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Contexts, networks, and the vote

An analysis of environmental effects
on electoral behavior in Italy





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For Giulia, Barbara, and Mauro

Contents

- 9 *Introduction*
- 17 **Chapter I**
 Environmental effects and electoral behavior: An explanatory model
 1.1. Introduction, 17 – 1.2. Patterns of network pressure and the influence mechanism, 21 – 1.3. Groups, network, contexts, and their relationship, 26 – 1.4. Alternative explanations: the role of media effects in election campaigns, 34 – 1.5. Why Italy?, 37
- 41 **Chapter II**
 The effect of the network: Influence mechanisms in 2014 European Elections in Italy
 2.1. Introduction, 41 – 2.2. Political influence: definition and effects, 44 – 2.2.1. *Hypotheses*, 47 – 2.3. Data, measurements, and models, 49 – 2.3.1. *Models*, 51 – 2.4. Results, 56 – 2.4.1 *Influence mechanism*, 56 – 2.4.2. *Directional influence*, 58 – 2.5. Discussion, 60
- 63 **Chapter III**
 Networks and the geographical context in Italy Interacting sub-national environments in 2013 National Elections
 3.1. Introduction, 63 – 3.2. The role of contexts and networks in shaping vote choices, 65 – 3.3. Data, models and variables, 70 – 3.3.1. *Models*, 73 – 3.4. Results, 77 – 3.5. Discussion, 79

83	Chapter IV
	<i>Time as a context The 2013 election campaign and the rise of the Movimento 5 Stelle</i>
	4.1. Introduction, 83 – 4.2. Diffusion of innovations, the threshold model and the role of weak ties, 85 – 4.2.1 <i>The Movimento's rise: a diffusion process fueled by weak ties?</i> , 88 – 4.2.2 <i>Hypotheses</i> , 90 – 4.3. Data, measures and models, 91 – 4.3.1 <i>ABMs: theory and applications in electoral studies</i> , 93 – 4.3.2 <i>Initializing and running the ABM</i> , 95 – 4.4. Results, 98 – 4.5. Discussion, 105
109	<i>Discussion and conclusion</i>
121	<i>Appendix</i>
135	<i>References</i>

Introduction¹

This book aims at analyzing theoretically and empirically the social and political environments and their relationship with individual voting behavior in Italy. The basic idea behind the theory that will be exposed throughout the work can be summarized as follows: people, in their everyday lives, are assumed to interact and discuss a number of topics; these discussions are expected to construct, crystallize or even change one's beliefs and attitudes on a myriad of topics. By means of interactions and opinions exchange, one can be affected concerning her everyday life decisions, such as buying a new car, trying a different restaurant, finding a job, getting involved in criminal activities or changing opinions about political, or social matters. In these cases, it is usually stated that the individual has been affected by her context or environment. No strong assumptions are needed in order to accept these straightforward statements, and a large number of works have investigated cases in which the environment, broadly defined, affects individuals, and especially their political and electoral behaviors and attitudes (Berelson Lazarsfeld McPhee 1954, Agnew 1987, Agnew 1995, Agnew 1996, Marsh 2002). A significant amount of contributions, especially in US-based research, is focused on this topic and committed to seeking for evidence that connects the context, broadly defined, and voting be-

¹ No work stands on its own. I would like to particularly thank Cristiano Vezzoni, Hans Schadee, Delia Baldassarri, and Michael Shin for reading previous versions of this book. Their suggestions, comments, and observations have contributed crucially to greatly improve the quality of the work.

havior. Especially among European scholars of electoral behavior, however, the term “context” is usually considered as a vague, underdeveloped concept (Makse et al. 2014): tentatively, context is usually considered as the set of factors that do not depend – entirely – on individuals, but contribute to affect the behavior of these latter.

