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What is a Workers' Referendum for? Evidence from Italy

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Abstract

In July 2007, the Prodi government and representatives of the three main Italian trade union confederations signed a landmark agreement on welfare and economic development. In October, in order to ratify or reject the agreement, the Italian labor movement organized a referendum, i.e. the Workers' Referendum of 2007, inviting workers, pensioners and the unemployed to assess the agreement. Based on a comprehensive sampling (1,574 interviewees), these research notes provide an analysis of the Workers' Referendum with regard to both key societal voting features and attitudes toward unions.

Keywords: Union democracy; Workers' Referendum; Italy; survey research.

JEL Classification: J50, J51, J52, J53, C83, C10

Introduction

On July 23rd, 2007 the Prodi government and representatives of Italy's three main trade union confederations (CGIL, CISL and UIL) signed a landmark 'social protocol' agreement on welfare and economic development (*Protocollo su previdenza, lavoro e competitività, per l'equità e la crescita sostenibili*). In October, in order to ratify or reject the agreement, CGIL, CISL and UIL organised a referendum (the so-called *Referendum dei lavoratori*) and invited workers, pensioners and the unemployed to assess the agreement.

The turnout ratio was in itself cause for reflection. Beyond the percentage of voters in favour of the agreement struck by the government and the unions – about 80 per cent of voters – what drew scholars' attention was the high turnout: more than five million workers, pensioners and job-seekers voted (Carrieri, 2008: 10). As suggested by Accornero (2007), the very complexity of the issues covered by the *Protocollo* – social

protection, economic development, labour policy, government spending and taxation – might have had a negative effect on turnout rates. Nonetheless, the referendum drew a large turnout and represented a milestone in terms of union democracy.

A vast majority of voters approved the agreement. This is the reason why the *Protocollo* between the Prodi government and the trade union confederations achieved a clear political result: albeit with some notable exceptions (basically metalworkers affiliated with FIOM-CGIL), we can say that the agreement was accepted. Indeed, turnout rates were in sharp contrast to the idea that an extremely segmented labour market, as is Italy's, with its multiple levels (gender, age, types of employment contracts, economic sectors and geographical specificities), and a Gini index above the EU average, would lead to a different result in terms of participation and voting (Carbonai and Pedaci, 2009). According to the official summary report, the vote was unanimous and evenly distributed across regions, social groups and economic sectors (all professional groups with the exception of steel industry workers).

Foremost, the 2007 workers' referendum was a clear episode of unity between CGIL, CISL and UIL. However, after the May 2008 crisis of the Prodi government, the Italian labour movement split again, especially during the last Berlusconi government, which extended until November 2008. In Italy, periods of closer union cooperation have been always followed by periods of greater coldness, if not outright hostility (Accornero, 1992). After the referendum, relations between the confederations were once again marked by differences, and the prospect of organizational unity seemed distant (Leonardi, 2010). However, in 2013, the trade union setting was further rattled by the political and institutional crisis submerged after February's general elections. This, in turn, practically forced a Union agreement (June 2013) on representation rules and led to renewed pledges of trade union unity.

Loyalty to the union and activism are expected to result from effective mobilising. Unions adopting a mobilising strategy expect to develop collectivism in their membership so that, in the future, loyal, active members would encourage other workers to take part in the struggle (Cregan et al., 2009). Thus, what were the outcomes of a referendum that drew over five million people and which represented an extraordinary moment of trade union unity, participation and democracy? Surely, demand for political participation had been rising in Italy over the previous years (Venturino, 2007). Besides arguably having partially met this demand for social participation, the referendum was also a response to an internal trade union demand of resorting to an external, democratic and participatory mechanism in order to legitimate the trade union as a collective actor and to reconfigure trade union divisions. Ultimately, however, the referendum was only partly successful both because the pro-labour Romano Prodi government remained in office for just about two years (May 2006– May 2008) and because the trade unions remained divided, thus fragmenting political and trade union representation, as they continued to lose membership (Bellardi et al., 2010; Baccaro and Howell, 2012). These critical elements of Italian trade union system may be encountered in this article.

