

Paolo Feltrin, Giuseppe Ieraci

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# Facilitating voting and electoral participation in Italy

## On some possible measures to contrast involuntary and imposed abstentionism

### **FACILITATING VOTING AND ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN ITALY. ON SOME POSSIBLE MEASURES TO CONTRAST INVOLUNTARY AND IMPOSED ABSTENTIONISM**

Voter abstentionism and declining voter participation are widespread phenomena in European democracies. Recently, the decline in electoral participation has also reached alarming proportions in Italy. However, a non-negligible share of abstentionism is not due to political attitudes or protest, but simply to objective impediments to going to the polling stations. These impediments include work and study in locations other than that of residence and electoral registration, as well as illness or physical immobility. The article emphasizes the possibility of limiting this imposed or involuntary abstentionism by using postal voting, deferred voting or free voting at any polling station, and above all by introducing digital voting supported by web platforms.

**KEYWORDS** *Abstentionism, Italy, Postal Voting, Deferred Voting, Digital Voting.*

## 1. Introduction

Democracies are permanent electoral campaigns, which are difficult to legitimize if voters do not participate. The drop in the voter turnout in Italy has become a shocking fact because it is sudden and accelerated. Until the 1979 political elections, voters in Italy were over 90%, the 2008 elections still registered 80.5% of turnout, today, in the elections of the last September 25,

Paolo Feltrin, Tolomeo Studi e Ricerche – Via Santa Bona Vecchia, 62 – 31100 Treviso, e-mail: [paolo.feltrin@gmail.com](mailto:paolo.feltrin@gmail.com), orcid: 0000-0003-2801-5151.

Giuseppe Ieraci, DiSPeS, Università di Trieste – P.le Europa, 1 – 34217 Trieste, e-mail: [giuseppe.ieraci@dispes.unts.it](mailto:giuseppe.ieraci@dispes.unts.it), orcid: 0000-0002-5837-7973.

2022, 63.8% of the Italian voters went to the polls. An analysis by Ipsos (2022) shows that among those who abstained on September 25, 41.5% were women, men 36.9%; university graduates 28.9%, those with a low level of education (elementary, middle school) 42.5%; about a third of Generation Z (born after 1996) and Boomers (born 1946-1964) abstained, and in other generational groups abstentionism went beyond the 40% threshold, with a peak of 50.8% in the «old» population of those born before 1946. These figures are not so disastrous when compared with those of other major European democracies (see Table 1 below), but an average drop of 30% of turnout at the national elections is enough to raise concern. More alarming are the data regarding the election for the local and regional administration. At the regional election of February 2023, in Lombardy the partial turnout was 41.7% (in 2018, with the same number of municipalities, 73.1% had voted), in Lazio the final turnout came to 37.2%, against 66.5% in the previous round.

It is not easy to say what the reasons for the decline in participation are, but if we were to adopt a market-oriented perspective and consider voters as a kind of «buyer» in a political market (Downs 1957) that has become increasingly chaotic, we could ask ourselves what stimuli, instruments and in a – broader sense – devices could help to make electoral participation less costly. Gerbaudo (2021, 272) suggested, for example, that if one looks at the role played by social media such as Facebook, Twitter, the marketing techniques known as funneling suggest a particular reading of mobilization because it is a «process of progressive social and spatial concentration».

One could add another consideration. The development of digital technologies and their direct use in the most diverse situations, from booking a theatre ticket to attending a business meeting, have profoundly changed the perception of social engagement and its relevance. The recent Covid-19 pandemic crisis may have given further impetus to this process of disregarding «living life in presence» or «social relations in presence». We have begun to relate to the public administration using internet and digital tools, some of us have stopped travelling to workplaces, carrying out our functions from home, we have learnt that a multitude of time previously needed for social activities can be economized and now recovered for private life. We do not want to pose any ethical questions, so we do not question whether this is good or bad, we merely record that this has happened. Wanting to put the question on a philosophical level, one could argue that digital technologies generate a kind of distortion of the individual's perception of space-time coordinates. Being in a certain place and time is no longer the *sine qua non* of social participation.

Moreover, echoing Huizinga's (1972) well-known conception of the individual as «*homo ludens*», one might ask whether digital technologies could

have a decontextualization effect of political-social participation, freeing it from its inhibitory ethical meanings. We have no data that can support such a hypothesis, the verification of which goes beyond the scope of this article, but it cannot be excluded that the use of digital techniques could favor the approach to electoral participation of «lazy voters», who have no strong interest, or do not have the tools to resolve themselves in the political offer but which can be positively stimulated by the use of devices that bring them back to a playful and free dimension (from the pressure of civil and political commitment). We stress again that it is not our intention to express an ethical-political judgment on this possible employment, but to limit ourselves to suggesting that the dissemination of the use of devices could prove to be an instrumental lever of some effectiveness in overcoming apathy and political indifference and in any case promoting electoral participation.

