

Youth in Politics: A Comparative Study of Italy and the USA

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This article explores the importance of political participation to a democracy's integrity. For a government to be representative of its people, the people must make efforts to articulate their interests and find ways to implement them in government. The most iconic symbol of a democratic society is the right to vote. However, many citizens (especially youth), do not use this right to their advantage for many reasons. Youth in Italy, for example, have ostensibly lower rates of voting in comparison to the older population and show little interest in voting because they have no interest in politics. They feel as if it does not affect them, and is inconsequential. Not only is this a sentiment expressed in Italy, but there is a global resurgence of political apathy amongst youth, reasons for which will be further discussed in the paper.

It is through our Rule of Law which establishes a balance of power among our executive, judicial and legislative branches that our form of government enables American citizens to participate in and hold accountable American decision makers. Not all countries have a system that enables and encourages participation by the people, especially young people. Using Italy as a contrasting system, this paper seeks to identify the critical components of the Rule of Law system necessary to enable participation.

There are many different political parties in Italy, each having proportional representation in parliament. Italy is divided into twenty different regions; five of which have more legislative and financial freedom than the others due to a provision in Article 116 in the Italian Constitution which grants them home rule, and in return, they must finance health care, school and public infrastructure systems.¹ In addition to that agreement, these regions were granted autonomy to protect their language minorities and to prevent their

¹ The Constitution Of The Italian Republic, 1948 (as Amended June 12, 2003), Official Gazette Dec. 27, 1947, no. 298.

secession from Italy after World War II.² This battle for secession highlights an important underlying factor in the lack of political participation; considering the lack of centralized authority in the Italian government. Because power is from the people, citizens must instill authority within the branches of their government. Without this basic form of democracy, political participation can erode following the lack of governmental credibility.

The president of Italy is Sergio Mattarella at the moment (Spring 2017), and unlike the USA, where the president is the head of his political party, Italian presidents are expected to be non-partisan leaders and to basically carry on the role the king of Italy held, to be a figure representing the unity of Italy. The president also makes sure that laws are constitutional; he appoints the Prime Minister, and can terminate Congress if he feels that there is a lack of political cohesion in forming a new government. Italians do not vote for the President or the Prime Minister, they only can vote for the party.

In regards to Parliament; Senators and the various parties representing the population appoint congressional candidates, then citizens vote for the party that they want in Parliament, as opposed to voting on individual candidates' ballots. After the parties receive their votes, Parliament is elected and the President appoints a Prime Minister after consulting delegations from each party. This is the framework in which citizens of Italy articulate their interests and choose their representation in government, in accordance with the constitution of their government. The level of political literacy invested in youths in both Italy and in the USA is very low.

Political participation is defined as; "Those activities by which private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and/ or the actions they take." In the process of the creation of a political culture, one must look at how its citizens are socialized. In most cases, political socialization begins in the home and develops through schooling and community involvement during the individuals' lives. Political

² H. Kudo, *Autonomy and Managerial Innovation in Italian Regions after Constitutional Reform*, Tokyo: Faculty of Law and Graduate School of Public Policy, Chuo University (2008).

participation is a part of socialization and it includes conventional and nonconventional forms of political expression. It is important to note, however, the difference between conventional and nonconventional forms of political participation and to note the changes in trends of political participation over time in Italy, both of which will be discussed.

Political participation is integral to a democracy's integrity. For a government to be representative of its people, the people must articulate their interests and find ways to implement them in government. The most iconic symbol of a democratic society is the right to vote. However, many citizens (especially youth), do not use this right to their advantage for many reasons. Youth in Italy, for example, ostensibly have lower rates of voting in comparison to the older population and show little interest in voting because they have no interest in politics. They feel as if it does not affect them and is inconsequential. There are many underlying reasons for this, one being the economic situation in Italy. Italy has one of the highest youth unemployment rates, at 44.2%.³ Also, according to The London School for Economics, Italy is below the European Union 15 (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom) average for political participation of youth by 4% and is 10% behind Belgium, the country with the highest rates of youth political participation.⁴

As a result, youth in Italy, according to demographic trends, take longer to accomplish "fundamental psychosocial transitions", such as graduating school to find work, and leaving their parent's house for marriage, than other youth in the European Union. This delay also contributes to their lack of participation in politics and social issues in general. A study on the perspectives of political participation across generations offer two main reasons for this delay in

³ Lorenzo Totaro and Chiara Vasarri, *Italian Youth Unemployment Rises to Its Highest Level Ever*, Bloomberg.com (July 31, 2015), <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-07-31/italian-unemployment-rises-with-youth-jobless-at-record-high>, (last visited April 10, 2016).

