

The Bumble-Bee is Still Flying: Italian Political Culture at 50

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Italian scholars and commentators often liken the Italian political system to a bumble-bee: an insect structurally unable to fly but apparently very effective in doing exactly this. Among the many legacies and constraints that would make the Italian political system theoretically unviable is its political culture. Despite the tumultuous and rapid pace of socioeconomic change Italy underwent in the last 50 years, the prevalent description of Italian political culture among analysts and commentators, both Italians and foreigners, still is one of political and cultural stagnation. The political culture has remained as static, backward, “*immobile*,” and impermeable to change as it was described in the early 1950s. How is it then that “the image of a backward Italy struggling (somehow) with modernity is a dominant representation of the country in the eyes of both Italian and foreign commentators” (Agnew 1997, 26)? Our effort in this paper is to turn the question upside down and ask to what extent is this prevailing image—and a few pages will be spent to describe it once again—an empirically adequate depiction of Italian political culture today? To what degree is the so-called familistic-parochial-localistic paradigm still valid, if it ever was, to capture the nature and characteristics of Italian political culture?

To do so, the paper is organized in three sections. In the next section, we briefly spell out the main characteristics of the familistic-parochial-localistic paradigm and the main challenges it has faced in

the last decade. We then discuss three of its characteristics—localism, (lack of) trust, and satisfaction with democracy—that usually place Italy in a league of its own as compared to other European countries. In the conclusions, we spell out some implications of these results for further analysis.

Italian Political Culture: Then and Now

Concluding a vast comparative research survey in five different countries, including Italy, Almond and Verba synthesized their results on Italy as follows:

The picture of Italian political culture that has emerged from our data is one of relatively unrelieved political alienation and of social isolation and distrust. The Italians are particularly low in national pride, in moderate and open partisanship, in the acknowledgment of the obligation to take an active part in local community affairs, in the sense of competence to join with others in situations of political stress, in their choice of social forms of leisure-time activity and in their confidence in the social environment. (Almond and Verba 1989 [1963]: 308)

This sentence paralleled the one reached—using different research design and methods—at approximately the same time, by another American scholar, this time a political anthropologist, Edward Banfield (1958). Banfield, having spent nine months of his life, with his wife and children, in a small Southern Italian village, Chiaromonte, in Basilicata, found a community whose inhabitants were unwilling to cooperate for their common good, distrustful of

both public officials and their own fellow villagers, and anxious and fearful of life and the external environment. Banfield located the sources of these uncooperative, distrustful, and suspicious attitudes pervading Chiaromonte in the ethos pervading the village; an ethos he incisively dubbed “amoral familism.” An amoral familist is, according to Banfield (1958, 83), a person who behaves according to the following rule: “maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise.” From the implementation of such a rule of behavior several negative implications for social and political life follow: the inability to even be able to conceive the public interest as something relevant to a person individually; the lack of interest in public problems; the perceived lack of control of public officials (whose motivations are read to be purely selfish); the difficulty in overcoming the free riding problem; the systematic violation of the rule of law, if impunity is reasonable to be expected; corruption and the preference for authoritarian order. The nuclear family and its problems are the core concern of a typical Montegraneese.¹ The individual as such does not exist without the family. Anxiety is the psychological trait characteristic of the inhabitant of Montegrano, a chronic fear for the welfare of the family that at any moment can suddenly be destroyed. In such a nasty, brutal, and often also short life, the material interest of the family is paramount. People are continuously engaged in a zero-sum social game, nurtured by the structural mistrust toward those who do not belong to the nuclear family (even if they are close relatives).

A few years later, another American scholar, Robert N. Bellah (1974), argued that the prevalent “civil religion” in Italy was the “*basso continuo*,” a sort of pagan pre-Christian religiosity. This form

1 Montegrano was the fictitious name Banfield gave to the small village of Chiaromonte.

of religiosity meant loyalty to the family, to the clan, to the enlarged parental group, such as the Mafia, the gang, the small, sometimes deviant, group. This particularistic religion ethos permeates the life of the average Italian citizen much more than the full-fledged ideologies that compete for attention among Italian political elites. In an interesting comparison with Japan, China, France, and England, Bellah claimed that such a form of pagan religiosity was stronger in Italy and Japan than in China, England, or France.

Twenty years later, a fourth American scholar, Robert Putnam (1993), offered a “cultural” explanation of institutional performances of Italian regions along the same lines. Putnam traced the differential effectiveness of the Italian regions back to the different endowment of social capital available in those regions. The different political and economic paths experienced since the Middle Ages by the “*Comuni*” in the center and northern part of Italy on the one hand and the feudal empire and the Papal State in the south on the other are at the source of the differential stock of social capital in the Italian regions. Those regions which experienced a vibrant and effective democratic experience during the “Communal” age now have a larger social capital than those in which feudal rule and Papal autocracy repressed all attempts at the flowering of social and political democratic life.

What is interesting in glancing, admittedly in a cursory way, at this stream of studies and analyses dedicated by American scholars to Italy and its political culture since the early 1950s is both the paramount attention dedicated to the cultural factor as a source of explanation (for a critique of this overall approach see Jackman 1998 and Jackman and Miller 2004) and the univocal negative decline of this culture’s characteristics. Both aspects are interesting, as compared to the domestic debate on the nature and characteristics of the Italian political system. First, Italian scholars (with the partial exception of Tullio-Altan 1997 and Cartocci 1994, 2007) have usually neglected cultural

explanations of Italian political problems,² emphasizing institutional and systemic factors (e.g., Sartori, 1982) linked to the functioning of the Italian party system. Second, while Italy is considered a case of extremely dynamic socioeconomic modernization, it remains puzzling that in the face of all economic, political, and social changes undergone in Italy in these forty years, its political culture (or, at least, the description of it by foreign commentators) has remained the same, unaltered and unalterable by the passing of time. Fifty years after the publication of *Civic Culture* it is probably appropriate to ask again if the Italian “familistic-particularistic” political culture (Sciolla 1997) is still descriptively adequate and explanatorily effective.