## 2. Types of abstentionism and possible countermeasures

As a starting point, it is necessary to investigate the characteristics of abstentionism, and then to suggest possible measures that could reduce it, provided that there is a convergence of opinion that the legitimacy of legislative assemblies and governments depends also on the level of electoral participation (Blondel *et al.* 1997). There are several variables that may affect electoral participation and abstentionism. Both politicians and scholars tend to emphasize the protest dimension, which refers to mistrust, skepticism, disaffection towards political representatives and/or the performance of the democratic system in contemporary times. In short, abstentionism would be the most obvious symptom of discontent with democracy. However, without denying discontent as a factor in the decline in electoral participation in democratic countries since the 1980s, are there other factors also at play?

The trend in voter turnout in European countries after the Second World War can be divided into four phases: 1944-1969, 1970-1992, 1993-2008 and 2009-2021 (see Table 1). While electoral participation was generally high and with negligible variations among the European democracies between 1944-69, it has been declining everywhere since the 1980s. The peak of abstentionism was reached in the 1990s and also accelerated after the 2007-08 crisis. We can assume that these trends have followed the processes of democratic consolidation, although in the Italian case abstentionism is linked to the crisis of the party system after the political scandals of the early 1990s.

TAB. 1. *Number of elections and average electoral participation in Europe (1944-2021)*

| Country     | 1944-69         |                   | 1970-1992       |  | 1993-2008       |  | 2009-2021       |  |
|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|--|-----------------|--|-----------------|--|
|             | N. of elections | Av. participation | N. of elections | Av. Participation (and negative differences with previous phase) | N. of elections | Av. participation (and negative differences with previous phase) | N. of elections | Av. participation (and negative differences with previous phase) |
| Austria     | 7               | 95.0              | 7               | 91.2 (-3.8)  | 5               | 80.8 (-10.4)   | 3               | 76.7 (-4.1)  |
| Belgium     | 8               | 92.2              | 8               | 93.3   | 4               | 91.2 (-2.1)  | 3               | 88.5 (-2.7)  |
| Denmark     | 10              | 84.4              | 10              | 85.4   | 5               | 85.8   | 3               | 86.0   |
| Finland     | 7               | 78.6              | 7               | 79.1   | 4               | 66.4 (-12.7)   | 3               | 67.7   |
| France      | 9               | 78.8              | 5               | 75.7 (-3.1)  | 4               | 64.9 (-10.8)   | 2               | 52.9 (-12.0)   |
| Germany     | 6               | 85.5              | 6               | 86.9   | 4               | 79.6 (-7.3)  | 4               | 73.8 (-5.8)  |
| G. Britain  | 7               | 78.7              | 7               | 75.0 (-3.7)  | 3               | 64.1 (-10.9)   | 4               | 66.8   |
| Greece      | n.a.            | n.a.              | 5               | 80.7   | 5               | 76.0 (-4.7)  | 6               | 62.8 (-13.2)   |
| Holland     | 7               | 94.7              | 7               | 83.5 (-11.2)   | 5               | 77.0 (-6.5)  | 4               | 77.6   |
| Ireland     | 7               | 74.3              | 7               | 73.9   | 4               | 66.0 (-7.9)  | 3               | 66.0   |
| Italy       | 6               | 92.4              | 6               | 90.4 (-2.0)  | 5               | 82.9 (-7.6)  | 2               | 74.0 (-8.8)  |
| Luxemburg   | 6               | 91.1              | 4               | 88.8 (-2.3)  | 3               | 88.8   | 3               | 88.8   |
| Norway      | 7               | 80.6              | 5               | 82.8   | 4               | 76.4 (-6.4)  | 4               | 77.1   |
| Portugal    | n.a.            | n.a.              | 8               | 81.5   | 4               | 63.9 (-17.6)   | 4               | 55.6 (-8.3)  |
| Spain       | n.a.            | n.a.              | 5               | 73.6   | 5               | 75.0   | 5               | 69.9   |
| Sweden      | 8               | 81.2              | 8               | 89.8   | 4               | 82.6 (-7.2)  | 3               | 85.8 (-5.1)  |
| Switzerland | 6               | 67.8              | 6               | 49.9 (-17.9)   | 4               | 44.9 (-5.0)  | 3               | 47.4   |

Source: adaptation from Raniolo (2007, 219), and Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (2022, 41).

If we look at the Italian case, we can see how the turnout goes from 92.4% in the first phase to 90.4% in the second, then decreases to 82.9% and 74% more recently. There is thus certainly a decrease in turnout of almost 20 percentage points (p.p.), which increases even further if we consider the last general elections of September 25, 2022. The trend in participation in Europe is uneven: in Luxembourg, Norway, Spain it decreases by about 2-4 points, in some other countries electoral participation is instead increasing (Denmark and Sweden), there are countries where the decrease is about 10-11 p.p., and finally in France, Portugal, Austria it goes over 20 points, like in Italy.

A first structural explanation of these trends is that in the «small democracies» of Northern Europe (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Austria) there are more elections. Katzenstein (1985; 2003) underlined that national identity may be stronger in the «small democracies» and that voting might represent a way of reaffirming identity and belonging<sup>1</sup>. A second explanation refers to the policies implemented in many European countries to facilitate voting and counteract involuntary abstentionism (see section 3 below). On reflection, in fact, going to vote at the polling station – a technique that was widespread in the 19th and 20th centuries – may seem now for many reasons an old-fashioned way of participating and so cumbersome in its procedures, and it is precisely for this reason that in many parts of the world alternative forms to the traditional polling station voting on fixed dates are being successfully experimented.

