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BOOK REVIEW

Protest elections and challenger parties. Italy and Greece in the economic crisis, edited by Susannah Verney and Anna Bosco, London, Routledge, 2015, 174 pp., €131.85 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-13-881360-1

This book – edited by Susannah Verney and Anna Bosco and originally published as a special issue of *South European Society & Politics* – proposes a convincing parallelism between two Southern European countries which have been badly hit by the financial and economic crisis of recent years: Italy and Greece. 5

The main argument of the editors – who write an interesting introductory chapter – is that the economic crisis has triggered a process of political convergence between Italy and Greece: while these countries were usually considered as being very dissimilar cases, both with respect to political features and economic dynamics, in recent years they have appeared to live parallel lives. First, they have both experienced a simultaneous downfall of their pre-crisis governments (Berlusconi in Italy and Samaras in Greece). Second, these governments have been replaced by technocrat-led governments (Monti in Italy and Papademos in Greece) based on parliamentary ‘super-majorities’. Third, both countries have been characterised by ‘protest elections’, marked by unprecedented levels of electoral volatility, the decline of bi-polarism and the startling rise of challenger parties (the Five-star Movement in Italy and Golden Dawn in Greece). 10 15

Thus, in Verney’s and Bosco’s view, the financial and economic crisis – while not affecting both economies equally – has resulted in Italy and Greece embarking on parallel political paths that contrast with their past political divergence. For example, alongside the three lines of convergence previously emphasised (the resignation of pre-crisis governments, new technocrat-led cabinets, protest elections), a major outcome of the political turmoil raised by the crisis is that both countries have changed their usual patterns of cabinet formation: grand coalitions have been formed both in Italy and in Greece. 20 25

These grand coalitions have been necessary because of the unexpected electoral success of challenger parties, which benefited from the significant rise in protest voting, mainly against austerity measures. Therefore, besides chapters examining the parliamentary elections themselves (Gianfranco Baldini with respect to Italy in Chapter 4; Sofia Vasilopoulou and Daphne Halikiopoulou with regard to Greece in Chapter 6), this volume includes chapters on two protest parties that recently achieved their first parliamentary breakthroughs: the Five-star Movement in Italy (Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini: Chapter 2) and Golden Dawn in Greece (Antonis A. Ellinas: Chapter 7). Yet, the Italian picture is enriched by two further chapters: James L. Newell (in Chapter 3) pinpoints the local elections of May 2012 as being full of significance for the general direction of change in Italian politics, whereas Piergiorgio Corbetta and Rinaldo Vignati (in Chapter 5) – analysing the May 2013 municipal elections – focus on the causes of the Five-star Movement’s loss of votes and question whether or not this negative result represents the first sign of an unavoidable decline. 30 35 40

More specifically, in the second chapter, Bordignon and Ceccarini show how the movement/party founded by the comedian, Beppe Grillo, can be considered as being a

sort of *unicum*: on the one hand, it focuses on online presence, has horizontal structural elements and aims at positioning itself ‘beyond’ (old) ideologies; however, on the other hand, it benefits from its presence in the squares; it is characterised by a clear top-down decision-making process and its electorate comes from various political families. In Bordignon’s and Ceccarini’s view, this growing electoral success will make even more explicit and unavoidable the underlying question which has dogged the movement from the start, namely its capacity to reconcile its (apparently irreconcilable) genetic traits. 45

In Chapter 3, Newell explores the profound national-level implications of the local elections of May 2012: by analysing the run-up, the campaign, the outcome and the aftermath of these elections, the author explains how and why centre-right parties were deserted *en masse* by their (potential) voters, centre-left parties were not able to capitalise on this discontent and the Five-star Movement was successful in its spectacular electoral advance (especially in the centre-north of the country). 50 55

The fourth chapter, written by Baldini, analyses the core elections of 2013 in Italy. With respect to parliamentary elections, the author stresses a very high level of volatility and the breakthrough of the Five-star Movement, which resulted in a hung parliament and a long-standing stalemate in the formation of the new government. With regard to presidential elections, for the first time in Italian history, the incumbent President of the Republic was re-elected for a second 7-year term of office. On one hand, the result of these two events has been Italy’s first grand coalition government (involving the PD, the PDL and Civic Choice); on the other hand, the Italian party system still remains in a state of flux. 60

Corbetta and Vignati, in the fifth chapter, conclude the analysis of the Italian case by dealing with the May 2013 municipal elections, whose main features have been the clear victory of the centre-left coalition, the marked drop in voter turnout and the shrinkage of the Five-star Movement. Yet the authors mainly focus on the latter result: they analyse the reasons why more than half of those who voted for the Movement in the general election of February did not do so again 3 months later. Thus, they propose five possible explanations: the difference between parliamentary and municipal elections, a precarious protest vote in parliamentary elections, the heterogeneity of the movement’s followers, the fact that it represents a negative rather than a positive vision and the personal (in)capabilities of Beppe Grillo as a leader. 65 70

The sixth and the seventh chapters deal with the Greek case: in Chapter 6, Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou provide an overview and analysis of the Greek general elections of both May and June 2012. Mainly because of the huge financial and economic crisis characterising Greece since 2010, neither the first round in May nor the second round in June led to a political force being able to form a single-party government. Yet, huge external pressure pushes ND and PASOK to form a grand coalition government in order to maintain Greece within the euro zone. Furthermore, the authors stress the main features of both elections: a very high level of electoral volatility, the fragmentation of the party system and the rise of anti-establishment forces (above all, Golden Dawn and, to a certain extent, Syriza). 75 80

Exactly the rise of Golden Dawn in Greece is the main theme of Chapter 7, in which Ellinas examines the ideological, organisational and voter profile of the party, and offers possible explanations for its breakthrough in the 2012 elections. More specifically, the author argues that the financial and economic crisis has brought a massive realignment of the Greek electorate away from mainstream parties, giving rise to anti-system and anti-immigrant sentiments on which Golden Dawn has been able to capitalise. Yet, the future of this party is anything but certain: above all, it will depend on its capacity to absorb organisationally any future tensions between party pragmatists and idealists. 85 90

Overall, this book offers a coherent and interesting picture of the huge political changes that have characterised both Italy and Greece in recent years. The main argument, which links political turmoil to the high price connected to austerity policies, appears to be convincing. Yet, in spite of their convergence, the two Southern European countries are not completely overlapping, and differences are outstanding too: most of all, in Italy the protest vote rewarded a movement with no clear ideological stance (the Five-star Movement), whereas in Greece Syriza – a clear left-wing party – is now the crucial actor of the party system. Why did this happen? The volume lacks an explanation for this diverging pattern. Moreover, it appears to be a bit unbalanced between the two countries, with four empirical chapters dealing with the Italian case but only two chapters focusing on the Greek case. In this respect, a further chapter on Alexis Tsipras' party, Syriza, its recent history, ideological features and organisation, would have been really interesting. Nevertheless, this book is a very useful tool for our understanding of two countries – Italy and Greece – which are still in transition towards an unknown landing place.

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