

BOOK REVIEWS

La legislazione elettorale italiana, edited by Roberto D'Alimonte and Carlo Fusaro, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2008, 424 pp., €28.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-15-12519-4

The Italian expatriate vote in Australia: Democratic right, democratic wrong, or political opportunism?, by Bruno Mascitelli and Simone Battiston, Ballan, Connor Court Publishing, 2008, 290 pp., AU\$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1921421099

The view that Italy's unsolved systemic problems make it an anomaly among Western democracies is not new. This kind of analysis can be found in a number of works on Italy beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, with the works of Banfield, La Palombara, Almond and Verba, through to Putnam's in-depth examination of Italian politics and government in his 1993 study *Making democracy work*. More recently, *The Economist*, in May 2005, labelled Italy as 'the real sick man of Europe', drawing the attention of the Anglophone media and political commentators to the perceived economic, political and cultural decline of the country. *The Economist* has dedicated at least three more issues to the subject, while over the past year several UK universities have held conferences and seminars on the topic of the status of Italian democracy and why Italy is incapable of reform. Critiques have not been limited to the current political ruling class, but have encompassed Italy's managerial class as well – see, for example, the work of a group of scholars from the London School of Economics that pointed out how Italian managerial selection very often relies on personal or family contacts instead of using a performance-based model.

La legislazione elettorale italiana, edited by Roberto D'Alimonte and Carlo Fusaro, is a further and subtler contribution to these analyses of Italy's chronic and systemic problems. The editors and contributors brilliantly illustrate how the electoral system and the debate around the reform of the electoral legislation are an expression of the problems associated with Italy's political elites and are deeply intertwined with the social and cultural fabric of the country.

The authors, who are from different methodological and disciplinary backgrounds, adopt a comparative approach in order to explain the peculiar features of the Italian electoral legislation in a European context. This comparative approach is perhaps too scattered across different chapters, while a single comparative chapter would have been more reader friendly. The legislative framework for Italian elections is addressed through a study of the complexity of constitutional and ordinary laws, as well as decrees and regulations, with a wealth of data which can be found in the 12 chapters of the volume that, when taken as whole, provide a complete and technical account of the functioning of the Italian political system. However, the aim of the book is more than a simple explanation of how votes get translated into seats. The authors also set out to assess the systemic and strategic factors that have led to political instability in Italy, the fragmentation of the party system and the exclusion from representation of important sectors of the nation. On this basis they also advance proposals for reform, with a view

to simplifying electoral legislation into an integrated, single text; promoting government stability; enhancing the transparency of campaign expenditure; allowing fair and equal electoral contests for all citizens; clearer rules to determine ineligibility for election; and ways of making the system more accountable, reliable and open. In short, they aim to improve the quality of Italian democracy.

Analysis of the electoral legislation itself is broadened to embrace considerations of elite political culture, current events and historical maladies affecting Italian society. In particular, the authors describe how some aspects of Italian society and politics – clientelism, familism, corruption, lack of civic spirit, self-perpetuating party elites – contributed to the hampering of attempts between 1994 and 2006 to build a stable bipolar political system, resulting instead in a ‘fragmented bipolarism’ between two heterogeneous and often litigious coalitions. Other effects of these longstanding ills of Italian society include preventing open access to the electoral race, with the procedures of recruitment and selection of parliamentary candidates now fully in the hands of the political parties, thanks to the closed list system; the lack of clarity regarding regulations concerning ineligibility; and a failure to deliver effective voter education, or to explain the accountability of the system.

The chapter on the political representation of women and the legislative action taken to achieve a political gender balance is worth citing in particular. Traditionally, Italy has an unhappy record of occupying last place among Western democracies in surveys that measure inequalities in achievement between women and men (see, for example, the UN reports *Gender empowerment measure* and *Gender-related development index*). As this chapter well demonstrates, however, this problem cannot be solved merely through affirmative action measures embedded in the electoral legislation. Any such measures must also be accompanied by a radical change in the selection procedures for candidates and, more importantly, by a new mentality fit for a better society.