We will focus our attention on three elements of this syndrome: political disaffection, lack of vertical and horizontal trust, and a strong localism. In Italy, satisfaction from the way the democratic system works is systematically lower than in other Western European countries and remarkably stable over time.³ The percentage of those satisfied with democracy has never gone above 30% of the population and, contrary to other countries (e.g., the United States), has shown no downward trend. Almond and Verba were the first to point to the lower sense of civic competence among Italian respondents. They found that in Italy, only 24% of the interviewed had a high sense of subjective political competence as against 32% in (West) Germany, 34% in the United Kingdom, and 52% in the United States. Only Mexicans had a lower level of subjective political competence than the Italians. Similar surveys carried out by Barnes and Sani in 1968 and 1972, by the Political Action Study in 1975, by the Four Nations study in 1985, and in the ITANES electoral surveys in 1990 and 1996

2 As Sani (1989) has pointedly remarked, Almond and Verba’s book was never translated into Italian.

3 For a thorough review of data on Italy, see Segatti 2000.

largely confirm this pattern.⁴ Segatti (2000), after a detailed analysis of all available trend data, concludes that the percentage of Italians who feel politically ineffective and perceive the political system as unresponsive has always been high and never below 45%.

A second important characteristic of the Italian political culture has been the pervasive lack of trust among citizens and toward political institutions. This sense of mistrust emerges very clearly from the anthropological study of Banfield, the considerations of Bellah, and the data of Almond and Verba. Italians do not trust their fellow countrymen, and sometimes, they trust foreigners *more* than their fellow citizens (Sniderman et al. 2000). Putnam (1993) reported that the sense of trust toward fellow citizens was related to the degree of civic-ness of a polity, but overall the level of trust is remarkably low in all subgroups (see Putnam 1993, table 4.15, p. 131).

A third character of the Italian political culture is its “localism,” the paramount importance of local identification in defining the group to which each Italian refers when he thinks of himself as part of the body politic. According to some scholars, approximately 50% of the Italians feel they belong to subnational bodies (such as the Commune and the Region) and another fifth to supranational bodies, such as the “world” and “Europe” (Sciolla 1997, 52), while no more than 30% would identify themselves with the national community (for a contrary view see Diamanti and Segatti 1994). This makes Italy a country in which national identity is weak, pride for the country is dead calm, and willingness to sacrifice for the country is minimal.

In sum, the familistic-parochial (*localista*) syndrome is characterized by high political disaffection, low trust for both the

4 Problems of wording affect the comparability of questions over time. For a discussion of these problems, see Segatti 2000.

fellow countrymen and the political institutions, the prevalence of local sources of identifications, low pride for the country, and unwillingness to make sacrifices if required.

In the last decade, some of these conclusions have been challenged both theoretically and empirically. Even if not reversed yet, new empirical results offer a different perspective from which to observe comparatively Italian political culture. In the next section, we will present some survey data that might help to shed some further light on this issue.

Identity, Trust and Satisfaction in the Italian Political Culture

This section discusses three characterizing aspects of Italian political culture: localism, lack of confidence, and dissatisfaction with politics. The discussion is organized as follows: We start by briefly reviewing the most recent literature on each of these factors; we then introduce some more recent survey results,⁵ comparing them when possible with other existing data; and lastly, we discuss the extent to which the new available data confirm or contradict previous results.

- 5 In this section I present the data of the ASES survey, conducted in the fall of the year 2000 in Italy, as part of a comparative study in nine European and nine Far East Asian countries. The survey was carried out by DOXA (a partner of Gallup international) on October 7–23, 2000, with a proportional stratified sample, using regions and size of community as strata and, within each stratum selecting a set of sampling points. The completion rate was 42.5%. The sample size is 1,016 individuals. For some analyses seven persons interviewed belonging to other nationalities have been excluded.

A. Localism and National Identity

National identity is quite a difficult concept to grasp and measure. For some, the problem resides in the fact that national identity is more appropriately described at the *collective* rather than at the individual level (e.g., Smith 1999). Other scholars, mostly social psychologists (e.g., Blank, Schmidt, and Westle 2000; Carey 2002; Lilli and Diehl 1999), disagree and offer different, sometimes quite complex ways of conceptualizing and operationalizing national identity. We strike a middle way between these two approaches. We use secondary analysis of available national sample survey data to explore one important dimension of the concept of national identity: the attachment to community. Territorial communities are a component of the individual self (Smith 1991, 4) and people may feel different degrees of attachment to different territorial entities. The discussion on the nature and combinations of these different territorial allegiances has been intense in both social psychology and political science. Basically, two models have been suggested: the nested model and the cross-cutting one. In the nested model, territorial attachments are layered along a continuum, in which attachment to a larger community implies attachment to smaller ones and the final and ultimate loyalty is to the “terminal community,” the highest territorial unit to which allegiance is felt. In a cross-cutting model, allegiance is distributed among different entities, without any implication that one loyalty is stronger or more important than others. Social psychology and political science, following the pluralist tenet, tend to impute to cross-cutting allegiances more peaceful and tolerant group relations than to nested ones (Herrmann, Risse, and Brewer 2000).

In Italy, the discussion on territorial attachment has focused mostly on the so-called local level (usually meant as the town-commune level), under the rubric of “localism.” Admittedly, localism is an ambiguous concept (Diamanti 1994, 1996), which has been used to stress the

paramount importance of territorial entities narrower than the state in the Italians' feelings of attachment. In other words, as the argument goes, in Italy either a greater proportion of people feel an attachment to local territorial entities as their "terminal community" or individuals attach a greater emotional significance to subnational territorial entities than to the national one. This argument has been developed with particular reference to the concept of "territorial subculture" (Galli 1966) and used to explain the success of the *Lega Nord* party in politicizing this level of attachment (Diamanti 1996) and the weak sense of national identity. National identity is challenged not only by a strong sense of local attachment, but also by internationalism, expressed in the forms of an enthusiastic Europeanism, to further undermine the weak Italian sense of allegiance to the nation as the terminal territorial community (Segatti 1995; Martinotti and Stefanizzi 1995).

We will address here three issues related to the sense of national identity: whether national identity is weak, how it evolves over time, and how it relates to other forms of attachment. In Italy, contrary to other countries or political cultures, no apparent tension between the national and the supranational exists; this is so precisely because the national identity is so weak. Let us review the available data to see what they tell us on this point.

Our first effort has been of data stocktaking. Table 1 presents all available questions we have been able to find on feelings of territorial attachments in Italy over the last forty years. This table offers a quite complex and multifaceted picture of the Italians' sense of territorial attachments. Questions about national identity and territorial attachments vary in format and wording as well as in the list of territorial entities among which to choose—and all these factors seem to affect the results. First, as to the wording, feelings of belonging are elicited in reference sometimes to a "community" and other times to the "country" (*patria*). The explicit reference to Italy or to country might have an effect, prompting a greater number of people to select it.