⁴ James Sloam, *Young People Are Less Likely to Vote than Older Citizens, but They Are Also More Diverse in How They Choose to Participate in Politics*, EUROPP (2013), <http://bit.ly/1asIEKJ>, (last visited April 10, 2016).

fundamental transitions: one is the general indifference or lack of regard for political and social issues, and the second is as a direct result of the negative experiences these youths have had in social problems, they feel “powerless” in affecting any type of legislation domestically and they feel as if their input is not valued or needed.⁵ This causes a major issue with their participation in government, and it could stem from the lack of political representation on the behalf of youths. Even though they have access to established formal venues of political participation, youth feel that they are ineffective in interest aggregation. This can be damaging to a youth’s perspective on political efficacy and can reinforce negative attitudes towards the legitimacy of their government.⁶ However, this is only one of many compounding concerns regarding political attitudes in the country.

Another issue is the adult perspective on political participation of youth. Per Cicognani’s study, adults have a preconceived notion that young people are unable to come together to formulate conversation related to politics and the issues pertaining to domestic and foreign policies. In addition, Italy’s jobs and government are dominated by the “older generation”, which exacerbates the youth’s ability to experience social and political development and involvement. Youth are often characterized as “being lazy, unproductive, and generally unable to lead or take initiative.”⁷ This negative attitude towards youth often stems from a lack of understanding of youths’ values and world views, and unfortunately, does not contribute to the effort to increase inclusiveness in political discourse and contributions amongst these young

⁵Elvira Cicognani, Cinza Albanesi, and David Mazzoni, *Civic and Political Participation Across Generations in Italy: A Qualitative Study*, Education Sciences, University of Bologna (Italy), (May 11th 2011) at 1, http://epubs.surrey.ac.uk/7066/1/Bologna_PIDOP_presentation.pdf, (last visited April 6, 2017).

⁶ Lucian W. Pye, and Sidney Verba, *Political Culture and Political Development*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, at 282 (1965).

⁷ Elvira Cicognani, Cinza Albanesi, and David Mazzoni, *Civic and Political Participation Across Generations in Italy: A Qualitative Study*, Education Sciences, University of Bologna (Italy), (May 11th 2011) at 3, http://epubs.surrey.ac.uk/7066/1/Bologna_PIDOP_presentation.pdf, (last visited April 6, 2017).

Italians. It only reupholsters the perception that youth are incapable of contributing to society and politics in a tangible way. Looking forward, to increase inclusiveness, young people must be given incentives to participate in policymaking, and these incentives should be upheld by their communities through afterschool programs and other efforts that are integral to the steps of socialization.⁸

Because of these issues, Italian youth suffer a lack of political representation and low self-efficacy in contributing to the political system. Youth have little credibility and thus have no incentive to become politically active. As one Italian teacher says about having constructive political conversation with young people:

“It is very difficult to talk to them because they are not able to... they do not watch even the news on TV, they do not follow political news. [...] I have asked them... at home they do not talk about politics, they do not talk at all ... they do not know political parties, the difference between left wing and right wing parties...”⁹

This is a telling narration about the widespread lack of the processes of political socialization in the home/family. This is a sharp contrast to political socialization in the USA. Politics tends to take center stage in American society, as politics are closely entwined with values that Americans hold closely, the reaffirmation of civil rights through widespread media attention and the power of the vote. However, this still has not aided the American youth in becoming more politically active in voting, as less than half of youth vote in Presidential elections, with these youths seeking alternative methods of

⁸ Lucian W. Pye, and Sidney Verba, *Political Culture and Political Development*, at 320, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, at 282 (1965).

⁹ Elvira Cicogani, Cinza Albanesi, and David Mazzoni, *Civic and Political Participation Across Generations in Italy: A Qualitative Study*, Education Sciences, University of Bologna (Italy), (May 11th 2011) at 4, http://epubs.surrey.ac.uk/7066/1/Bologna_PIDOP_presentation.pdf, (last visited April 6, 2017).

political involvement, through online activism, protests or civic action.¹⁰

In addition to the differences in political culture, American culture allows that parents, in comparison to Italians, disseminate their ideas (in varying degrees of depth) about their party alignment, their views on domestic and foreign issues, and their constant reminder of the need for their children to embrace and be assertive for one's rights; as depicted in the famously American phrase, "I'll sue you!" Indeed, politics is passed on through generations, and children end up growing up holding similar views as their parents, then passing it on to their own children. In addition, the USA was built on the premise of 'No taxation without representation,' so leaders are held accountable and their actions are scrutinized to ensure that tax dollars are not wasted. In short, there is a belief that their taxes are for their community's benefit, and that their leaders will receive and represent their interests.¹¹ Attitudes such as these, however, could only be formed after certain cultural aspects have been established over the course of a country's history.

In the Referendum of Italy in 1946, when voters chose between the Monarchy and the Republic, half the voters were in favor of the Monarchy and the other half of the Republic. The south desired the monarchy, and the north voted for "institutional transformation."¹² This shows an issue with the government's perceived legitimacy. Italy's parliamentary republic was built upon a shaky foundation, a foundation that lacked unity between the north and south regions of Italy. Thus, there are large conservative parties that advocate for the return of a Monarchy, and the extreme right who have such distaste for the republic that they would rather have it replaced by some form of totalitarianism.¹³ The

¹⁰ Russel Dalton, *Youth Participation Beyond Elections*, School of Social Sciences (2012): 1-14, UCI School of Social Sciences, University of California, (2011), (last visited Feb. 9, 2017).