In general, research into trade union participation and democracy is focused on company-related cases (Hammer, 1998: 143; Snape and Redman, 2012). The purpose of this survey-based research is to establish a solid base of data from which to draw conclusions and make interpretations of current critical evidence of trade union and industrial democracy in Italy, outside the realm of the enterprise. In line with other

general trends (Gahan, 2012), the data analysed provides critical elements concerning institutional trust in the trade union: i.e. its capacity to represent certain professional categories, and simultaneously accomplishing inclusion that reaches beyond unionized workers. This probably reflects a shift in Italy from a sense of social community – e.g., expressed by the Union memberships – to a more fragmented society.

Does a workers' referendum reduce fragmentation?

With regard to comparative cases in Europe, the use of referendums is rare in Germany, Austria and Belgium, where unions are formed by representative bodies of all workers. In the Netherlands, in contrast, referendums are increasingly popular (Baccaro and Carrieri, 2011). Generally speaking, this practice is used to legitimise the outcome of collective deals, especially those involving political issues (Poole et al., 2001). The Italian case falls in this category.

On May 20th, 1970 the Italian Parliament adopted Law no. 300, the so-called “Workers Statute”, introducing in Article 21 the “trade union referendum”. According to this provision, unions can organise referendums on trade union issues, involving the workforce of a single enterprise, an economic sector or even the entire labour force, also, in order to legitimise agreements centralised by the government and the employers.

Union democracy gained momentum in 1988, when the three Italian metalworkers' unions submitted a joint bargaining agenda regarding a threshold agreement and a national referendum. Or in 1995, when the main trade union confederations launched a national “trade union referendum”, through which Italian workers approved a critical reform of the pension system as proposed by the Dini government. Still, the referendum of October 2007 showed a higher turnout rate in comparison with the 1995 referendum, with 5,128,507 votes cast in 2007 against 3,786,586 in the 1995 referendum.

The geography of the 2007 vote highlights some elements of discontinuity with respect to the referendum of 1995. In 2007 the total number of voters in the southern regions of Italy increased (e.g. in Sicily, voters increased by 462,598 and in Campania by more than 300,000 voters compared to 1995). On the whole the vote appeared homogeneous. However, among metalworkers levels of approval were below average, although slightly above 50% of them were in favour of the agreement.

A referendum on collective bargaining system was once again held in 2009, yet this time only by the trade union confederation CGIL. In Italy, collective bargaining in the private sector primarily takes place at two levels – industry level and company level (i.e. after the national-level agreement between employers, unions and government of July 1993, which radically reformed the system of collective bargaining). This bargaining framework has come under pressure in recent years. Changes to the system, agreed upon by CISL and UIL but not by CGIL in January 2009, altered the balance between confederations and divided unions. In 2009, employers' association Confindustria called for bargaining to be more decentralised and for company level bargaining to be assigned more importance. These issues were discussed by the three confederations in an attempt to reach a compromise, but to no avail. Hence, CISL and UIL decided to act without CGIL and, in January 2009 and with the support of UGL too, signed a framework agreement with the employers and the government on a new system of collective bargaining (*Accordo Quadro governo-sindacati di riforma degli assetti contrattuali*). In

April 2009, this was followed by a more detailed agreement specifying the rules for the new system in the industrial sector. CGIL refused to sign either agreement and did not recognize the new system. In March 2009, CGIL organised a referendum on the new arrangements of the government-labour framework agreement, with 3.4 million out of the 3.6 million workers and pensioners' constituency voting against it. Ultimately, the referendum retained its ratifying function yet lost its aggregative nature.

Data on and Statistical Analysis of the Workers' Referendum of 2007

The most interesting issues regarding the Workers' Referendum are not related to who won but to issues such as why people voted the way they did or the implications of the results. These questions are not always easily answered. Surely, just looking only at campaign events and incidents will not suffice.