Second, the list of available entities among which the respondent must choose also can make a difference. In one survey (DB 1994) “town” was excluded from the list and in another (European Community Study 1971[ECS]) it was “world” that was absent. Excluding one or the other affects the overall distribution of responses. Third, the number of people mentioning the nation or any other territorial entities is also systematically affected by the format of the alternatives. When, as in the ECS of 1971, the ITANES study of 1990, and the two World Value Surveys (WVS), two possible responses are allowed, the amount of people mentioning the nation as an ecological unit of attachment increases. This is even more so when, as in a Likert-type question asked twice (in Eurobarometer 1991 and in the International Social Survey Program [ISSP] 1995), the respondents are called to express how close they feel to every item in the list. Enabling this possibility substantially raises the percentage of people choosing the country.

Table 1 Sense of territorial attachments – Italy, various years (percent)

	ECS 1971			WVS-1981		
	1 st	2 nd	All	1 st	2 nd	All
World	-	-		16	13	28
Europe	8	13	21	5	17	15
Italy	37	27	65	28	33	59
Region	9	20	29	11	19	32
Town	42	34	77	40	18	62
DK	4	7	4	-	-	
Total	100	100	197	100	100	
N	2,017	2,017	1,975	1,988	1,938	3,267

Table 1 (continued)

	1990 ITANES			WVS-1991		
	1 st	2 nd	All	1 st	2 nd	All
World	11	10	22	18	11	29
Europe	3	13	16	4	11	22
Italy	36	30	67	25	36	60
Region	13	27	41	8	24	29
Town	35	15	51	45	18	57
DK	1	4	-		-	
Total	100	100	196	100	100	
N	1,500	1,500	2,922	1,275	1,218	3,267

Questions: ECS-1971: Q1a. Among the following geographic units, to which one do you feel you first belong? City, locality, “canton” where you live; department or province; region; country; Europe; other. ITANES 1990: Everybody thinks of himself as being part of a commune, region, or the country in which he/she lives. Do you feel to be mostly part of a city (e.g., Bolognese), region (e.g., Emiliano); Italian, European, or citizen of the world. What’s next? WVS 1981–1991: Which of these geographical groups would you say you belong to first of all? And the next? Locality or town where you live; State or region of country where you live; The US as a whole; North America; The world as a whole; Don’t know.

Table 1 (continued)

	Eb – 1991	DB – January 1994	DB – December 1994	DB-June 1995	ISSP 1995	
			Country	Community		
World	-	18	21	22	20	-
Europe	60	10	9	9	5	69
Italy	90	60	54	51	56	87
Region	87	10	10	7	9	80
Town	88	-	5	9	9	82
DK	-	2	0.5	1	1	
Total		100	100	100	100	
N	1,076	1,300	405	412	794	1,094

Table 1 (continued)

	DB – January 1996	DB – July 1996	DB – June 1997	SWG April 1999	CIRCaP June – November 1999	
					Country	Community
World	15	18	16	19	14	21
Europe	10	6	8	9	6	13
Italy	61	59	59	56	60	39
Region	6	9	9	7	9	15
Town	6	7	7	7	8	11
DK	2	1	1	2	2	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	804	816	1,000	1007	2,003	2,003

Questions: DB-December 1994 (split half): Do you feel mostly a citizen of. . . Italy, world, region in which you were born, Europe, your own town, other. Which of the following do you consider your country? Italy, world, region in which you were born, Europe, your own town, other. DB-January 1994: Which community do you feel to belong to . . . Italy, world, region in which you were born, Europe, your own town, other. DB-June 1995, January 1996, July 1996, June 1997, April 1999 Kosovo: Which of the following do you consider your country? Italy, world, region in which you were born, Europe, your own town, other. CIRCaP June-November 1999: Which community/country do you feel to belong to? Italy, world, region in which you were born, Europe, your own town, other. ISSP – 1995: How close do you feel to . . . neighborhood, city, county, country, continent. Eb-1991 (36). People may feel different degrees of attachment to their town or village, to their region, to their country, to the European Community; or to Europe [as a whole]. Please tell me how attached you feel to . . .?

Source: Authors' development of data from above referenced surveys.

As to evolution over time, the data does not reveal any clear pattern across such a diverse set of questions. If any, the variability seems to reside more in the different wording, format, and number of responses than in any change over time. Looking at the set of four multiple response questions, asked respectively in 1971 (ECS), 1981 (WVS), 1990 (ITANES), and 1991 (WVS), attachment to the town appears to be declining, while attachment to other political entities shows no clear pattern. However, no such a trend is detectable from the other types of questions. Moreover, variability seems to affect certain territorial entities more than others. The amount of people selecting the nation as a primary (or secondary, when more than one choice is available) object of attachment goes from a minimum of 51% in the DB 1994 survey to a maximum of 90% in the Eurobarometer survey of 1991. On the other hand, the percentage choosing either subnational or supranational entities oscillates more widely up or down, depending

on the format and kind of question. As an example, the number of people mentioning the town as primary object of attachment goes from approximately 7% in several Difebarometer surveys⁶ to 88% in the Eurobarometer survey of 1991.

In an attempt to clarify the role of these different sources of variation among the 16 questions on territorial attachments listed in Table 1, we used an OLS model, in which three groups of independent variables were regressed on the percentage of respondents mentioning the “country” as their primary territorial attachment: question format, wording, and time. First, the format of the question, being single, multiresponse, or a Likert-scale, seems to affect the proportion of people choosing one or the other alternative. In this case, the variation is not simply an artifact of the structure of the question to which the respondent is called to react, but also a possible consequence of the fact that people belong to different political entities at the same time, and these ties are not incompatible with one another. Second, wording also plays a role. The explicit reference to the country (or to Italy) and the presence or absence of the “world” and the “town” as an alternative affect the results. Third, there is the possibility, hard to detect by an “ocular test,” that time makes a difference. To explore the source of variations more systematically we coded all questions on these three sets of variables, as dummies.⁷ As to the time variable,

6 Difebarometer is a series of surveys carried out in the 1990s by Archivio Disarmo and SWG-Trieste to examine public attitudes toward foreign and defense policy issues.

7 As an example, the ECS 1971 question “Among the following geographic units, to which one do you feel you belong to first? And second?” was coded 1 on the multiresponse variable (allowing for two possible answers); zero on the Likert scale; and 0 on the “Country” (because no explicit reference to “*patria*” or Italy was mentioned), World and Town (we reversed the coding for World and Town, setting 0 when the item was present and 1 when it was absent).

we set a counter starting with the year 1971, the first in which data are available, as 1. Table 2 shows the results of the regressed independent variables on the percentage of respondents choosing Italy as their main territorial attachment (dependent variable).

