



Open Essays and Researches

Identity and politics in Italy and Argentina

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Abstract. Politics in many Western democracies have become increasingly personalized; as a consequence, the individual personalities of voters and their social identity are now essential in order to understand political choices. This essay explores the role of social and personal identity, by relating such factors as one's family, occupation, class consciousness, religion, and personality in general to political choices in order to understand the recent cultural changes in the political scenarios in Italy and Argentina. This research is based on almost 7,000 face-to-face interviews collected between Italy and Argentina from 2014 to 2020.

Keywords: social identity and political choices, face-to-face interviews, politics in Italy and Argentina.

1. METHODOLOGICAL PREMISE

This research¹ stems from a project designed by Alberto Marradi and has been developed by his Italian and Argentinean students and former students – who form a sort of school, known as Marradi's school² – under his supervision. This community is formed by academicians – professors at different levels; researchers, Ph.D.'s., and Ph.D. students – who share his criticism of the inferiority complex openly shown by many a social scientist vis a vis physics and natural sciences sharing positivistic and neo-positivistic orientations (Marradi 2015; 2017).

The consequence of the above complex has been the spread of the idea that a social scientist is bound to do nothing else than verifying³ pre-

¹ This article came up from a common reflection of the two authors; however, paragraph 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 were written by Claudia Mariotti; paragraph 5 was written by both authors and paragraph 7 (*A latere*) was written by Alberto Marradi.

² Of which the main author of this essay is a member.

³ Being derived from the Latin words *verum facere* (make it true) the expression is indeed a naive confession of what many researchers do, consciously or not: do everything they can in order to “demonstrate” that their own favorite hypothesis/es turned out to be true. When Popper's outright attack onto neopositivism (1934) crossed

existing hypotheses, by paying no attention to the fact that the properties interesting the social scientist are hardly measurable, and the objects of these sciences hardly – if ever – allow for bona fide experiments and – above all – they thoroughly exclude the presence of laws, i. e. of controllable propositions concerning men, cultures, and societies all over the planet, from the most remote past to the most distant future, and make ridiculously meaningless the search for them.

More than two centuries ago, the proto-positivist Saint Simon's advocated for "the passage from the idea according to which the various phenomena are governed by particular laws through the idea according to which everything will be governed by a single law which – could one doubt it? – will be the law of gravity" (1813, XL: 161). In reading some "modern" texts in the philosophy of science, and above all some research reports in social sciences, the impression is that not enough steps have been moved beyond the nomothetic excitement of early positivists.

This comparative research is widely different from other social research due to three main reasons:

1. It didn't rely on public or private funds. This entails complete freedom from a patron's interests and desires, and the absence of bureaucratic deadlines which regularly go with public funds. The absence of a patron allowed us to investigate issues close to the interviewees *Lebenswelt*, inducing them to explore their inclinations, identifications and motivations. The interviewees showed to appreciate the original questionnaire: as a consequence, none of the almost 7 thousand face to face interviews was interrupted. The choice to realize self-supported research allowed the adoption of a perspective of *longue durée* (Bergson 1889) which is a guarantee of quality – as many academicians know, the pressing need to respect deadlines can dramatically affect decisions on every phase of a project's implementation.
2. It did not follow the model set by the first international survey in comparative politics (Almond, Verba 1963): the questionnaires – drawn up by American social scientists according to the guidelines of their culture – should simply be translated into "local" languages and directly submitted to respondents in other countries, by taking in no account cultural differences⁴. On the contrary, the questionnaire of this research takes into accounts the cultural differences of the two countries. This is why the two questionnaires are not equal in form, but rather equivalent in meaning (Przeworski, Teune 1966-67; Nowak 1976; Mokrzycki 1982).
3. This research enterprise has been carried through thanks to the voluntary work of more than 300 researchers spread on two nations' territory which realized almost 7,000 face-to-face interviews. All the interviewers were not professionals, but researchers who were informed of and shared the research spirit. The behaviourist tenet that interviewers should behave like robots in repeating the same questions in the same order and with the same intonation⁵ is not compatible with the spirit of this research. The interviewers/researchers were all part of the team for the entire duration of the study. This made them able to adequately satisfy any request for clarification, evaluating the opportunity and the time to intervene. On the contrary, even the highest quality comparative research is bound to have recourse to professional interviewers who are hardly aware of the research aims, and by no means are expected to share its spirit.

2. STUDIES ON SOCIAL IDENTITY AND PERSONALITY TRAITS IN POLITICS

The first part of this research refers to the literature on social identity, based on experiments in social psychology, stating that any form of group-belonging activates both positive feelings in evaluating one's own group and

the Channel and spread all over Europe, during several decades many declared they were trying to "falsify", rather than verify, their own hypotheses. Several in depth surveys have shown that they were only paying lip service to the latest fashion (see e. g. Rodolfi 1997).

