

Fleeing the Ballot Box: Behind the Unprecedented Abstention in the 2022 Italian General Election

Fabio Bordignon
Luigi Ceccarini
Giacomo Salvarani

Introduction

More than one-third of Italian voters (36%) turned out to be non-voters on the election night of 25 September 2022. This time, the first result to be reported in the conventional flow of election news was not the least in subsequent interpretations of the outcome. The umpteenth «shock» in the increase of abstention was neither easily forgotten nor overshadowed by the party race. Rather, it became an integral part of the broader reading of the election. Although a continuation of the trend was to be expected, the degree of non-voting was genuinely surprising, marking the most substantial spike in the history of the Republic.

This article analyses abstention trends in Italy, with a focus on the record-high rate registered at the 2022 General Election and its possible explanations. The starting point, confirmed by the analyses presented in these pages, is that abstention is a multifaceted phenomenon with multiple and intertwined causes. In the Italian case, abstention must be framed within the long-term evolution of the relationship between society and politics across the various Italian «republics» and their recurrent crises.

The central idea put forward in this article is that the progressive decline in electoral participation and its collapse, even in the case of «first order» elections, should be considered as a systemic issue regarding political representation. This will be shown using original post-electoral survey data collected by the LaPolis (Laboratory of Political and Social Studies) Electoral Observatory at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo.

Section 1 will outline the long-term trends concerning electoral participation in Italy and its progressive decline during and after the transition from the First to the Second Republic, identifying the systemic

reasons behind this dynamic. Section 2 will focus on the most recent rise in the abstention rate, highlighting the key statistics and coordinates. The profile of the Italian non-voter will be traced in its social, geographical, and electoral dimensions, identifying the multiple explanations for this outcome. The explanations will be further explored in Section 3, which considers the relationship between abstention and social, political, and economic malaises. The concluding section will provide some final remarks, refining the main interpretation anticipated in this introduction.

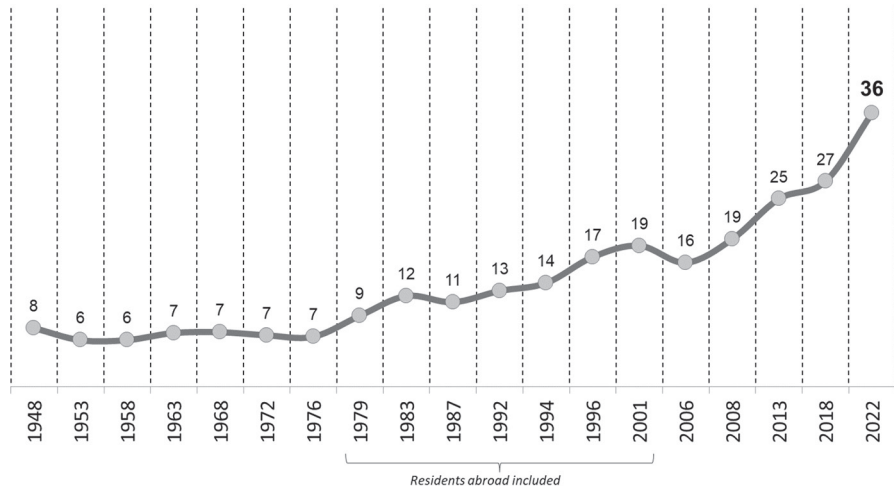
1. From Near-Universal Participation to the Rise of Abstention

During the so-called First Republic (1946–1992), Italy registered very high, near-universal levels of electoral participation. The age of the Italian *party democracy*¹ was characterised by the role of both solid party organisations and deep-seated political ideologies embedded in the territory. People's choices reflected this model and voting behaviour was largely stable over time. On the voters' side, elections were occasions to express loyalty to a party and the (territorial) *political subculture*² they identified with. During the post-war decades, electoral participation could be interpreted as an expression of faith for large sectors of the electorate. There were also important institutional incentives for electoral participation, for instance, automatic registration, home delivery of electoral certification, voting over two days (i.e., Sunday and Monday), and the constitutional stipulation that voting was a civic duty³.

Until the 1970s, abstention remained below 10% and could be read almost entirely as an involuntary phenomenon, attributable to impediments such as ageing or ill health; this interpretation was suggested by Mannheim and Sani⁴, who estimated that about half of those who abstained in the 1979 General Election (about 1.1 million) were over-65.