Another interesting chapter is dedicated to the vote of Italians abroad. Italy granted absentee voting rights to nationals residing abroad through the Constitutional Laws no. 1 of 17 January 2000 and no. 1 of 23 January 2001, and Law no. 459 of 27 December 2001. There is a growing trend among the world’s nations to permit citizens living abroad to participate in national elections (see the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance handbooks on *Voting from abroad*). Yet Italy’s legislation seems once again quite exceptional, as it allocates an extremely generous number of representatives – 12 deputies and six senators – to Italian nationals residing abroad, giving them a potentially pivotal importance in the case of a tight electoral race – as was the case of the 2006 elections. More importantly, the legislation seems ill conceived and flawed. First of all, it grants broader rights to voters abroad than to voters within Italy, since the former are allowed to express up to two preferences and can vote by mail. Second, since Italians living abroad who have registered with Italian consular services receive their ballots from the consulate by post, there is no control over voting procedures, leading to risks in terms of violation of the secrecy of the vote and electoral manipulation. Last but not least, the current legislation raises a series of normative concerns that could be summarised with the phrase: *no taxation and over-representation*.

These concerns are also indicated – and partially shared – by Bruno Mascitelli and Simone Battiston in their book *The Italian expatriate vote in Australia*. The authors consider the ‘dilemma’ of maintaining such a generous electoral entitlement for Italian expatriates and their descendants who retain Italian citizenship, while they are ‘no longer

part of the living process of the affairs of their home country (or never were) and are not subject to its laws and consequences' – and even seem relatively uninterested in the country, given the record of generally low turnouts.

This volume represents a pioneering study of the Italian vote from abroad, with a sound empirical analysis of the electoral campaigns of 2006 and 2008 in Australia. The authors focus specifically on Australia, the country with the largest Italian community in the constituency that comprises Africa, Asia, Oceania and Antarctica and that elected two candidates to the Italian Parliament on both occasions, namely Marco Fedi and Nino Randazzo. The analysis of the two elections is framed in the history of the Italian experience in Australia on one side, and the evolution of Italy's citizenship policies towards its expatriates on the other. Some reference is made to the scholarly debate on political transnationalism and Diaspora studies, but the authors do not consistently pursue a dialogue between their empirical study and the recently burgeoning analysis of countries' policies to manage 'diasporas' abroad, often for the purpose of promoting their national interests in the international arena. A more systematic interaction with the theoretical literature on how States try to create nationalism among their expatriates would have provided the reader with a better understanding of why, according to the authors, the Italians in Australia 'have become pawns of greater political and nationalist games of Italian political elites'.

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Evicted from eternity: The restructuring of modern Rome, by Michael Herzfeld, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2009, xiii + 392 pp., £19.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-226-32912-3

Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld has a longstanding preoccupation with the cohabitation of past and present in modern societies. His first book, *Ours once more: Folklore, ideology and the making of modern Greece* (1982), examined the role of history and tradition in the production of Greek national identity; he subsequently wrote an ethnography of shepherds in contemporary Crete. He has also done fieldwork in Thailand, exploring southern Europe and Southeast Asia in a comparative framework. Given these interests, it is perhaps inevitable that Herzfeld should train his gaze on Italy, and particularly on Rome. Like Greece and Thailand, the past is ubiquitous and insistently present in the *bel paese* – and nowhere more so than in the Eternal City.

Evicted from eternity provides a snapshot of Rome at the turn of the millennium, as it undergoes a moment of crisis and dramatic transformation. While always a global city – as the seat of an ancient empire and a world religion, as well as a tourist mecca – Rome has only recently had to contend with globalisation, with the pressures and paroxysms of the international market economy. Herzfeld provides a window on these upheavals through a richly detailed portrait of Monti, one of Rome's oldest quarters, wedged between Stazione Termini and the ancient heart of the city. An urban 'village', home to traditional artisans and small shopkeepers, Monti has undergone a massive wave of gentrification in recent