In accordance with the constituency of the referendum, the sampled population is composed of workers, retirees and jobless people entitled to vote. The survey was conducted in April 2008 and included 1,574 randomly selected voters and non-voters, in a constituency of workers, jobless people and pensioners (1). The data can be considered a representative sample of the relevant population. The sample data was collected by the SWG institute and commissioned by CGIL. The sample is composed of quotas extracted from lists of names provided by the phone book of the entire national network. A random probability sampling method is used, stratified into four levels: 1. sex; 2. geographical area; 3. demographic size of the town; 4. professional status.

Among those who declared they were informed about the content of the social pact (54% were "informed" or "very informed"), 33.9% of the respondents decided to vote. Among workers, propensity to vote is generally higher than for pensioners: 40.6% of the workers decided to vote, while 22.52% of the retirees voted (Table 1).

Table 1 – Vote and employment status (percentages and standard residuals)

	N	Did you vote at the Workers' Referendum of 2007?		Total
		Yes	No	
Active workers	983	40.69%*	59.31%**	100%
Retired workers	564	22.52%**	77.48%*	100%
Unemployed	27	25.93%	74.07%	100%
Total	1,574	33.93%	66.07%	100%

* Standard residual over 2 (strong positive association between categories)

** Standard residual less than -2 (strong negative association between categories)

Pearson Chi-Square = 53.59

Union membership is an important factor in understanding turnout statistics (Table 2). Clear differences can be seen across "union members" (or, otherwise, "anyone who is considering becoming a member") and those who, in contrast, assume an attitude of "rejection/opposition" to unions ("No, I do not wish to become a member"). About half of the members chose to vote (48% among those who were not members but were

“considering becoming a member”). This percentage decreases to 23.97% among non-member workers who had no intention of becoming members in the future (Table 2).

Table 2 – Membership and voting attitude (percentages of vote and standard residuals)

	N	Did you vote at the Workers' Referendum of 2007?		Total	
		Yes	No		
Are you currently a union member?	Yes	448	50.22%*	49.78%**	100%
	No, but I was in the past	372	48.96%*	51.04%	100%
	No, but thinking of becoming	96	27.96%**	72.04%	100%
	No, and do not intend to become	609	23.97%**	76.03%*	100%
	I prefer not to answer	49	24.49%	75.51%	100%
	Total	1,574	33.93%	66.07%	100%

* Standard residual over 2 (strong positive association)

** Standard residual less than -2 (strong negative association)

Pearson Chi-Square = 97.52

Typically, there are no significant differences between public employees and private sector workers. But private sector workers' turnout is above average. The percentage of voters among teachers (30%), however, is significantly lower than the mean values (41.48%).

If we take into consideration just the voters (534 respondents), 54.3% of them voted in favour of the agreement; 26.4% voted against the deal; 4.9% voted blank; and the others (14.4%) preferred not to answer. This is a population that had already developed strong convictions regarding voting choices: only 11% of those who claim to have voted in favour of the agreement changed their minds within the period between the signing of the agreement and the referendum in October. This “rigidity” of opinion can be observed for both votes in favour and against the agreement. Union membership is a determinant of the vote (Table 3). Considering only the subset of voters, 68.89% of union members voted in favour of the agreement. Among those who would like to join a union (“No, but I’m thinking of becoming a member”) the propensity to vote in favour is higher than the sample average (and equal to 57.45%). Among those who had been members in the past, propensity drops to 48.08%.

Table 3 – Vote and union membership

	N	Did you vote in favour or against the agreement?				Total	
		In favour	Against	Blank (null) vote	I prefer not to answer		
Are you currently a union member?	Yes	225	68.89%*	22.67%	1.33%**	7.11%**	100%
	No, but I was in the past	104	48.08%	35.58%*	2.88%	13.46%	100%
	No, but I'm thinking of becoming a member	47	57.45%	19.15%	6.38%	17.02%	100%
	No, and I don't intend to become a member	146	36.99%**	29.45%	10.96%	22.60%	100%

I prefer not to answer	12	33.33%	8.33%	8.33%	50.00%	100%
Total	534	54.31%	26.40%	4.87%	14.42%	100%

* Standard residuals over 2 (strong positive association)

** Standard residuals less than -2 (strong negative association)

Pearson Chi-Square = 70.30

Excluding those who did not turn out to vote yet would have nullified their votes, it is possible to categorize the sampled population according to a criterion of general “attitude towards the agreement of July 2007” into four types of attitude (Table 4).