⁴ See the critiques by Scheuch (1967) to Almond and Verba's five nation "comparison" and, more generally, Brislin, Lonner and Thorndike (1967) criticism of so-called "cross-cultural" research – that are, instead, deeply U.S.-centered.

⁵ See a thorough critique of this behaviorist dogma in Pitrone (1984).

negative feelings in evaluating outside groups (Tajfel *et alii* 1971; Billig, Tajfel 1973). This process starts through the development of the so-called in-group biases (seeing one's group in a favorable light regardless of the actual situation). It tends to gain force in a situation of conflict with other groups (Druckman 1994; Iyengar, Sood, Lelkes 2012), in particular in the presence of a polarizing electoral campaign aimed at developing conflict (Druckman *et alii* 2020).

A specific American school of thought (Iyengar, Sood, Lelkes 2012; Richey 2012; Westwood *et alii* 2018; Iyengar *et alii* 2019; West, Iyengar 2020) connect the causes of affective polarization to the role of partisanship meant as a social identity, which fosters in-group favoritism and out-group hostility.

Through numerous academic contributions, this research tradition assumes that party identity has now become a central factor in the development of voters' social identity - equally, if no more, than race and gender identity (Iyengar, Westwood 2015).

Unlike most studies on affective polarization, we explore the role of religion, family, profession and class consciousness in order to understand if these social categories can be considered a driver of political identification meant as a social identity.

The last part of this essay refers to the literature on individual personalities. Politics in many Western democracies have become increasingly personalized (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Zimbardo 1999; Caprara 2002; Giddens 1998; Ricolfi 2002) and as a consequence, the individual personalities of voters, besides their social identity, become decisive for political choices (Caprara, Zimbardo 2004). However, research aimed to connect the study of personalities with political choices faces several problems, as Caprara *et alii* (2006) pointed out: "early research on personality in politics dealt mainly with individual differences in the dispositions, attitudes, and motives of voters and leaders. Researchers proposed politically relevant constructs such as alienation (Seeman 1959), conservatism (McClosky 1958), dogmatism (Rokeach 1960), and power (Browning, Jacob 1964; Winter 1973). The absence of a general theory of personality functioning limited this research, however, as did the lack of agreed-upon methods to assess personality. No integrated conceptual vision guided the early research, nor did it adequately attend to situational factors that might interact with personal dispositions (Greenstein 1975). It was therefore difficult to compare findings and build cumulative knowledge (Brewer-Smith 1968; Knutson 1973). A broad literature attests to the merits and limitations of these early approaches (e.g., Knutson 1973; Simonton 1990)" (2-3). The authors have kept all the above criticism in mind while performing a remarkable piece of research in Italy (Caprara *et alii* 2006). They examined two aspects of personality that may influence political choices (traits and personal values) using the Five Factor Model of personality traits⁶ and the Schwartz (1992) theory of basic personal values. They relied on a dataset composed of 3044 voters in the Italian general election of 2001 and found a relation between the five traits of personality mentioned in the above footnote and the vote for center-right and center-left coalitions. On the contrary, this research enterprise relied on indirect questions aimed at revealing specific personality traits (such as the aggressivity directed towards humans and non-humans animals).

Another branch of research in personalities and politics investigates how some traits of personalities can affect the relationship between voters and the political system. Very recent research (Baird, Wolak 2021) based on the responses from a module of the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study found that electors with low self-esteem and a weaker sense of control over their fates are more likely to blame the political system for the challenges they face in their lives. In our questionnaire, we asked almost 7000 interviewees how they consider their life (dull/gratifying and hard/easy) looking for a possible relationship with their political choices. However, this part seems the most influenced by social desirability – as explained in paragraph 5.

A well-articulated debate on the role of individual and social identity is still going on in psychology, sociology, and political science (Vignoles 2018). According to the Oxford Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology (2nd ed), the two processes need to be considered together because only "understanding identity as both personal

⁶ The Five-Factor Model traces individual personality differences based on five main dimensions. The five factors have various names: emotional or stability neuroticism, extraversion or energy, agreeableness or friendliness, conscientiousness, openness to experience or intellect/culture.

and social reveals the crucial role of identity dynamics in mediating the relation between the individual and society” (Vignoles 2018: 14). This is why our questionnaire investigates both the social and the personal dimensions of identity.