In order to study and tackle abstentionism in Italy, to reduce and facilitate voting, as early as December 2021 the Italian Ministry for Relations with Parliament set up a Commission of Experts that produced the White Paper for Citizen Participation (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2022), to which we will be referring now, where a distinction between apparent and real abstentionism is stated. In the context of real abstentionism, with reference to the explicit or implicit reasons underlying the decision not to go to the polls, the White Paper for Citizen Participation distinguishes:

- involuntary (or «necessary») abstentionism, which depends on the material impossibility to go to the polling stations due to physical or material impediments. These are the cases, for example, of the very elderly, sick people at home, persons with disabilities;
- imposed abstentionism, as in the cases of voters unable to vote due to temporary stays outside the municipality of residence for reasons of study, work, holiday, or other;
- political abstentionism due to disinterest in politics, as in the cases of people in a position of cultural and social marginality, with little or no interest in public affairs;
- abstentionism in protest, which characterizes the alienated, ranging from those who explicitly disagree with government policies, to those who contest the political class with clearly anti-establishment positions, those who do not trust in the democratic (electoral) me-

<sup>1</sup> The exception is Switzerland, where the electoral turnout fell below 50%, but it must be borne in mind that in the Swiss political system the cantonal vote has a much greater (and growing) salience than the federal vote. See Kriesi and Trechsel (2008); Bühlmann Nicolet and Selb (2006).

thod, and those with radical, even neo-authoritarian attitudes (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2022, 15, 43).

In short, as many other authors have also pointed out, it seems incorrect and misleading to consider the entire abstentionist as voluntary, because part of it could be apparent and involuntary<sup>2</sup>. At the latest Italian political elections on September 25, 2022, around 16 million citizens deserted the polling stations, 9 million of whom did so for attitudinal and political reasons (political abstention and abstentionism in protest), 2 million for health and age reasons (involuntary or «necessary» abstentionism) and as many as 5 million because they were temporary away from their municipality of residence (imposed abstention). To reduce both involuntary and imposed abstentionism could be relatively feasible if one operated on the objective reasons of the impediments to go to the polling stations.

TAB. 2. *Italian resident voters and Aire voters (Dec. 2001- Jun. 2021)*

|            | Italian<br>resident<br>voters | Aire voters | Total<br>voters | % Variation<br>Italian<br>resident<br>voters * | % Variation<br>Aire<br>voters* | % Aire<br>voters on<br>total voters |
|------------|-------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|--|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 31/12/2001 | 47,353,619                    | 2,238,545   | 49,592,164      | 100.0  | 100.0                          | 4.7                                 |
| 31/12/2002 | 47,328,435                    | 2,385,013   | 49,713,448      | 99.9   | 106.5                          | 5.0                                 |
| 31/12/2003 | 47,683,886                    | 2,548,986   | 50,232,872      | 100.7  | 113.9                          | 5.3                                 |
| 31/12/2004 | 47,549,281                    | 2,873,109   | 50,422,390      | 100.4  | 128.3                          | 6.0                                 |
| 31/12/2005 | 47,591,079                    | 2,966,144   | 50,557,223      | 100.5  | 132.5                          | 6.2                                 |
| 31/12/2006 | 47,599,844                    | 2,945,223   | 50,545,067      | 100.5  | 131.6                          | 6.2                                 |
| 31/12/2007 | 47,622,370                    | 3,044,966   | 50,667,336      | 100.6  | 136.0                          | 6.4                                 |
| 31/12/2008 | 47,609,389                    | 3,192,925   | 50,802,314      | 100.5  | 142.6                          | 6.7                                 |
| 31/12/2009 | 47,622,592                    | 3,307,845   | 50,930,437      | 100.6  | 147.8                          | 6.9                                 |
| 31/12/2010 | 47,618,569                    | 3,405,888   | 51,024,457      | 100.6  | 152.1                          | 7.2                                 |
| 31/12/2011 | 47,597,630                    | 3,501,627   | 51,099,257      | 100.5  | 156.4                          | 7.4                                 |
| 31/12/2012 | 47,469,171                    | 3,615,944   | 51,085,115      | 100.2  | 161.5                          | 7.6                                 |
| 31/12/2013 | 47,357,115                    | 3,751,928   | 51,109,043      | 100.0  | 167.6                          | 7.9                                 |
| 31/12/2014 | 47,245,740                    | 3,888,966   | 51,134,706      | 99.8   | 173.7                          | 8.2                                 |
| 31/12/2015 | 47,212,590                    | 4,029,231   | 51,241,821      | 99.7   | 180.0                          | 8.5                                 |
| 31/12/2016 | 47,026,980                    | 4,210,246   | 51,237,226      | 99.3   | 188.1                          | 9.0                                 |
| 31/12/2017 | 47,080,745                    | 4,324,972   | 51,405,717      | 99.4   | 193.2                          | 9.2                                 |
| 31/12/2018 | 47,038,405                    | 4,459,627   | 51,498,032      | 99.3   | 199.2                          | 9.5                                 |

(follows)

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Blais *et al.* (2004); Blais (2006); Green and Gerber (2015); Wass and Blais (2017); Solijonov (2016); Gallego (2015); Cancela (2017).

