
THE ENFORCEMENT OF EXTERNAL VOTING RIGHTS AND THE ITALIAN DIASPORA:
THE CASE OF THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT – This essay examines the voting behaviour of Italian citizens in the United States in the homeland’s parliamentary elections and referenda since the passing of a 2001 legislative package that let Italian nationals residing abroad vote by mail. Specifically, it aims at assessing to what degree external voting rights strengthened Italian Americans’ diasporic ties to Italy. The essay concludes that most eligible voters failed to profit by such provisions and that the mobilization of the few who mailed their ballots resulted less from Italian-based concerns than from U.S.-oriented stimuli. Therefore, Italian citizens hardly reflected the paradigm of diaspora in the field of politics.

KEYWORDS – diaspora, external voting rights, Italian citizens, United States, parliamentary elections, referenda, 2003-2018

Diaspora is nowadays a fashionable paradigm inside and outside the Academia to identify both long-term migrants leaving their native land in mass numbers and their offspring born in the adoptive countries (Cohen and Fisher 2018). At the very beginning, scholarly interest in human beings’ global mobility in the past pertained mainly to the field of social history (Moch 1994) and such a discipline, according to George Macaulay Trevelyan’s well-known definition, refers to “the history of a people with the politics left out” (Trevelyan 1944, vii). Nonetheless, in the last few years diaspora studies have progressively extended their realm to include the political experience of both the expatriates and their progeny (Adamson 2016). In particular, recent literature has highlighted that migrants and their children are significantly involved in the political process not only in the societies of destinations, when they promote the interests and back the claims of their respective homelands, but also in the latter, when they endeavour to influence the election outcomes (Adamson 2019; Baser and Halperin 2019; Kovács 2018). In this context, external voting rights (i.e., the opportunity to cast ballots, usually by mail from abroad but also in person at consulates or other designated polling stations, in the elections held in the native or ancestral country) have eventually come to be listed among the leading means that enable citizens living outside the borders of their nation states to retain strong connections to the fatherland

and these ties, too, fall within the very notion of diaspora (Hartmann 2015; Jaulin 2016; Lafleur 2013).

The increase in worldwide mobility in the age of globalisation has encouraged a growing number of countries to enact extra-territorial political citizenship and to remove barriers to electoral participation for the expatriates and their progeny retaining the ancestral nationality¹. Italy joined the lot in 2001, when a legislative package granted its nationals residing abroad both postal voting rights and a parliamentary representation of their own by establishing a foreign constituency with six seats in the Senate and twelve in the Chamber of Deputies. External voting rights were also applicable to referenda about Italian laws. The centre-right coalition government led by Premier Silvio Berlusconi of Forza Italia eased the passing of such legislation on the grounds that those new Constitutional provisions would help consolidate its majority by benefiting from the Italian migrants' allegedly nationalistic and conservative-oriented stand. The mastermind of such measures was Mirko Tremaglia, an influential member of Alleanza Nazionale and an unrepentant volunteer as a teenager in Benito Mussolini's neo-Fascist Social Republic, who served as minister for the Italians in the World in Berlusconi's second cabinet from 2001 to 2006 (Pelaggi 2015, 52). Yet, the enactment of external voting rights also marked the pinnacle of the efforts by the Italian state to resort to political practices as means to incorporate the members of its diaspora within a borderless nation scattered worldwide. Such endeavors dated back at least to the Fascist regime (Pretelli 2010).

This essay offers a case study of the enforcement of the 2001 provisions. It examines the behaviour of Italian citizens living in the United States in Italy's parliamentary elections and referenda since the concession of the vote by mail from abroad. Specifically, it aims at assessing to what degree external voting rights contributed to strengthening Italian Americans' diasporic ties to Italy, as the rationale of at least some legislators implied, regardless of Berlusconi's political interests and hopes.

