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MPs elected abroad: selection, strategies and programs*

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Since the adoption of the “Tremaglia” law to the last general election, enough time has passed to enable an initial assessment of the “foreign” constituency phenomenon. The regulatory framework has changed radically in the last 20 years: from the “Moschini-Armella” law to the present day, procedures have enforced the opportunities of political participation within representative institutions for Italian citizens abroad (Balsamo, 2012). In this context, a first decisive step was the setting up of representative bodies for Italian Communities (Comites in 1985; Cgie in 1989). Later, in 2001, the “Tremaglia” law¹ further expanded the space for participation: it instituted a new constituency (Circoscrizione Estero) for Italian emigrants and introduced postal voting in general elections and referendums. Italians living abroad have been able to elect 12 deputies and 6 senators, while only those who can reside permanently in a foreign state are eligible for election (passive electorate).² Therefore, there are many critical points of laws: the drawing up of the electoral district (Sartori, 1999; Sica, 2008), the possibility of fraud, the delimitation of electorate (Zincone, 2006b): and the quality of political representation (Tarli Barbieri, 2007; Gratteri, 2008).

After the law’s adoption, the first referenda (2003, 2005), the confirmative referendum on constitutional reform (2006) and the general election (2006) have had positive outcomes in terms of voter turnout: Italians, listed in AIRE (Anagrafe Italiani Residenti all’Estero), increased from 4.5% of electoral certificates delivered³ (in the 2001 general election) to 42.54% of ballot envelopes sent back in 2006 (Feltrin, Coassin, 2007; Rubechi, 2008). Data also show that the Italian electorate abroad may produce unexpected results: for example, in contrast to the rest of the Italian electorate, the “Estero” constituency approved constitutional reform in the referendum of June 2006; it also rewarded centre-left parties. Also the 2013 elections gave, at least symbolically, a strategic value to results of the “Estero” district: the weight of “Italians abroad” is a determining factor in the election results.⁴

The central problem was representation and its construction in the presence of such a large “orbiting” electoral college (Sartori, 1999). In this context, the selection of elected representatives in the new college and the quality of representation become key issues.

The profile of Italian MPs elected abroad is linked to general transformation of Italian deputation profile and to electoral mechanisms. The last general elections (De Lucia, 2013; Tronconi, Verzichelli, 2014) show profound transformations of parliamentary representation that partially match the new profile of the “Estero” delegation in XVII Legislature.

The “Estero” electoral system and, in particular, the preference system limits turnover, favouring candidates with greater visibility and recognition. New elected,⁵ in fact, are only half in the foreign constituency, compared with 64.2% of all elected. Levels of instruction are very similar while, in contrast, generational change is less marked. The proportion of women is also divergent from the general trend: the number of women is only 22.2%. The analysis of political participation (in the year preceding the 2013 elections) reveals the prevalence of traditional participatory activities (party activities, meetings and debates, mobilization) and, secondly,

significant activism online. Unconventional forms (fair trade consumption) or territorial forms of mobilization (parades, demonstrations, leafleting) are less important.

The General Election re-elected a large part of the parliamentary constituency abroad, returning even someone who had not been confirmed in 2008. For four of the elected, this was their third election: they have represented a permanent presence since 2006, the year of the first application of the “Tremaglia” Law.

There were no lateral entrances, nor outsiders: MPs elected were all previous members of political parties and trade unions or in one of the hundreds of emigrants associations (Colucci, 2001). The latter are very important because his mobilization role: “mediation ... between the territories of origin, arrival and return” (Colucci, 2001: 429; cfr. Consonni, 2012). For “foreign” elected, trade unions and employers’ organizations are crucial in order to win the elections, even more than the parties.

The logic of selection of political personnel is slightly different from what is found in a national context. The role played by the party organizations is central and the role of “incumbent” MPs is enhanced. From interviews, the selection process seems largely attributable to party logic. A partial exception is the case of the “Parlamentarie” that select candidates of the M5S and, in a few cases, the “Primarie” for the PD. Talking about candidates’ selection for the constituency, Democratic Party and Forza Italia representatives indicated national committees before local ones. To win elections, the associative profile appears more important than party membership. Associations have a territorial and thematic aspect that is complex and growing, especially in these areas. This explains the parties’ competition to secure the “services” of central figures – to serve as relational hubs – in a network of relationships. Over time, however, prudence dictated the choice of candidates more clearly included in party networks: this was to limit electoral “migration”.

