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## Quality of elections. Definition and measures, with an application to the Italian case

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**Abstract.** The study of the quality of elections is spreading very rapidly. This article aims to provide a general overview of the state of the art to introduce an empirical analysis of the quality of elections for the Italian parliament. After reviewing the definitions of 'quality of elections', the article thoroughly examines the two main measurement tools. One is based on the experts' perceptions and promoted as part of the Electoral Integrity Project. The other is based on objective data called the Elections Performance Index. Finally, the article applies the measurement method based on the residual vote to the Italian case.

**Keywords:** quality of elections, Italian politics, electoral integrity, electoral systems.

### INTRODUCTION

Most countries in the world provide for some form of election of their political rulers. According to a recent count, 185 independent states out of 193 currently elect members of the lower houses of parliament (Norris et al. 2016). Since the end of World War II, Brunei, China, Eritrea, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have been among the few countries where elections have not been held (Golder 2005). This means that regardless of the democratic or autocratic nature of the regime, elections currently are the main instrument of mobilisation or participation of the political community. This simple observation helps us understand why the electoral process is so essential for the social sciences and, above all, for political science.

Elections are widespread in both democratic and autocratic political systems; however, it is apparent that they perform very different functions. In democratic regimes, elections are helpful both in legitimising the government and allowing citizens to choose their representatives. Instead, in autocratic regimes, elections have mainly the purpose of co-opting wider social groups, collecting information on the oppositions, and allowing the expression of popular discontent (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). This state of affairs has involved the rise of hybrid regimes, such as the 'electoral authoritarianism' proposed by Schedler (2006). Remarkably, using the adjective 'electoral' would be utterly redundant in speaking of democracy: authoritarian-

ian regimes do not need elections; democracies cannot exist without them.

For the reasons just mentioned, although it also covers authoritarian regimes, the study of the quality of elections plays a critical role in democratic regimes. More precisely, it is closely linked with an essential dimension of the quality of democracy: electoral accountability (Rombi 2015). As studies on the quality of democracy have established (f.i., Diamond and Morlino 2004), quality in a procedural sense is measured by looking at the functioning of electoral accountability mechanisms. Moreover, the proper functioning of elections – their level of integrity – is a necessary, though not sufficient, precondition for electoral accountability. When the elections are manipulated, the voter register excludes parts of the population, the electoral campaign is not correctly regulated, and the votes are not accurately tallied, then representatives have no incentive to act in the interests of the voters (Pitkin 1967). When these – and other similarly negative – conditions occur, elections have low integrity, political representation breaks, and accountability does not work suitably.

Although the quality of elections is paramount in authoritarian and hybrid political systems, it also concerns democratic representation. Within established democracies, interest in the quality of elections emerged following the 2000 American presidential election due to the global political scandal related to the malfunctioning of Florida's punch card ballot system (Alvarez et al. 2008; Alvarez et al. 2012; Bowler et al. 2015). Since then, many studies have shown that even established democracies present widespread problems related to gerrymandering, vote fraud, voter registration, vote buying, risks posed by voting technology, early voting procedures, challenges posed by social media, and foreign interference in elections.<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to discuss some basic tenets of the literature on the quality of elections and to adapt them to the analysis of the Italian political system. To do so, the present article proceeds through two steps. First, we propose a review of the pertinent literature. Although relatively new, it has already reached a notable amount that is impossible to manage in a single article. Hence, we concentrate on two prominent approaches: the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP) proposed by Pippa Norris and associates (Norris, Frank and Martinez i Coma 2013) and the Elections Performance Index (EPI) devel-

oped by the Caltech/MIT research group (Gerken 2009; Stewart 2020). Second, we use some measures provided by this literature and tentatively apply them to an exploration of Italian politics. Of course, we do not deliver a systematic analysis; instead, we aim to show the potentialities granted by applying consolidated theories to studying a polity such as Italy.

The article is organised as follows. The subsequent section provides a literature overview on the quality of elections to discover recurrent definitions, methodological approaches and measurement problems. Then a cursory empirical analysis of the Italian case is presented based on the two examined theories. The final section contains some concluding remarks.

## DEFINING THE QUALITY OF ELECTIONS

The concept of quality of elections has taken on different names. The literature has proposed several definitions without finding a univocal proposal. In a somewhat confusing landscape, the most effective method to put some order was presented by Carolien van Ham (2015; 2020), who deals with electoral integrity, distinguishing between positive and negative definitions. Expressions such as 'free and fair elections', 'democratic elections', and 'elections quality' all belong to the universe of positive definitions (Elklit and Reynolds 2005; Elklit and Svensson 1997; Lindberg 2006; Kelley 2012). Conversely, formulas such as 'elections rigging', 'electoral malpractice', and 'elections fraud' fall within the negative definitions. In general, positive definitions are characterised by the 'presence of criteria (or fulfilment of norms) for democratic elections'; the negative ones are instead characterised by the 'absence of criteria (or norm-violations) that render elections less-than-democratic or plainly un-democratic' (van Ham 2015, 716).