The United States is a valuable setting to test Italian expatriates' response to the granting of postal voting in 2001. On the one hand, this country has been overall the major adoptive society for Italian migrants since the late nineteenth century and accounted for roughly five percent of the total outflow from Italy in 2018, the year of the latest parliamentary elections, when the United States was home to 263,447 Italian nationals, out of a total of 5,114,469 worldwide, and ranked as the seventh global and the second transatlantic destination in terms of the number of arrivals thanks to 6,233 newcomers (Licata 2018, 13-14). Although a vast majority of Italian expatriates moved to countries other

1 See the database of the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance n.d.

than the United States in the decades following the end of the Second World War (Vecoli 1995, 121), the progeny of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century migrants still makes up a large reservoir of latent citizens and, consequently, voters. It was hardly by chance that in 2010, at the time of the most recent census of the American population, about 17,8 million U.S. residents claimed Italian roots and could potentially assert their right to their ancestors' citizenship and the ensuing suffrage if they did not already enjoy both of them (Egmont 2015, 176). On the other hand, Italians living in the United States had long been sensitive to the issue of a political representation of their own in the Italian Parliament since the early twentieth century. In both 1908 and 1911, the U.S. delegates to the first and the second conference of the Italians abroad called for the election of a few deputies in the lower Chamber (at that time the Senate was appointed by the king) to be chosen among the Italian citizens who lived outside the territory of the Reign of Italy. But their proposal was rejected on the grounds that these so-called "colonial members" of Parliament would end up being a sort of second-class category and such a de facto discrimination would be inconsistent with the allegedly democratic nature of Italy's Liberal regime (Napolitano and Di Stefano 1969, 3). Those pressures were revived and gained such momentum after the First World War that a nationalist deputy, Antonio Casertano, introduced a bill in 1923 to the effect of granting Italian newcomers in the United States a handful of seats in Parliament (Ginnari 1927, 28-30; Migone 1971, 38-40). One more time, however, the proposal was to no avail. The Italian ambassador in Washington, Gelasio Caetani, persuaded Benito Mussolini to have the bill tabled. The diplomat feared that political representation in Rome for Italian immigrants would cause disapproval within the U.S. government and impair the relations between the two countries. The *Duce* eventually agreed with the objection: "telegraph that he will not hear of it any longer," he jotted down in his handwriting on the ambassador's dispatch (Caetani 1923).

Moreover, in the decades following the end of the Second World War, expatriates to the United States took the lead in the Italian migrants' campaign to secure the opportunity to cast absentee ballots from abroad. Actually, prior to the enforcement of the 2001 provisions, the migrants who retained Italian citizenship also maintained the right to vote in the homeland's elections but, in order to exert the suffrage, they had to travel back to Italy and go to a polling station in the constituency that included the place where they or their ancestors had resided before moving abroad. For most expatriates in far-and-away nations such as the United States, the time and money necessary for the journey to Italy meant the exclusion from the electoral process. For instance, *Italamerican*, a monthly publication printed in New York City, argued in 1968 that only a handful of professionals could afford to fly to Italy and to vote for the candidates standing for the Italian Parliament (ABC 1968). Similarly, in

1976, Andrea Mantineo, the editor of the New York City-based *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, the most authoritative and largest Italian-language newspaper in the country, protested that Italian nationals in the United States were “citizens of an inferior category” in terms of political rights. As he put it, “for us, who live an ocean apart, the return to Italy for voting purposes is almost a non-existing problem. Only the very few fortunate people who manage to take a holiday on the occasion of the elections and have the money to spend their vacations in Italy can afford it” (Mantineo 1976). Two years later, *La Follia di New York* similarly resented how current electoral rules infringed the migrants’ Constitutional political rights (“Voto” 1978).

Quantitative data corroborated such complaints. For example, in the 1979 parliamentary elections, turnout was 22 percent among the expatriates living in Europe as opposed to 2.4 percent for their fellow citizens residing in the other continents (La Mesa 1981, 72). The situation hardly underwent major changes a couple of decades later. In the 1996 and 2001 elections, the last two held before the enforcement of the legislation concerning external voting rights, as few as roughly 4.5 percent of the Italian nationals in the world took the trouble to travel to Italy and to cast their ballots there. Once again, the most active voters were in adjoining or nearby countries such as France, Switzerland, Belgium, and Germany. Conversely, the number of returnees from the United States was negligible (Coassin 2006, 93-94).