As the deputies claimed, it is not easy to construct a communication electoral campaign for the communities of Italians living abroad. Therefore, the numerous associations become short cuts to mobilization. Using the associations as intermediaries reduces the costs of political mobilization for the candidate: in enormous territories, costs are unsustainable for a candidate without abundant economic resources. Given these premises, the campaign of candidates generally focused on restricted portions of territory, generally adjacent with his own place of study or work. Therefore, the distribution of individual preferences means that more than half the votes came from the state of residence of MPs where they, in all probability, focused their efforts. The candidates’ approach was concrete: mobilization campaigns developed in relatively short periods and with little investment. From the interviews, it emerges that candidates habitually use traditional tools in their campaign: leafleting, meetings, rallies. Traditional media (radio, tv, etc.) and digital platform appear less central, but this does not mean that MPs are not present on social networks. Social networks become important to stay in touch with the voters in the constituency.

Data show that the chances of winning are greater in cases with a specific profile, namely candidates who come from states where there are large communities of Italians and also from those states where turnout propensity is more pronounced.

In studies on the elected, Parliamentarians’ interpretation of political representation is a central issue. As well as data on productivity in parliament, it is useful to ask about the role played by the “foreign” delegation, in order to assess the form given to representation. The “Tremaglia Law” gives importance to a set of specific policies for Italian immigrants, giving them the opportunity to identify representatives of the territories and also some specific policies. Representation should simultaneously cover a territorial dimension (the electoral college) and a thematic dimension (the rights of migrants). As shown in other studies (Carey, Shugart, 1995), the proportional electoral law for the college encourages intra-party competition, which is not limited to the election period but also extends to parliamentary life. In this framework, draft bills and many individual activities (“ordini del giorno”, interpellations, time questions, and amendments) are linked to the individual’s need for external visibility, especially to the voters (Zucchini, 2001; Russo 2013): a long-term strategy to be re-elected.

The productivity index of parliamentarians reveals a composite situation in comparison with parliament as a whole. From the data of Openparlamento, senators and congressional representatives have very different productivity ratios.

Analysis of the intentions and activities of parliamentarians showed polarization on issues directly related to the theme of living abroad. Even when the subject seems distant or general (E.g. the defense of the welfare state), the protection of Italian emigrants and their rights are frequently encountered. Among the activities that can be monitored – leaving in the background activities of informal pressure – I analyzed the production of draft bills. In sum, the number of approved draft bills is overall very low. For example, the elected are aware of some critical issues in electoral law, especially the mechanisms for defining voters and collecting expressed votes. These reflections express a wide consensus that could ensure a process of partial reform of the law. Despite sharing many reforms, the deputation is not able to build a shared agenda on the issues of migration within Parliament, but it can influence marginal aspects of legislative output.

Notes

* This text describes briefly the main points of my on-going research on Italian MPs elected abroad: reconstruction of Italian deputation profile and the kind of representation enjoyed by Italian migrants.

¹ Legge 27 dicembre 2001, n. 459 “Norme per l’esercizio del diritto di voto dei cittadini italiani residenti all’estero”.

² The “foreign constituency” has four sub areas: “Europe” (including the Russian Federation and Turkey), “South America”, “Central America and North America” and “Africa-Asia-Oceania-Antarctica”.

³ The data refers to the electoral certificates that were withdrawn from registered voters (AIRE- Anagrafe Italiani Residenti all’Estero). Registration was required to vote in polling stations located in the Italy “native” or “origin” towns.

⁴ PD obtained first position only if we sum “Italia” and “Estero” votes (8646034 + 287975). Only in “Italia”, the first party is Movimento 5 Stelle [M5S] (8.691.406 votes without “Valle D’Aosta” constituency).

⁵ The research is mainly based on semi-structured and self-administered questionnaires through the platform “Google-drive” and on some in-depth interviews. We interviewed 18 MPs (12 deputies and 6 senators) and 34 non-elected candidates of 227 candidates, selected from electoral lists of the “Estero” constituency. Just for the latter (the data will be used only in limited form for this paper), the electronic method, has overcome the problem of geographical distance. The questionnaire assessed the socio-demographic profile, the methods of political recruitment, political participation propensity, and communication to electorate. In consideration of the universe considered, we considered only the absolute values and it is excluded the use of multivariate techniques for profiling. *The research includes analysis of draft bills.*

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