Table 4 – A typology of vote and attitudes towards the Workers’ Referendum

Typology	n	%	Type Characteristics
1. In favour	290	19.72%	Turned out for Referendum and voted in favour
2. Free-riders	318	21.62%	Did not participate in the vote but declared to be in favour of the agreement
3. Against the referendum	377	25.63%	Against (a): turned out for the Referendum and voted against the agreement (141 votes against the agreement); Against (b): did not turn out for the Referendum but declared their opposition to the agreement (236 against who did not vote)
4. Indifferent	486	33.03%	Neither voted nor have an opinion on the agreement
Total	1,471	100%	

The propensity of men to free-ride is substantially higher than that of women (27% of men versus 12% of women). While among men the proportion of those who are “indifferent” to the agreement is 24.64%, among women this percentage grows to 46.32%. Those who are most “indifferent” towards the agreement are those employed (42% of employees versus an average of 33%), mainly workers in small firms.

The typology proposed herein is also associated with union membership. Union members’ propensity to be in favour of the agreement is substantially higher than the sample’s average (36.3% versus 20.25%). In contrast, ex-members and free-riders showed a higher propensity to be against the agreement (Table 5).

Table 5 – Cross tabulation: “Union membership” by “attitudes toward the agreement”

N	In favour	Free riders	Against (voters)	Indifferent	Total
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		and non-voters)					
Are you currently a union member?	Yes	427	36.3%*	20.1%	26.5%	17.1%**	100%
	No, but I was in the past	351	14.2%**	29.3%*	32.8%	23.6%**	100%
	No, but I'm thinking of becoming a member	85	31.8%*	10.6%**	21.2%	36.5%	100%
	No, and I don't intend to become a member	550	9.8%**	20.4%	27.8%	42.0%*	100%
Total		1,413	20.25	21.93	28.24	29.58	100%

* Standard residuals over 2 (strong positive association)

** Standard residuals less than -2 (strong negative association)

Pearson Chi-Square = 181.29

What is worth stressing is that the level of trust in Italian trade unions overall is low, both among those in favour and those against the referendum. 40.4% of the respondents believe unions have become self-serving; added to the 23.9% who think trade unions ought to reorganize themselves, nearly two out of every three respondents are, indeed, criticising labour. This critical area for Italian labour does not only involve those against the Workers' Referendum. For example, 17% of those in favour of the referendum (Table 6) believe trade unions have become self-serving (27% of the free-riders).

Table 6 – Cross tabulation “In your opinion do trade unions in Italy play a role [...]” by “typology of voter”

	N	“Indispensable” + “important”	“Unions are self-serving”	“Don't know”	Total
In favour	290	82.06%*	17.24%**	0.60%	100%
Free riders	318	70.75*	27.04%**	2.2%	100%
Against	403	41.68%**	56.82%*	1.48%	100%
Undecided	435	44.59%**	50.57%*	4.82%*	100%
Total	1,446	57.05%	40.45%	2.48%	100%

* Standard residuals over 2 (strong positive association)

** Standard residuals less than -2 (strong negative association)

Pearson Chi-Square = 176.29

This area also spans over union membership. For instance, one in every four members believes the unions are self-serving (Table 7).

Table 7 – Cross tabulation: “Union’s membership” by “In your opinion, do Italian trade unions fulfil the role [...]”