Table 2 Determinants of attachment to country (OLS estimate, unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors)

	b	Std. Error
Constant	62.96	7.03***
“Country”	12.86	3.31**
Town	-15.01	5.16*
World	-3.09	8.18
Likert-format	40.43	8.19***
Multiresponse	17.05	5.30**
Year	0.006	0.417
R ² adjusted	0.887	4.13***
N	16	

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Source: See Table 1 and coding procedures discussed in the text.

With a predicted average of 63% choosing the country as the preferred territorial reference—slightly higher than the actual average of 61%—the table reports the impact of three main sets of predictors. The first three variables make reference to the presence (in the case of the country) and the absence (in the case of the world or the town) of each of these words in the opening statement of each question. Of the three terms, lack of reference to town and explicit reference to country or to Italy has a significant impact on the percentage mentioning the country. On the other hand, the lack of reference to the world emerges as not

significant, once controlling for the other variables. Therefore, an explicit reference to the country or to Italy increases by about 12 points the percent of those who chose Italy as main community of belonging, vis-à-vis the more neutral “geographic unit” or “community.” Part of the variance is also due to the format of the question, whether it is a multiresponse or Likert question. In particular, asking the respondent to express how “attached” (Eurobarometer 1991) or “close” (ISSP 1995) a respondent feels himself to each community of a list of territorial entities increases the percentage of those feeling close or attached to the country by approximately 40 percentage points. This could be read as a consequence of the fact that people have multiple territorial identities and these questions allow the expression of these multiple attachments. Finally, time has no appreciable effect on attachment to the country. Once controlled for the type of question and the wording, the impact of time has no significant effect, confirming the first impression of no clear trend in attachment to the country. There has been no apparent trend in nationalization or denationalization of Italian identity between the 1970s and 1999.

These results indicate that people have multiple territorial identities, and this is reflected in the high number of respondents who feel attached to more than one territorial entity. Moreover, among these multiple identities, when they are allowed to be expressed (as in the Eurobarometer 1991 and in the ISSP 1995 survey), the nation is the one most frequently mentioned. When compelled to choose among different communities, however, people make their choices by reacting not only to the set of alternatives offered but also to the clarity of the “national” cue in the survey question banner. Confirming the largely “latent” nature of national identity, when the “national” territorial identity is not clearly primed into the respondent’s mind, people are less likely to choose it as their primary unity of attachment rather than other groups. The percentage of individuals who feel themselves

“national,” in other words, depends on the different clarity with which this kind of specific identity is noted in a question. This could be read as a manifestation of national identity being taken for granted rather than being weak (Breakwell 2004). National identity might be a pervasive but not salient form of identity that needs to be activated in order to be made relevant as a choice for the respondent. To back this statement up we will offer three further pieces of evidence.

In a survey carried out in two waves between June and November 1999 the following experiment was carried out. At the beginning of the survey, a question asked to which of a list of “communities” the respondent felt he/she belonged the most (only one choice was allowed). The list included Italy, Europe, the world, the town, and the region, and the order of items was randomly rotated. To this question, 39% chose Italy, while 12% the town, 14% Europe, 15% the region, and 21% the world. Later on in the same interview—after several questions related to national identity and European integration were asked—a second question asked quite straightforwardly which, on the same list of items, the respondent considered his country (*patria*). Again, the order of items was randomly rotated. This time, 60% mentioned Italy, 14% the world, 9% the region, 6% Europe, and 8% the town. If we assume that some people might have remembered the question, and therefore the pressure to be coherent was probably working against change,⁸ this result shows that using the word *patria* and engaging the interviewees in a discussion on national identity issues increases the number of people able to recognize this territorial entity as the most appropriate terminal community by approximately 20 percentage points.

8 In the pre-test we explored how many of the interviewed actually remembered a similar question asked before in the interview. None of those interviewed remembered such a question. This is not surprising because the questionnaire was quite long and engaging.

A second corroborating piece of evidence results from a split-half question asked in December 1994 in another survey. Toward the end of a long telephone interview on questions related to defense and security issues, half of the sample was asked which of a list of entities the respondent considered his/her country and another half, randomly assigned, was asked if the respondent felt him/herself mainly a citizen of Italy, the world, Europe, his/her region, or the town. No significant difference appears between those who chose the country in the first formulation (54%) and those who chose it with the second formulation (51%). The term “citizen” probably evokes in the respondent a similar reaction to that of “country.”⁹

A third and last piece of evidence arises from the ASES survey of 2001. In that survey, the opening question of the interview asked, “Do you think of yourself as Italian or as belonging to another nationality?” Some 94% answered that they think of themselves as Italians and 0.7% (n=7) as belonging to another nationality (they were in fact of nationalities other than Italian); only 51 persons (5%) of the overall sample did not think of themselves as Italians. The next question then asked, “Overall, how important is it to you that you are Italian?” Of those who thought of themselves as Italians,¹⁰ 93% deemed it “extremely” (51%) or “somewhat” (42%) important. In a context in which respondents are focused to think in terms of nationality, as the banner of the opening question helped to do,¹¹ Italians have no problem

9 Coding the half-sample question in which the word “citizen” is used as 1 in the dummy variable measuring whether a reference to the country is explicitly made increases both the explanatory model of our model and the influence of the “country” dummy from 12.86 to 19.31.

10 We excluded the seven respondents of foreign nationality.

11 The opening banner stated: “Many people think of themselves as being part of a particular nationality, for example, as French or American or Japanese or whatever.”

to recognize themselves as “nationals.” It is in this discursive context that we should also interpret the less intuitively interpretable answers to the open question asking, “Is there any other community or group that you feel part of?” To such a question, only 19 persons (2%) mentioned the neighborhood, 37 persons (4%) the region, 4 persons (0.4%) an ethnic group, and 26 (3%) religious affiliations; 89% flatly said that they “do not think of themselves as part of any other community or group.” This is quite a surprising result given what we have discussed before about localism. It is less so, however, if we interpret this result in the context of an interview’s structure that frames the exchange in “national” terms. Having framed the discussion around nationality as the main category of discourse since the very beginning, most of the people adapted their following consequent opinion and attitudes to this context, and, apparently, in so doing, they neglected references to other groups and communities.