(continues)

|            |            |           |            |      |       |      |
|------------|------------|-----------|------------|------|-------|------|
| 31/12/2019 | 46,943,554 | 4,616,344 | 51,559,898 | 99.1 | 206.2 | 9.8  |
| 31/12/2020 | 46,757,577 | 4,779,531 | 51,537,108 | 98.7 | 213.5 | 10.2 |
| 30/06/2021 | 46,770,857 | 4,829,866 | 51,600,723 | 98.8 | 215.8 | 10.3 |

Source: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (2022, 46).

Note: \* The percentages are referred as variation from the first figure of 31/12/2001.

Apparent abstentionism is largely linked to the incidence of voters registered in the Aire (Anagrafe degli italiani residenti all'estero) on the calculation of the turnout percentages (see Table 2). Voters registered in the Aire, in fact, are not resident in Italy and only at the national elections and referendum can vote by mail<sup>3</sup>. For all other types of elections (European, regional, municipal) there is no postal voting. The Italian Ministry of the Interior distinguishes between voters from abroad and voters from Italy only with regard to the political elections (in 2022, abroad: 29.8%; Italy: 72.9%) and for European elections (abroad: 7.6%; Italy: 56.1%), and not in the cases of regional and municipal elections. The issue was not particularly relevant in the first years after the institution of Aire<sup>4</sup>, but today the question presents itself in a different way due to the continuous growth of electors registered in Aire and the concomitant decrease in the population resident in Italy.

Aire electors were around 4,800,000 as of June 30, 2021 (see Table 2) and exceeded 5,000,000 as of December 31, 2022<sup>5</sup>, just under 10% of the total electoral body (59,433,744 eligible voters). The effect is that apparent electoral participation is significantly lower in regional and municipal elections (but also, to some extent, in European elections) due to the fact that almost no Aire citizens return to Italy to vote in these types of elections. In the absence of actual data, if one assumes that Aire voters do not turn out at administrative elections, we can conclude for instance that in Friuli-Venezia Giulia at the last 2023 regional elections the apparent electoral participation (45.3%) was more than 15 percentage points lower than the real electoral participation (60.8%)<sup>6</sup>. The same applies, albeit in different proportions, to the recent regional elections in Lombardy and Lazio, as well as to all administrative elections<sup>7</sup>. A solu-

<sup>3</sup> On the first experience of voting by Italians abroad see Feltrin and Coassin (2007). On the problems that emerged in the 2006 elections see also Feltrin (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Following the so-called «Tremaglia law», December 27, 2001, no. 459.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. [https://dait.interno.gov.it/elezioni/rileseme/index\\_ricerca.php](https://dait.interno.gov.it/elezioni/rileseme/index_ricerca.php).

<sup>6</sup> On December 31, 2022, in Friuli-Venezia Giulia there were 173,041 Aire voters (15.5%) out of a total of 1,115,889 registered voters.

<sup>7</sup> The incidence of voters living abroad (therefore Aire registered) depends on the size of the municipalities. In those with up to 5,000 inhabitants, 16.5% of the voters are Aire registered; in municipalities with between 5 and 15,000 inhabitants they are 10.2%; in mu-



tion to avoid this entirely apparent inflation of abstentionism in local elections could be (at least) to record at the polling stations the residence – in Italy or abroad – of the voters.

Then there is involuntary abstentionism, that is due to the impossibility of going to the polls for a variety of objective reasons largely independent of the subjective will of the voters (people who are away on voting day for work, study, holidays, special events; the elderly; the sick; etc.). These electors have grown vertiginously over the last three decades and they are now estimated to be about 10,000,000 (corresponding to about 20% of the electoral body), 3,000,000 of whom live at least four hours' drive away from their place of residence and electoral registration. Distribution per region of these 5 million of voters upon whom abstention is imposed by their actual condition as workers or students is presented in column four of Table 3.

TAB. 3. *Italian voters signalled as away from their municipality of residence due to work or studying reasons, according to regions and distances expressed as minutes of necessary road return travelling (absolute figures and % at Dec. 2018)*

| Regions and geographic clusters | Resident registered voters (data updated 31.12.2018) | Total W, U, and S* registered as voters in the regions | Total W, U, and S* living in provinces or municipalities other than those of electoral registration | W, U, and S* according to distances expressed as necessary total return travelling time (minutes) from residence to working or studying destinations |                              |                             |                         |                                |
|---------------------------------|--|--|---|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
|                                 |  |  |   | <=240 minutes (<=4h)   | >240 e <= 480 (from 4 to 8h) | >480e <=720 (from 8 to 12h) | >720 minutes (over 12h) | Total >240 minutes (over 4h)   |
|                                 |  |  |   | Absolute figures   | Absolute figures             | Absolute figures            | Absolute figures        | % Over total voters per region |
| Piemonte                        | 3,356,096  | 1,721,698  | 296,920   | 215,578  | 30,544                       | 14,272                      | 36,526                  | 2.4                            |
| Valle D'Aosta                   | 99,059   | 55,244   | 8,189   | 3,881  | 2,251                        | 421                         | 1,636                   | 4.3                            |
| Lombardia                       | 7,495,716  | 4,037,905  | 999,635   | 836,122  | 68,574                       | 56,585                      | 38,354                  | 2.2                            |
| Trentino-Alto Adige             | 803,555 4  | 75,093   | 39,223  | 17,424   | 12,485                       | 7,409                       | 1,905                   | 2.7                            |
| Veneto                          | 3,723,229  | 2,072,323  | 418,412   | 309,967  | 59,002                       | 32,764                      | 16,679                  | 2.9                            |
| Friuli-V. Giulia                | 948,442  | 494,711  | 113,012   | 67,539   | 15,473                       | 12,673                      | 17,327                  | 4.8                            |
| Liguria                         | 1,214,804  | 587,044  | 103,486   | 57,664   | 22,594                       | 16,847                      | 6,381                   | 3.8                            |