¹¹ Lucian W. Pye, and Sidney Verba, *Political Culture and Political Development*, at 285, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, at 282 (1965).

¹² Mario Quaranta, *The Rise of Unconventional Political Participation in Italy: Measurement Equivalence and Trends, 1976-2009*, at 252, *Bulletin of Italian Politics*, 2012th ser., 4, no. 2 (January 01, 2012).

¹³ *Id.* at 285.

reason for this split is due to the political corruption after the unification of Italy in 1870. After the establishment of the liberal parliamentary republic, the elections were rigged and controlled by party bosses. This kept the country from advancing and it was backward in comparison to its European counterparts. Consequentially, the republic was met with distrust due to the rampant corruption, and democratic traditions were not established.

Around this time, fascism took hold. Once Italy became entrenched in the First World War, issues only worsened. Citizens were unhappy with Italy's foreign policy, because instead of receiving large territorial gains, as was expected in return for the sacrifice of 600,000 Italian lives, they only received a small portion; and the economy was collapsing (exacerbated by the return of millions of troops to Italy after the war's end). Many Italians were disillusioned with the inefficacy of their government and, consequentially, wanted change. Fascism, in the grip of Benito Mussolini, offered the promise of national unity and political stability, a strong foreign policy, and a return to the formal glory of the Roman Empire. During his rise to power in the 1920s, Mussolini used propaganda and violence to crush his opposition and he limited worker's rights by preventing employees from striking by bringing their employers under his control. King Victor Emmanuel was forced to give him the position of permanent Prime Minister in 1929 and Italy was under his total control. After the Italy's multiple losses in World War II, however, Mussolini lost his power during the War.¹⁴

This legacy of dissatisfaction with the government carried on to modern-day Italy and explains why there are parties who advocate for a return to the monarchy. However, different sentiments are reflected in other parties as well, such as those who look favorably upon the political system as it is, but demand changes to address the institutional inefficacy. Due to the Italian government's perceived lack of credibility, Italian citizens lack interest in engaging in the political discourse in their country, and consequentially, have no desire to learn about political issues and are not knowledgeable about their political affairs. In addition, their identification with political parties and other means of political participation is minimal, with ostensibly negative views

¹⁴ Donald Sassoon, *Mussolini and the Rise of Fascism*, London: HarperPress, (2007).

towards them. Almond and Verba record the results of a poll in their book, *The Civic Culture*, regarding the level of satisfaction with one's country's government and their perception about their government, and the poll asks: "Speaking generally, what are the things about this country that you are most proud of?" Under "Government, political institutions", only 3% of those polled have pride in their government, 1% have pride in social legislation, and 27% are proud of "Nothing, or [they] don't know", in comparison to 85%, 13%, and 23%, respectively, in the USA.¹⁵

This indicates the need for a change which, according to a study, Italians have taken into their own hands. Despite a lack of participation in conventional methods of political participation, Italy has seen an increase in unconventional methods of political participation¹⁶, such as sit-ins, demonstrations, protests, and symbolic occupations, in attempt to affect change in decision making.¹⁷ One of the reasons for the increase in unconventional participation is the tendency for Italians who "reject participation in electoral politics" and lack trust in political parties to turn to advocating for community causes within their localities instead.¹⁸ This trend began after World War two and picked up momentum as citizens' concerns became overarching global concerns with the spread of globalization and increased technology in communication systems.

Conclusion

The Italian Republic has come a long way from the days of fascism, but inherent institutional distrust has affected their government's efficacy and its ability to represent the people. The USA was also built on a legacy of distrust of authority, exemplified by our second Amendment, 'the Right to Bear Arms',

¹⁵ Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture; Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations, an Analytic Study*, Boston: Little, Brown, (1965).

¹⁶ Samuel H. Barnes, and Max Kaase, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, (1979).

¹⁷ Donatella Della Porta, *The Global Justice Movement: Cross-national and Transnational Perspectives*, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, (2007).

¹⁸ Mario Quaranta, *The Rise of Unconventional Political Participation in Italy: Measurement Equivalence and Trends, 1976-2009*, at 257, *Bulletin of Italian Politics*, 2012th ser., 4, no. 2 (January 01, 2012).

and the country's colonial roots. These similarities explain the downward trend in political participation amongst youth, but as these youths grow older and become adults, they will understand their clout in the system and become part of that system from which they were marginalized. The key to preventing this in the future is political socialization from birth. Youth must understand the society in which they live in, their history, the mistakes of their predecessors and how to avoid them. The cyclical nature of life extends to government as well, and society must escape the traps of history and progress!