There was a gradual decline during the 1980s, which could be interpreted as one of the signs of a malaise already visible beneath the surface of a «blocked» party system. Italian society was experiencing a process of rapid political secularisation that detached people from their former political faiths, particularly those supporting the two big political «churches»: the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano – Italian Communist Party) and DC (Democrazia Cristiana – Christian Democracy).

Fig. 1 - Electoral Abstention in Italy from 1948 to 2022 (%)



Source: LaPolis Electoral Observatory, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, based on data from the Ministry of the Interior

Nonetheless, it is only after the final collapse of the First Republic – after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the corruption scandals of the early 1990s – that the curve plotted in Figure 1 begins its steepest progression. Since the end of *polarised pluralism* in Italy, voters have become «free» to vote for new parties promising radical change; however, they have also become «free» not to participate, meaning that abstention has progressively become an acceptable, legitimate option.

The profound renewal of the political landscape triggered by the transition of the early 1990s, while not fully justifying the announcement of a Second Republic⁵, did not close the gap between society and politics. Rather, populism drift and the spread of anti-political sentiment among voters became structural elements of the political system⁶, openly favoured and exploited as a political weapon by its main actors. In this new bipolar scheme, the «light loyalty»⁷ that replaced old political faiths generally prevented citizens from crossing the line between centre-right and centre-left; however, abstention was often used to punish one’s party or coalition without rewarding its competitors.

Between 1994 and 2001, abstention rose to involve nearly one-fifth of the electorate (19%). The 2006 General Election was the last time a decrease in the abstention rate was recorded. However, this was an illusory effect as more than two million voters living abroad⁸ were included in new overseas constituencies⁹, thus reducing the denominator for the computation of voter turnout.

However, the most spectacular rise coincided with the new Italian transition, starting in 2011. Participation dropped by six points between 2008 and 2013. The 2013 General Election was marked by the growth of protest voting and the success of the M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle – 5-Star Movement) at its debut on the national political scene. However, the success of this new populist party, which extended the opportunities for participation to the digital sphere, provided only a partial alternative to abstention, which for the first time involved a quarter of the electorate.

60 During this phase, persistent signs of political crisis combined with (and appeared to be fuelled by) other crises affecting both the economic and cultural dimensions. The global financial crisis not only contributed to the political instability that led to the collapse of the last Berlusconi government (2008–2011)¹⁰ but also produced social distress and an increased level of distrust regarding institutions, mainstream parties, and their leaders.

This multidimensional malaise favoured a desire for alternative political outlets and, when these were not recognised in the electoral market, triggered the *exit* towards abstention. As shown by Tronconi and Valbruzzi, an even more noticeable downward trend affected «second order» elections during the same period¹¹. The average turnout in regional elections in the 15 ordinary regions was around 60%. Moreover, at the 2019 European election turnout was only 56%. For both types of elections (regional and European), electoral participation had been over 70% at the end of the 2000s.

The twofold populist success in the 2018 General Election, which saw the League and M5S – allied in the self-defined «government of change», the Conte I (2018–2019)¹² – win 50% of the vote, may explain the partial slowdown in the progression of abstention, which grew by two points compared to 2013.

In the same vein, the partial exhaustion of the populist experiment can be seen as the first potential explanation for the marked growth of abstention in 2022. Although once again the election outcome rewarded a populist challenger – the last one on the political scene¹³ – the election was also characterised by the impressive growth of non-voting, which reached 36%. The overall decline in voter turnout between the general elections of 2006 and 2022 has been hugely significant, reaching 20 percentage points.

Chiaromonte et al. have noted that the drop between 2018 and 2022 (nine percentage points) «ranks in the top 10 cases of largest turnout declines in the entire electoral history of Western Europe after World

War II»¹⁴. In the Italian case, it was the most significant decrease between two consecutive elections since 2013 (6 points). It is worth noting that both cases followed the experience of a grand, technocratic coalition: the Monti government (2011–2013) and the Draghi government (2021–2022).

When comparing these two elections, at least three significant differences should be considered: (1) unlike in 2013, the 2018 elections were not characterised by a comparable renewal in the supply side of the competition¹⁵; (2) while the outcome of the 2013 race was highly uncertain, the success of the centre-right had long been anticipated in the early elections of 2022¹⁶; and (3) the unexpected fall of the Draghi government in the summer of 2022 and the resultant snap election led to an unprecedented «seaside campaign» that failed to capture voters' interest¹⁷. These elements can be taken as initial clues regarding the reasons behind the increase in abstention, which will be further investigated in the next section.