(follows)

municipalities with between 15 and 50,000 they are 7.4%; in municipalities with between 50 and 250,000 they are 6.3%; and in municipalities with over 250,000 inhabitants, they are 8.6%. A borderline case is represented by the municipality of Soverzene (province of Belluno, Veneto) where 71.5% of voters are registered with Aire.

(continues)

|                |            |            |           |           |         |         |         |     |
|----------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|---------|---------|---------|-----|
| Emilia-Romagna | 3,341,599  | 1,851,325  | 361,535   | 269,304   | 63,608  | 20,895  | 7,728   | 2.8 |
| Toscana        | 2,829,895  | 1,511,760  | 373,353   | 262,754   | 89,452  | 14,455  | 6,692   | 3.9 |
| Umbria         | 667,096    | 340,877    | 58,881    | 31,664    | 18,386  | 7,890   | 941     | 4.1 |
| Marche         | 1,181,569  | 641,442    | 135,839   | 86,883    | 34,521  | 13,070  | 1,365   | 4.1 |
| Lazio          | 4,333,776  | 2,150,618  | 332,687   | 179,725   | 54,518  | 72,841  | 25,603  | 3.5 |
| Abruzzo        | 1,035,823  | 513,356    | 141,480   | 83,138    | 32,598  | 20,991  | 4,753   | 5.6 |
| Molise         | 250,230    | 113,290    | 32,770    | 14,694    | 10,438  | 3,507   | 4,131   | 7.2 |
| Campania       | 4,500,766  | 1,897,292  | 455,640   | 236,368   | 109,813 | 35,729  | 73,730  | 4.9 |
| Puglia         | 3,223,518  | 1,430,927  | 325,962   | 125,159   | 32,336  | 83,396  | 85,071  | 6.2 |
| Basilicata     | 457,608    | 215,275    | 59,498    | 23,627    | 10,452  | 7,417   | 18,002  | 7.8 |
| Calabria       | 1,515,699  | 579,776    | 154,498   | 47,238    | 15,296  | 25,406  | 66,558  | 7.1 |
| Sicilia        | 3,926,808  | 1,507,835  | 328,361   | 98,942    | 32,761  | 5,030   | 191,628 | 5.8 |
| Sardegna       | 1,354,380  | 517,064    | 155,363   | 67,117    | 12,458  | -       | 75,788  | 6.5 |
| North-West     | 12,165,675 | 6,401,891  | 1,408,230 | 1,113,245 | 123,963 | 88,125  | 82,897  | 2.4 |
| North-East     | 8,816,825  | 4,893,452  | 932,182   | 664,234   | 150,568 | 73,741  | 43,639  | 3.0 |
| Centre         | 9,012,336  | 4,644,697  | 900,760   | 561,026   | 196,877 | 108,256 | 34,601  | 3.8 |
| South          | 10,983,644 | 4,749,916  | 1,169,848 | 530,224   | 210,933 | 176,446 | 252,245 | 5.8 |
| Islands        | 5,281,188  | 2,024,899  | 483,724   | 166,059   | 45,219  | 5,030   | 267,416 | 6.0 |
| Italy          | 46,259,668 | 22,714,855 | 4,894,744 | 3,034,788 | 727,560 | 451,598 | 680,798 | 4.0 |

Source: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (2022, 71).

Note: \* W = workers; U = University students; S = other Students.

Finally, there are the voluntary abstentionists, who are of two types: alienated or protesting and indifferent or disinterested. Voluntary abstentionists – on the basis of estimates of the Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (2022), Eurobarometer surveys<sup>8</sup> and opinion polls (most recently Ipsos 2022) – are about 60% of the total number of abstentionists.

### 3. Facilitating voting and electoral participation

In all contemporary democracies there is an increasing focus on interventions to encourage voting by those who would like to vote but for a variety of reasons are prevented from doing so, and various measures to counter involuntary abstentionism have been tried (see Table 4), including through the implementation of relatively simple procedures and the use of new technologies.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/it/be-heard/eurobarometer/post-election-survey-2019-first-results>.