The type of definition – positive or negative – is consequential for empirical research. Negative definitions refer to intentional acts aimed at modifying election results. In contrast, positive definitions cover a broader spectrum of behaviours, including intentional and unintentional ones. The latter, which can be empirically measured as irregularities – for example, the number of null ballots – also depends on the electoral process quality; therefore, it may be helpful to examine them.

As effectively shown (Hartlyn and McCoy 2006; van Ham 2015), the available conceptualisations of the quality of elections are also distinguished according to the nature of the criteria used. On the one hand, some approaches refer to universalistic principles based on the theory of democracy (Dahl 1971) or the standards estab-

<sup>1</sup> Empirical analysis of the quality of elections in consolidated democracies regards countries such as the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Ireland (Alvarez et al. 2008; Alvarez et al. 2012; Bowler et al. 2015; James 2013; Clark 2017; Buckley and Reidy 2015; Norris et al. 2018).

lished by international organisations (Norris 2015); on the other hand, alternative approaches are based on the perception of the quality of elections by citizens or parties (Elklit and Reynolds 2005). Of course, the first approach assumes that it is possible to identify objective standards valid in all countries; the second type maintains that it is impossible to disregard the context in which the elections are held. The first approach adapts more effectively to the point of view of comparative politics.

According to Elklit and Svensson, ‘the phrase «free and fair» cannot denote compliance with a fixed, universal standard of electoral competition: No such standard exists, and the complexity of the electoral process makes the notion of any simple formula unrealistic. Election observation requires the simultaneous use of multiple scales to achieve valid and reliable measurements of complex phenomena’ (1997, 43). This perspective places in antithesis the approach based on universal norms and that based on a processual conception of the quality of elections. In reality, most conceptions of the quality of elections consider both normative aspects of a universalistic nature and a complex analysis of the phenomenon characterised by cyclical phases.

Figure 1 helps us to understand the components of the electoral process, which, although with some differences from case to case, are taken into account by the primary empirical analyses concerning the quality of elections (Kelley 2013; Simpson 2013; Norris 2014; 2015). The electoral process is articulated in many phases, most of which fall under the pre-voting period, others con-

cern the voting period, and a relatively small number concern the post-voting period. The pre-voting period includes several phases, each of which in turn consists of a variable number of rules and activities: the legal framework (f.i., electoral system); planning and implementation (f.i., electoral calendar); training and education (f.i., voters’ information); voter registration; electoral campaign (f.i., media access). On the other hand, the voting period is composed of two dimensions: voting operations and election day (f.i., vote counting); verification of results (f.i., tabulation of results). Finally, the post-voting period consists of a single dimension: post-election (f.i., audits and evaluations).

Following this approach, Pippa Norris (2014, 21) affirms that ‘the overarching notion of electoral integrity refers to agreed-upon international conventions and universal standards about elections reflecting global norms applying to all countries worldwide throughout the electoral cycle, including during the pre-electoral period, the campaign, on polling day, and its aftermath’.

From this point of view, the debate between the alleged universality of the norms related – in this case – to the quality of the electoral process and the supposed Western bias can be resolved by considering two aspects. First, by pointing out that almost all international organisations have formally supported international standards on the quality of the electoral process, starting with the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the African Union (AU); secondly, by focusing on empirical analysis as the only tool capable of determining the gap between international standards – supported by all regional organisations – and the actual unfolding of the electoral process.

MEASURES

As in many other fields of political science, investigating the quality of elections requires empirical analyses aiming to provide evidence. In this case, the research questions related to the main topic may be challenging, as many aspects of the electoral process are involved, and sometimes - f.i., electoral fraud - they involve hidden (mal)practices. Therefore, researchers of the quality of elections make use of a wide-ranging array of approaches and methods, including old and new institutionalism, behaviouralism, technological determinism, cultural anthropology, radical theories, and rational choice (James 2012, 6-15), often criticised for proposing an alternative perspective (James 2020). This eclecticism notwithstanding, two methodological approaches

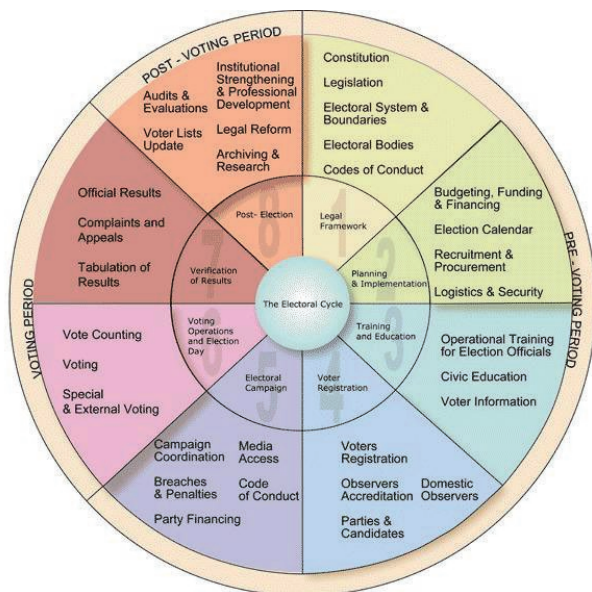


Figure 1. The electoral cycle. Source: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), [www.idea.int/elections/](http://www.idea.int/elections/).

