

Italian divorce referendum (1974): from membership to opinion vote

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Introduction

Divorce referendum which took place in Italy in 1974 represents a turning point in Italian political electoral history. Starting from this perspective, it is interesting to focus the analysis on the role played by parties and their position concerning this debate.

Previously this referendum, scholars believed that Italian party system was based on a strong relation elector-party, and rightly did so [Sartori, 1993]. Indeed, people massively based their vote on ideology, traditions and self-recognition in the social structure [Pasquino, 1980].

Despite of the changes occurred after the referendum on divorce, parties remained the fundamental actors in conveying the opinion of citizens until 90s. National electoral results of 1976 proved this aspect and showed an important increase of left parties, in particular PCI (Italian Communist Party) which reached its historical peak¹.

The referendum on divorce dramatically changed the electoral approach of Italians, which became to identify their votes on personal opinions, interests and feelings rather than on old standards based on membership [Parisi, Pasquino, 1977].

Mass-parties of that period were DC (Christian Democracy Party) and PCI, which were able to mobilize a dramatic amount of people capitalizing on the cleavages of Italian society.

Some interesting data

The referendum on divorce was held on 12 May 1974 and it was the first referendum in the country after the referendum on the Italian Constitution of 1946. Citizens were asked if they wanted to abrogate the law approved by the parliament three years before that had introduced for the first time the institution of divorce in Italy². By voting "Yes" the elector stated his preference for the abrogation of the law whereas by voting "No" he expressed his will to keep the law.

¹ www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/elezioni-e-referendum.

² The law is commonly known as Fortuna-Baslini's law.

Italian Constitution prescribes that in order to pose a referendum, it is necessary to collect at least 500 000 signatures in agree with the proposal³. The collection of signatures was promoted by CEI (Episcopal Italian Conference), DC, MSI (Italian Social Movement Party) and by Vatican State. Moreover, the “Italian Catholic world” was not homogeneous at all. ACLIs (Italian Catholic Workers Associations) which role on the territory was strong and important were in general aloof with DC position and in certain cases in favor of the maintenance of the law.

On the other side the “left Italian world” with PCI, PSI (Socialist Italian Party), PSDI (Socialist Democratic Party) PSIUP (Socialist Party-Proletarian Union) and other centrist parties like PLI (Liberal Italian Party) and PRI (Italian Republican Party) were in favor of the maintain of the law. An increasing important role in favor of “No” was also played by the Radical Movement.

National election of 1972 (Tab 1) saw the affirmation of DC as first party. PCI increased its preferences but remained the second force.

Tab1⁴

Party	N. of votes	Percentage
DC	12 912 466	38.66
PCI	9 068 961	27.15
PSI	3 208 497	9.61
MSI	2 894 722	8.67
PSDI	1 718 142	5.14
PLI	1 300 439	3.89
PRI	954 357	2.86
PSIUP	648 591	1.94
Others	1 195 611	1.44
<i>Turnout</i>	<i>34 525 687</i>	<i>93.19</i>

In consideration of the strong polarization of Italian party system [Parisi, Pasquino, 1977; Sartori, 1993] the two fronts gave indications to their electorate to vote "Yes" or "No" with the certainty that electors would have followed parties position.

³Article 75, Italian Constitution.

⁴Italian National Elections, 1972. *Source: Italian Ministry of Interior.*

Two years later -after a strong electoral campaign- the referendum on divorce was held on 12 May 1974. Results showed a wide affirmation of "No" with 19 138 300 preferences (59.26 % of the total).

Tab 2⁵

Voters	Yes	No
33 023 179	13 157 558	19 138 300
Turnout: 87.72%	40.74%	59.26%

By observing results, it is interesting to underline how a large amount of electors did not follow the parties indications (compared to 1972 National elections) but decided to vote differently from party recommendation. These features appears more stressed by Christian and MSI figures which seem to show that were the electors of those parties which had not followed parties indications.