3. THE RESEARCH DESIGN

This research enterprise began in 2014 in Latin America and lasted over 6 years. Almost 7,000 interviews were collected between Italy and Argentina. In Italy, almost 4000 interviews were collected until the end of 2017; in Argentina, the interviewing continued until 2020 in order to reach over 2500.

As mentioned above, all the interviews were face-to-face and submitted by members of the research team. The sample was selected endeavoring to balance age, gender, and geographic location.

In the first part of the questionnaire, a set of questions was aimed at investigating the different faces of identity: the relationship with the territory, the reasons why one would change one’s present residence, the preferred type of place where to live, etc. The identity of the interviewees was then explored by asking them, e. g., how they identified themselves with a series of categories of increasing breadth, starting from the self and passing over to gender, age group, profession, social class, religious and political creeds, up to being an animal, a living thing and a physical object. All those questions were close-ended. Then came two instruments imagined by Marradi (2005) and then adopted by several members of his school (among them Addeo, Montesperelli 2007; Ciucci 2012; Mariotti 2010). They consist of short stories related to a value dimension, which implicitly pose a value dilemma. The interviewees’ reactions are completely open and, in general, free from social desirability⁷.

The next pair of open-ended questions asked respondents for an overall assessment of their life along two dimensions (hard/easy and dull/gratifying). Immediately afterward the interviewee was led to India and to the major tenet of Hinduism, the reincarnation. They were asked for which animal they would prefer and for which they would hate to reincarnate in if obliged to; then they answered the same question regarding plants.

The final battery listed 26 physical or temperamental properties, each one specific to a non-human animal, or a plant, or a phenomenon of nature like water or a thunderbolt. Each interviewee was asked to quantify (by a score from 0 to 9) her/his (greater or lesser) inclination to acquire each property (e. g., being able to fly) though remaining her/himself. Besides the obvious aim of gathering information about each subject’s personality, this final battery also had the function of favoring a reflection on the fact that the human species is not the culmination of all virtues and qualities, in that animals, plants and natural phenomena own properties that humans lack completely, or possess only to a limited extent.

4. POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS AND SOCIO-GRAPHIC⁸ CHARACTERISTICS

Before telling the world how the world is made, relying on our grand theories conceived in an armchair, we’d rather look through the window, smelling odours and tastes; and listening – as Ricoeur has been preaching for some time (1969; 1983; also see Montesperelli 1997; 2014). And after listening, we should describe – a term redeemed by Geertz (1973) after more than a century of discredit to which positivists and neo-positivists had condemned it.

We begin by analyzing the results of the investigation by mentioning some findings on the relationships between political orientation and some classical socio-graphic characteristics described by other participants in the research who analyzed the problem (D’Ambrosio, Palmieri 2021; Martarelli 2018).

⁷ The “story” is built in such a way that the interviewee has difficulty in understanding which is the socially desirable reaction.

⁸ Like several Italian authors, we prefer the term ‘sociographic’ to the heavier term ‘sociodemographic’ – we consider redundant the syllables ‘demo’, as they are implied in the syllables ‘socio’. Should one prefer completeness to parsimony, one might write ‘socio-anthropopsychocodemographic’.

Table 1: Political orientations.

	frequency/ It	% Ita	frequency/ Arg	% Arg
apolitical/ no answer	1113	28.4	800	31.1
far left	182	4.6	46	1.8
left/izquierda	801	20.4	246	9.6
catholic left	152	3.9		
moderate left	632	16.1	540	21
secular center/center	173	4.4	533	20.7
catholic center/ center	205	5.2		
moderate right	291	7.4	294	11.4
right/ derecha	194	4.9	101	3.9
far right	53	1.4	14	0.5
five star movement	89	2.3		
radical	13	0.3		
anarchic	24	0.6		
total	3922	100	2574	100

Since Italy’s and Argentina’s political parties are not comparable, the political orientation has been expressed through a classical left-right scale, though allowing the interviewees to mention specific parties such as Peronists, Five Stars Movement, etc.

The results in either nation are described in table 1.

When comparing the answers given by interviewees, a substantial difference emerges: Italians tend to prefer moderate left-wing parties, while the Argentinians express more traditionalist and conservative positions, favouring parties of the centre and the right.

Argentina is a much younger country than Italy, and this is duly reflected in the two samples. As shown in figures 1 and 2, young Argentinians seem to be oriented much more to the left than young Italians, which are equally distributed between the left on one hand and apolitical, right and protest parties on the other.

Interestingly, the average age of Argentine respondents who declare political positions of the left and moderate left is the lowest compared to the other ranges of age (the trees have a narrower crown, fig. 2): the leftist parties in Argentina are preferred almost only by young people. In both Italy and Argentina, reject of the leftist parties is expressed by the less educated and by people who declare to be fairly or strongly affected by their religion (D’Ambrosio, Palmieri 2021).