A theoretical attempt of deepening the “context” term is that of Marsh (2002): according to Marsh’s argument, it is possible to identify two types of context: the first, the global one, is connected with the characteristics that can be defined as “high-level factors” – institutions, party systems, electoral laws, macro-historical or macro-social factors. The second, the compositional context, is produced by the composition of the local “units” and is aimed at identifying how variations among these units will affect the behavior of individuals. Marsh argues that the focus on the latter type of effects has led to substantially poor results. Citing earlier works (Huckfeldt Sprague 1995, Pattie Johnston 1995, McAllister Studlar 1992), Marsh states, on the one hand, that geographical variation of the electoral strength of parties, once considered as a “genuine” compositional effect, explains only a residual amount of variance of electoral outcomes. Also personal relationships, according to Marsh, exert an effect, all things considered, weak. The suggestion of Marsh is, therefore, of abandoning studies that deal with compositional effects and focusing more on global contexts, which allow appreciating quantitatively larger effects. The conclusion of Marsh is enlightening of a specific way of understanding electoral studies. The theoretical and epistemological approach which permeates this argument – and a large part of European electoral studies in general – start from the assumption that, from the theoretical and empirical point of view, political macro-environment has some kind of theoretical and technical precedence with respect to voter’s social environments. In other words, the outcome of the elections must be investigated, together with individual properties, using predictors substantially related to “high level” political factors that are placed “beyond” the individual, with respect to relational factors, which are often difficult to empirically measure, and theoretically under-

stand. To some extent, the scientific project pursued by Marsh – and, with him, by a large part of the scholars who study elections – can be linked to the so-called new institutionalism (Hall Taylor 1996), a form theoretical approach to political and social facts that identifies institutions (intended here in a very broad sense) as the main circumstances that affect political behaviors. The new institutional argument made by Marsh is perfectly consistent with a political science-based idea of electoral studies, in which, rather than focusing on interactions, relations, networks and other sociological concepts, the researcher decides to focus on other factors, that actually contribute to shaping vote choices, and, at the same time, are related to genuine political constructs (such as electoral laws and variation in party supply). These theoretical constructs are primarily national, and it seems quite apparent that a vast majority of voting behavior students are concerned in developing, theoretically and technically, relationships between the vote and national predictors.

The empirical and theoretical way that we will follow is radically different with respect the one exposed above: by and large, what we are going to employ in this work is what can be defined as a “sociological” way of investigating electoral behavior. We will argue, by providing empirical evidence of it, that interpersonal interactions that happen during one’s everyday life are relevant in shaping people ideas and behaviors. Citizens, by means of dyadic interactions, can be convinced to change their opinion slightly, or to sustain their idea more strongly, or, even, to be converted by (or convert) their discussant to different opinions. This does not mean that people are not affected by national-level or purely political factors. More simply, what we argue is that, together with high-level political determinants to vote choices, a less studied set of factors, strictly connected to people’s everyday lives, is relevant, if not crucial, in shaping citizenry political attitudes and behaviors. This framework, thus, represents an alternative point of view by which we can see the same processes, such as an electoral campaign or results of an election. Theoretical and technical basis of this “sociological way” of looking at elections and political

behavior can be found in the 1940s and 1950s, in particular with the work of Paul Lazarsfeld and Bernard Berelson (Lazarsfeld Berelson Gaudet 1944, Berelson Lazarsfeld McPhee 1954) who started from a clear and, at that time, innovative epistemological assumptions. According to these theorists, it is possible to understand social reality by means of individual and, especially, relational mechanisms that guide human behavior in modern societies (Machamer Darden Craver 2000). Organizations, informal groups, social networks, structures of interdependence, and actors are equally important to build those theoretical models (Manzo 2010). This scientific program (that has been defined with the term “analytical sociology”) is based on the idea of the individual as a non-atomized object of research (Coleman 1990, Udehn 2001, Manzo 2010). Differently from the classical structuralist sociology (e.g., Blau Schwartz 1984), this approach puts at the center of its theoretical treatment the individual, her desires, beliefs, and opportunities. At the same time, the structural conditions are not left apart but are expected to exert an effect on citizens’ behaviors. Keeping the individual at the center of our theoretical framework, without forgetting her relational environment, means dealing with a person who is affected by several types of effects, coming from outside her.

More precisely, the effects that will be taken into consideration are mainly of two types: the first type is the one that will be defined as a network effect. People with whom individuals share their everyday lives are a fundamental tool through which social – and voting – behavior is modeled. Following the ideas of several important scholars in the field (Granovetter 1973, 1983, Huckfeldt et al. 1995), we will expect that exposure to dissonant views can sometimes convince people to change their political ideas. Also, we will argue that intimacy is a crucial element in evaluating the strength of interpersonal effects: stronger ties – i.e., people who are closest to us – will exert a greater effect on individual characteristics, while people who are less intimate will have a weaker effect.