61

2. 2022: Measures and Reasons for the Collapse

2.1 Electoral Flows Towards Abstention

During the 2022 General Election, a significant portion of the electorate who had previously participated in the 2018 election chose not to cast their votes. Where does this increasing abstention predominantly stem from?

To examine electoral flows, we draw from Itanes' post-electoral survey data¹⁸. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked about their choices for both the 2022 election and the general election in 2018. Aside from non-voters who confirmed their choice of not showing up at the polls (54%), most abstainers had voted for M5S in 2018. A striking one-third of this electorate chose not to vote in 2022. These «novel» abstainers likely expressed their discontent toward M5S government performance and with the party's election campaign. In their chapter in the Itanes' edited volume on the 2022 election, De Sio and Paparo note that the migration of the M5S electorate towards abstention or other parties has been the highest recorded for a party since the 1996–2001 general elections¹⁹. Due to its «institutionalisation» and entrance into a left vs right electoral dynamic²⁰, the M5S lost its appeal as a movement «neither on the right nor on the left». Because of this and the explicit decision to position itself to the left of the political spectrum, it lost a significant proportion of 2018-M5S voters who identify with the right²¹.

These considerations highlight how a protest voting choice can be viewed as one face of a two-faced Janus phenomenon, with the other being electoral abstention. In this scenario, the M5S represented the only breach in what Ilvo Diamanti has called «Arcore's wall»²², namely a metaphorical division between two electorates – one on the left and the other on the right – that will never vote for a party on the opposing side. Rather, they will abstain.

62

Beyond the M5S, in terms of relative percentages of 2018 party voters who abstained in 2022, the FI (Forza Italia – Forward Italy) and the PD (Partito Democratico – Democratic Party) recorded the highest abstention rates at 23% and 19%, respectively. The Democratic Party's percentage was higher than other parties on the left such as PaP (Potere al Popolo! – Power to the People!) and LeU (Liberi e Uguali – Free and Equals). These findings contrast with the data on electoral flows from 2013 to 2018²³. During that period, parties positioned to the left of the PD witnessed a larger proportion of their 2013 voters opting for abstention in 2018 compared to the PD and any other party. From one general election to the other, these parties have consistently experienced a decline in both the proportion and absolute number of voters. Nevertheless, they might have reached a saturation point in driving their potential voters towards abstention. In contrast, there is clear evidence of sustained electoral success for Giorgia Meloni's FdI (Fratelli d'Italia – Brothers of Italy) as only 6% of 2018-FdI voters abstained in the September 2022 election. This is a markedly lower percentage compared to its allies, FI and the League, with the latter seeing 17% of its voters opting for abstention.

More than four out of five abstainers in 2018 also abstained in 2022, depicting a consistent, largely unchanging abstainer demographic due to the current political supply.

2.2 *The Geography of Abstention*

Before examining the self-reported individual reasons for abstention and the underlying factors as analysed through a multivariate regression analysis, we will scrutinise the sociodemographic profile of those who abstain, starting with the geopolitical picture. A pronounced lower turnout in the 2022 election is evident in the South, echoing a historically recognised trend. The three provinces with the lowest turnout were Nuoro (50.3%), in the region Sardinia, and the provinces of Reggio Calabria (48.9%) and Crotona (45.9%) in the Calabria region. The abstention rate was lower towards Central Italy, with the provinces in the regions

of Lazio and Abruzzo recording a turnout exceeding 60%. This rate is comparable, if not higher, to certain provinces in the North of Italy, with Aosta, Bolzano, and Trieste reporting turnout rates of 60–62%. In contrast, the provinces of Firenze and Modena saw a turnout rate of 73.1%, close to the highest figure reported for the province of Bologna (74%). Considering data aggregated at the regional level, the highest level of participation was recorded in three Northern regions: Emilia-Romagna (72.0%), Veneto (70.2%), and Lombardy (70.1%). These figures delineate a distinct disparity between Northern and Southern Italy.