In both countries, apolitical positions are preferred by younger people and women, with a low (Argentina) or middle (Italy) level of education, socialized in small cities (Martarelli 2018).

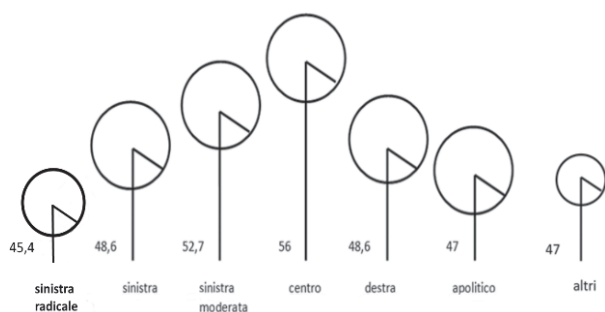


Figure 1: Distribution of political preference and age in Italy. Source: D’Ambrosio and Palmieri (2021).

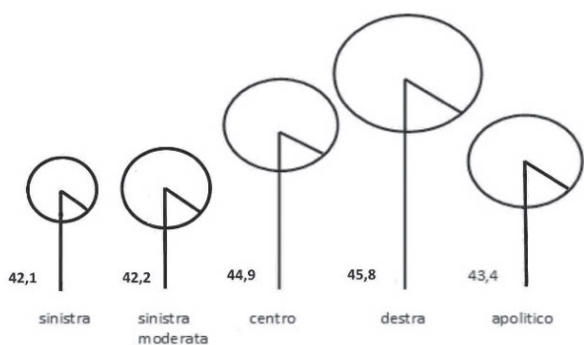


Figure 2: Distribution of political preference and age in Argentina. Source: D’Ambrosio and Palmieri (2021).

5. WHAT TRIGGERS POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS? THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL AND PERSONAL IDENTITIES

After mentioning the relationship between political orientation and sociographic characteristics, we checked whether there were systematic differences between left and right inside and in between the two countries, and if so, to what properties they happened to be related.

The findings on the influence of religion on the political orientations in the two countries are as expected. Table 2 shows that the percentage of

respondents who define themselves as atheists is much higher in Argentina than in Italy, probably due to the limited influence by the Church in politics in that country (in Argentina there has never been a catholic party). In Argentina the percentage of observant Catholics is by and large the same as in Italy, but the two mass political cul-

Table 2: Influence of religion on political orientations.

	Italy		Argentina	
	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq
left	1.22 1.27	975	0.77 1.18	269
centre-left	1.96 1.30	779	1.11 1.34	514
anticasta	1.42 1.28	126		
center	2.53 1.24	377	1.49 1.37	519
center-right	2.18 1.26	290	1.46 1.35	286
right	2.17 1.33	246	1.49 1.44	112

Table 3: Identification with the family and political orientations.

	Italy		Argentina	
	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq
left	3.13 0.96	980	3.36 0.85	289
centre-left	3.24 0.87	784	3.35 0.85	536
anticasta	3.12 0.94	126		
centre	3.35 0.83	378	3.45 0.80	530
centre-right	3.28 0.88	291	3.39 0.90	293
right	3.20 1.01	246	3.34 0.85	114

tures that characterized Italy during the whole XXth century (the Socialist and the Catholic one) never influenced the Argentinean political system.

The Italian scores show that the influence of the Catholic Church is strong not only on the people which declare a centre or centre-right orientation but also on the rightists.

Both as individuals and as an organization, Argentinean Catholics occupied the entire political spectrum. A large part of the hierarchy flanked even the cruellest⁹ of the dictatorship – that of Videla-Massera-Viola-Galtieri from 1976 to 1982 – while rank-and-file clergymen often led the workers' demonstrations against poor retirement treatments and poor welfare in general. The movement of "*curas obreros*" – clergymen who, still wearing their frock, joined the working class in factories and shared their daily life – saw the light in Latin America before spreading over Europe – France in particular.

Then we investigated the relationship between political orientation and the identification as a member of one's family, of one's social class and one's profession.

Table 3 shows some results as far as the former relationship is concerned.

1) the means in the Argentinean case are usually higher than the Italian ones. We can then argue that Argentines tend to identify with their family more often than Italians do.

2) in general, the highest means come from the centre, as expected.