TAB. 4. *Types of vote in national elections in some western democracies*

| Country        | Proxy vote | Internet vote | Postal vote | Early or deferred vote in place of residence | Early or deferred vote with no restriction of place | Vote with no restriction of place but on the election day | Vote for specific category of electors |
|----------------|------------|---------------|-------------|--|---|---|--|
| Australia      |            | √             | √           | √  | √   | √   | √                                      |
| Austria        |            |               | √           |  |   | √   | √                                      |
| Belgium        | √          |               |             |  |   |   | √                                      |
| Canada         |            |               |             | √  | √   |   | √                                      |
| Czech Republic |            |               |             |  |   | √   | √                                      |
| Denmark        |            |               |             | √  | √   |   | √                                      |
| Estonia        |            | √             |             | √  | √   | √   | √                                      |
| France         |            |               |             |  |   |   | √                                      |
| Germany        |            |               | √           |  |   | √   | √                                      |
| Ireland        |            |               | √           |  |   |   | √                                      |
| Italy          |            |               |             |  |   |   | √                                      |
| Netherlands    | √          |               |             |  |   | √   | √                                      |
| Norway         |            |               |             | √  | √   |   | √                                      |
| Portugal       |            |               |             | √  | √   |   | √                                      |
| Slovakia       |            |               |             |  |   | √   | √                                      |
| Spain          |            |               |             |  |   |   | √                                      |
| Sweden         |            |               |             | √  | √   | √   | √                                      |
| Switzerland    | √          | √             |             |  |   |   | √                                      |
| United Kingdom | √          | √             |             |  |   |   | √                                      |
| USA            |            |               | √           | √  |   |   | √                                      |

*Source:* Presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri (2022, 98).

If the reduction of political and protest abstentionism might prove to be a long lasting and uncertain battle, the contrast of involuntary and imposed abstentionism could be attempted – as in other countries – by the implementation of four relatively simple procedures and with resort to new technologies.

### *Proxy voting*

The voter authorises someone else to vote according to his/her instructions. In Italy there is a legal problem relating to the constitutional reservation regarding secrecy of the vote (Art. 48, section 2, of the Italian Constitution),

even though the provision for secrecy of the vote is present in many other constitutional charts without it being judged to be an impediment to proxy voting.

### *Postal voting*

This mode is widely practiced in the Usa and also in Germany and involves the voter receiving the ballot paper at home, voting and sending it to the polling station (Bergman and Yates 2011). If one looks at the German case<sup>9</sup>, or at the Us mid-term elections in November 2022, when more than 54.4 million voters cast their vote by mail<sup>10</sup>, there would seem to be no doubt that nurturing participation should be worth pursuing even if at risk of the secrecy of vote. In our opinion, it is doubtful whether the secrecy of the vote is of more value than a very significant extension of the voting population.

When carefully managed, postal voting prevents recognition of the voter, because the mailing envelope is neither stamped, nor – of course – registered or signed. However, as anticipated in relation to proxy voting, in the Italian case this method is subject to a ruling by the Italian Constitutional Court, because it would not guarantee the constitutional right to secrecy of the vote (Morrone 2014). Nonetheless postal voting already exists in the Italian electoral system, as has already been pointed out, since it is practiced by Italian citizen registered in the Aire who are growing in number and now are almost 6 million (2022 figure), of whom over 4.8 million are voters (see again Table 2 above). Postal voting was also introduced by the province of Bolzano, which enjoys the benefit of a special statute in the Italian administrative system.

Out of these 4.8 million of Aire voters, around 1.84 million exercised their right to vote on September 25, 2022 general elections. Why does the Court allow these exceptions? Is it perhaps that Aire citizens do not deserve to vote in secret? Secondly, secrecy is really hiding behind a fig leaf: we all talk at home, at work, with friends and acquaintances, we try to influence each other's inclinations, we get heated and argue heatedly. The vote or – better – the political attitudes of each of us are by no means secret, and the orientation against postal voting appears to be linked to excessive concerns about the possible manipulation of this instrument.

<sup>9</sup> In the 2020 German federal elections, 47.3% of German voters voted by mail, almost half, including former Prime minister Angela Merkel. The largest group was made up of voters over the age of 60 (see [https://www.destatis.de/EN/Press/2022/01/PE22\\_036\\_14.html](https://www.destatis.de/EN/Press/2022/01/PE22_036_14.html)). More generally, see Kaplan and Yuan (2018).

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. <https://about.usps.com/what/government-services/election-mail/pdf/usps-2022-post-election-analysis.pdf>.

Early or deferred voting. This could be another effective way to counteract imposed abstentionism, which mainly affects workers and students who leave away from their constituencies (Kaplan and Yuan 2018). It would imply to allow voting on some days before scheduled polling day. If early or deferred voting had been in force at the moment, those who could not go to the polling station on September 25, 2022, for instance, could have voted some time earlier. This could have been done at the administrative offices (municipalities) of residence or living, or at post offices. There do not seem to be any possible legal-formal objections to this modality. Some might object that it would overload public offices, but this seems a purely obstructive argument with no ethical, political or judicial ground.

### *Free voting at any polling station*

That means that the voter, wherever s/he is in the country, should be allowed to turn up at any polling station with an electoral certificate and vote. Similar in intent is the possibility of voting in a place other than one's place of residence (De Nicola 2022), in a polling station where it is possible to ask for an electronic printout of the ballot paper, with the exact indication of the constituency and the uninominal constituency of residence. This is another effective way to counter involuntary abstentionism, which mainly affects workers and students who move away from their constituency. There seems to be no legal-formal objection to this modality.