		N	«Indispensable» + «Important»	«Unions are self- serving»	«Don’t know»	Total
Are you currently member of a Union?	Yes	448	72.8%*	26.1%**	1.1%	100%
	No, but I was union member in the past	372	57.5%	41.1%	1.3%	100%
	No, but I am going to become a Union member	96	82.3%*	12.5%**	5.2%	100%
	No, I won’t become a Union member	609	39.6%**	56.5%*	3.9%	100%
	I prefer don’t answer	49	49%	30.6%	20.4*	100%
Total		1,574	56.2%	641	28.24	100%

* Standard residuals over 2 (strong positive association)

** Standard residuals less than -2 (strong negative association)

Pearson Chi-Square=203.98

Decommodified (but inclusive) bargaining

Often, the debate on union revitalization also involves re-thinking bargaining models and forms of participation. First, the structure of collective bargaining, ranging from comprehensive to more fragmented systems, affects labour’s bargaining power and goals. Because of worker participation, referendums and similar forms represent an attempt – especially in the case of the Workers’ Referendum of 2007 – at inclusive bargaining. In 2007, Italian Unions were in need of an instrument of industrial democracy. So, whereas in 1995 the role of the trade unions was limited to “calling-to-vote”, in 2007 the unions held thousands of meetings and debates in which the *Protocollo* was carefully explained and discussed with the workers. In this sense, the referendum should not be viewed as a simple count used to settle internal disputes, but as encouraging debate, discussion, consideration of the long-term consequences of the decision, as well as a “school of democracy” (Cohen and Rogers, 1992).

Second, because of direct participation, referendums tip the balance between bureaucracy – in favour of internal democracy – and the relationship with and between union members.

According to Baccaro (2007), the adoption of these procedures may strengthen the capacity of unions to engage and influence governmental policies, through aggregative (referendum) and deliberative mechanisms (assessment of social protocol). Moreover, the mutated character of the political negotiation – in particular the decline of the amount of resources for political exchange (*decommodifying*) – forces unions to invest much more in inclusive procedures, such as workers’ referendums, in which the decisions of the union leaders are discussed and expressly authorized by the workers, the rank-and-file (Baccaro, 2007, 2008). A trade-off is assumed between contractual counterparts and

democratic procedures: the scarcer the counterparts, the bigger the investment in democratic processes of legitimation. Unlike hierarchical control, union democracy promotes inclusive bargaining and assures political legitimacy – even in the absence of material incentives, union members accept collective choice (Baccaro, 2008: 63). Also, a referendum can be even more important, especially when the general levels of trust expressed to the union are low (such as data suggested).

Since the 1990s collective bargaining has steadily become less concessive in Italy. Over the last twenty years labour's political agenda in Italy has been challenged by wage containment policies, restricted access to welfare benefits, the introduction of various forms of flexible work, the lowering of social protection standards. From this point of view, the referendum supports the union leadership in mobilising consensus on unpopular choices and strengthens perceived legitimacy. In fact, when bargaining is acquisitive, legitimacy is generally based on the resources acquired. In contrast, especially with the decline of the amount of resources available for political exchange, legitimacy is based on “discursive democracy”, a form of democracy in which deliberation is central to decision making (Baccaro, 2011).

The electorate body was extended to include all workers, not just union members, in accordance with the spirit of the *Protocollo*. Most importantly, the constituency of the referendum and the audience, i.e. those who are affected by the agreement, matched one another. Pensioners were included in the electorate; however, none of the agreements on pension reform over the last 15 years has changed the actual conditions of Italian pensioners. Because they were not part of the affected interests, their right to participate in the decision-making process did not seem to be fully justified. In contrast, including students and young people who were unable to vote in July 2007 in the electorate body is justified, since the agreement would, albeit not immediately, be applicable to them. It is possible this would have had an effect on the results of the vote. Anyway, the results show that a wide part of Italian society – including unionized workers, students and young people too – demand political and social participation, but it might express a deep disagreement with Unions, even if in favor of Social Protocol.