For Italians 'centre' means Catholic Church, and Catholic Church means family¹⁰. The Catholic vote is considered typical of a moderate cultural matrix, which is ideally placed at the centre of the political spectrum. During the so-called First Republic, the centre was occupied by Christian Democracy. After the collapse of the First Republic and of its dominant party, a bipolar system took its place, and the Catholic vote became an object of desire for both the right and left parties. However, the interests of the Catholic hierarchy have found a better recognition in the policies of the centre-right parties, although many of their leaders lead secular lifestyles, largely distant from Catholic tenets (Garelli 2011: 160; 2014: 8-9)¹¹.

⁹ Some 15 thousands executed after a political process; some 40 thousands *desaparecidos*, of which at least 3000 narcotized and flung into the Ocean from airplanes.

¹⁰ On the symbolism of the family implemented in the Christian Democracy's electoral campaigns in 1946 and 1948 see: Leonardi, *Il sacro come strumento politico: le elezioni del 1948, la Democrazia Cristiana e i manifesti elettorali*. California Italian Studies, 5(2014).

¹¹ In the last general elections (2013-2018) a large generational turnover has been triggered in the whole political class. However, in a political situation characterized by dramatic political and economic crises, several key political players (such Monti, Letta, Renzi) keep coming from strong Catholic background.

Table 4: Identification with the profession and political orientation.

	Italy		Argentina	
	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq
left	2.18 1.24	963	2.21 1.25	286
centre-left	2.34 1.15	776	2.26 1.23	529
anticasta	2.24 1.23	124		
centre	2.35 1.20	373	2.31 1.25	521
centre-right	2.64 1.07	287	2.17 1.30	290
right	2.50 1.19	239	1.75 1.19	111

Table 5: Class identification and political orientation.

	Italy		Argentina	
	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq
left	1.85 1.16	942	1.77 1.32	283
centre-left	2.05 1.08	759	1.69 1.33	536
anticasta	1.78 1.24	123		
centre	2.04 1.10	362	1.74 1.26	522
centre-right	2.24 1.07	280	1.60 1.30	289
right	2.23 1.06	238	1.44 1.27	114

The identification with the family is quite important in Argentina¹², as shown in table 3, but the influence of this identification in politics is not so clear as it is in Italy

The following table shows that for many Italians with right-wing sympathies the profession plays an important role as a criterion for social identification. Quite surprisingly, in Argentina exactly the opposite happens, in that professional category as a criterion for self-identification seem to be stronger for left-wing people – as we said above (figures 1 and 2), young and educated people.

A similar difference between the two countries also emerges when class consciousness is related to political orientations (table 5).

In Italy, there seems to be a greater class consciousness among right-wingers – as confirmed by a previous study on the Italian case (Tambellini 2018).

This finding may be surprising indeed. However, the decreasing relevance of social class for Italian left-wing voters was confirmed by research on the last rounds of general elections (2013 and 2018: Lapolis 2013; 2018). In 2018, for example, Italian blue-collar workers preferred two parties other than the Democratic Party (a traditional referent of the working class – a position that in the previous decades was held by the Communist Party – occupying the centre-left of the political spectrum). They voted for the Five Star Movement (initially a populist party), and for the Lega¹³. In the two latest national elections, the Democratic Party obtained much better results in the middle-class city centres than in popular suburbs (Emanuele 2013¹⁴; Chiaramonte, De Sio 2018).

¹² “Argentina has been able to maintain certain age-old, cultural parameters that other places have abandoned” (Zelmira Bottini de Rey 2015). Argentines got through a terrible economic crisis in 2001 not thanks to government intervention, but because of the family’s solidarity, particularly across generations. According to the 2014 study *Argentines and the Family* by the Catholic University of Argentina and the Observatory of Argentine Social Debt, about 65% of respondents – regardless of the respondent’s age, sex, level of education, and socioeconomic status – said their family “always” or “nearly always” relies on help from grandparents (interview to Zelmira Bottini de Rey, director of the Institute of Marriage and Family at the Catholic University of Argentina, in *Family realities changing in Argentina* by Soli Salgado in “National Catholic Reporter”, October 2015: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/family-realities-changing-argentina>).

¹³ The League is a national anti-immigrant, far-right party, originated from the Northern League, a regional, (secessionist and then federalist) party.

¹⁴ On the Italian general elections of 2013 and 2018 see the reports of the following research centers: Lapolis <http://www.demos.it/a01485.php>; Istituto Cattaneo <http://www.astrid-online.it/static/upload/cfe2/cfe25139baeb2621bd2c7823319bebdd.pdf>; Cise https://cise.luiss.it/cise/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/DCISE4_83-88.pdf

Table 6: How much do you identify yourself as a member of your social class?

	little or nothing	much or very much	total
apoliticals	338 32.1	354 33.6	692 65.6
left	372 39.5	279 29.6	651 69.1
centre-left	311 27.7	386 34.4	697 62.1
right	115 22.2	224 43.2	339 65.3
anticasta	55 45.5	36 29.7	91 75.2
total	1.191	1.279	2.470

Source: Tambellini 2018.

the late XIXth century and maintained a leftist orientation when they became industrial workers (Sivini 1971).