However, provincial data reveal that specific areas exhibit significantly low turnout rates even in the North of the country. Thus, the abstention phenomenon cannot solely be attributed to the specific conditions of Southern Italy. Instead, it permeates the whole peninsula. Nonetheless, it is in the South – with the exception of Sicily – where we can observe the most dramatic decline from the 2018 election, with some provinces witnessing a decrease of up to 15%. Similarly, Northern provinces such as Aosta, Vercelli, Trento, and Ferrara, notably spread across four distinct regions, have seen a decline of approximately 10 points. Although lower turnout rates in secondary elections are usually expected, noteworthy abstention rates were also observed in the regional elections of February 2023; approximately three out of five eligible citizens did not show up at the ballot box in the Lombardia and Lazio regions. Thus, notwithstanding existing geopolitical disparities, the rise of abstention is geographically widespread and characterises both first and «second order» elections.

63

2.3 *The Sociodemographic Profile of Abstainers*

The rising abstention rate can be viewed as a widespread phenomenon, covering not only the geographical level but also other sociodemographic characteristics²⁴. The following descriptive analysis on the sociodemographic of abstainers – as well as the multivariate analysis reported in Section 3 – is, as mentioned above, based on a post-election survey conducted by the Electoral Observatory of LaPolis²⁵.

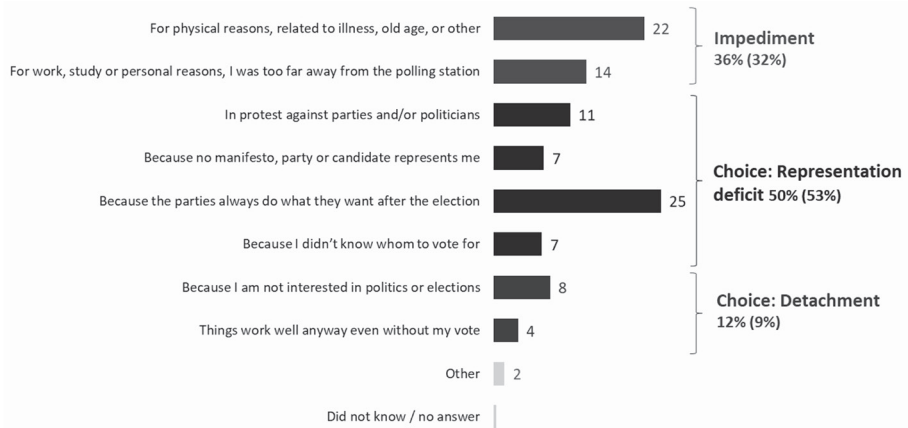
The abstention rate in the 2022 election is higher for women (38%) compared to men (34%). It also tends to increase with age, as 42% of the electorate aged over 75 did not participate. This is likely due to more pronounced reasons related to impediments for the older age group compared to the younger electorate. Nonetheless, there is still a significant abstention rate among the younger demographic as, according to Itanes' data²⁶, over one in three young Italians, given their first opportunity to vote in national

elections, chose not to. However, there is a marked difference between those who identify as students and the broader young population aged 18–29. While the latter group has an abstention rate of 30%, the rate for students drops to 15%, the lowest across all socio-professional categories. Among these categories, the highest abstention rates were registered among the unemployed (51%) and unpaid domestic workers (47%), social groups more likely to be affected by economic hardship. Lastly, a distinction of note emerges between those with medium²⁷ or high levels of education, with abstention rates of 28% and 26%, respectively, as opposed to 45% for those with a lower educational background. Although these descriptive statistics are useful in depicting the sociodemographic profile of non-voters, we still do not know *why* a large part of the electorate made this decision.

2.4 Self-reported Reasons for Abstention

As previously highlighted, various impediments have significantly influenced the absence of the older segment of the electorate. Approximately 22% of abstainers cited age, illnesses, or other physical constraints as barriers to voting. Given the ageing population in Italy, it is plausible to anticipate a rise in such abstention rates in the forthcoming years. This is a very similar figure to that obtained by Mannheimer and Sani in their analysis of Italian elections at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries²⁸. However, we must underline how this «involuntary abstention» is a multifaceted issue permeating other segments of society who do not suffer from impediments related to age or illnesses. Thus, beyond the 22% mentioned above, we must consider an additional 14% of abstainers who attributed their non-participation to logistical challenges, for example, the inability to reach their designated polling station due to work commitments, study locations, or other personal reasons. These motivations account for over a third of the electorate (36%), a figure that has risen from 32% in 2018. This may also be related to increased territorial mobility for study or work reasons. Tackling this component of electoral abstention is feasible; potential solutions could encompass revising electoral laws and exploring avenues such as remote or electronic voting. These considerations become increasingly pertinent in light of the ageing population and the evolving logistical challenges due to the evolution of the job market, among other factors.

