

Politics Spotlight

The Party Abroad

TRANSNATIONAL OUTREACH EFFORTS AND ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE OF ITALIAN PARTIES ABROAD: DO THEY EARN WHAT THEY DESERVE?

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When discussing the political rights of nonresident citizens, and particularly the concept of political parties abroad, it is difficult to not think of the Italian case. Aided by the fact of it historically being one of the main emigration countries in Western Europe, Italy boasts an almost 20-year experience in running a system of special representation for its approximately 5 million citizens residing overseas.¹ The 14th Legislature (which took place between 2001 and 2006) can be considered a watershed in this sense because it is when emigrant constituencies were legislatively acknowledged and electorally organized in four different regions (i.e., Europe; North and Central America; South America and Africa; and Asia, Oceania, and Antarctica).

As in all other cases discussed in this Spotlight, Italian political parties are pivotal actors of their overseas electoral system: first, as subjects deciding its establishment at the very beginning; and, second, as actors elaborating specific outreach and electoral strategies, including candidate selection, aimed at maximizing their electoral bonuses at election times. Regarding the first aspect, many scholars have already clarified how the introduction of external voting rights in Italy did not respond—at least initially—to a commonly felt will of reconciliation with “distant” citizens among political parties. Rather, it was especially the National Alliance (i.e., the former post-Fascist Italian Social Movement) that intercepted pressures coming from emigrants and proposed specific measures

with respect to improving their political inclusion.² Regarding the second aspect of whether parties' electoral performance benefits from their transnational outreach efforts, existing studies are more reticent.

As shown by Østergaard-Nielsen and Ciornei (2019) in a recent comparative analysis, parties' efforts to convey electoral consensus from abroad can take different forms. The leftist Democratic Party (PD), for example, tends to combine a structured grassroots presence across overseas territories with an emphasis on emigrant policy issues in its party program. The rightist People of Freedom (PdL, formerly Forza Italia) and the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) both present a relatively less structured organizational profile. The latter party, moreover, keeps a much lower emigrant profile in its campaign style compared to the other two.

Against this background, it seems reasonable to assume that the most structured parties abroad—which also consistently emphasize emigrant issues in their campaigns (i.e., the PD)—are the most successful at mobilizing the Italian emigrant vote. However, looking at the distribution of aggregate vote shares in the latest General Elections of 2018 across constituencies, such an expected relationship does not appear to hold in all cases. Indeed, in countries affected by more recent or working-class-based emigration patterns (e.g., the United Kingdom and France, respectively), the PD and a few other leftist parties appear to perform relatively better than their competitors. Conversely, in territories characterized by long-term “conservative” electorates accustomed to personal voting based on specific issues, such as Argentina and the United States, either emigrant-led parties (e.g., Associative Movement Italians Abroad) or center-right actors turn out to be the most prominent (Battiston and Luconi 2018).

Despite their preliminary character, these figures seem to suggest that, regardless of how much effort parties make in building strategies of transnational outreach, much of their electoral performance abroad depends on an external factor—that is, the characteristics of their “host” emigrant constituencies. In the absence of adequately extensive data on the profiles and political orientations of Italian citizens across such vast territories, however, this conclusion is currently no more than a

possibility. Future efforts should be directed toward a systematic data collection of parties' vote shares across overseas constituencies along with other information, including their campaign contents and style, the type and intensity of their transnational activities, and the characteristics of the emigrant electorate they aim to mobilize. This combination will provide the necessary empirical basis for testing how electorally rewarding parties' outreach efforts actually are vis-à-vis other relevant factors.

NOTES

¹Before the introduction of the new mixed electoral system in early 2018 (i.e., the so-called Rosato Law), the number of special representatives granted to emigrants was 12 for the Chamber of Deputies and 8 for the Senate. Starting from the 19th Legislature, they are going to be 12 and 6 respectively.

²This is not surprising or unique to Italy because a similar dynamic was found in comparative studies highlighting how right-wing ideology can favor party support for external voting rights (e.g., Østergaard-Nielsen, Ciornei, and Lafleur 2019). In the case of Italy, however, an additional element that possibly played a role was rightist politicians' preconception of Italian emigrants as politically conservative (Peltoniemi 2018). Nevertheless, final approval of the 2001 Rosato Law enjoyed wide parliamentary support. For a detailed overview, see Tintori (2012).

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