have been commonly practised so far. Some researchers adopt an approach based on expert surveys to gather qualified information from few but skilled individuals; other scholars prefer to analyse electoral results aggregated to various territorial levels, often blending these sources of information with mass surveys targeted at voters and election officials. According to this partition, here we present two emblematic streams of research on the quality of elections, namely the Electoral Integrity Project and the Election Performance Index. Of course, some other approaches concern the empirical study of the quality of elections. However, EIP and EPI are undoubtedly the two most structured – because they have been subject to a systematic empirical test – and best attempts able to illuminate the differences between an approach based on expert judgment – among them, it is worth mentioning Elklit and Reynolds (2005) – and one based on the observed behaviour of voters.

### *The Electoral Integrity Project*

Launched in 2012, the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP) builds on the framework of the electoral cycle as initially proposed by IDEA and sketched in the previous sections. As adapted by the EIP researchers, the electoral cycle is framed in the eleven stages shown in Figure 2<sup>2</sup>. Remarkably, this version of the electoral cycle maintains a comprehensive approach, in the sense that it entails a full consideration of pre-election activities (phases 1 to 5), campaign regulations (6 and 7), the election day (8 and 9), and post-election audits and potential judicial disputes (10 and 11).

EIP covers many cases including, in principle, all the nation-states worldwide. A limited number of exclusions is due to practical reasons (Garnett, James and MacGregor 2022, 29): micro-states with a population of less than 100,000; states without a popularly elected legislature; states constitutionally endowed with a representative parliament where de facto elections have not been held since an extended period; one-party systems; and small (and primarily exotic) states with limited data availability. According to these criteria, from 2012 to 2021, EIP has researched 480 parliamentary and presidential elections held in 169 countries: 87 per cent of the currently existing 194 polities.

According to the advocated methodology, EIP coordinators recruit experts for each country under examination to obtain the required information. These experts



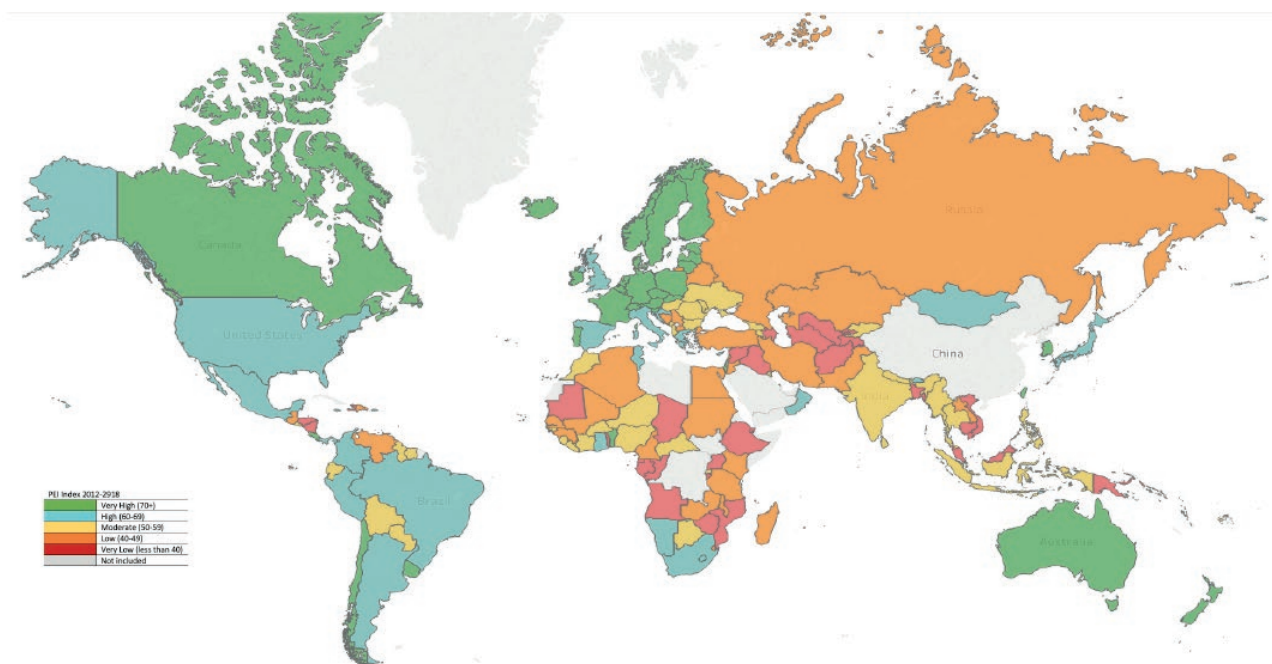
**Figure 2.** The 11-stage electoral cycle used in the Electoral Integrity Project. Source: Van Ham 2020, 116.