These results challenge the idea that, in Italy, national identity is weak or even non-existent. Most of the people indeed feel some sense of attachment to Italy as a country and when this identity is made salient, they forcefully do so. Rather, Italian national identity is non-salient or “banal” (Billig 1997), and it needs to be made salient in order to evoke it. In that somehow odd situation that is the interview setting, the ability to recognize that a question is calling on to for expression of national attachment depends in part on the clarity of the stimulus. A further question, that admittedly we do not address here, is whether such a lack of saliency, which makes it hard for many respondents to recognize an ambiguous stimulus about group attachment as referring to national identity, is, in itself, evidence of support of a weaker national identity.

Italians not only have a sense of national identity, but that feeling coexists with other identities. Segatti (1995, 110) has already shown, using the 1990 ITANES survey, that most Italians have multiple

identities, among which the nation is central for the majority of the population. The ASES survey confirms these conclusions, as compared to European identity. The 2000 ASES questionnaire asked, “Some people also think of themselves as being part of a larger group that includes people from other countries, for example, as European, Asian, Chinese, Islamic, etc. How about you? Do you think of yourself in this way?”¹² Approximately two-thirds of the respondents (68%) answered that they thought of themselves as Europeans as well and one-third (31%) that they did not think of themselves as such.¹³ Among the 68% who think of themselves as European, an overwhelming majority (87%) of them thought their supranational European identity was extremely (31%) or somewhat (56%) important. These results are in line with a systematic amount of evidence pointing to the willingness of the Italians to think of themselves as Europeans (see Ammendola and Isernia 2005; Martinotti and Stefanizzi 1995). To explore whether these two identities, national and European, overlap or clash, we cross-tabulated the importance attached by the respondents to these two dimensions of identity.¹⁴ Table 3 reports the results ($\chi^2 = 52.047$, $p < .001$). Quite clearly, being Italian and feeling European do not work at cross-purposes for a majority of the Italians. Fifty-seven percent of the respondents think that *both* their national

12 Given the overall positive attitude toward Europe among the Italians, this is a weak test of the interaction among different territorial identities. A stronger one would be to set the national identity beside the local identity.

13 Only 10 persons (1%) answered they had other supranational identities.

14 We recoded those who answer that the national and European identities are important into two groups: those who think it is very or somewhat important and those who think that it is only a little important or not at all important. In this second group are also included those who answer these two questions by indicating that they do not think of themselves in this way.

and supranational identity are very or somewhat important. They are what Segatti (1995, 111) called the “post-national nationalists.” For them, the sense of national identity does not exclude loyalty to a supranational institution. The pure nationalists, those who deem their national identity important but not their European identity are one third of the sample (31%). Almost 90% of the interviewed belong to these two groups. Eight percent of the sample think that both sources of identity attachments are not important and only 4% (n=37) is purely Europeanist in thinking that only the European identity is important.

Table 3 National and supranational identities
(percent, number of cases in parentheses)

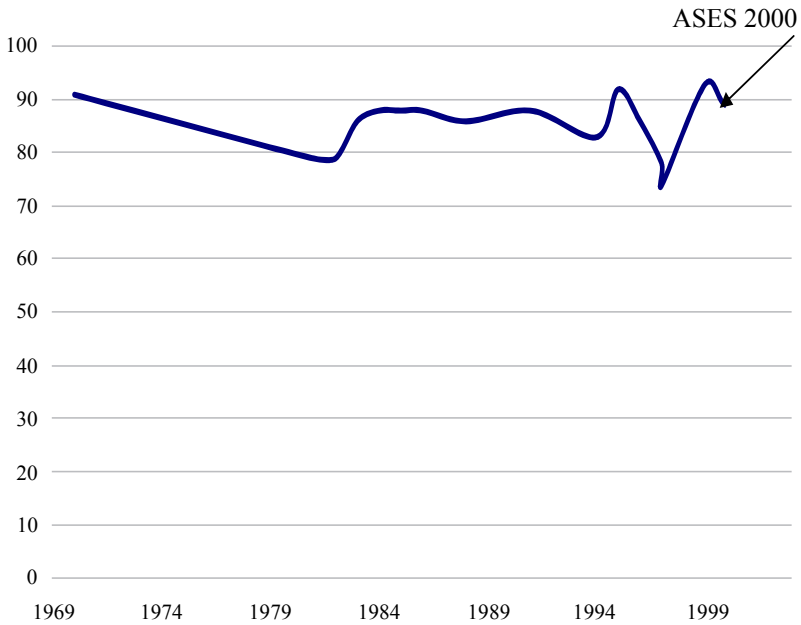
Importance supranational identity	Importance national identity		Total
	Not important	Important	
Not important	8% (85)	31% (313)	40 (398)
Important	4% (37)	57% (567)	60% (604)
Total	12% (122)	88% (880)	100% (1002)

Pearson’s χ^2 52.047, significant at the level 0.001.

Source: Authors’ development of data from the 2000 ASES Survey.

Italians are not only used to thinking of themselves as Italian, but they are quite proud of it as well. To the question “Overall, how proud are you to be Italian?” an overwhelming majority answers to be “very” or “somewhat” proud of being Italian. This trend has been quite stable since the early 1970s, as reported in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Pride for the country (very or quite proud; percent)



Unless otherwise stated the question is: “How proud are you to be Italian? Very proud, quite proud, not very proud, not at all proud.” Those who do not answer are excluded; 1970: “We hear a lot of things about the United States of Europe. I am going to read a certain number of opinions and I would like you to tell me (for each of them) whether you agree completely, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or disagree completely. I am proud to be an Italian. Agree completely, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, disagree completely”; 1995: “I am proud to be an Italian. Agree completely, agree somewhat, undecided, disagree somewhat, disagree completely.” The undecided category (5%) has been excluded.

Sources: Authors’ development of data from 1982–1997: Eurobarometer Mannheim Cumulative file 1970–97; 1981 and 1991: World Value Surveys; 1994–1996 and 1997: Difebarometer Survey; 1995: ISSP National Identity; 1999: CIRCaP Survey; 2000: ASES Survey; 2002: Selecta survey.

Table 4 Pride of country among different identity groups (percent)

Pride in being Italian	Importance attached to national and European identity				Total
	Only national	Both	Only European	None	
Not proud	8	5	34	52	11
Proud	92	94	66	48	89
Total	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(306)	(565)	(35)	(82)	(988)

Pearson's χ^2 179.851, significant at the level 0.001. Goodman and Kruskal τ : 0.182

Source: Authors' development of data from the 2000 ASES Survey.