Some Italian Americans even exploited the Cold-War-related anti-communism of their homeland’s government in the fruitless attempt at securing external voting rights. This, for instance, was the case of Michael Pesce, a native of Mola in the province of Bari and a member of New York State’s legislature. In 1978, exploiting the Red Scare rhetoric of the time, Pesce seized the opportunity of a visit by Benigno Zaccagnini, the secretary general of Italy’s Christian Democratic party, to the Italian-American community in Brooklyn to remind this politician that many residents of this district were anti-Communist and that they could, therefore, make their contribution to “save” democracy in their ancestral country, providing that they were enabled to cast their ballots in the parliamentary elections by mail (LaGamba 1978, 7).

Therefore, the 2001 introduction of postal voting eventually fulfilled a historical request from the Italian nationals living in the United States. A delegation of the Order Sons of Italy in America, an influential Italian-American ethnic organization, specifically flew to Rome on the occasion of the 2002 Columbus Day to thank Tremaglia for that achievement of his ministry (“Da Tremaglia una delegazione dei Figli d’Italia in America” 2002). After Tremaglia’s death, even such a progressive-oriented newspaper as *La Voce di New York* expressed its gratitude to him in an obituary and called him a “brave heart” who had fought for “the rights of Italians in the world” (Vaccara 2011).

Against this backdrop, one could have reasonably expected that a significant number of Italian citizens in the United States would seize the opportunity of the external voting rights and cast their ballots by mail. This, however, was not the case.

The first chance for the implementation of postal voting was Italy's 2003 referenda about the abolishment of the exemption of small companies from the obligation to re-employ workers illegitimately dismissed as well as the repeal of a measure providing for real estate owners' legal inability to oppose the installment of electric power lines on their properties (Baccaro and Simoni 2004; Tirabassi 2003). Turnout was negligible in the United States. Electoral participation was 14.7 percent, as opposed to 25.7 percent in Italy². It is likely that the few active voters in the United States were almost exclusively nationals with real estate in Italy. Nonvoting underwent a further increase two years later. In 2005 only 11.8 percent of the eligible electors cast their ballots in additional referenda to rescind the most restrictive sections of a controversial law restricting embryo research and assisted fertility (Ainis 2005).

Conversely, turnout rose to 30.7 percent in the parliamentary elections of April 2006. It was a significant growth over the 11.8 percent of the 2005 referenda, but Italian nationals in the United States lagged behind fellow citizens in other countries of the western hemisphere. Actually, voter participation in the United States failed to get to the level of 35 percent that was recorded in the whole North-Central America district of the foreign constituency. In addition, turnout reached 50 percent in Peru and Venezuela. It even exceeded 55 percent in Argentina and 60 percent in Uruguay.

Such political mobilization, albeit comparatively narrow, did not last long. A few months later, in June 2006, Italy held another referendum concerning changes to 57 out of the 139 articles of the country's Constitution. Berlusconi's outgoing government had introduced the proposed amendments to increase devolution (in order to appease the regionalistic and federalist claims of the Northern League, a key component of the coalition) and to strengthen the prime minister's powers within the cabinet. His opponents contended that the future of Italian democracy was at stake and that the ratification of the reshaping of the Constitution would pave the way for an authoritarian regime stifling political freedom (Bedock 2017, 234-235). These arguments were frightening enough to mobilize a majority of the eligible voters in Italy, where turnout reached 53.8 percent. Conversely, such warnings fell overall on deaf ears in the United States, where participation was confined to 23.7 percent.

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2 All the percentages about voter participation in this essay refer to the database of Italy's Ministry of the Interior (Ministero dell'Interno 2018).