are picked up due to their knowledge of the involved political system – with special reference to the electoral process – usually ascertained through their university employments and scientific publications. The general target is enlisting 40 experts to be interviewed, but significant differences exist around this quantity. This data collection feature brings about a major shortcoming of each expert survey, i.e., the low number of respondents for some countries<sup>3</sup>.

To grasp the eleven dimensions of the general concept of electoral integrity shown above in Figure 2, the questionnaire – beyond the items for identifying countries/elections and some features of the respondents – contains 49 ‘core questions’ (Norris and Grömping 2019, 29). Data are collected through Likert scales, and answer modalities are oriented – eventually after a recode – so that a high score corresponds to a state of high integrity. The general Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI) index and the score for every stage are calculated as a sum of the related questions and then standardised to build a 100-point scale. This procedure warrants the availability of raw data usable both for compara-

<sup>2</sup> Although the framework remains unaltered, the labels used to identify each phase are changed after the initial proposal by Norris (2013, 568). We prefer the electoral cycle in the form proposed here inasmuch as recently published.

<sup>3</sup> In the report by Norris and Grömping (2019), the number of interviewed experts spans from two (Antigua and Barbuda) to 125 (Czech Republic). The authors suggest dealing with caution in eight out of 166 countries due to the low number of respondents. The following report by Garnett, James and MacGregor (2022), referred to years from 2019 to 2021 instead, covers 142 elections held in 115 countries and acknowledges 27 cases where the number of experts was too low to administer the questionnaire.



**Figure 3** Electoral integrity worldwide, 2012 to 2018. Source: Norris and Grömping 2019, 5.

tive analyses and in-depth case studies. Figure 3, for instance, shows a classification of all the currently existing countries with the PEI scores split into five classes of electoral integrity, from very low to very high.

The first wave of PEI data, collected in 2012 and amounting to 20 cases, has been used to implement test validity and reliability of indicators (Norris, Frank and Martinez i Coma 2013). First, the PEI index has shown external validity to a reasonable extent. This has been calculated by correlating PEI scores with independent measures of democracy, such as the political rights and civil liberties scales proposed by Freedom House<sup>4</sup>. Second, internal validity means that PEI scores are not influenced by the individual characteristics of experts expressing their judgments. Third, PEI scores reach a good level of legitimacy, as they are congruent with the assessments of the public opinion collected during the sixth round of the World Values Survey by using the same questions previously used to address the countries' experts.

### *The Elections Performance Index*

Although also usable for analysing specific countries or elections, the Electoral Integrity Project is oriented to

broad comparative politics. Alternative approaches often focus on a single country, particularly the United States. Here the electoral management had a long history of intervention by politicians, academics, and practitioners, largely due to racial issues and their links with the enfranchisement of black people started in the 1860s. A key feature of the American electoral landscape is decentralisation, a consequence of federalism that empowers states and counties to implement elections. This organisation has created very different state legislations about voter registration and turnout. Therefore, researchers have exploited the possibility of analysing formal variations and their effects on political participation. While in many countries electoral management is considered a technical problem, in the United States it is intertwined with hot partisan issues. Democrats are mainly engaged in adopting expansive registration procedures, while Republicans are concerned about possible frauds made easier by some types of vote casting, mainly postal. Thus, both parties think that their electoral fortunes are significantly affected by the makeup of the electoral process.

The 2000 presidential election and its aftershock powerfully drove the analysis of the electoral process. Because the troubles of that election originated from the voting equipment - ballot design, lever machines, punch cards - most efforts addressed the voting technology and the possible solutions to technological problems. A relevant endeavour in this direction has been the Voting

<sup>4</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-methodology>

Technology Project (VTP) jointly launched by Caltech and MIT (Alvarez et al. 2012). Subsequently, the focus enlarged to target additional problems, such as voter registration, polling places, absentee voting, election finance, and the overall administrative structure of elections (Alvarez, Atkeson and Hall 2013).