Later on, when class ties began to weaken (Sylos Labini 1974; Accornero 1998), and populist parties began to substitute Christian Democrats as an anti-Communist dyke, left-wing parties and in particular the Democratic Party (an heir to the Communists and left-wing Christians) found followers in civil servants and middle class fairly educated people, which – as we said above – had a more sophisticated political view.

The Communist leaders hardly accepted the mere fact that even in the forties and fifties their electoral space was only in part in the industrial working class, as the orthodox Marxist doctrine would have it, and that – as the economic standing of the workers improved – the class struggle lost intensity, and it was time to look for an alternative constituency. The only Communist leader who urged the party to envisage its own future in the development of a mature electorate, endowed with civic culture and capable to reject populist propaganda, was Giorgio Amendola, son of an antifascist martyr. On the contrary, the party followed the requests of its teachers' union, which urged for any sort of "liberalization" (i. e. weakening) of the rather demanding Italian school system of the post-war. The hard intellectual training offered by Latin grammar was abolished or cornered and every kind of hedge that early students should be able to surmount was lowered or removed. As a consequence, students weakened their ability to connect cause to effect, and their view of what happened around them became a sort of random sequence of disconnected events. Together with a critical attitude vis a vis what happened around them, the capability of the youth of distinguishing what was a reasonable political program from what was just populist propaganda declined.

The findings in Argentina are a countercheck of this thesis. In this country the process of separation between the left and blue-collar workers never started: according to table 6, the social class consciousness still characterizes left-wing interviewees.

We then explored another problem, viz. whether the fact of having had a hard or an easy life might affect one's political orientation, for instance turning into supporters of the left most people who had to work hard to make a living.

The tables 7 and 8 suggest some general and some specific observations.

¹⁵ Thanks to its pro-unemployed policy, the anti-elite Five Star Movement was by far the most voted party in the Italian South (Emanuele and Cataldi 2013; Chiaramonte and De Sio, 2018)

¹⁶ The Alford index – a widely used indicator of class voting – is simply the difference in support for leftist parties between the middle class (both old and new) and the working class (see e. g. Butler and Stokes 1969).

Table 7: Hard/Easy life.

	Italy		Argentina	
	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq
left	6.15 1.85	966	6.25 1.74	284
centre-left	6.16 1.85	777	6.28 1.86	536
anticasta	6.02 2.15	126		
centre	5.89 1.93	376	6.34 1.84	524
centre-right	6.10 1.95	288	6.37 1.82	288
right	6.11 1.91	245	6.05 2.08	114

Table 8: Dull/Gratifying.

	Italy		Argentina	
	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq
centre-left	7.3 1.57	775	7.59 1.51	534
anticasta	7.44 1.77	125		
centre	7.25 1.63	375	7.64 1.55	525
centre-right	7.24 1.62	289	7.57 1.57	290
right	7.37 1.59	245	7.66 1.60	115

- 1) The Italian sample is heavily biased leftward. This depends on the fact that, as was explained in the premise, interviewers came from the university's environment. Everyone had a gadget with ten cells (sex and 5 age-ranks) to be filled. In every cell, there was a target to be reached but not exceeded. Within these limits, everybody was free to select the interviewees more at hand and/or better disposed. Given the characteristics of the research design, this bias was inevitable; the wisest thing to do is taking into account the bias' indirect influence on other results.
- 2) The other general observation – emerging throughout the whole questionnaire – concerns the tendency of Argentines to give higher scores than Italians.
- 3) In both countries, the interviewees tend to perceive their life as difficult but rather gratifying. Goffman (1956) would read it as a paradigm case of presentation of the self: everything considered, I had a rather hard life, but I manage to make it satisfying.
- 4) The interparty-differences are slight but not surprising for readers acquainted with the two countries' situation. In Italy the centre has been occupied for decades by the Catholic party, mostly voted by hard-working and generally poor peasants (Allum 1997). On the contrary, in Argentine, centre and centre-right are preferred by middle-class people. Among Italians, the highest scores on gratification have been given to their own lives by anti-elite (anti-casta) voters, including people such as anarchists and followers of a populist party, the Five Star Movement, convinced that the man-of-the-street could do much better than the corrupted political elites in governing the country (Mudde, Kaltwasser 2018).