The general level of pride for the country coexists with a much lower level of pride for the way the political system and its institutions works (Diamanti and Segatti 1994; Segatti 2000; Battistelli and Bellucci 2000). Italians are proud of their country, but not of their political institutions, as the ASES data reported in Table 6 shows. Not surprisingly, Italians tend to be prouder of the "cultural" dimension of the country, (history, landscape, culture, art, etc.) than of the civic one (Battistelli and Bellucci 2000).

Table 5 shows that pride increases as we move from the way democracy works to Italian economic achievements and Italy's armed forces (an institution whose image has significantly improved in the last decade or so). Only 28% of the Italians are very or somewhat proud of the way the country's democracy works, and of its influence in the world; 30% are proud of the Italian welfare state and 44% of the Italian economy's achievements; 49% are proud of their armed forces.

Apart from this variation, on average, the level of pride for each of these “civic” aspects of the Italian political culture is well below that for the country as a whole. These results point to an image of public opinion highly dissatisfied with the working of the Italian political system. There is a moderate relationship between pride for the country and satisfaction “with politics in your society today.” ($\chi^2= 69.630$, $p<.001$, $\gamma = -.54$, $\tau\text{-}b = -.27$). Among those not proud of the country, 82% are not satisfied with politics in their society; while among those who are proud of the country, those not satisfied are 55%. However, comparatively, Italians are by far much less satisfied with politics than other Europeans. No more than 10% of the Italians are satisfied “with politics in your society today,” while 65% are not satisfied with it. This is the dimension to which we now turn.

Table 5 Pride regarding different aspects of country (percent)

How proud are you of Italy in...	Very proud	Somewhat proud	Not so proud	Not proud at all	DK	Total
The way Italy’s democracy works	4	24	42	28	1	100
Italy’s political influence in the world	3	25	44	24	4	100
Italy’s social welfare system	3	27	42	27	1	100
Italy’s economic achievements	5	39	37	15	4	100
Italy’s armed forces	9	40	28	17	6	100

N=1009

Source: Authors’ development of data from the 2000 ASES Survey.

B. Confidence, Disaffection, and Political Participation

Italy has been defined (Segatti 2000) as the case study *par excellence* of political disaffection. Since the beginning of survey research in Italy, it has been seen quite clearly that Italians feel detached, critical, and powerless vis-à-vis the political institutions. Disaffection toward politics has been not only systematically higher in Italy than in other countries, but also very stable over time. In Italy the *cri de douleur* about the decline in public confidence does not apply (Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000), because confidence was never high in the first place, irrespective of the sea-change in the social, economic, and political changes citizens have gone through in the last 40 years.

To make the puzzle even more elusive, attitudes toward politics and political institutions do not seem to relate to actual political behavior (contrary to what happens in other countries, such as the US, see Abramson and Aldrich 1982). For more than 40 years, Italy has seen a startling low level of political efficacy coexist with a record high level of voter turnout. We examine here two dimensions of this phenomenon: subjective political efficacy, a standard measure of the political competence of citizenship, and confidence in a wide set of institutions.

As to political efficacy, Table 6 presents the trend on four standard indicators of political efficacy. The general picture is unequivocal and the message it sends is clear and sharp. A great majority of Italians thought in the past, and still think now, that politics is so complicated that one cannot understand what is happening, that those running for national parliament immediately stop thinking about the public's interest and caring about what people think once they get elected, and that citizens have no say in what the government does. No trend is detectable in the data. If possible, the impression is that disaffection increases slightly over time (Segatti 2000).

Table 6 Level of political dissatisfaction in different years
(percent in agreement with sentences)

	1959	1968	1972	1975	1985	1990
Politics so complicated	65	80	85	83	79	89
(n)	(801)	(2001)	(1602)	(1384)	(2003)	(1486)
People no influence	84	-	-	73	-	78
(n)	(821)			(1304)		(1466)
Politicians lose touch	90	52	93	88	83	90
(n)	(814)	(2497)	(1614)	(1308)	(1989)	(1446)
Politicians don't care	-	67	77	81	81	83
(n)		(1831)	(1516)	(1329)	(1958)	(1474)
	1996	2000	2001	2004	2006	
Politics so complicated	-	74	88	85	81	
(n)		(1016)	(3163)	(1048)	(2005)	
People no influence	52	70	84	83	73	
(n)	(2416)	(1016)	(3136)	(1048)	(2005)	
Politicians lose touch	83	64	94	90	88	
(n)	(2430)	(1016)	(3119)	(1048)	(2005)	
Politicians don't care	-	69	88	-	90	
(n)		(1016)	(3135)		(2005)	

Sources for authors' development of data and question wording from:

1959 Civic Culture: 1. “Politics so complicated”: Some people say that politics and government are so complicated that the average man cannot really understand what is going on. In general, do you agree or disagree with that. 2. “Lose touch”: All candidates sound good in their speeches but you can never tell what they will do after they are elected. 3. “No influence”: People like me don’t have any say about what the government does; **1968 Barnes and Sani:** 1. “Politics so complicated”: Politics and government sometimes seem so complicated that people like me can’t really understand what’s going on; 2. “Lose touch”: In general, the deputies we elect quickly lose contact with the people; 3. “Don’t care”: I don’t think the government worries much about what people like me think ; **1972 Barnes and Sani:** 1. “Politics so complicated”: Politics and government sometimes seem so complicated that people like me can’t really understand what’s going on; 2. “Lose touch”: Politicians talk a lot but accomplish little. 3. “Don’t care”: I don’t think the government worries much about what people like me think ; **1975 Political Action Study:** 1. “Politics so complicated”: Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on. 2. “Lose touch”: Generally speaking, those we elect to [parliament] lose touch with the people pretty quickly. 3. “Don’t care”: I don’t think that public officials care much about what people like me think. 4. “No influence”: People like me have no say in what the government does; **1985 Four Nations Study:** 1. “Politics so complicated”: Politics is so complicated that people like me can’t really understand what’s going on; 2. “Lose touch”: Those in power, always follow their personal interest; 3. “Don’t care”: Politicians do not worry much about what people like me think; **1990, 1996, 2001, 2004, 2006 ITANES:** 1. “Politics so complicated”: Sometimes, politics is so complicated that people like me can’t really understand what’s going on; 2. “No influence”: People like me have no say in what the government does; 3. “Lose touch”: In general, people we elect to Parliament quickly lose contact with the people; 4. “Don’t care”: I don’t think the politicians/parties worry much about what people like me think; **2000 ASES:** 1. “Politics so complicated”: Politics and government are so complicated that sometimes I cannot understand what’s happening (Q201d); 2. “No influence”: People like me don’t have any say in what the government does (Q201c); 3. “Lose touch”: People who are elected to the national parliament stop thinking about the public’s interest immediately (Q201f). 4. “Don’t care”: I don’t think governmental officials care much what people like me think (Q201g).