Fig. 2 - Self-reported Reasons for Non-Voting (% , Figures for 2018 in Brackets)



Source: LaPolis Electoral Observatory, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, October 2022 (base: 1,315 cases)

More challenging to address is the abstention rate deriving from deliberate choices or a general disinterest in politics. A «negative» apathy is the sentiment of those who declared that they are uninterested in politics or elections and is evident in 8% of the abstainer subset. Furthermore, a seemingly marginal 4% believe that «things function well anyway», regardless of their vote. This is a form of «positive» apathy. The combined figure for these two opposing forms of apathy has slightly increased from 9% in 2018 to 12% in the 2022 election.

Approximately half of non-voters cite a form of representation deficit as their primary reason for abstention. Therefore, in the case of the most recent general electoral consultation, abstention mainly represents a distinct choice. 25% mentioned that «after the elections parties do what they want anyway», and 11% underlined an explicit protest toward the electoral supply of political parties at the national level. In this latter motivation, we can also glimpse the root of the recent Italian populist wave, characterising, above all, the electoral success of the M5S. Finally, 14% said that they do not «feel represented by any electoral program, party, or candidate», or, simply, that they did not know «for whom to vote for». Thus, when discussing the current trend of abstention in Italy, it is key to remark that it is primarily a choice stemming from political considerations. Many abstainers are not inherently apathetic towards politics. Given a different political landscape or improved performances from existing parties and candidates, these abstainers could be (once again) inclined to participate in future elections.

Having provided a descriptive analysis of abstention trends during the 2022 Italian General Election in terms of electoral flows, geography, and sociodemographic dimensions, we will now delve into a multivariate statistical analysis to test the impact of specific variables on electoral abstention, beyond self-reported individual reasons.

3. Economic, Cultural, and Political Malaises behind Abstention

66 We ran a nested series of logistic regression models on the post-electoral survey by the LaPolis Electoral Observatory. This type of regression model is particularly suitable for our empirical analysis given that our dependent variable is dichotomous. This was defined as: having voted in the 2022 General Election = 0; abstention = 1²⁹.

The aim was to explore the potential influence of specific attitudes towards non-voting. Given the differences highlighted in Section 2, to «clean» the relationship between our main explanatory variables and the outcome we controlled for four key sociodemographic variables: gender, age, education, and geopolitical area.

The attitudes we examined are grouped into three main areas, each representing a specific attitudinal focus – a «malaise» – which could have impacted electoral abstention in the 2022 General Election.

1. **Economic malaise.** The first set of independent variables examined pertains to economic insecurity, both «sociotropic» and «egotropic». The former could be a sign of negative judgment of the parties' performance regarding the country's economic circumstances³⁰, while the latter might indicate household economic challenges and insufficient resources to be politically active³¹. These two perspectives have been analysed using two variables, each on a 10-level scale, in which respondents were asked how satisfied they are with (i) the national economic situation, and (ii) their household's economic circumstances. Although through different mechanisms, both dimensions are expected to drive electoral abstention, especially in the Italian case; the country is experiencing long-standing macro-economic stagnation, high inflation, and a lack of progression in terms of «real wages» and the related lack of social mobility, with the consequence being a significant reduction in households' purchasing power.
2. **Cultural malaise.** This second set of «malaise» indicators specifically refers to attitudes towards migration, starting with the level of

agreement with the identification of migrants as a threat to public order and safety on a 4-level scale. This fear might have encouraged negative sentiments toward the political performance of previous governments, hence the decision to abstain. Secondly, we have considered a dichotomous variable from a question in the LaPolis survey. Respondents were asked to express their preference concerning two opposing statements concerning the idea of an «open» vs «closed society»: «Italy should open up more to the world» = 0; «Italy's borders should be more controlled» = 1. The testing of these factors stems from those readings interpreting election results in Italy – and in particular the rise of right-wing populist parties, such as the League and FdI – as the result of a cultural malaise linked to international migration. As we considered the «poor» performance of the League in the 2022 General Election compared to the previous election and, above all, the previous European election, we expected that part of the electorate that the League previously managed to capture through a cultural malaise linked to international migration³² decided to abstain in 2022 and did not defect to other centre-right parties such as FdI.