In the last section of the questionnaire, we asked the interviewees to score (from 0 to 9) the properties owned by a variety of animals, plants and phenomena of nature: e. g. flying like a bird, being transparent like water, destroying obstacles like a tornado.

We wondered if the preferences for more aggressive skills (such as squeezing an enemy like a python, turning objects to ashes like a lightning, controlling everything from above like an eagle) were particularly appreciated by those interviewees who showed extreme political orientations – in both left and right – in each of the countries.

Tables 9 and 10 show that in both countries – as far as a python's or a lightning's abilities are concerned – this hypothesis is fully confirmed for right-wingers, and fully disproved for left-wingers.

Table 9: Squeezing an enemy like a python.

	Italy		Argentina	
	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq
centre-left	2,40 2,75	784	3,19 3,15	540
anticasta	2,69 2,85	126		
centre	2,42 5,69	378	3,07 3,12	533
centre-right	2,75 2,96	291	3,29 3,18	294
right	3,96 3,49	247	3,93 3,65	115

Table 11: Seeing everything from above like an eagle.

	Italy		Argentina	
	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq
centre-left	7,80 2,19	784	7,41 2,49	540
anticasta	8,12 2,12	126		
centre	7,73 2,28	378	7,54 2,36	533
centre-right	7,85 2,12	291	7,55 2,53	294
right	7,87 2,31	247	7,36 2,25	115

Table 10: Turning obstacles to ashes like a lightning.

	Italy		Argentina	
	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq	mean score <i>standard deviation</i>	freq
centre-left	4,75 3,17	784	4,77 3,2	540
anticasta	5,30 3,03	126		
centre	4,75 3,31	378	4,55 3,39	533
centre-right	5,44 3,18	291	4,63 3,27	294
right	5,94 3,28	247	4,71 3,56	115

The far-right political orientation¹⁷ has always been characterized by nationalism, xenophobia, the demand for a strong state, and economic conservatism (Mudde 2007: 21). However, table 10 shows an interesting exception: the highest score given to the ability to turn objects to ashes was given by the Argentinean interviewees who place themselves at the centre-left of the political spectrum. This position is usually chosen by most followers of “peronism” (still a widespread orientation in that country)¹⁸. During his periods in power, Peron was popular for his aggressive and daring decisions against formidable powers, such as the nationalization of local enterprises owned by U.S. capital.

The typical property of an eagle – overseeing everything from above – is chosen particularly by Italian anti-casta (table 11): indeed, it fits very well with the task they assigned themselves. One is reminded of an episode almost a decade old. When members of

the Five Star Movement entered for the first time in the Parliament in 2013, they declared they wouldn’t choose their benches according to the party’s position in the political spectrum; they stated they would fill all the highest benches in the assembly hall in order to oversee all the other MPs and check them¹⁹.

¹⁷ Despite the still open debate on the conceptual and terminological definition, the far right in Italy is usually associated empirically with various party forces, such as Social Movement - Tricolor Flame, Forza Nuova, Social Action (merged into the People of Freedom on 2009), National Social Front (merged into La Destra on 2008), Alleanza Nazionale (merged into the People of Freedom on 2009) and Fratelli d’Italia and Lega Nord/Lega.

¹⁸ On the influence of social-cultural bases on political identity in Argentina see Ostiguy, Peronism and Anti-Peronism, paper presented at the LASA meeting, Guadalajara, Mexico (1997).

¹⁹ Roberta Lombardi, group leader designated by the M5S in the House of Deputies, explains that the Five Star Movement’s members of Parliament have chosen the highest benches “not only because they are transversal, but because they are symbolic of the way in which we want to be in the Parliament: to monitor and to control what the old parties do. We will ask to have assigned all the top seats of the hemicycle” (<https://st.ilssole24ore.com/art/notizie/2013-03-15/alla-camera-grillini-scelgono-105739.shtml?uuid=AbQYvKeH>)

6. IN FORM OF CONCLUSION

The research findings shown in this essay attest to a declining strength of the factors that traditionally affected political orientation such as family and religion. In both countries, religion seems only slightly connected with voting for the center, center-right and far-right parties, while the role of the family, though being still strong, doesn't seem to be related to political choices. On the contrary, the profession and the social class – though in different ways in Italy and in Argentina – appear as factors that still affect political orientations.