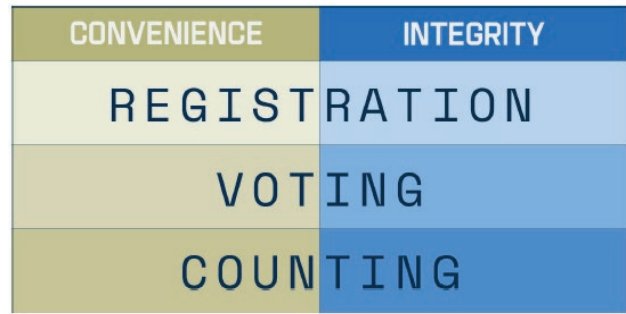
In 2010, building on these experiences, a research group based at MIT Election and Data Science Lab (MEDSL) launched a new and inclusive approach grounded on the Electoral Performance Index (EPI) (Stewart 2020). In the same mood as the abovementioned Electoral Integrity Project, EPI adopts a comprehensive approach considering the election day but also includes investigating activities preceding and following it. However, while EIP segmented the electoral process into four phases - pre-election activities, campaign regulations, election day, and post-election activities - EPI identifies three phases: registration, voting, and counting. Moreover, according to Gerken (2009), EPI considers two relevant dimensions of the concept of performance: *convenience* measures the voting experience of the individual voter and how comfortable she is with the election procedures; *integrity* measures the probability that her vote will be correctly included in the final tally. Figure 4 summarises the EPI approach showing the two dimensions of the state performance and the three stages of the electoral process.

To tap these concepts, the EPI project uses 19 indicators to provide a global view of the electoral administration deployed by the 50 American states and the District of Columbia<sup>5</sup>. At present, they cover federal elections from 2008 to 2020, but it aims to scrutinise the American elections in the long run. This imposes some limitations on the data collection, as information gathered according to the EPI methodology is supposed to meet six principles:

1. be from a reliable source;
2. be available and consistent over time;
3. be available and consistent for all states;
4. reflect a salient outcome or measure of good elections;
5. be easily understood by the public and have a relatively unambiguous interpretation;
6. be produced in the near future.

Table 1 details the current indicators used to assemble the Elections Performance Index. By and large, they have been grouped into seven areas (MIT Election Data Science Lab 2022, 15-20). Indicators 7 and 16 refer to the online capabilities of a given state; indicators 11, 12, 15,

<sup>5</sup> The current metrics with 19 indicators were adopted in 2020; the previous version of the metrics made use of 17 indicators.



**Figure 4.** A rubric for election administration. Source: MIT Election Data Science Lab 2022, 7.

and 18 measure the state's performance on the hot issue of registration; indicators 2, 13, 14, and 17 are related to in-person voting on election day; indicators 5 and 6 point to the role played by the military and other overseas voters; indicators 3 and 4 measure the states' efficiency in the implementation of the mail ballots; indicators 9 and 10 concern provisional ballots, namely the temporary vote cast by a voter whose eligibility is to be ascertained at a later time; finally, indicators 1, 8 and 19 assess the level of data transparency warranted by a state.

All the above-reported indicators are scaled according to the same procedure. In practice, the lowest actual score is anchored to 0, while the highest measure is anchored to 1; thus, once normalised, all the actual values assume a score higher than 0 and lesser than 1. An essential consequence of this choice is that all indicators are weighted equally. Indicators may be used according to two different approaches: first, it may be illuminating to examine each indicator separately to understand how a state performs on a particular aspect; second, indicators may be combined for developing a summary measure of the performance in an election. This is an advantage shared with the alternative Electoral Integrity approach.

#### ADAPTING EXISTING METHODOLOGIES: EXAMPLES FROM ITALY

As reported in the above sections, the investigations of the quality of elections may adopt alternative points of departure. Generally, they may be summed up according to a simple dichotomy between approaches based on expert surveys or objective data (citizens' and poll workers' surveys included). There is, however, a large agreement on the fact that, as much as unique, each approach should be based on some evidence, a point of view firstly vocally advocated by Gerken (2009).

**Table 1.** List of the indicators used to build the Elections Performance Index.

1. *Data completeness*: The degree to which a state's local jurisdictions report critical election statistics to the EAVS
2. *Disability access<sup>a</sup>*: difference in turnout rates between people who reported having one of six disabilities and those who reported having none of these disabilities
3. *Mail ballots rejected*: Number of mail ballots rejected, as a percentage of turnout
4. *Mail ballots unreturned*: Number of mail ballots unreturned for counting, as a percentage of turnout
5. *Military and overseas ballots rejected*: Number of Uniformed and Overseas Civilian Absentee Voters Act ballots rejected, as a percentage of UOCAVA ballots returned
6. *Military and overseas ballots unreturned*: Number of UOCAVA ballots unreturned, as a percentage of ballots distributed
7. *Online registration available*: Whether a state provides the opportunity for citizens to register online
8. *Post-election audit required*: Whether a state requires a post-election audit of election returns
9. *Provisional ballots cast*: Number of provisional ballots cast, as a percentage of turnout
10. *Provisional ballots rejected*: Number of provisional ballots rejected, as a percentage of turnout
11. *Registration or absentee ballot problems*: Percentage of non-voters who cite 'registration problems' as the reason for not voting
12. *Registrations rejected*: Number of registration forms rejected, as a percentage of new registration forms submitted
13. *Residual vote rate*: Over- and under-votes as a percentage of turnout
14. *Turnout*: Number of voters as a percentage of the voting-eligible population
15. *Voter registration rate*: Percentage of respondents who voted or stated they were registered
16. *Voting information lookup tools*: The number of voter information lookup tools on a state's election website, out of a possible five that are tracked
17. *Voting wait time*: Average amount of time reported waiting to cast a ballot
18. *Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) membership<sup>b</sup>*: a binary coding of whether a state is a member of ERIC
19. *Risk-limiting audit required<sup>b</sup>*: states that mandate risk-limiting audits state-wide in statutes are coded at the highest value, while states that do not conduct risk-limiting audits are coded as missing

