

Le elezioni amministrative della prima Repubblica. Politica e propaganda locale nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra (1946–1956), by Rosario Forlenza, Rome, Donizelli, 2008, xii + 258 pp., €32.00, ISBN 978-88-603-6260-5

This study by Rosario Forlenza of the University of Tuscia is representative of Italian scholars' growing interest over the past two decades in local political history. This new interest draws on both international and domestic developments. Influenced by France's *nouvelle histoire du politique*, Forlenza brings an inter-disciplinary focus to his work, drawing particularly on anthropology, linguistics, political science and communication studies. Approached in this way, elections become 'places of social integration and participation, of ideology and propaganda, of mobilisation and the networks of sociability' (p. 3). On the domestic political level, Forlenza's work is also timely in view of the gradual devolution of power to provinces and communities across the peninsula in recent years.

Forlenza has organised his book around the communal elections of 1946, 1951–1952 and 1956, devoting one substantial chapter to each (chapters 1–3). Sixteen colour reproductions of campaign posters, flyers and political cartoons evoke the sometimes shrill, sometimes humorous tenor of these elections. Chapter 4 is arranged thematically, focusing on electoral geopolitics, political symbols, political education and finally electoral discourse. The chapter's subsections allow Forlenza to tease out larger trends and to bring comparative and theoretical considerations to the fore. Rounding out the work is an impressive 29-page bibliography of works cited in the study. The range of secondary works and the scope of primary sources utilised by the author – archival, manuscript and print – testify to the rigorous research that went into this book.

For this reviewer, the first chapter was the most accessible and provided the richest array of insights. A fascinating case in point is Forlenza's discussion of the post-war enfranchisement of Italian women. Although the Fascist government had granted them the (rather hollow) right to vote in local elections in 1925, the chauvinist thrust of Mussolinian ideology increasingly relegated women to second-class civil status. Upon entering the co-belligerent Italian government in 1944, the Resistance parties lost little time in pushing for women's suffrage. In a decree dated 1 February 1945, Umberto II extended to Italian women the right to vote at all levels. Strangely, however, what was then called 'passive suffrage' – the right to stand for election – was not incorporated in the February decree. This was only corrected on 10 March 1946 – the same day that communal elections began.

The administrative elections of 1951–1952, covered in chapter 2, took place in a greatly altered ideological context. The virulent Cold War led the nation's leading political blocs to frame local governance in opposing ways. Despite the fundamental importance of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching, the Christian Democrat-led government sought to downplay the effective autonomy of local governments in order to blunt grass-roots leftist strength, especially in Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany and Umbria. The leftist opposition, by contrast, pressed for full implementation of the constitution as pertaining to regional, provincial and local empowerment. The central government's instruction that local governments had to be 'non-political' in the name of administrative neutrality and efficiency (*tecnicismo amministrativo*, p. 76) was used as a ploy to suppress unwelcome initiatives on the part of opposition parties.

By the 1956 elections, the focus of Forlenza's third chapter, clear prospects for ideological distension and political dialogue marked both domestic Italian and international politics. Khrushchev's succession after the death of Stalin and his denunciation of Stalin's crimes in February 1956 sent ripples around the world. Within Italy, the Socialist party distanced itself from the Communists. The social and economic hardships of the immediate post-war years had clearly lessened, and the 'Economic Miracle' beckoned.

The administrative elections of that year registered a number of important changes as well. Turnout topped 90%, surpassing the levels attained in 1946 and 1951–1952. Forlenza attributes this to a variety of factors. The election was managed in a more consistent and efficient manner and there were more polling stations. Anti-abstention drives by the government and by the parties themselves bore fruit. New regulations curbing the most incendiary political propaganda tamed the contests, as many observers remarked on the civility of the campaign. Turnout at electoral rallies actually fell off – a discouraging trend for the left, which relied heavily on such face-to-face settings. The chief beneficiaries of the new electoral environment were the Christian Democrats and, to a lesser extent, the Socialists and Social Democrats, while the Communists managed to hold their own. Smaller parties, especially those on the right, lost ground.

Complementing the wide-ranging analysis already discussed are more focused assessments that Forlenza provides of Sicily's 1947 regional elections (in chapter 2), and of Neapolitan municipal politics in the 1950s (in chapter 3). In Sicily, a striking swing to the left elevated the national political temperature heading into the watershed parliamentary elections of April 1948. The reign of the idiosyncratic rightist Achille Lauro as Mayor of Naples, 1952–1958, seemed more of an anomaly at the time. In hindsight though, it is unnerving to note the extent to which Lauro anticipated Silvio Berlusconi in his populist, anti-establishment message, irreverent public persona and pugnacious rhetorical style. Forlenza's study ably underscores how often, and how colourfully, the microcosm of local politics has presaged the macrocosm of developments in Rome through the turbulent history of the Italian Republic.

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