Among the Italian constitutional scholars, free voting at any polling station is rejected with the argument that representatives are allotted per constituency and hence the votes are based on the population resident in a territory. It is argued that if a citizen is registered as voter, let us assume, in Trento, and s/he is in Bari because of work, study or any other reason, by allowing her/him to vote in any polling stations located where s/he is, the electoral body of the two constituencies (those of Trento and of Bari, in our assumption) would be altered in a non-democratic way.

However, this argument is very weak and unacceptable both on political and practical grounds. On a political level, the representative – based on Edmund Burke's conception of representation – is indeed elected locally and belongs to a certain constituency with which some bounds are established, but s/he is at the same time the representative of the nation. In other words, the locally elected representative is eventually supposed to serve her/his term in the national parliament and then has to deal with problems of national politics and therefore follow the «interests of the nation» as a whole, not exclusively that of her/his party or constituency. As a representative of the nation the

elected to the post has to take into consideration the interests of those who did not vote for her/him too.

If this ethical and political argument does not meet with approval, then one could ignore it and move to some practicalities. On a practical level, indeed, the problem of territorial representation could be easily overcome. What would be the impediment to any officer operating in any polling station in Italy to print out the ballot paper of the constituency of a voter registered anywhere in the country if s/he requested so? By printing *in loco* and on demand any ballot paper the (weak) argument of the «integrity of the constituency» could be easily dismissed. The nowadays advanced digitalization of most administrative procedures and functions would make the free voting at any polling station a banal routine.

### *Digital or telematic voting*<sup>11</sup>

It should be made clear that by digital voting we mean the use of web platforms to cast votes directly through the use of personal devices (tablets, smart phones, PCs). We therefore do not refer to the controversial use of so-called «electronic voting» in the American context. Electronic voting is in fact a different thing; it is about the use of an electronic device

in which the voter inputs preferences electronically – either flipping some mechanical levers that record a vote into the electronic voting device (the so-called direct recording electronic device), tapping selections on a ‘touch screen’ voting system, or using some other input method to indicate a vote to an electronic voting device. When using electronic voting technologies, the voter is interacting with a computerized system that translates the voter’s input into an electronic stream of information that is then somehow recorded and preserved for later tabulation (Alvarez and Hall 2008, 9).

The risks of manipulation and falsification of results through the use of devices – whether electronic or mechanized – are well known, as in the American case<sup>12</sup>. In fact, by using the concept of digital voting we mean something different, namely the use of platforms to express one’s vote «directly» and without mediation. This modality – today – should appear as the egg of Columbus. Any voter could easily stay at home, or go to the polling station if s/

<sup>11</sup> The most interesting case is Estonia, where i-voting was introduced in 2005 and is now used by more than 46% of Estonian voters. See <https://e-estonia.com/solutions/e-governance/e-democracy>; <https://www.valimised.ee/en/internet-voting/i-voting-fact-check-myth-and-reality>. See also Vassil *et al.* (2016); Solvak and Vassil (2018); Vilamala (2007; 2008).

<sup>12</sup> On these aspects of «peril» for democracy, see also Alvarez, Atkinson and Hall (2013).

he prefers it, having received a Personal identification number (Pin), log in to the voting system with some individual credentials (tax code, polling card no., Id card no., and similar), enter her/his Pin and vote for any candidate and list of his/her constituency, wherever s/he is in the election day. Smart phones, tablets, and Pc – whatever is connected to the web – would do to express our vote, and it would not matter where we are, either at home, on work, at a polling station, or travelling.

There is an apparently serious objection, but it is actually specious. There are hackers who could manipulate voting and that would put democracy at risk. We cannot deny that there might be some risks, there would need to be a very serious control action that only technicians and specialists could guarantee, but generally speaking any transaction through the web is today relatively safe, provided that all the cautions above described are taken. The fact remains that rumors of ventilated hacking actions – e.g., in the last American elections – have remained unproven inferences, but conspiracy theories as such are irresistible. They cannot be proven by definition, because the *Abc* of conspiracy is the indemonstrability of one's theories.

Apart from the five listed above, many other methods and practices could be introduced in Italy to improve the electoral procedure by making it more adapted to contemporary habits.

One or two election days could be scheduled on fixed dates (in spring and autumn) so as to have the certainty of the voting dates.

An electronic voter card could replace the paper one, based on the example of the digital Green pass used during the Covid-19 emergency.

Some special voting procedures could be introduced for any category of people who are disadvantaged or have difficulty in going to the polls<sup>13</sup>.

The modalities for compiling municipal electoral registers should be updated, for instance through the introduction of a national digital electoral register linked to the digital Id.

The «electoral tools» should be modernized, the entire voting action which is today almost identical to two centuries ago should be reengineered. We still vote using paper and pencil, and the procedures for counting the votes and drawing up summaries is still manual – all as if computers or Internet had never appeared on the scene.

In short, an in-depth revision of the entire organizational flow that constitutes the basis of the electoral process can no longer be postponed (Fabrizio and Feltrin 2008), if only to bring it a little closer to the sensibilities and ex-

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. Fiala-Butora *et al.* (2014); Braun (2015).

pectations of contemporary time, as has already happened in many other fields, from health to welfare, from finance to information.