The short-term effect of Workers' Referendum

In Italy, over the period 2005–2011, the demand for social participation by workers and left-leaning electorate is generally increasing. In 2005, in the primary election of centre-left electoral alliance *Unione*, the total count is in excess of 4.3 million voters (Venturino, 2007). Two years later, in October 2007, voters of the Democratic Party were called to choose the party leader, among their representatives at the Constituent Assembly: more than 3.5 million voters. Similarly, the Workers' Referendum of October 2007 and a new one in March 2009: when CGIL organised a new referendum on the new arrangements of the government-labour framework agreement (about 3.6 million voters). Of note was the case of *Popolo Viola* [Purple People], a protest movement originated in 2009; using a network of Facebook pages, the *Popolo Viola* created a connection among large groups of people, coming from different Italian regions and varied social layers. Finally, from 2010 to 2011, students protested frequently and intensively – e.g. the Global Day of Action on October 2011th in Rome – against what they consider as attacks on public education, such as budget cuts and increased levels of tuition fees.

In 2012, the number of protests – and social demand of political participation – is reduced when compared to the period 2005-2011. Italian unions and left parties do not aggregate this demand. Nevertheless, in order to grow, protests and social demands need political opportunities. The creation of potential allies – e.g. left-parties and unions – becomes a necessity, both strategic and fundamental: such allies are important to broaden the mobilisation, for the logistic resources they can offer, and, even more, to increase the political influence of the protest. However the Monti's government grand coalition (from November 2011 to April 2013) drastically reduced this opportunity. In this period, political parties – and indirectly unions, because of the historical linkage with the party system¹ – support the neoliberal government in the Italian parliament: they would not be credible allies for those who are opposing Mario Monti's policies.

The Italian general election of February 2013 saw the ascent of Beppe Grillo and the success of M5S MoVimento 5 Stelle (M5S) [Five Star Movement] also as a result of this lack of social approval. In 2005 Beppe Grillo created the blog beppegrillo.it which immediately showed a remarkable success. Since then, this success has been rapidly increasing. In 2008, the Observer ranked “beppegrillo.it” as the ninth world's most influential blogs. Then, followers began to organise themselves independently through the beppegrillo.meetup.com platform. If on the one hand, the (more or less) relatively institutionalized social demands of participation was reducing, on the other hand, Beppe Grillo was growing both in the new media, among followers (through the blog beppegrillo.it), regular political demonstrations (e.g., the Vaffanculo day, in 2007), among people (the Tsunami Tour, in 2013).

Grillo's constituency is of a very heterogeneous social composition. M5S was particularly successful with the middle and upper middle classes, large sections of working class – typically identified with the “left” – young people (Tronconi, 2013). Those people are identified by Grillo as one of two social blocks existing in Italy². M5S' 160 senators and parliamentarians mostly hail from this milieu and social block: young postgraduate and anti-establishment people, but also novices of the political arena, without a well-defined political identity.

In Beppe Grillo's language and rhetoric there is also a quite strong criticism towards the Italian unions. For example, during the Tsunami Tour for the 2013 electoral campaign, Grillo went so far as to propose the elimination of the unions because of a structure «as old as the political parties». With one exception: the Fiom-CGIL (the Trade Union for the metal industry's labourers and office workers in Italy). His blog (beppegrillo.it) reserves quite appreciation for the Fiom-CGIL: the only trade union organization who supported the “No” at the Workers' Referendum of 2007. For example, in 11th January 2011 Grillo's blog posted: «the Fiom is not just defending the Mirafiori workers. It is defending the Constitution, the democracy, and the freedom of choice. It is basically defending the possibility of giving a future for our country, that seems to us to be getting ever more distant». The General Secretary of the Fiom-CGIL Maurizio

¹ In order to exemplify, Guglielmo Epifani, appointed Secretary of the Democratic Party (PD) in 2013, was the General Secretary of the CGIL from 2002 to 2010.

² In a blog post on 26th February 2013, Beppe Grillo claims that in Italy there are “two social blocks.” Block A, which voted for M5S, was made up “of millions of youth without a future”, including “the excluded, the over-taxed, [...]” and a Block B that consists “of those who want to maintain the status quo [...]”.

Landini also appeared in a video message on the blog (on 29th March, 2012). Although a clear and defined proposal on industrial relations in Italy has never been present in the M5S, Beppe Grillo's discourse and rhetoric points out the critical juncture of the union system in Italy.

Notes

- (1) For a description of sample, see Carbonai (2010).

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