In 2006 it was the election of four progressive candidates in the foreign constituency by Italian nationals in the world which enabled Romano Prodi to secure a majority in the Senate and, consequently, to govern Italy as the leader of a center-left coalition, replacing Berlusconi in the office of premier. Political scientists have suggested that nonvoting results in part from people's sense of powerlessness at the polls and from the perception that casting one's own ballot is essentially a futile gesture (Budge and Farlie 1977). The 2006 elections did not fall within this theoretical frame. Their outcome demonstrated that the foreign vote did count because Italians abroad had managed to make a difference. Such awareness, however, was unable to stimulate a significant mobilization among Italian citizens in the United States in the following elections. In 2008 voter participation only climbed to 32 percent, an increase of as little as 1.3 percent over 2006. Turnout in parliamentary elections further dropped to 27.3 percent in 2013 and reached an all-time low of 26.3 percent for the Senate and 26.1 percent for the Chamber of Deputies in 2018.

In 2011 four additional referenda were held. They included the abrogation of measures allowing the supply of water to be entrusted to private companies, financial profits on the capital invested in this service, and the production of nuclear power. The most relevant political issue at stake in this package, however, was the proposed repeal of legislation about the prime minister's privilege not to appear in criminal court during his term as head of the Italian government. The law had been tailor-made to prevent Berlusconi from being tried and sentenced for tax frauds and other misdemeanors. On that occasion, while participation reached almost 58 percent in Italy, it was as little as 20 percent among voters in the United States.

A subsequent Constitutional referendum did not achieve greater success in terms of turnout in North America. In December 2016 Italians cast their ballots on amendments to 47 articles of the Constitution that premier Matteo Renzi had elaborated as the key plank of a project that allegedly aimed at modernizing Italy's institutions. At that time, the political debate was hotter than ten years earlier. Renzi was even accused of devising a scheme to implement the same "Masonic" programme of "soft authoritarianism" that Berlusconi had been eventually unable to carry out in 2006 (Gianulli 2016). Some Italian-American newspapers echoed such criticism, though in milder tones (Vecellio 2016). Yet, most Italian nationals in the United States were again irresponsive to the stimuli of the campaign and fewer than 29 percent of the potential voters took the trouble to mark their ballots and to mail them to Italy, while participation was unexpectedly high in the homeland (Pedrazzani and Pinto 2017).

It can be easily argued that many topics and related provisions discussed in the referendum debates were of little or even no interest at all to people who did not reside in Italy and, therefore, were not affected by Italian laws. Nevertheless, attention to Italian politics was minimal in the case of parlia-

mentary elections, too, and paramount matters tended to be U.S.-centered concerns. The platforms of a few successful candidates offered cases in point. For example, Senator Renato Turano from Chicago—the largest vote getter in North America in 2006 with 11,634 ballots (“Chi sono” 2006)—focused on more funds for Italian consulates in the United States and on an increase in the number of non-stop flights from Chicago and New York City to Italy (Turano 2012). After defeat in 2008, Turano won a second term in 2013 on planks calling for state subsidies to Italian-language media in America and for more lenient procedures to apply for or reclaim Italian citizenship for the migrants’ descendants (Basile 2013). Likewise, an upgrading of consular services and assistance for Italians in the United States was the top priority on the agenda of Fucsia Fitzgerald Nissoli, who was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 2013 (Gandolfi 2013). Furthermore, in her 2018 victorious bid for re-election, Nissoli made a point of emphasizing that she had fought to let migrants retain their Italian retirement benefits after moving to other countries (Nissoli 2018). Her commitment touched a sensitive chord in a country such as the United States that received roughly 10 percent of the total amount of the pensions dispensed to Italian nationals living abroad (Ponticelli and Thomas 2017, 55-56). Another winner of the 2018 parliamentary races in North America, Francesca Alderisi, capitalized on her former role as a well-known host of Rai International’s “Gran Sportello Italia,” a television programme by Italy’s national public broadcasting company providing legal and bureaucratic advice for Italian expatriates (Alderisi 2018; Bianchini 2018).

