

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84070-5 - The Politics of Italy: Governance in a Normal Country

James L. Newell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

In 2006, Italy saw a general election which resulted in the incumbent centre-right government being ousted in favour of the alternative coalition of the centre left. It saw the defeat of wide-ranging proposals for constitutional reform in a popular referendum. It saw Italy win the FIFA world cup. All three of these things bore witness to the fact that Italy is a normal country.

If the normal pattern of party politics in European countries is left-right alternation in office sustained by bipolar competition, then the April general election showed that Italian party politics conformed to this pattern: the centre-right Casa delle Libertà (CdL) coalition of parties, under Silvio Berlusconi, had won the election held in 2001. For the 2006 election to the Chamber of Deputies, the centre-left Unione, under Romano Prodi, came from 3.8 per cent behind to stake out a position 0.3 per cent ahead of the CdL, in the process taking over the reins of government with a majority of sixty-six seats.¹ If a 'normal' country is one in which constitutional arrangements provide political integration by offering fixed and enduring points of reference for the large majority of players, then it had to be of significance that in June voters decisively rejected wide-ranging proposals for change, in the process ruling out the likelihood, for the foreseeable future, of major alterations to the constitution that had been adopted in 1948. If a normal country is one for whose citizens expressions of 'national pride' are something natural, then, as Prime Minister Prodi pointed out a couple days after the world cup victory, the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84070-5 - The Politics of Italy: Governance in a Normal Country

James L. Newell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE POLITICS OF ITALY

celebrations suggested that the people had ‘finally reclaimed [the national flag], wresting it back from the separate world of officialdom’. He continued: ‘The same thing, if you look closely, has also happened in Germany, the other country which, like us, is most restrained in terms of national sentiments. We have turned the page, achieved and internalised a national spirit that is strong, healthy and positive, and free of nationalistic ideologies’ (Mauro, 2006).

By the term ‘normal country’, then, I here mean one that is fully comparable (within the limits of comparative analysis itself) with other countries belonging to the category of ‘developed industrial democracies’. I mean too that in terms of the quality of its democracy, Italy is in most respects no worse than other countries in the category and is in some respects much better.

The reasons why I have chosen to emphasise this point, beyond the obvious one of needing to explain the choice of a potentially obscure subtitle, are essentially twofold.² In the first place, until recently, it is unlikely that the claim I have just made about Italian politics would have found much support among mainstream political scientists, Italian or foreign. On the contrary: Italy tended to be viewed as a ‘democratic anomaly’, the party system and political culture in particular being thought of by many as falling short of what was required to sustain a healthy participatory democracy. Since the early 1990s, the consensus on this has begun to break down somewhat. This, as will become apparent from the following chapters, has been due partly to objective changes – in particular, the party-system upheavals that followed the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and their (long-term) institutional and policy consequences – and partly to the beginnings of a reassessment of what went before 1989. Once, the so-called First Republic and its principal actors were analysed almost exclusively in terms of their supposedly negative concomitants, notably, a lack of political accountability and policy-making inefficiency. Now, increasing emphasis is being placed also on the impressive contribution they made to the consolidation of democracy in international conditions whose pressures almost all worked in the opposite direction.

The second reason, then, for choosing to emphasise the point about normality is that the reader has a right to be told explicitly about the perspective (and possible biases) of the author. Though there is a world that has an objective existence independently of our perceptions of it, it remains the case that no description of that world can ever reflect its nature with complete accuracy; for perception always and inevitably takes place from a given ‘angle of vision’ that emphasises *this* at the expense of *that* aspect and so on. This was implicitly recognised in the Italian First Republic practice of dividing control of the then three principal television channels between the main political parties. Giving the viewer a choice of news bulletins, each with differences of emphasis, strikes the author as having been a rather better, because more honest, way of bringing current affairs to the citizen than is the way of broadcasting that is more rigidly governed by principles of party-political neutrality. Leaving aside lies and conscious distortion, there is no such thing as completely objective reporting. But precisely for this reason, the reader needs to be told about the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84070-5 - The Politics of Italy: Governance in a Normal Country

James L. Newell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

angle of vision of the author whose work s/he is reading in order to be empowered to make an independent assessment of it.

