difference. On top of geographical distinctions in parties' vote shares, the analysis also clarifies that the Asian-Oceanian constituency

¹ With the introduction of the new Rosato Law, since the 19th Legislature the representative elected in overseas constituencies have become sixteen in total (Camatarri, 2021).

features more preference votes by center-left lists, while local lists tend to maximize this type of personalized support in South America. Finally, according to official data Italians abroad are rather 'conservative' when it comes to referenda concerning ordinary laws (meaning that they tend not to support modifications of the legislative status quo), while they hold more progressive attitudes toward constitutional reforms.

But who are the Italians abroad exactly? Simone Battiston digs very thoroughly and in a complementary way into this question in Chapter 5, that the previous analysis of aggregate voting trends so intuitively begs. According to the official register, Italians abroad are about 5,5 million, usually established in a foreign country since many years (more than 45% has been subscribed for more than 15 years) and men (52%). Additional data collected by the editors based on an original survey detail the picture even further in Chapter 5. Particularly insightful the considerations on the persistence - even overseas - of a socio-economic gender gap as Italian women abroad have lower employment rates compared to male emigrants, despite similar or higher levels of education.

In Chapter 6 Marco Valbruzzi integrates the individual-level picture with more political-attitudinal details, as well as perceptions of political competition, i.e., an effort that had not been consistently attempted yet in the literature and that gives further added value to the book. The analyses, which encompass positions on the traditional left-right continuum, on contemporary cultural issues (e.g., openness to immigration, LGBTQ+ rights) and toward the European Union, offer a heterogeneous picture of the attitudinal profile of Italians abroad, with respondents living in the South American and AAOA district being relatively more conservative on various topics. Particularly original also the analysis of external voters' mapping of political parties in a two-dimensional competition space, which shows an important degree of similarity between Italians abroad and in the homeland, confirming a quite 'strong' transnational connection of non-resident citizens with the categories and perceptions of homeland politics that are highly shared also by citizens that are highly exposed to it.

Chapter 7 by Simone Battiston shifts the focus toward emigrants' opinions on aspects of the legislative framework such as citizenship rules and the external voting right system. In line with the previous sections, also this analysis keeps a markedly descriptive tone that gives the reader an immediately clear and intuitive portrait of Italians abroad's positions on these issues. Interestingly, almost half of the survey respondents are in favor of introducing limitations on citizenship transmission abroad based on *iure sanguinis* criteria, with supporters of Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi) holding the most negative attitude toward unlimited transmission of Italian citizenship (both overseas and in the homeland) and supporters of the Movimento Associativo degli Italiani all'Estero (MAIE) holding a rather opposite view. Besides these differences, respondents appear quite unanimously in favor of introducing electronic voting as an integral part of the external voting procedure, while only a minority of them would support a merge of all the extra-European constituencies.

The final chapters (8, 9, and 10), written by Toni Ricciardi, Edith Pichler, and Rossana Sampugnaro respectively, take stock of the Italian overseas voting system as a tool of representation and discuss its pros and cons in light of an increasingly complex emigrant electorate, where new and old migrations are increasingly co-existing. In this regard, Toni Ricciardi reflects on the interesting distinction between "Italians living abroad"—citizens who become non-residents as a consequence of relatively recent international mobility—and "Italians in the world"—second-generation Italians born abroad or people aiming to acquire Italian citizenship from abroad. Most likely, these alternative profiles also imply different experiences, interests, priorities, and perceived meanings

and implications of 'migration.' Such heterogeneity represents a significant challenge for adapting an overseas election system designed to channel supposedly homogeneous emigrant interests based on a limited number of emigrant representatives.

To conclude, Sampugnaro turns the spotlight on the political supply side, exploring whether and how emigrant elites represent their fellow constituents toward the country of origin. Based on a text analysis of legislative proposals over the last decade, the picture that emerges is that of a steadily high degree of attention toward long-standing 'diaspora' issues, such as citizenship, voting rights recognition, and promotion of Italian culture over the whole period. However, following the election of younger representatives with more recent emigration trajectories in 2018, more emphasis has also been given to contingent issues related to new mobility, such as the protection of the social and political rights of emigrants under Brexit and Covid-19.

Additionally, the analysis indicates that emigrant representatives tend to focus on the demands and needs of the specific country or geographical region where they come from, without putting much effort into the (almost) unfeasible task of representing the entire "galactic" constituency where they have been elected, be it Europe, North America, Central and Southern America, or the AAOA district.

With these main findings, *"Cittadini Oltre Confine"* completes its comprehensive portrait of the origins and evolution of emigrant representation in the Italian political system until very recent times. Thanks to its ability to frame and discuss the transnational dimension of Italian politics from different angles and based on multiple types of data, this collective effort represents a valuable baseline for new endeavors on this topic. On this basis, future work could combine even further citizen- and elite-level data, also employing more sophisticated techniques, to explore the quality of emigrant political integration. Regarding elites, in particular, new analyses could expand the focus to candidates and whether the topics they mobilize at election times are consistent or not with the aspirations, preferences, and priorities of their constituents. Concerning citizens, on the other hand, new analyses could aim at accounting not only for attitudes toward aspects of homeland politics and political actors but also for opinions and experiences of politics in the country of residence. Clearly, exploring the potentially dual embeddedness of Italian emigrants would not be a simple task, considering both the inter-continental scope and complexity of Italian emigration trajectories, and the intrinsic challenges of surveying a notably hard-to-reach population (Caramani and Grotz, 2015; Østergaard-Nielsen and Ciornei, 2019). Yet, with its analyses relying on a cross-country sample of Italian foreign residents, this book provides an important step in this direction, leaving the reader with the certainty that much more is to come in transnational strands of electoral research in the coming years.

Bibliographic references

- Luconi, S., & Battiston, S. (Eds.). (2019). *Autopsia di un diritto politico: il voto degli italiani all'estero nelle elezioni del 2018*. Accademia University Press.
- Camatarri, S. (2021). Transnational Outreach Efforts and Electoral Performance of Italian Parties Abroad: Do They Earn What They Deserve?. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 54(1), 117-118.
- Caramani, D., & Grotz, F. (2015). Beyond citizenship and residence? Exploring the extension of voting rights in the age of globalization. *Democratization*, 22(5), 799-819.
- Østergaard-Nielsen, E., & Ciornei, I. (2019). Political parties and the transnational mobilisation of the emigrant vote. *West European Politics*, 42(3), 618-644.
- Tintori, G. (2012) *Il voto degli altri. Rappresentanza e scelte elettorali degli italiani all'estero*. Rosenberg & Sellier.