## 4. Some conclusions

For those who care about democracy, to encourage the participation in voting of those who for the most diverse reasons are unable to go to the polling stations should be a priority. Measures such as those suggested above in 2021 allowed in Germany 47.7% of voters to vote away from the polling stations, and in the Usa in 2022 almost 48 million electors voted earlier than the election day or by mail.

Although in Italy some Mps have tried to introduce a new legislation on the matter<sup>14</sup>, which did not reach the floor because of the early dissolution of the XVIII legislature in 2022, and notwithstanding the fact that some groups are mobilizing and pressurizing in favor of the introduction of the vote modalities above described<sup>15</sup>, Italy, together with Malta and Cyprus, is the only Eu country that does not provide remote voting for those who live and work in a city other than the one in which they reside. The resort to postal voting, early or deferred voting, free voting at any polling station, and above all of electronic and telematic voting could be a straightforward, legal and fair solution, particularly since postal voting is already allowed to almost 5 million of Italian electors living abroad and/or in Alto-Adige (province of Bolzano).

Some philosophers (Palano 2020; Barberis 2020) have emphasized the transformation of modern democracy as a result of the digital revolution in contemporary democracy. Usually, these authors tend to warn the public about the risks this revolution entails, because it alters the conception of representation and authority and because it would risk putting an end to the very legitimacy of democracy (De Anna 2022). Be that as it may, philosophers argue that the digitalization of society would produce a kind of bubble democracy as

<sup>14</sup> For instance, see Camera dei Deputati, Proposta di Legge n. 1714, March 28, 2019, by M. Madia *et al.* (link: <http://documenti.camera.it/leg18/pdl/pdf/leg.18.pdl.camera.1714.18PDL0054080.pdf>), titled «Provisions for exercising the right to vote in a different municipality from that of residence, in case of absence for study reasons, work or care, and delegation to the Government for the experimentation of telematic voting systems».

<sup>15</sup> «The Good Lobby», «Will Media», «University Network» and «Rete Voto Sano da Lontano» are university student groups particularly active on the issue. Their recent rally in Rome (March 16, 2023) was cross-party supported by Marianna Madia (Pd), Riccardo Magi (piùEuropa), Vittoria Baldino (M5s) and Igor Iezzi (Ln). Cfr.: [https://stream24.ilsole24ore.com/video/italia/fuorisede-partiti-piazza-roma-il-voto-distanza/AEWNsg5C?refresh\\_ce=1](https://stream24.ilsole24ore.com/video/italia/fuorisede-partiti-piazza-roma-il-voto-distanza/AEWNsg5C?refresh_ce=1).



a new form of politics. Bubble democracy is characterized by fragmentation of the public, reduction of the importance of political parties as mediators, transformation of trust networks, with the reduction of experts and non-experts to the same level, distrust of the political class, and finally a tendency towards polarization of opinions (Palano 2020).

There is a pragmatic argument that can be put forward in support of digital voting, even if it might raise the above reservations from an ethical point of view. If the citizens would now be encapsulated in a «bubble», which transforms their perception of reality and also their modes of social interaction, why not instead take advantage of the socio-political opportunities that this bubble offers? Parties as complex organizations have to some extent been able to exploit this opportunity, devising new forms of engagement, new tools to get their message across to voters, i.e., they have rapidly transformed themselves into «network parties» or «digital parties», which use social media platforms to increase their followers but also to make them interact (Gerbaudo 2019, 126-144). For instance, in Italy, the M5s managed at its origins to spread among the public precisely thanks to the participatory platform MeetUp (Ieraci and Toffoletto 2018).

We can agree with D'Alimonte (2022) that administrative measures and digitalization cannot solve the problem of abstentionism at the root, but they could certainly help facilitate the voting action of those who are prevented from voting for objective reasons. In general, there is an overestimation of the manipulative capacity of the «media bubble» and conversely a distorted perception of the voter's autonomy of judgement in the pre-digital age. We know very well (Budge *et al.* 1976) that in the pre-digital era the voter was hetero-directed by party identifications and ideologies, in a way that should even make us doubt his autonomy of judgement, which is more than we can say of the contemporary «bubble voter». Digitized social practices also mean the discovery of a completely new playful dimension, in a broadly Huizinga-like perspective. That is to say that if the individuals have an innate propensity to build playful dimensions and if these dimensions are increasingly circumscribed within the bubble that contains them, nothing prevents us from conceiving – if not a somewhat bigoted moralism – that individuals can now develop within this bubble also their political dimension and their electoral participation. It would be a new participatory dimension but also one that promises to revitalize democracy and the inclusion of the citizens in its dynamics.

Moreover, in a not entirely dissimilar perspective, Alessandro Pizzorno emphasizes that voting is a ritual of adhesion and legitimization of the political system:

[...] By not voting, one offends those who do politics, one refuses explicit consent, one withdraws the only legitimization of those in power with no other merit than that of having succeeded in convincing a certain number of citizens, thanks to their capacity for propaganda. Absenteeism is the defeat of propaganda, and propaganda is the only competence that those who vote know [...] ours is a vote against the isolation in which we would feel if we did not also vote [...] if we go to vote, we do so out of solidarity (Pizzorno 2023, 390-392).

If voting is a ritual of solidarity as well being a civic duty, it is essential to devote adequate care and necessary updates to it in order to cope with the incessant change of customs, under the constant pressure of the digital revolution.

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