Source: adaptation from MIT Election Data Science Lab 2022, 4; Stewart 2020, 123-124.

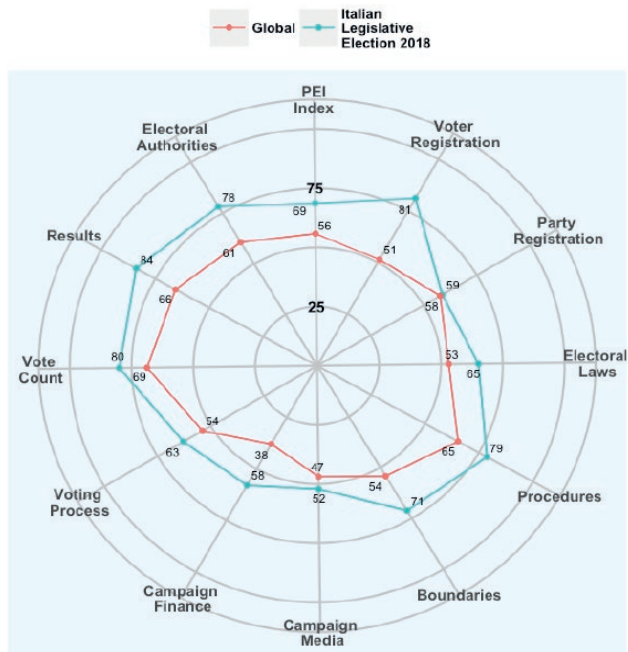
a: since 2020, has substituted an old indicator named 'Disability- or illness-related voting problems'.

b: added in 2020.

This stance should also be seriously considered in Italy, where the problem of the inquiry – and eventual reform – of the quality of elections is relatively new. This entails a situation recurrent in many democracies, the United States being the only exception, where involved people must face a mere lack of data or, at best, a lack of transparency. For instance, in Italy, neither voters nor poll workers have been surveyed to know their experience on election day. However, this is a rarity outside the United States (see at least Clark and James 2017; Partheymüller et al. 2022). Moreover, while the electoral reforms have been hotly debated for thirty years, the registration, voting and counting processes still go largely unnoticed by academics, politicians, and public opinion, the officials in charge of running the elections being the only real experts. Therefore, the evidence available to interested people is, at best, anecdotal; what matters more, it mainly comes from journalistic reports that are usually negatively framed. Thus, even a limited number of poll station lines, misconduct by the poll workers, or delayed result reports are headlined to emphasise the failures of the electoral administration.

To avoid such an unbalanced account of the electoral processes, it is necessary to dispose of a battery of indicators for collecting, gathering, and analysing data; explicit rules for aggregating those indicators in an index are also requested. Both approaches considered above share these features. For instance, EIP data often used for broad comparative analyses can also be used at a more disaggregated level by exploiting the scores of each of the 49 indicators to describe the quality of elections in a given country. And it is worth remembering that the Italian case has already been examined according to the technique provided by the EIP. Figure 5 reports the 0-100 scores conferred at each stage in Italy's parliamentary election held in 2018. Being a long-standing democracy, not surprisingly, it gains a score on the general PEI index greater than the mean reached by all countries – 69 against 56. Moreover, Italy performs better than the grand mean of the whole sample on all stages, although in some cases – i.e., party registration and campaign media – the difference is quite small.

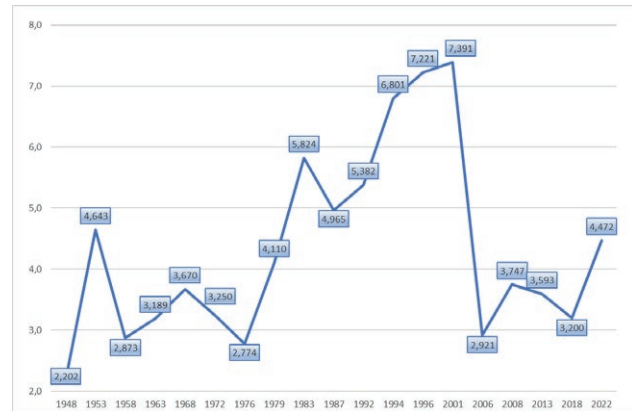
Unlike the EIP, the Caltech/MIT approach has been explicitly elaborated for the analysis of the United States; thus, no application to other countries has ever been attempted. Here we aim to apply part of the methodology to a tentative investigation of the Italian case. Within the scope of the activities of the Voting Technology Project (VTP) launched by the Caltech/MIT research group, a relatively simple indicator, named the residual vote rate, is defined as follows (Alvarez, Atkeson and Hall 2013, 24):



**Figure 5.** Italy's performance on the PEI subdimensions, 2018 parliamentary election. Source: Norris and Grömping 2019, 12.