As to confidence in institutions, the ASES 2001 and ITANES 2006 surveys confirm the low level of confidence in several political institutions, with political parties always at the bottom of the list, with only 11% having a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in them in 2001 and 26% in 2006. Political leaders follow closely, with only 14% of the public trusting them. The main political institutions—the parliament, the government, the judiciary and bureaucracy—have the confidence of no more than one-fourth of the sample (with two exceptions, police, at 63%, and the armed forces, at 56% in 2001 and 77% in 2006). A slight majority of the Italians have confidence in the media and big business (but the latter declined to 37% in 2006).

The combination of lack of trust in the main political institutions and low level of subjective political efficacy contribute toward explaining why only 10% of the sample is satisfied “with politics in your society today.” And, of course, the two are closely related ($r = 0.353$, $p < .001$),¹⁵ people who are highly dissatisfied also feel subjectively inefficacious.

15 The correlation coefficient is computed on an index of political trust, based on the individual scores in the items related to political institutions and an index of subjective political efficacy, based on a summated rating index of the four variables presented in table 6. The index of political trust has a range from of 1 to 4, with mean 2.06 and median 2.12. The index of political dissatisfaction has a range from of 1 to 5 with mean 2.12 and median 2.

Table 7a Confidence in different national institutions – 2001 (percent)

How much confidence do you have in...	A great deal	Quite a lot	Not much	None at all	DK	Total
National parliament	3	22	42	30	3	100
Political parties	1	10	38	48	3	100
Italian government	2	23	39	33	3	100
Law and the courts	2	25	41	28	3	100
Main Italian political leaders	1	13	42	42	3	100
Police	10	53	24	10	3	100
Civil service	2	26	44	27	2	100
Military	10	46	24	14	5	100
Big business	11	50	23	11	4	100
Media	4	41	37	16	2	100

Source: Authors' development of data from ASES 2001; N=1009.

Table 7b Confidence in different national institutions (percent) – 2006

How much confidence do you have in...	A great deal	Quite a lot	Not much	None at all	DK	Total
National parliament	6	43	41	7	3	100
Political parties	2	24	56	16	2	100
President of the Republic	31	49	13	3	4	100
Law and the courts	11	47	32	7	3	100
Church	21	43	26	8	2	100
Police	26	54	17	2	1	100
Civil service	2	26	44	27	2	100
Military	20	57	18	3	2	100
Big business	4	33	44	9	10	100
Local government	7	44	35	12	2	100
Europe	9	53	30	4	4	100

Source: Authors' development of data from ITANES 2006.

From this viewpoint, the most recent data corroborate what commentators have written all along: Italians feel detached from the political system and its main political actors, confidence in public institutions is rare, and trust in parties and political leaders is almost nonexistent. Looking at the characteristics of those who are satisfied and dissatisfied with politics (tables 8 and 9), some patterns do emerge.

Table 8 Confidence in public institutions by sociopolitical characteristics (percent)

	Level of confidence in political institutions*			Total
	Low	In-between	High	
Gender				
Male	37	30	33	100 (455)
Female	39	29	31	100 (420)
Age				
18–29	40	21	39	100 (191)
30–44	42	31	27	100 (303)
45–64	35	35	31	100 (271)
65 and over	34	30	35	100 (110)
Education				
Elementary	38	33	30	100 (141)
Junior	45	27	27	100 (233)
High School	38	31	31	100 (349)
University	29	29	42	100 (151)
Left-Right				
Extreme left	32	24	43	100 (99)
Left	25	33	41	100 (138)

Table 8 (continued)

	Level of confidence in political institutions*			Total
	Low	In-between	High	
Center	32	31	37	100 (224)
Right	42	28	30	100 (137)
Extreme right	49	31	19	100 (77)
Party Preference				
Center-Right	41	29	29	100 (264)
Center-Left	24	30	45	100 (239)
Mass attendance				
Regularly	34	31	36	100 (255)
Occasionally	35	31	34	100 (310)
Never	45	28	26	100 (310)
Regions				
North-West	34	28	37	100 (168)
North-East	26	32	42	100 (184)
Center	48	27	25	100 (199)
South and Islands	41	31	28	100 (324)

* The index is computed from the question “How much confidence do you have in...” using the following items: national parliament, political parties, government, law and the courts, main political leaders, police, civil service and the military. The index was then recoded in three groups of approximately equal size.

Source: Authors’ development of data from ASES 2000 Survey.

Starting from political efficacy (Table 9), the ASES 2001 data show that belief in it is stronger among males, better educated citizens, and on the center-left of the political spectrum, while a lower sense of political efficacy is more frequent among the less educated, women, and on the center-right. Age has no clear linear impact: Mature adults, now between 45 and 64 years of age, are slightly more likely to feel themselves more efficacious politically than their younger and older age cohorts.

Table 9 Subjective political efficacy by sociopolitical characteristics (percent)

	Level of subjective political efficacy*			Total
	Low	In-between	High	
Gender				
Male	37	33	29	100 (488)
Female	46	32	22	100 (484)
Age				
18–29	42	35	23	100 (217)
30–44	41	35	24	100 (344)
45–64	39	30	31	100 (295)
65 and over	52	28	20	100 (116)
Education				
Elementary	50	31	20	100 (153)
Junior	48	30	22	100 (267)
High School	40	35	25	100 (382)
University	28	34	37	100 (169)
Left-Right				
Extreme left	32	30	38	100 (104)
Left	30	42	28	100 (153)

Table 9 (continued)

	Level of subjective political efficacy*			Total
	Low	In-between	High	
Center	41	34	25	100 (248)
Right	35	36	29	100 (150)
Extreme right	48	31	21	100 (84)
Party Preference				
Center-Right	40	34	26	100 (284)
Center-Left	30	36	34	100 (257)
Mass attendance				
Regularly	40	36	24	100 (289)
Occasionally	39	33	28	100 (340)
Never	45	30	24	100 (343)
Regions				
North-West	38	30	32	100 (193)
North-East	42	29	28	100 (200)
Center	41	36	23	100 (221)
South and Islands	44	34	23	100 (358)

* The index is computed from the four questions used in Table 5. The index was then recoded in three groups of approximately equal size.

