


BOOK REVIEW

Lo spazio della politica. Partiti e politiche da Berlusconi ai populist

Edited by Giannetti Daniela, Pedrazzani Andrea and Pinto Luca. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2022. 222p. €23 paper, €14.65 ebook version.

Paolo Gambacciani 

Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
Email: paolo.gambacciani@unibo.it

(First published online 21 December 2023)

Starting from Downs's seminal work, the link between policy and electoral competition has been a main focus of investigation in political science. According to the literature spawned by An Economic Theory of Democracy (1957), to understand electoral outcomes, party system's configuration, and government formation dynamics, we should rely on accurate estimates of the policy positions of political parties and voters. The underlying intuition is that voters choose those parties occupying a position along the left–right continuum that is closer to their own policy preferences. The left–right axis can be converted into a more complex environment, when the most salient policy issues for parties and voters are taken into account. Considering each issue as a policy dichotomy (e.g. in favor or against increasing taxes vs. services), a policy space can be built with a number of dimensions equal to the number of issues considered (typically two or three). Parties and voters can then be located in such a multidimensional policy space. When looking at government formation, coalition governments' agreements are achieved more easily when parties occupy nearby positions in such Euclidean space. This approach is known as the Spatial Theory of Voting and is systematically used by the authors – Daniela Giannetti, Andrea Pedrazzani, and Luca Pinto – to analyze the electoral competition in Italy from 2001 to 2018. Following the previous works of Benoit and Laver, the theory is also used to explain how their strategic location in the policy space prompted the electoral success of Italian and European's populist parties in recent general elections (2017–2018).

Following a methodological chapter reviewing the main techniques employed to estimate parties' policy positions, the empirical analysis begins in chapter 3. The chapter shows the changes that occurred in Italy from 2001 to 2018 and argues that the 2012 economic crisis brought about a reconfiguration of the policy space. Before 2012, the two most salient issues were taxation and immigration. Starting from 2013, the most salient ones became the European authority over national policy sovereignty (EU Authority) and taxation (in 2013), or immigration (in 2018). Thus, from 2013, the electoral competition concerned '*less the economic issues, replaced by cultural-identity issues (immigration), or issues related to the relationship between national sovereignty and the process of European unification (EU Authority)*' (p. 116, my translation).

As argued in chapter 5, this new scenario represented a perfect breeding ground for Italian populism. The *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S) and *Lega* (LE) strategically adopted extreme positions on these issues and, thanks to their policy positioning, these matters were ushered in the mainstream political space. These issues, especially when it comes to EU Authority, became a new dimension structuring party competition, since previously established parties (such as *Partito Democratico* and *Forza Italia*) did not devote extensive attention to these topics. In hindsight, the entry of M5S and the rebranding of LE introduced a centrifugal direction into the party

competition which, in turn, increased the policy distance between the main parties, leading to more difficult government negotiations.

Relying on the spatial approach to coalition formation, the authors devote chapter 5 to explain why the M5S in 2018 participated in governments with both far-right (LE) (first Conte government) and center-left parties (*Partito Democratico*, *Italia Viva*, and *Liberi e Uguale*, second Conte government). In the electoral campaigns of 2018, the party founded by the former comedian Beppe Grillo promoted itself as a post-political party, meaning that it could be in favor of both traditional right- and left-wing policies, as long as they were in the interest of the national well-being. The spatial analysis shows that in terms of the European integration dimension, the M5S was closer to the *Lega*, while in regard to economic issues, it was closer to *Partito Democratico* (PD). This strategic positioning helped M5S to gain electoral support and become central in the policy space in 2018, making possible to ally with partners on the right and on the left.

The last chapter (chapter n. 6) of the book offers a comparative analysis of the electoral competition in Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands in 2017–2018 through the lenses of the spatial theory of voting. Thanks to the availability of expert survey data, the authors are able to directly compare the data gathered by surveying Italian experts (the members of the Italian Political Science Association) with data collected by their German and Dutch counterparts. The authors build a common policy space, using immigration and EU Authority as the two main issue dimensions. Then they locate German, Dutch, and Italian parties that took part in the 2017–2018 general elections in such a common policy space. The findings add to and corroborate the previous analysis: populist parties, across the EU, promote extreme policy positions concerning the topics neglected by mainstream parties (EU and immigration) and thus acquire ownership of these issues (*issue ownership*). In all three cases, they introduce a centrifugal direction into party competition.

All in all, we can read the author's interpretation of centrifugal tendencies as an extension of the concept of the centrifugation of a party system proposed by Sartori in 1976 (*Parties and party system: a framework for analysis*). Sartori's based his analysis on a uni-dimensional representation of the space, i.e. the left–right continuum. This book shares with the most recent literature the idea that a multidimensional representation helps a better understanding of centrifugal and centripetal trends in party competition. The capacity of adapting the traditional left–right axis to the complexity of multiparty systems is the strength of the spatial theory of voting. This exercise proves to be particularly valuable today, when parties escape an easy left–right labeling.

The limit of this approach – and consequently of the book itself – is that it does not take into account the *non-policy factors* to explain party competition. The policy-based approach does not evaluate the role played by reputational effects and the personalization of politics and assumes that both voters and party leaders are fully informed and rational actors. In reality, both sides have bounded rationality and act in a context of uncertainty and scarce information. In particular, non-policy factors play an important role in party competition. These limits are acknowledged by the authors (see Introduction or chapter 1). The main strength of their book consists of the temporal extension of its political analysis. The authors carry out an in-depth longitudinal analysis of the party system providing new insight about its changes. This makes their study a valuable contribution to the analysis of political competition, illustrating the analytical and predictive potential of the spatial approach.

The book enriches the existing literature on the Italian political system, electoral competition, coalition formation, and populism and is recommended for scholars dealing with these issues. The more technical vocabulary, methodology, and statistical techniques employed are all addressed, justified, and explained in depth, to make the book readable to the most. Moreover, the content flows well and the chapters are linked coherently together. For these reasons, this book shouldn't fail to capture the interest of both the scholar and the politics-savvy readers.