



Research group on “2008 General Elections”

The Party of Undecided. The election campaign for the 2008 General Election as seen by the italians

The research¹ explores the phenomenon of political indecision with particular reference to the voting behaviour declared by left-wing voters² in the Italian election campaign of 13 and 14 April.

Different studies in Italy³ have looked at the phenomenon of voter indecision. They have tried in the first place to isolate the variables which influence electoral choice. Very often research into the behaviour of undecided voters is carried out by means of structured questionnaires.

This research uses different instruments of analysis to understand the perception the subjects have of the election campaign and the elements individuals take into consideration to overcome indecision and reach a choice.

The research was developed in three phases, each of which was distinct regarding the objectives and the instruments adopted. The undecided voters, who were identified initially by means of a structured questionnaire, were subsequently interviewed in depth and then re-contacted for a third time a few days before the election. By means of this **on-going approach to the sample group** of voters it was therefore possible to “follow” the undecided voters and their decisional processes up until the moment of the vote. The use of a panel, in the tradition of the seminal studies dating from the 1940s of Katz, Lazarsfeld and Berelson and dedicated to the relationship between media exposure and electoral choice, made it possible to trace a map of the processes of change. Moreover, the use of non-standard instruments also made it possible to examine more thoroughly the motivational aspects and the evaluations of the undecided voters. In particular:

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² The definition “left-wing” was applied to those interviewed who, when asked about their personal political opinions so far, self-classified themselves as “left” or “centre-left”, irrespective of their declared voting intentions in the 2008 General Election.

³ See., among others, Barisone, M., P. Castellani, and L. De Sio. *La scelta degli indecisi, fattori e dinamiche della decisione di voto a ridosso delle elezioni politiche 2006*. ITANES, Roma 2006; Gangemi, G. (ed.) *Le elezioni come processo. Nuove tecniche di indagine e nuovi ambiti di ricerca*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2006



1) in the **first phase** (from 1 to 10 March 2008) a **structured questionnaire** was given to a sample group of 2427 voters. This non-probabilistic sample was chosen by means of a grid in order to obtain homogeneous representation with regard to sex, age and place of administration. In order to find respondents who were as homogeneous as possible the questionnaires were administered in shopping centres and cinemas⁴ in the towns involved in the study. The administration of the structured questionnaire made it possible to interview respondents from almost all the Italian regions: among these 794 declared themselves undecided. As well as voting intention in the elections under examination, the questionnaire asked for information about voting behaviour in previous elections (European, general election, referendum) attitude towards politics and political participation;

2) in the **second phase** of the study (from 15 to 31 March) 136 respondents among the undecided voters identified were **interviewed in depth**. The aim of the interview was to examine more closely the reason for the indecision, to reconstruct the perceived climate of opinion (by means of both opinion polls and personal contact), and retrace the political-electoral history of those interviewed in order to define their relationship with politics. Moreover, in this phase of the study particular attention was paid to the perception of the electoral campaign. Following the interview, in fact, a structured questionnaire was administered to determine the consumption of TV, radio, internet and daily and weekly newspapers and magazines.

3) in the **third phase**, conducted close to the elections (from 8 to 10 April 2008), 99 individuals of the survey group were re-contacted for a **follow-up telephone interview**. The aim of the follow-up was to determine whether those interviewed had made up their minds with just a few days left before the elections and to isolate the role played by certain factors (the influentials, the media, etc.) or by particular events in the campaign in their final choice. Furthermore, the follow-up made it possible to monitor the entire decision-making process of a small group of individuals and to identify changes of opinion and attitude in the course of the Campaign.

The three phases of the research, considered in their entirety, make it possible to determine the changes in attitude (voting-not voting), to situate them in a specific phase of the election campaign (immediately prior to the elections or in the weeks preceding them), to isolate the specific indecision (between voting and abstaining, between coalitions, between parties of the same coalition) and to monitor "deviant" positions (for example, the movement

⁴ When choosing the cinema, consideration was made of the films showing when the questionnaire was administered, so as to identify the spectators of both commercial films and those of a more serious nature.



from one political area to another or the differentiated vote for the House of Representatives and the Senate).

- Starting from this strategy of analysis **five decision-making processes** were reconstructed. These were considered of particular relevance in determining some of the dynamics which characterize the electoral behaviour and the orientation of interviewees. The first category outline describes potential abstainers who, in the course of the election campaign, have decided to vote. The second refers to those voters who have decided to vote but who, undecided as to which party, finally either opt for the centre-right or annul their ballot paper. The third outline describes the behaviour of those voters who have always voted for the Left (The Party of the *Italian Communists* or *The Communist Refoundation Party*, for instance) but who in this election are orientated towards the Democratic Party. They have been defined as “monitoring citizens”. The fourth describes the motivations of those individuals who are still undecided only hours before the elections. The final outline looks at the reasons of those who intend to abstain.
- The indecision in the Italian 2008 election campaign seems more **the consequence of a distracted relationship with politics** rather than a specific phase of a difficult decisional process.
- Among those who classify themselves **on the left, not voting** does not necessarily mean non-participation. It **is a choice**, painful and dictated by resentment.
- The accounts are full of redundancy; **contempt for the political class** in all its forms and expressions, weariness and lack of confidence are a background noise.
- **Media and cultural consumption no longer seem to be instruments of an awareness of concrete problems and their relative solutions**, even during the election campaign. The media are no longer able to “mediate” the relationship between ordinary citizens and the political system.
- **The orientation of the final vote seems to be the fruit of contingent humours**, not deeply rooted convictions which emerge at the end, or of choices made thanks to the effects of the election campaign.
- The choice of voting removes the indecision but **not the uncertainty**.



Diffusion of results

The seminar *Why did the Left lose?*, which has been organized in Rome, during the July 2008, was the first occasion to show the results of the research on the phenomenon of political indecision in the 2008 Italian general election. The paper, *Someone was communist. The undecided voters of the Left in the 2008 election campaign*, will be available in a book which describes the reflections developed during the seminar.

The research on undecided voters has also been discussed during the XXII National Congress of Italian Society of Political Science (SISP), organized in Pavia on September 2008, and during the Congress "Beyond individualism?", organized by the Italian Sociological Association at the University of Milan Bicocca during the October 2008.

The research group is working on a book which will analytically describe the results.