My angle of vision is such that I claim for Italian politics the status of 'normality' as I have defined this term above. This does not mean that I wish to deny the reality of some of the obvious problems of Italian democracy – for example, fragmentation of the party system (though in this respect the 2008 election brought the system, at least in Parliament, well within the range of 'normality' for European democracies). Depending on party-political developments in the aftermath of the 2008 election, fragmentation could continue to pose significant conundrums, especially for the prospects of a stable centre-left alternative to the present government. Oreste Massari (2005: 448) was surely correct to point out that Italy's bipolar coalitions cannot be regarded as the 'functional equivalent' of the British 'two-party' system or of the German or Spanish bipolar systems. Or, to give another example, it is true that anti-political sentiments are widespread in Italy – and so on. But what I do wish to claim is two things; first, that if the attempt were made to draw up some kind of 'balance sheet' in order to compare Italian democracy with that of other European countries, then one would be forced to the conclusion that other countries have similar problems or, if free of one or the other of the problems affecting Italy, have other problems Italy does not have. Second, and more importantly, I want to claim that phenomena that are often adduced to compare Italy unfavourably with other democracies are too often interpreted, and evaluated, in terms of categories imposed on them from the outside and that this blocks understanding of their significance and therefore of the country's politics: see Newell (2004) and Mastropaolo (2006). So the claim that Italy is a normal country is also an invitation to the student to avoid interpretations in terms of external categories, and to seek, instead, to interpret phenomena in their own terms through the effort to appreciate the meanings that actors themselves attach to their actions; for ultimately, this is the only way in which the social and political life of others can be explained and understood, the only way in which – by definition – it can cease to appear mysterious and abnormal to us. The point goes beyond the question of Italy and is relevant for the study of comparative politics in general: a sympathetic understanding of the points of view of those whom one is studying is indispensable if one wishes to achieve knowledge such that 'the characteristics attributed to [the] foreign culture ... differs from the folklore or prejudices about the foreign country which already exist in his own society' (Scheuch, 1967, quoted by Dogan and Pelassy, 1990: 70).

■ Plan of the book

With the aim of offering something that allows the reader to acquire understanding, and that is *insight* into Italian politics, I have sought to present the chapters, though they can be read independently, in a way that reflects a clear underlying logic.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84070-5 - The Politics of Italy: Governance in a Normal Country

James L. Newell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE POLITICS OF ITALY

Since current arrangements and events have the shape that they do because past arrangements and events have conspired to give them that shape, chapter 1 seeks to offer a historical perspective on Italian politics, focusing on the main threads underlying the formation of the Italian state and its subsequent passage from liberal to Fascist to post-war republican regimes.

Chapter 1's observations about the failure of attempts, in the 1990s, at thoroughgoing reform of the republican constitution then provide the basis for the analysis, in chapter 2, of the Constitution's basic principles and the institutional framework it establishes and sustains. Chapter 3 proceeds to put flesh on the constitutional bones by considering how the institutions actually interact in the multi-level governance that is a central feature of the policy-making process in Italy as in all other democracies. Since the institutions of central government – Parliament, the executive and the bureaucracy – remain, despite polycentrism, those with the greatest influence over the substance of public policy, chapter 4 is devoted to an analysis of their working and interactions. The following three chapters then move beyond the institutional corridors of power to explore the social and political environment within which the institutions are embedded and with whose demands they must come to terms. Thus chapter 5 explores aspects of the political culture driving and expressed by political actors' behaviour, while chapter 6 explores how political demands are expressed through pressure-group activity – looking, in the process, at the organisations of capital and labour, promotional groups and the Catholic Church, and asking about their contribution to the quality of Italian democracy. For the vast majority of Italians as for the citizens of most other democracies, the most significant channel for the expression of political demands is, however, the one given by elections and parties – topics to which chapter 7 is consequently devoted.