A residual vote rate is computed by determining the total number of ballots cast in a given election race and subtracting the total number of votes cast in the race. The percentage of ballots that were cast without a vote for a given race is the residual vote rate for that race.

In practice, the residual vote is calculated as the sum of blank and null ballots or as the difference between cast and valid votes. On the one hand, an advantage warranted by this indicator is the availability and comparability of the raw data, usually publicised by electoral officials. On the other hand, it is affected by some shortcomings, the most important being the impossibility of distinguishing intentional nonvoting from invalid votes due to miscounting or voters' errors. In any case, the residual vote rate is recurrently used to analyse several aspects of the elections, such as the choices of social minorities and low-income voters (Herron and Sekhon 2005). In the American landscape, it is also employed to compare in-person and absentee voting. However, it has been initially created and successfully used to analyse the consequences of different voting technologies. It is important to recall once more that electoral administration in the United States is overseen by states, counties, and sometimes municipalities. Therefore, several different ballot casting methods are used, including paper ballots, punch cards, optical scans, lever machines, and electronic tools, the latter often referred to as DRE



**Figure 6.** Residual vote rate in Italy, 1948-2022. Note: data are referred to the Lower House elections.

(Direct Recording Electronic voting machines) (Alvarez, Atkeson and Hall 2013, 41). In the first systematic analysis of this indicator, Ansolabehere and Stewart (2005) correlated the level of the residual vote with different voting technologies. They discovered that punch cards and mechanical lever machines perform worse than alternative methods. This damage the rights of the citizens voting in those precincts where the electoral officials choose them.

While the relative merits of different types of voting equipment is a key issue in the American elections, the Italian electoral administration cannot be assessed from the point of view of different voting technologies because since the first elections were held in the 1940s, a paper-and-pencil method has been used with no exception or innovation<sup>6</sup>. However, the scores of the indicator can also be calculated for the Italian elections by using the existing procedures, and they are reported in Figure 6 for the Lower House (*Camera dei Deputati*) at the national level<sup>7</sup>.

Values of the residual vote rates maintained below 4 per cent in the first seven elections (1948-1976), with a peak in 1953, then scores fluctuated about 4-5 per cent in the following four elections (1979-1992). Values skyrocketed by around 7 per cent in the three elections held from 1994 to 2001, to plummet again below 4 per cent in the four elections from 2006 to 2018. At the last election in 2022, the residual vote equals 4.5 per cent. How can we account for these trends? As just said, this indicator has

<sup>6</sup> Recently, some experiments have been done by introducing innovative forms for expressing and counting votes. However, these experiments should be considered pilot tests, only including a few poll stations rather than involving the electorate as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> Data are taken from the official website of the Italian Ministry of the Interior.



been shaped initially to gauge the performance of different types of voting equipment, a groundless problem in Italy. Instead, Italian voters seem to react to the different types of electoral systems used in the seventy years since World War II. All elections from 1948 to 1992 were held under a PR system, allowing voters to pick up their preferred party. The 1953 election was an exception because a new mixed system provided a seat majority bonus for the most-voted coalition while maintaining a proportional structure<sup>8</sup>. Thus, voters were involved in strategic evaluations of parties *and* coalitions, which made their political reasoning more complex.

The medium level of the scores of the 1979-1992 period is difficult to explain with reference to the electoral system. A reform was approved through a referendum for the 1992 parliamentary election, curbing the number of preference votes admitted for each voter from four to one. This reform should be crucial for a political and party system where intra-party competition is a key characteristic of parliamentary elections. However, it is difficult to relate it to the values of the residual vote rate. Rather, the growing scores of the period could be better accounted for by the mounting party fragmentation affecting Italy after the 1976 election, when the two most voted parties – Christian Democrats and Communists – summed up about three-quarters of the total vote.

The three elections of 1994-2001 correspond to the mixed electoral system mocked by Giovanni Sartori with the label ‘Mattarellum’. The Lower House was partially elected with a PR system in this case. At the same time, 75 per cent of the parliamentary seats were disputed through a first-past-the-post system based on single-member districts, a novelty for the Italian voters. Moreover, implementing this electoral system needed the simultaneous use of two ballots. Overall, this mixed system was doubtless more intricate than the previous PR and may easily account for the unusual level reached by the residual vote rate<sup>9</sup>.