As regards personality traits, we found interesting associations between the preference for qualities typical of this or that animal and vote for specific parties. For example, a python's aggressive tendencies received high marks from right-wing interviewees (see par.5): far-right parties and leaders are usually more inclined to carry out aggressive political communication against their opponents than their left counterparts. It is no surprise when one recalls that in previous research "Energy²⁰" turned out to be the quality preferred by voters for the center-right coalition (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Zimbardo 1999: 185). In fact "by voting for a coalition (or party) whose programs they (interviewees) perceive as congruent with their own actual or ideal traits, voters actively express and affirm that they themselves possess the traits they wish or believe they have. Leaders reinforce the link between voters' personalities and their political choices by projecting the traits that voters value" (Caprara *et alii* 2006: 10).

This essay explores the role of social and personal identity, by relating such factors as one's family, occupation, class consciousness, religion, and personality in general to political choices in order to understand the recent cultural changes in the political scenarios in both countries. Further research is needed in order to understand why and how party cleavages have changed so much and grown so deep.

7. A LATERE

We beg the readers' pardon for the fact that this side reflection is mostly concerned with the Italian situation. We share the opinion of several political scientists (see O' Donnell 1973; O' Donnell, Schmitter, Whitehead 1986; Pérez 2005; Alberti 2006) that Argentina – like many other Latin-American nations – has not yet crossed the threshold that distinguishes a personalist regime from a mature political system. While in postwar Italian politics some slow and long-term political changes can be detected (and rationally explained), similar trends can heavily be detected in Argentinian politics. The image best representing the situation is a sequence of hectic and random movements being a sort of surface ripples hiding a substantial stand-by at least since the presidency of Domingo Sarmiento in the 1870's, when a definitive end was put to the dominance of various *caudillos* in as many provinces of the country.

The thesis throughout this article is crystal clear. In front of the technological evolution, that increasingly reduced spaces for the sickle and the hammer, and consequently for proletarian selling their material workforce and abiding by working-class organizations, the only way for a responsible left-wing party representing Rousseau's *volunté générale* rather than the interests of groups and cliques is to raise the level of people's critical consciousness so as to make them able to defend themselves from populist preaching aiming at gratifying short term and short-range interests.

Our thesis goes on stating that, since readership of newspapers is fainting, and both mass media and "the social" are rowing in the opposite direction, the only pathway by which the above mentioned result can be reached is by upgrading the level of teaching in secondary and high schools. More than one century ago, Michels stated that democracy involves an increase in education of the masses, which leads to an increase in their ability to criticize and control their leaders: "a wider education involves an increasing capacity for exercising control". The task of

²⁰ Energy is one of the Five Traits of Personality associated to: level of activity, vigor, sociability, talkativeness, need to excel, persuasiveness, competitiveness. The corresponding facet are: Dynamism (Activity and enthusiasm) and Dominance (Assertiveness and self-confidence).

social education is, therefore, to “raise the intellectual level of the masses, so that they may be enabled, within the limits of the possible, to counteract the oligarchic tendencies of the working-class movement” (1925/1962, 369)²¹.

It is well known that Michels’ preoccupation was to fight leaderism within the parti(es) of the left. This is less and less the preoccupation of the day. However, raising the intellectual level of the masses should be the preoccupation of the left-wing leaders if they want to escape a clear destiny of utter irrelevance.

On the contrary, in the latest decades of the latest century, under pressure by the teachers’ unions, and in the vain hope of electoral advantages, the Communists favoured the Catholic-inspired legislation intended to gradually lower the level of what was requested from students and from teachers. The day in which and the topic on which a pupil would be examined began to be object of negotiation; the very hard and rightly feared (in the fifties and sixties) “maturity” examination was progressively weakened and made palatable to students and their families; the very hard qualifying examination that one should pass before being enabled to teaching was transformed into the attendance to a ridiculous course held by a union member.

Of course, it cannot be imagined that a policy aimed at raising the general intellectual level might bring short-term results. This is one of the reasons why none of the present Italian politicians, whose horizon never reaches farther than the next general elections, is likely to endorse a policy that might bring fruits to the next generation. The other reason in general. It is a really difficult effort to remind a post-war minister of education who considered his charge as a *Beruff* rather than a second-rank place in the cabinet. During the recent pandemia, notwithstanding the frequent declamations in favour of the importance of education in the future world, Italy has been, among “advanced” nations world, the first in closing and is being the last in opening the schools. A young minister who manifested a far-for-common passion in defending the place of education, namely Lucia Azzolina, has been the target of generalized derision, and one of the very few members of the previous cabinet who was not confirmed in the following one. Choose the odd woman out.

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²¹ Second edition completely revisited (as stated by the author): Roberto Michels, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie; Untersuchungen über die oligarchischen Tendenzen des Gruppenlebens*. Leipzig: Kröner 1925. The English version of this work was published in 1962: Roberto Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*.

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