The final part of the book then moves on to look at the nature of the policy outputs that are the product of the institutional interaction and the behavioural inputs described and analysed in the preceding two parts. Starting from the recognition that successful economic management is an essential prerequisite for success in every other area of policy-making – and therefore for governments' capacities to remain in office – chapter 8 looks at the record in terms of Italian governments' experience with economic policy in recent years. It, and the subsequent chapter, devoted to welfare and rights policy, adopt the same basic approach, exploring first the policy context, next the problems and constraints this has thrown up, and finally, the ways in which Italian governments have in recent years sought to respond to these problems and constraints. Finally, chapter 10, which explores foreign policy, offers a 'rounding off': while the first chapter placed the Italian polity in its temporal context, chapter 10 places Italy in its spatial context, describing the most relevant characteristics of the global environment within which the country is located, the implications these have had for Italian politics and how Italian policy-makers have reacted to them.

■ Notes

1. In the Senate contest the Unione had a majority of two seats and was behind the Cdl by 124,273 votes. This placed the Senate contest alongside the outcomes of two British general elections and one US presidential election in the post-war period, all of which saw the loser in terms of votes nevertheless emerge as the winner in terms of seats.
2. It should also be noted that the subtitle is not being offered in some kind of polemical contrast with Geoff Andrews' (2005) book, *Not a Normal Country: Italy after Berlusconi* whose material is, in my opinion, well written, very insightful and yes, moving in places: see for example, chapter 2.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84070-5 - The Politics of Italy: Governance in a Normal Country
James L. Newell
Excerpt
[More information](#)

I

Historical background



1 History

■ Introduction

It is conventional among writers on Italian politics to divide its history from the birth of the Italian state in 1861 into three main types of regime – the liberal, the Fascist and the republican. The republican era is often divided into two, the first running from the promulgation of the republican constitution after 1948 up to the early 1990s, and the second from the early 1990s to the present. In each of these, those in government tended to see the forces of political opposition as inherently illegitimate. In each case they saw their mission as being less to ‘govern’ than to defend the state against the forces of opposition, which they saw as ‘usurpers’. The ultimate failure of those in power to contain the forces of opposition led to a crisis of the regime itself (Salvadori, 1994). The latest of these was prompted by a number of factors including, most notably, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the signing of the European Union’s Maastricht Treaty in 1991, and revelations of widespread political corruption that emerged after the Italian general election of 1992. The result of this combination of political circumstances was that the parties that had been in power in the first republican period began to disintegrate, to be replaced by new and different parties and political forces. However, a regime transition of modern Italy is yet far from complete because there is still no fundamental constitutional change. Nevertheless, the Italian political system is no longer as ‘unique’ or ‘anomalous’ as it was in its early periods, and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84070-5 - The Politics of Italy: Governance in a Normal Country

James L. Newell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Italian politics are now more like those of the countries in other parts of Western Europe.

With this in mind, we begin with a brief account of Italian political history from the birth of the state in 1861. The chapter covers:

- The liberal regime, 1861–1924
- The Fascist regime and its aftermath, 1924–46
- The first republican period, 1946 – early 1990s
- The second republican period, early 1990s to the present.

■ The liberal regime, 1861–1924

The processes that led to the genesis of liberal Italy are complex. However, the state's birth sprang from convergence of the goals of liberals and nationalists, with the international ambitions of Piedmont Sardinia. Prior to 1859, the

