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Government approval in Italy: Political cycle, economic expectations and TV coverage

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses government approval in Italy – which has become a key aspect for electoral support in the new party system of the Second Republic – exploring the influence that TV coverage exerts on approval net of traditional accounts of government support. Relying on both aggregate time series and pooled individual-level surveys analyses, it is shown that communication has a sizable impact on government approval. The popularity of Centre-Left and Centre-Right governments is affected evenly by the economy but differently by the news coverage of their activity. People with lower political interest are the most reactive to news coverage of government performance.

1. Introduction

Italy's political transition in the 1990s brought about a new party system, a new mixed proportional-majoritarian electoral law, the building of unprecedented pre-electoral alliances and, eventually, actual government alternation between centre-left and centre-right political blocs (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007). These new features of the Italian political system were mirrored in (and encouraged by) important changes of mass political behaviour, which has since shown a decline of cleavage based (class and religion) voting (Bellucci and Heath, 2012) and an increasing importance of valence politics cues (Stokes, 1992). Most significantly, performance related issues were found behind the four government alternations Italy experienced between 1996 and 2008 which saw all incumbent governments – each with a low approval rate, short of 30% – electorally defeated. Government accountability appeared therefore heightened and, at the individual level, voting choice resulted from the interplay of political predispositions with their updating with short-term cues (Bellucci, 2012). The state of the economy, government performance and leaders' image are then, in Italy as well as comparatively (Clarke et al., 2009), among the main factors which define valenced short-term determinant of voting choice.

The relevance of short-term cues in the electors' individual calculus of voting highlights the importance of understanding the evolution of voters' political evaluations across time, which will then impact on voters' choice. It is over the inter-electoral period that public opinion's dynamics shape the individual perception about government competence and the actual managing of the economy, a perception that will set the tone of the electoral campaign providing additional information for updating already formed voters' political predispositions (Gelman and King, 1993; Norris et al., 1999). A key variable in this context is the popular assessment of government performance, measured by its approval rate.

The study of popularity functions has a long tradition which has identified several determinants of government support among the mass publics (Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000). Among them, relatively little attention has been given to the role that media communication plays in it. In this paper, we first discuss findings from an aggregate level

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analysis of monthly government approval in Italy between September 1994 and March 2012 where, together with standard determinants of approval, we have been able to include (for a shorter period: May 2001 through May 2012) a variable tapping television political coverage which has been only rarely included as predictor of government popularity. Then, since time-series aggregate models do not allow easily to take into account voters' heterogeneity in the individual level dynamics of government approval, in the second part of the paper we analyse a dataset built by pooling 38 individual level monthly surveys carried out by the Ipsos polling agency between June 2006 and February 2010, which include a government approval question, together with other political attitudes and socio-demographic characteristics. We matched each survey with the monthly reading of consumers' expectation and TV coverage so to be able to assess individual voters' response to contextual factors, namely the economy and media news.

Our empirical strategy thus exploits a dual perspective: we are able to test our hypotheses of the impact of media news on approval throughout electoral cycles, as in classic popularity function's studies, but we are further allowed to evaluate its impact at the individual level, as in the context of a voting study.

2. Government popularity and media political communication

Numerous controversies crowd the popularity functions literature, mirroring the disputes that aliment economic voting research: from the time perspective of voters' evaluations (retrospective/prospective) to their content (sociotropic/egotropic); from the relative importance of economic and political factors to the stability of the estimates (Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000). Popularity functions reflect this debate and, traditionally, have relied on two sets of explicative variables: economic and political (Paldam, 1991). Among the former, research has moved from the earlier assessment of the impact on government approval of objective economic indicators to subjective economic perceptions of the voters, relying on sociotropic (prospective or retrospective) aggregate survey response. Among the latter, political variables have included both various measures of political relevant events as well as the electoral cycle, leaders' evaluation, institutional features (see, for a recent review, Bellucci and Lewis-Beck, 2011). Further, scholars have also questioned the homogeneity of the individual level approvals, aggregated to form a single national index. And research on heterogeneity of economic voting has documented how bias in aggregate variables could result from omitting to control for voters' individual and group differences: Duch and Palmer's (2000) cross-national study uncovered systematic variance in people's economic perceptions according to political sophistication and information, partisanship and socio-economic status; Palmer and Whitten (2011) highlighted how dynamics of government support vary according to income groups, while earlier research showed class differences in voters' response to economic cycles (Weatherford, 1978; Hibbs, 1982).

Focussing on political and institutional determinants of popularity, only more recently research has enquired the impact of political communication on government approval. These efforts have been mainly aimed at exploring the sources of citizens' assessment of the economy, and of their perceptions of the government's economic competence. Signalling the shift from reliance on objective to subjective economic indicators, the factual knowledge voters possess of the economy has firstly been assessed, with the typical finding that they know little (Paldam and Nannestad, 2000; Aidt, 2000) although voters appear to convey a remarkable 'overall sense of macroeconomic improvement or decline' (Sanders, 2000, 276), a finding confirmed across a large set of polities (Duch and Stevenson, 2006; 2008). Research on the source of voters' knowledge about the economy and on the determinants of their subjective economic perceptions has therefore come to the fore, showing – counter to common wisdom assuming a recursive causal chain running from economic conditions to consumers' confidence to political evaluations – that both peoples' economic and political evaluations sustain their economic outlook. Nadeau et al. (1999) show that mass public economic expectations in the USA reflect objective economic indicators, political trends as well as (print) news reports of the economy. A finding confirmed by later research (De Boef and Kellstedt, 2004) demonstrating US consumers' sentiment to be driven by the objective economy, political trends/events, and indirectly by print media reports. Also in the UK, Sanders and Gavin's analysis (2004) shows that people's economic expectations depend more on the television news program coverage of economic developments rather than on objective changes of the economy.

Overall this body of research raises attention to two points: a) it challenges the assumption that voters' economic perceptions are produced exclusively from changes in the objective economic conditions, and highlights the importance to comparatively assess the impact of the institutional variance of political sources of voters' economic perceptions (Duch and Kellstedt, 2010); b) it provides a reading of the impact on voters' political attitudes, and specifically on government approval, of media news, a topic notoriously difficulty to empirical scrutiny.

Two findings are common to this stream of research: first, economic news describe quite accurately the actual state of the economy, being the trend of balance of negative and positive news explained by objective economic indicators (Nadeau et al., 1999:118; Sanders and Gavin, 2004: 1262). Second, the impact of media communication on government popularity is indirect rather than direct. Coverage and tone of news have a direct impact on people's economic expectations which in turn (matched by objective economic indicators) affect the evaluation of the competence of the government (or president) in dealing with economic issues. Competence evaluations then directly impact on the approval of the executive. This finding holds both for print media in the US and UK (Sanders et al., 1993) and for television news in the UK (Gavin et al., 1996; Sanders and Gavin, 2004), the only context where, to our knowledge, non-experimental