

# Politics: A Disengaging Affair

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Should we consider the 81.2 percent turnout in Sunday's election as a sign that Italians are engaged with the political process?

Traditionally, Italy has witnessed high numbers of voters in general elections compared with most western nations. From 1948 through the 1970s, around 93 percent of the electorate participated. In the 1996 general election, 82.9 percent was widely viewed as a low turnout. So Sunday's turnout was not high from a historical perspective.

But it may seem high because there is a widespread sentiment that this is an era of disengagement from politics. As the British election campaign has kicked off, there has been a strong emphasis on the need to participate amid fears that more people will abstain than vote for the likely winner, Tony Blair's Labour Party.

This follows last year's U.S. presidential elections when the turnout in most states was just below 51 percent of registered voters, provoking serious concern. Robert Putnam's widely discussed book, "Bowling Alone," suggests that voter apathy is symptomatic of how Americans now do little collectively: even though more Americans are bowling, fewer do so in organized leagues. Ironically, Putnam was relatively upbeat about participation in voting and civic groups in "Democracy and the Civic Community," an earlier study (1993) of the new regional governments in Italy after 1970, especially in Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany.

But voting rates in regional elections declined by 12.9 percent between 1990 and 2000, with falls of 13 percent in Emilia Romagna and 14.2 percent in Tuscany. Only 32 percent turned out last May for a multiple referendum vote.

According to an authoritative survey by Censis in spring 2000, only 4.4 percent of Italians think that political parties represent the majority.

The disengagement of younger voters is particularly serious. During the lead up to the recent general election, more than 60 percent of voters between the ages of 18 and 24 were undecided in a study published by *La Repubblica*.

With older voters representing safer votes and a growing proportion of the electorate, no wonder that both the leading coalitions were reluctant to touch the thorny issue of reforming Italy's pensions during the election campaign.

Although the Italian turnout compares favorably with countries like the U.S., there is also a wider decline of civic engagement. Italians have had a rich tradition of participation in groups that have strong links to political processes, from the Catholic Church's "white" co-operatives in the Veneto to the left's "red" ones in Emilia-Romagna. However, relatively few Italians now believe that such organizations represent the interests of the majority. The Censis survey found that only 21.6 percent believe so for local institutions, 19 percent for voluntary organizations, 16.3 percent for the Church, 11.5 percent for Parliament, 9.2 percent for civic, environmental groups and trade

unions. Even though people were invited to indicate two answers, the largest percentage, 42.3 percent think none of these organizations represent the interests of the majority.

Trade unions and even the Mafia have been decisive in forming strong political identities that have made voting a call to arms in the past. But voting has become more a question of individual choice in an atomized society. For most Italians, gone are the past patterns of the Church supporting Christian Democrats or labor unions backing the Communists.

While the Northern League and Forza Italia created clubs to support their political activities, these are relatively weak compared to the millions who participated in the DC or PCI of yore. Both the League and Forza Italia bear more resemblance to marketing companies than mass political parties.

Meanwhile, the left continues to rely too heavily on institutions that were stronger in the past, such as trade unions.

Attempts to rebuild participation in a top-down fashion are doomed to failure in terms of recreating mass democracy. And with the political programs of the leading coalitions virtually identical, it is not surprising that voters were turned off by campaigns that were reduced to discussing who was the better looking candidate.

Some have suggested that the Internet provides an avenue to rebuild civic participation and political life. While 44.3 percent think that it is useful for activities such as making public administration payments, only 32.3 percent

believe it can be used for participating in the decisions of administration.

The Internet can be a great tool for information and even political lobbying, as in the U.S. during the last presidential election. But virtual communities cannot replace real ones. Politicians must be engaged with through political identities in real communities to prevent oligarchy.

However, voting is the least important part of this. To mark a ballot paper is the most passive aspect of politics, given that it involves no need to discuss ideas. There is an absence of an active culture of public meetings, demonstrations and door-to-door campaigning that goes beyond advertising to build political identities.

How many candidates knocked on your door to discuss their policies during the election campaign?

When there is not a genuine political choice between the programs of the leading coalitions, voting becomes meaningless in terms of engagement. We need competing visions of society for an authentic election.

Whether the turnout in Sunday's election is considered high or low is not the issue. The evidence suggests that the problem of political engagement is more profound. The precondition for rebuilding engagement is that we need to stimulate ideas that Italians can wholeheartedly identify with outside the narrow confines of the existing party framework.

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