The second effect identified is that of geographic and temporal context. The context, as it will be stressed during

the book, can be represented as an element that contributes to shaping the opportunities that one has in encountering people that present specific characteristics (Boyd Iversen 1979, Blau 1977). It will be argued that the geographical and temporal contexts contribute to the composition of the network in which the individual is embedded. Another key argument of the work is connected to the relationship between context and network and how the effect of this latter changes according to the strength of the ties that bind individual to different groups (such as relatives, friends, and coworkers, or even strangers). The main feature of this environmental relation is that exposure to relational groups leads to different perceptions and connections with the broader context. This feature, as it will be seen throughout the work, has a significant impact on how individuals perceive the context and on how they can be indirectly connected to this latter.

The theoretical framework, taken by and large, might lead to an important number of expectations. Part of these expectations will be tested using Italian data, and, in particular, by the data collected during (and after) election campaigns of 2013 National Elections and 2014 European Elections. Italy represents a compelling case for many reasons: first of all, the Italian political spectrum has been subjected, in the last few years, to a violent turmoil that threw into crisis the democratic changeover between center-left and center-right coalitions (the political equilibrium that journalists and scholars defined the “Second Republic”). The political crisis represents an important test bench of how the hypothesized mechanisms are actually applicable also to political systems that are less stable with respect to, for instance, US (in which the contextual literature is widespread).

Given that a large part of studies about the relationship between environment and individual voting behavior is performed with US data – one of the most stable two-party system of contemporary democracies – the aim of testing those relations in a multiparty system will need several methodological adjustments. In this work, it will be made use of the stacking technique (van der Eijk et al. 2006), a modified version of usual re-

gression models, which allows the researcher to find relationships between individual choices and characteristics of “generic parties” (De Sio Franklin 2011), considering, in this way, the characteristics of the environments and the effects that these latter can produce on the individual, taking into account, at the same time, several party choices.

Regression-based approaches, however, tell us only indirectly whether mechanisms that we have hypothesized actually hold. To have stronger evidence of theorized mechanisms, simulation approaches will be employed. Simulations, generally speaking, allow us to construct, by means of a computer software, a reproduced social system, in which agents follow elementary behavioral rules and are allowed to interact among each other (Rolfe in Manzo 2014). One of the central concepts of this kind of approach is that of *emergence*: given a number of behavioral and relational rules that agents possess, and given the environment in which these “simulated people” are embedded, emergence is represented by the aggregate patterns and outcomes that emerge from the repeated interactions among agents and between agents and the environment. This approach is usually employed to test the logical consistency of different mechanisms and their aggregate outcome. In this work, an agent-based model will be employed in order to assess the relational/individual mechanisms that relate time, networks and individual voting strategies during an electoral campaign. The agent-based model that will be implemented in the work, moreover, presents another element of novelty: if in political science studies simulations are usually employed to theoretically assess the logical consistency of specific outcomes, neglecting real-world cases, the model presented in these pages has the aim of making the simulation consistent with a real case (the diffusion of Movimento 5 Stelle among Italian electoral body in 2013) and will be primarily based on real data. In this case, thus, the agent-based model will need to be externally valid (Liu 2011).

The book is structured as follows. Chapter 1 will be dedicated to deepening the theory of the environmental effects that has

been only sketched here. It will be investigated the relationship between contexts, networks and the individual, it will be shown how global effects, according to Marsh lexicon, can be consistent with the theory (introducing the concept of constraints set) and it will be argued how the individual has some power in responding actively to these environmental effects. The number of expectations to which the theory leads is quite significant, and only a subset of those expectations will be tested. In particular, it seems interesting to test what we can call the three central tenets of the theory: the interpersonal influence effect, the relationship between geography and networks, and the one between time and networks.

Chapter 2 will focus on individual strategies by which citizens can react to relational stimuli. In particular, the chapter is focused on testing interpersonal influence, namely, the relational pattern that, given a situation of disagreement, results in some sort of agreement reached by people changing actively their political position.

Chapter 3 will focus on the relationship between geographical space and interpersonal networks in Italian National Elections of 2013, showing how people can be affected by both these levels of the sub-national environment. Moreover, it will be argued, using multilevel regression models, how these two levels interact.

In chapter 4, the relation between time and network will be investigated. The chapter will focus on the case of Movimento 5 Stelle increase during the 2013 election campaign. Simulation-based evidence will be exposed to stress that the shaping capacities that the context has on networks can form a diffusion of an innovation-like process. Moreover, it will be stressed (as in chapter 3) how different levels of intimacy among people lead to different outcomes.

Finally, the final chapter will summarize the results obtained in the previous four chapters, investigate the implications of these findings, and advice further testing of this theoretical framework.