The new mixed system operated on a de-structured party system due to the consumption of the historical parties following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Clean Hands judicial investigation. The voters, therefore, on the one hand, voted with new – and certainly more complex – rules; on the other, their vote concerned an

almost completely transformed political landscape. This also helps explain the residual vote trend in the 1994-2001 phase.

The large decrease in the residual vote rate that occurred in the passage from 2001 to the 2006 parliamentary election is unquestionably a remarkable change. It elicited a hot debate due to a journalistic inquiry that pretended the 2006 election had been rigged by transforming blank ballots into votes for Forza Italia, then the party of the incumbent Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi<sup>10</sup>. However, not only these accusations did not produce any lawsuits<sup>11</sup>. Once more, they may be instead explained with the electoral reform approved by the Italian parliament in December 2005. It established a mixed system radically different from the pre-existing one. The new rules envisaged a PR system with a seat majority bonus for the most voted coalition, where voters could support their preferred party – with no strategic reasoning referred to coalitions – using only one ballot. In a nutshell, the electoral system used in the 2006-2013 years was extremely simpler than ‘Mattarellum’, and this should be considered a sufficient condition to vindicate officials from the charge of fraud. Almost the same holds for the new mixed system used for the 2018 and 2022 parliamentary elections when residual votes maintained a low level.

## CONCLUSION

The study of the quality of elections is characterised by a plethora of approaches and methods, which can be traced back to two macro-sets: those based on the perception of qualified observers and those based on hard and objective data. In this article, we have illustrated the peculiarities of two prominent approaches – the Electoral Integrity Project and the Elections Performance Index – to introduce the study of the quality of elections in the Italian political science community. Apart from the comparative analyses promoted by the EIP, Italian political science has no established tradition in studying the quality of elections<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, launching a research program to fill this gap is worthwhile.

In achieving this objective, it is also worth drawing lessons for Italy from one of the most analysed case

<sup>8</sup> The bonus would be provided so that the most-voted coalition reaches 50 per cent of the total votes. As this did not happen, the bonus was not allocated, the parliamentary seats were distributed on a purely proportional base, and the provision was immediately deleted.

<sup>9</sup> Probably, the residual vote growth during the 1994-2001 phase is also due to the lack of coherence among the electoral systems at the various levels of government (state, regional, provincial, and municipal). That did not allow voters to learn the proper functioning of each system, favouring voting errors.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.repubblica.it/2006/11/sezioni/politica/polemica-film-deaglio/uccidete-la-democrazia/uccidete-la-democrazia.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.lastampa.it/cronaca/2007/01/22/news/chiusa-l-indagine-sui-brogli-deaglio-1.37135613/>

<sup>12</sup> Several studies in the field of law have been conducted on the shortcomings of Italian electoral legislation (i.e., Pavani et al. 2011; Tarli Barbieri 2018; 2021). The volume edited by Roberto D’Alimonte and Carlo Fusaro (2008) presents, instead, an intermediate approach between political science and law.

studies: the United States. In comparison with the United States, some profound differences emerge. First of all, in approaching the analysis of the quality of elections, American researchers must consider at least two peculiar elements. First, in the US, the rules governing the administration of elections are set at the state level. Second, electoral administration is a highly politicised issue on which Democrats and Republicans provide opposing and conflicting interpretations. In contrast, regarding this issue, decentralisation and partisanship are absent in Italy. This difference must be considered seriously when approaching this issue, starting from the pioneering research that began in the United States.

The caution applies all the more when using residual voting. In this article, we have followed one of the paths some US researchers took, starting from the critical 2000's presidential elections. Examining the residual vote is the first step in analysing the quality of elections in Italy. It is an indicator whose increase could indicate some problems in electoral integrity. It cannot be excluded that in the future, voting technology may also become an explanatory variable in the Italian case. To date, however, the most interesting independent variables are the type of electoral system and the format of the party system. Concerning the first variable, it can be assumed that the greater the complexity of the electoral system, the greater the possibility that voters will cast an invalid vote, thus increasing the residual vote share. Regarding the second variable, we can speculate that the higher the number of parties in competition, the higher the ballot confusion and the higher the level of residual voting.

The start of a research program on the quality of elections in Italy must have at least two objectives. The first and most immediate is the transition from a national scale of analysis to one at the sub-national level down to the municipal level. In this way, we will have the opportunity to evaluate the impact of local contexts on the trend of residual voting. We will thus be able to understand better when and under what conditions can be attributed to defects in the electoral process. These include, for example, the complexity of the electoral system and that of the voting paper. The second, instead, requires the involvement of practitioners and the use of qualitative research techniques, such as focus groups and in-depth interviews with officials and poll workers. This allows us to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the Italian electoral process and to find out in which phases of the electoral cycle harmful elements for the quality of the elections may emerge.

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