Furthermore, if we observe results at regional level this tendency seems more evident and marked (Tab 3).

Tab 3⁶

Region	% referendum 1974	% referendum 1974	Majority after 1972 National elections	Majority after 1972 National elections
<u>North</u>	Yes	No	DC - MSI majority	PCI and OTHER LEFT majority
Valle d'Aosta	24,9%	75,1%	x	
Liguria	27,4%	72,6%		x
Piemonte	29,1%	70,9%	x	
Emilia-Romagna	29,1%	70,9%		x
Friuli-Venezia-Giulia	36%	64%	x	
Lombardia	40,7%	59,3%	x	
Trentino Alto-Adige	50,6%	49,4%	x	
Veneto	50,7%	49,3%	x	
<u>Center</u>				
Toscana	31,2%	68,8%		x
Umbria	32,6%	67,4%		x

⁵Referendum on divorce, 1974. Source: Italian Ministry of Interior

⁶Referendum results per region, 1974. Source: elaboration of Italian Ministry of Interior

Lazio	36,6%	63,4%	x	
Marche	42,4%	57,6%	x	
<u>South</u>				
Abruzzo	48,8%	51,2%	x	
Calabria	50,8%	49,2%	x	
Campania	52,2%	47,8%	x	
Puglia	52,2%	47,8%	x	
Basilicata	56,7%	43,3%	x	
Molise	60,1%	39,9%	x	
Sardegna	44,7%	55,3%	x	
Sicilia	49,5%	50,5%	x	

National elections of 1972 gave the majority to PCI and other left parties only in Liguria, Emilia-Romagna, Toscana and Umbria. Here -consistently- in 1974 electors voted “No” with high percentage over “Yes”.

In Northern regions where the majority of voters gave their preferences to center-right parties in National elections (Valle d'Aosta, Piemonte, Friuli-Venezia-Giulia and Lombardia) voted for "No" in 1974. Only Trentino Alto-Adige and Veneto voted in coherence with previous elections saying "Yes". Anyway, it is important to underline that "Yes" defeated “No” just for few votes.

In Central Italy “No” won in every region. Excluding the already mentioned cases of Toscana and Umbria, Lazio and Marche saw a large affirmation of “No” despite of the DC-MSI majority in 1972.

The case of Southern Italy appears more heterogeneous. Here DC had played for long time the role of *catch-all party* [Kirchheimer, 1966], particularly in Sicilia. Nevertheless, in the two islands and Abruzzo the "No" affirmed its unexpected victory over the "Yes", despite of the intense campaign promoted by DC and local Catholic institutions. Meanwhile the affirmation of "Yes" -with different intensities- was confirmed in Calabria, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata and Molise.

Conclusion

In summary, a passage of votes from center-right electorate to a different party-position seems undeniable. It did not entail that center-right electors changed their parties preferences, as 1976 elections confirmed and the theory of electoral stability prove [Parsons, 1963; Pasquino, 1997]. In fact, DC and PCI increased their votes two years later⁷.

However, a shift of votes from one side to the other occurred in 1974. Data interpretation orientate to confirm that DC traditional electorate transferred its position to another stance different from party's one meanwhile the center-left electorate had maintained its loyalty to parties' positions [Pasquino, 1985; Sartori, 1993].

In fact, while the difference from "Yes" parties and "No" parties was about 443 208 electors in favor of the firsts, the difference increased up to 5 980 742 in 1974 referendum when the turnout slightly decrease to 87.72%⁸. A so much increase cannot be accounted for a shift of classical preferences from one party to another but needs a more carefully interpretation.

I believe that in this particular case electors decided to vote by following their own personal position, interests and feelings because of the intimacy of the topic. In conclusion, it appears clear that the electorate passed from a vote based on the membership to a vote based on the opinion [Parisi, Pasquino, 1977], refusing the previous political patterns that marked Italian political history.

⁷ www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/elezioni-e-referendum.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

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