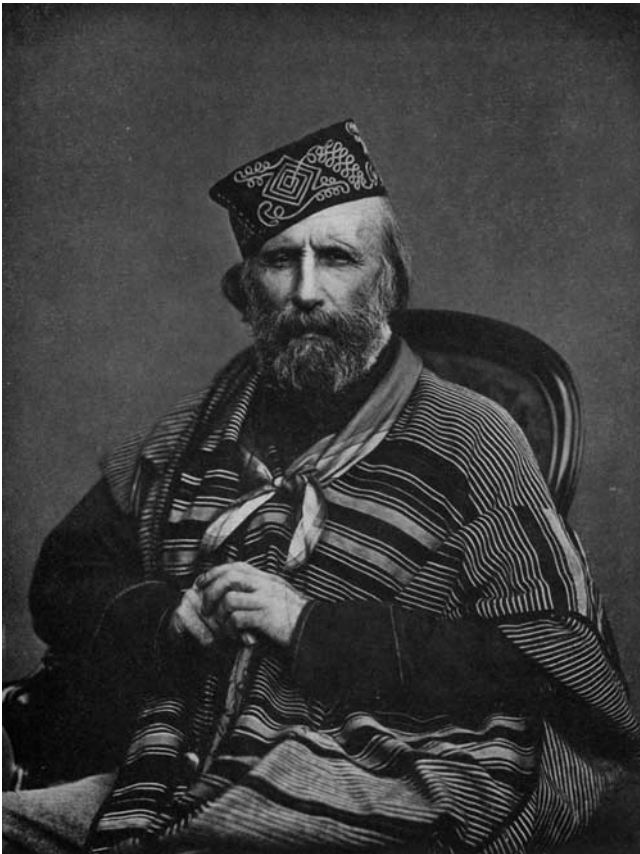


Figure 1.1. Giuseppe Garibaldi (see Box 1.1)

Italian peninsula was divided into ten separate states, whose existence had been underwritten by the Treaty of Vienna of 1815.¹ The overriding purpose of the treaty was to contain French expansionism and the revolutionary social and political ideas identified with it. Therefore it was designed to enable the Austrian Habsburgs to dominate the peninsula. This was achieved through Austria's direct control of one state (Lombardo-Venetia), while members of the House of Habsburg governed two others (Tuscany and Parma) and an Austrian was the ruling duke of a fourth (Modena). Austrian ambitions were counterposed by the Kingdom of Sardinia (consisting of Piedmont and the island of Sardinia) and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (the southern half of the peninsula plus the island of Sicily). All these states were governed by conservative, absolutist rulers. However, economic and political changes had begun to feed a search for political liberty within the peninsula:

- First, while most of the peninsula was economically backward, in Lombardy silk production had spawned the emergence of commercial capitalists. These wanted liberal reforms as a means to advance their interests in general and to achieve specific economic goals – in particular, the removal of tariff barriers between the peninsula's states.
- Second, French occupation of the peninsula between 1796 and 1815 had shown that constitutional government there was feasible and that Italy could become a single state. This helped link demands for liberal reform to **nationalism** (Box 1.2). Meanwhile, people were aware that the achievement of reform would necessarily require independence because so many absolutist rulers depended on Austrian bayonets to sustain them (Gooch, 1989: 2).

■ The unification of Italy

Uprisings in 1820–1 and in 1831 that were easily crushed by Austria reinforced this awareness. Then, the argument for looking to Piedmont Sardinia to provide assistance in ousting Austria was strengthened by two things. The first of these was the wave of European revolutions of 1848 which led the Piedmontese king, Charles Albert, to grant a constitution. The second was the revolutions' aftermath, which left Piedmont as the only Italian state in which constitutional government survived. In this situation, Charles Albert's successor, Victor Emmanuel II (Box 1.1), was prepared to assist anti-Austrian revolutionaries for motives of dynastic aggrandisement. Piedmont's Prime Minister, Camillo di Cavour, was prepared to do the same because of the contribution he thought expansionism would make to Piedmontese economic and social development.

However, Cavour's aims did not encompass unification of the entire peninsula. Also, while he opposed absolutism, he also opposed democracy and republicanism. Therefore, the fact that democratic and republican Italian nationalists nevertheless embraced the cause of Piedmont against Austria owed much to the argument that independence had to be won first, before the ultimate goal of

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



Map 2. The Italian states at the time of the Treaty of Vienna, 1815
Source: Shepherd, William. *Historical Atlas*. New York: Henry Holt and Company 1911

liberty could be achieved. As a result of the war of 1859, Piedmont acquired Lombardy, Parma, Modena and the Romagna area of the Papal State. Further expansion was potentially threatening to France. However, British pressure helped induce the latter to accept the idea of a single state of central and