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## Quality of elections in Italy: a promising research field. Special issue introduction

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Elections have become a common practice worldwide. This is partly a consequence of the spread of democracy beyond Western regions, a process that began in the second wave of democratization and has continued since the 1970s, when a third wave commenced. Additionally, it is due to the emergence of political systems that blend electoral procedures with a flawed application of the rule of law. As a result of the increasing importance of these so-called hybrid regimes, labels such as ‘illiberal democracy’ and ‘electoral authoritarianism’ are widely used – albeit somewhat criticized – in the field of comparative politics.

While different types of political systems utilize elections, their function is not the same everywhere. Only in liberal democracies are elections a means of selecting rulers. However, even in those cases where effective competition exists, flaws may affect the electoral procedures. This explains why the quality of elections concept has gained significant relevance in recent research. But what exactly does ‘quality of elections’ mean?

The usual response to this question refers to specific international standards. The most frequently quoted benchmark is an article from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures (UDHR, art. 21.3).

Political scientists have accepted the general sense of this statement and condensed it into the phrase ‘free and fair elections’. However, a comprehensive approach to the electoral process encompasses both election day and the periods before and after elections. In 1956, Robert Dahl, in his work ‘A Preface to Democratic Theory’, outlined a series of prerequisites for the functioning of a democracy. Regarding elections, he first emphasized that the election day and the voting period are essential. Still, the pre- and post-election periods, when electoral campaigns occur and legislatures assemble, should also be considered. Furthermore, the entire inter-election stage, where critical issues such as electoral reforms and voter enfranchisement are decided

upon, significantly influences how democracy operates. This perspective has been widely accepted by contemporary scholars, whose analyses investigate the quality of the entire electoral cycle.

When assessing potential issues affecting the electoral process, the type of incumbent regime becomes significantly important. Firstly, while disruptions inherently affect elections held in authoritarian and hybrid regimes, they may also occur in liberal democracies, as dramatically demonstrated the recent case of the assault on the United States Congress on January 6, 2021. Additionally, regimes matter in another sense. Some disruptions are unimaginable in full-fledged democracies. Hindered candidacies, voter harassment, and ballot box stuffing are deliberate acts – often promoted by the government – that may only occur in undemocratic political systems. On the other hand, unintentional errors may happen even in a liberal democracy. These incidents can have consequences, as was the case in the 2000 American presidential election, where the result was ultimately decided by a court rather than the will of the voters.

Political scientists have not yet agreed on a conventional classification of electoral shortcomings. Nevertheless, flaws can be described based on the primary political actors involved: candidates, voters, or the electoral administration. Disruptive actions by candidates can disregard the formal rules and amount to a felony, such as the improper use of electoral funds; alternatively, they may simply involve inappropriate behavior, with negative campaigning and refusal to accept defeat being two notable examples. It should be noted that, even though not a crime, the latter may cause significant harm to the electoral process and politics in general.

Voters are particularly involved in assessing the quality of elections from the perspective of voter turnout. It is generally believed that the electoral process becomes unreliable when voters do not reach a certain percentage of the voting-age population, often evaluated based on the turnout levels of other comparable countries. However, it is crucial to differentiate between voluntary and involuntary abstention. The former results from voters' free choice, influenced by their political culture and attitudes. The latter occurs when a voter encounters difficulties reaching the polling station and casting his ballot. In this case, abstention is ultimately a voter's choice. However, the electoral administration plays a significant role, for several reasons. First, by making voter registration difficult; second, by imposing stringent criteria for voter identification at the polling station; and third, by failing to provide solutions like early voting or absentee ballots for citizens unable to vote in person on election day.

The role of the electoral administration is less relevant in non-democratic regimes due to the lack of autonomy of the Electoral Management Boards (EMBs), which are officials designated to oversee elections. In liberal democracies, electoral officials may contribute to gerrymandering, which is in theory reserved for politicians. However, they may be the sole party responsible for disruptions due to an unintentional incorrect tabulation or an unclear ballot design.

While flaws in the electoral process can diminish the quality of elections, this does not necessarily lead to a generalized – or generic – crisis of democracy. Or, at the very least, we should not approach the subject in these terms. It is more productive to address the issue by considering the crises within many democracies. Political science can improve the functioning of existing democracies by suggesting where and how to rectify them. In other words, it can help us understand where the crises – the issues, problems, and disruptions – in democracies are, and recommend the tools that can be used to address them or limit their impact. Starting from this perspective, this special issue can contribute to the debate on the quality of elections in liberal democracies. On the one hand, some researchers have delved into theoretical problems related to the concept of 'free and fair elections', also suggesting a synthetic measurement method, which can undoubtedly represent an advancement in this field of research. Also from an empirical perspective, the papers in the special issue provide information and analyses on under-researched areas – especially in the Italian case – that can influence the quality of the electoral process, such as the nature of non-eligible voters, the determinants of involuntary abstention, and the impact of invalid votes.