One can, therefore, easily suggest that many Italian citizens in the United States cast their ballots, looking less for representatives to shape their homeland’s politics than for spokespeople to secure concessions and to receive assets. This attitude has been blatant since the 2006 parliamentary elections (Caporale 2008, 83). It was hardly by chance that, at a debate in New York City during the 2018 campaign, when a candidate was asked why all the issues discussed focused on the specific interests of Italians living abroad and Italy’s politics was neglected, he retorted that “there are 600 members of the Parliament who will take care of such matters; we have to deal with petty things” (as quoted in Demelas 2018). Likewise, while congratulating the three winners of seats in Parliament from North America in 2018, an ordinary voter made a point of reminding them that “their mandate is only to promote the agenda of Italian nationals in the world,” regardless of their own political affiliation, and that there were other deputies and senators in their respective parties to “enact the platforms of the tickets on which they ran” (as quoted in Pozzi 2018). Echoing a similar stand, in the last few weeks of the same election campaign a candidate running in the United States suggested that all the members of Parliament elected abroad should establish a caucus that would represent the foreign constituency beyond partisan divisions (“Macerata e coalizioni” 2018).

Even when voters addressed matters that seemed relevant to Italian politics only, they focused indeed on the repercussions of such issues in their adoptive society. For example, concerns about Berlusconi's conflict of interests as a media mogul and entrepreneur governing Italy as well as about his endeavours to secure immunity from prosecution for violations of the fiscal codes and other laws hardly revealed a stand against political corruption and the support of reform programmes per se. Instead, Berlusconi's critics feared that his behaviour would damage Italian citizens' reputation in the United States and would, thereby, interfere with their own professional activities and the standing of their nationality group in the host country (Severgnini 2006).

This attitude affected the electoral behaviour in the 2006 and 2016 Constitutional referenda, too. Overall, the two sets of the above-mentioned amendments were rejected by 61 percent in 2006 and by 59 percent in 2016. But voters in the United States endorsed the former by 53 percent and the latter by 59 percent. In both cases, they were less anxious about the future of democracy in Italy than about their own reputation in the adoptive society. They generally thought that the supposed modernization in the homeland underlying the referenda would benefit them, too, because the expatriates would no longer be associated with the image of a politically backward nation. For instance, abstaining from joining the debate about the future of democracy in their native land and focusing only on the practical consequences of the proposed reform as for the management of the state administration and the removal of bureaucratic obstacles for firms, investors and other economic operators, thirty Italian students and researchers at Harvard University and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology endorsed the 2016 package of Constitutional changes on the grounds that "it would help the country adjust faster to the 21st century and follow the latter's transformations without lagging behind" (Amorello *et al.* 2016).

In conclusion, low turnout in both parliamentary elections and referenda as well as the determinants of the vote for the few who actually cast their ballots by mail suggest that the political behaviour of most Italian citizens in the United States did not reflect a deep sense of Italianness. Nonvoting obviously meant lack of political involvement with Italy as well as detachment from the problems of the native or ancestral country. This approach was inconsistent with the notion of diaspora. So were the feelings of the few who did exert the suffrage because most of them paid little attention to the impact of their decision on Italian politics and were more interested in the consequences on their own lives and status in the adoptive country.

This lack of political identification with the homeland is hardly surprising. On the one hand, after Italy offered the expatriates' progeny the opportunity to reclaim the ancestors' citizenship, which was a necessary prerequisite to vote in elections and referenda, as few as 16,500 seized this chance in the United

States between 1998 and 2007 (Tintori 2009, 39). On the other, present-day brain-drain migrants either consider themselves less as Italian nationals than as citizens of the world or reveal such hostility toward their mother country, on the grounds that the latter, at least indirectly, forced them to move abroad to improve their professional lives or to achieve a better education, that they feel no stimuli to have a say in Italy's politics (Cucchiariato 2010; Nava 2009).

Recent expatriates' detachment from the native land made actual nonvoting even higher than the official statistics report. The eligible electorate is calculated on the basis of the number of migrants who are listed in the "Anagrafe degli Italiani Residenti all'Estero" (AIRE), namely the register of the Italians residing abroad. Many migrants, however, did not sign up with the AIRE because they concluded that their weak commitment to Italy was not worth the burden of the bureaucratic procedure (Tirabassi and del Pra' 2014, 110, 181). Since registration with the AIRE is a prerequisite to exert the suffrage by mail from abroad, the failure to comply with such a requirement meant that additional Italian citizens deliberately excluded themselves from their homeland's electoral process and further demonstrated their political aloofness from the mother country.

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