Source: Authors' development of data from 2000 ASSES Survey.

The results are slightly different if we look at confidence in institutions. Here, even the few, and ultimately not dramatic, differences among the different socio-economic and political subgroups we found when examining political efficacy, almost fade away. Gender, a major factor differentiating those with registering low or high political efficacy, does not play any appreciable role and once again age has no clear

cut impact. Education seems to work in the expected direction, but its effect is clearly seen only among those with more than a high school degree. Party preferences and ideological leanings have a stronger impact than in the case of confidence. This is probably a consequence of the impact of party preferences on the judgment of the institutions and the ruling political parties. In fall 2000, the center-left coalition was in charge and trust in public institutions was higher among those who voted for this side or locate themselves at the center-left of the ideological spectrum. Also, Mass attendance plays a slightly greater role than in the case of political efficacy, with 45% of those who never attend Mass having a low level of confidence and 34% of those who attend regularly having a low level of confidence.

To what extent does this pervasive political disaffection and lack of confidence contribute toward explaining the propensity to take part in political activity, namely political participation? We have several measures of political participation in the ASES survey. A first standard measure of a traditional form of participation is voting. To the question “have you voted in national/local/European elections?” the respondents answered 88%, 87%, and 83% respectively that they had voted in almost all of them. Voting, at each of these three levels, is not related to political efficacy and only weakly to trust in political institutions. In fact, voting as a form of political participation stands in a class of its own among Italians, as is seen in Table 10 for which factor analysis was performed on a set of statements about political efficacy and competence, three of them related to voting behavior. This analysis shows that voting considerations in the Italians’ mind are orthogonal to the overall sense of political efficacy that each respondent subjectively feels. People’s voting behavior and the perception of the government’s responsiveness to citizens’ demands are quite distinct in peoples’ minds. The first factor, which captures the traditional measure of political efficacy, is more powerful in explaining the variation among variables than the second factor (33% of the total variance), but together they

still explain only half of the total inter-items variance. That voting is not necessarily related to influence—and therefore to the perception of government’s responsiveness to citizens—is also indirectly inferred by the low loading of the item that states “The way people vote is the main thing that decides how this country is run.” This seems to imply that voting attitudes are not related to the sense of being influential, but rather they are affected by a normative prescription that makes voting felt to be mandatory, irrespective of the impact on the political process each individual thinks he/she has through this individual act.

Table 10 Dimensions of the subjective sense of political efficacy
(Principal component analysis, factor scores)

How much do you agree or disagree with the statement. . .	Factor 1	Factor 2
I don’t think governmental officials care much what people like me think	0.779	
People who are elected to the National Parliament stop thinking about the public’s interest immediately	0.774	
There is widespread corruption among those who manage our national politics	0.709	
People like me don’t have any say in what the government does	0.634	
Politics and government are so complicated that sometimes I cannot understand what’s happening	0.597	
Citizens have a duty to vote in elections (polarity inverted)		0.850
Since so many other people vote in elections, it really doesn’t matter whether I vote or not		0.729
The way people vote is the main thing that decides how this country is run (polarity inverted)		0.395

Varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization.

Source: Authors’ development of data from ASES 2000 Survey.

Slightly different—and stronger—are the relationships between both sense of political efficacy and trust and other forms of political participation. Table 11 shows the correlation among trust and disaffection with level of political participation.¹⁶ Political participation is more strongly related with sense of political efficacy than with trust. In fact, 53% percent of those with a low sense of political efficacy have a low level of political participation, while only 16% of those with a high sense of political efficacy have a low level of participation. Similarly, among those with low trust, 43% have a minimal level of participation, while among those with high trust in political institutions 27% have a low level of participation. In line with previous research on this topic, in Italy and abroad, sense of political efficacy exerts an influence on the level of political participation; the perception that the individual makes a difference on political institutions prompts a person to be actively engaged in some sort of political activity. An important difference between trust and efficacy, which might explain why trust is less strongly related to participation, is what happens at the two extreme poles of the index of participation. Trust has no discriminating effect among them: 35% of those low on political trust and 38% of those with high trust are actively involved in political activities of different kinds. This result points out that trust—and the lack of it—works differently at the low and high pole of the level of involvement of political activity. At the low level, to have trust in institutions slightly increases the likelihood to participate. At the higher level of political participation, on the contrary, trust has no effect at all. Trust (or lack of it) do not motivate people to participate.

16 The index is built from the question that asks “Have you ever been involved in political activity” using the following items of political participation: sign a petition, contribute money to the campaign of a party or candidate, contact an elected politician about a personal problem, attend protest or march in demonstrations, contact an elected politician about a national issue, actively help a political party or candidate.

Table 11 Pearson's correlations among dimensions of trust and disaffection and level of political participation

	Level of participation	Trust political institutions	Political efficacy
Level of political participation	-	0.138*	0.281*
Trust political institutions	-	-	0.343*
Political efficacy	-	-	-

* Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Authors' development of data from ASES 2000 Survey.

Conclusion

In this paper we have examined three dimensions of political culture in which Italy has traditionally been marked as lacking or deficient in comparison to other European countries: sense of national attachment, trust in institutions, and disaffection with politics. Comparing the more recent data with the past, we have found continuities and differences in all three dimensions. National identity is the dimension in which a more striking difference is found with other analyses. Contrary to what has often been claimed, namely, that Italy exists even though Italians are still to be made, the sense of attachment to the country is not low or, in any meaningful sense, weak. In fact, sense of belonging to the country is a widespread feeling among an overwhelming majority of the population. These results, however, do not stem from a reversal in the trend of national attachment in Italy, but simply from a different way of looking at the same data. In fact, from what we can infer from the existing trend, there is no discernible over-time pattern

in levels of national attachment. What makes a real difference is the way national identity is discussed and framed in surveys. National identity is, as in several other countries, a “banal” identity, taken for granted and rarely activated. As such, it is not easily evoked in the survey context. Only in the presence of a clear stimulus, does national identity become salient and detectable.

Not much has changed, on the contrary, with the other two dimensions we have analyzed: disaffection and trust in institutions. The data from the first decade of the twenty-first century still show, as in the past, the coexistence of a low level of personal subjective efficacy and minimal confidence in political institutions with record-high levels of voting. The indictment, voiced over 50 years ago, that the Italian political culture is one of disaffection and distrust still seems to be with us.

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