67

3. **Political malaise.** The final area delves into attitudes towards the national democratic processes and sentiments regarding Mario Draghi's 2021–2022 government, the last administration of the XVIII legislature started in 2018. While «technical» governments, such as Draghi's, are aligned with the constitution, they can sometimes be viewed with scepticism or may even be perceived as «less democratic» compared to those led by a Prime Minister representing a specific party. These negative sentiments about how democracy works have often been interpreted as a driver of both electoral abstention and the rise of populist parties. Moreover, as noted in Section 2, many abstainers directly referenced representational deficits as a reason for their non-participation. Because of these reasons, four variables have been taken into consideration to capture the potential effect of political malaise on the decision not to show up at the polls. Firstly, we measured the effect of individual satisfaction with the Italian democratic process in general using a 10-level scale. Secondly, we measured the effect of another variable on a 10-level scale, this time specifically evaluating the performance of Draghi's government. Thirdly, we have taken into consideration the individual preference for direct democracy over political representation mechanisms, the latter being the reference category for a dichotomous variable. This

indicator is particularly fitting for the Italian political context as the rise of the M5S went hand in hand with its (anti-)political rhetoric in favour of direct democracy and against the current parliamentary system. As noted in the previous section, the M5S lost a substantial number of voters to abstention in 2022. Finally, given the widespread issue of representation deficit and especially the lack of trust regarding the current political parties, we have measured the effect of a dichotomous variable linked to whether respondents believe – or *do not* believe, this latter option being the reference category – in the functioning of democracy «without political parties».

68

Tab. 1 - Logistic Regression Models1 (Dependent Variable: Abstention)

	<i>Coef.</i>	<i>(sig.)</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>R</i> ²
Satisfaction with national economy (1–10)	-0.109	***	0.033	0.070
Satisfaction with household economy (1–10)	-0.116	***	0.030	0.073
Fear of migrants (1–4)	-0.147		0.080	0.064
Border control (dichotomous)	-0.131		0.147	0.062
Satisfaction with how democracy works in Italy (1–10)	-0.170	***	0.030	0.088
Assessment of the Draghi government (1–10)	-0.127	***	0.028	0.078
Preference for direct democracy over representation (dichotomous)	0.269		0.145	0.064
Think democracy can work without political parties (dichotomous)	0.404	**	0.147	0.067

¹ Each line represents a logit model in which the relationship was controlled only for sociodemographic variables (Gender, Age, Education, Geopolitical Area); Sig. indicates the level of significance; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. R^2 is McFadden's pseudo R^2

Source: LaPolis Electoral Observatory, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, October 2022 (base: 1315 cases)

The parameters of the logistic regression models are presented in Table 1. In each of them, alongside the sociodemographic controls, we introduce a specific explanatory variable of interest, and the number of predictors is kept consistent across models. Table 1 shows the effects of our key explanatory variables on the decision to abstain. The most robust relationships – also confirmed by a comprehensive logistic regression model including all the independent variables – are also displayed with a plot of their predicted probabilities regarding electoral abstention (see Figures 3 and 4).

Economic malaise, encompassing «sociotropic» and «egotropic» dimensions, emerges as a pivotal factor influencing the 2022 electoral abstention. This underscores the salience of economic concerns within the Italian electorate. The magnitude of the effect is comparable across both dimensions, albeit marginally more pronounced for the assessment of one's household economy in comparison to the current national economic trend. These relationships are illustrated in the predicted probabilities of abstention based on varying levels of economic satisfaction, as depicted in Figure 3. Consequently, the M5S appears to have only partially succeeded in appealing to the economically insecure portion of the electorate, a goal more effectively accomplished in 2018³³. A significant portion of this electorate opted for abstention in 2022.

69

Two other variables on a 10-level scale manifest an even more pronounced impact than those associated with economic insecurity. The first pertains to respondents' evaluation of the Draghi administration, while the second assesses the effect of individual satisfaction with how democracy works in Italy. Both variables reveal a significant negative association with electoral abstention, as evidenced in the predicted probabilities plotted in Figure 4. Given the broad coalition supporting Mario Draghi's government – unparalleled in its level of parliamentary support – the disenchanted electorate seemingly either gravitated towards abstention due to a perceived lack of viable alternatives or opted for *the* opposition party of the XVIII legislature: FdI.

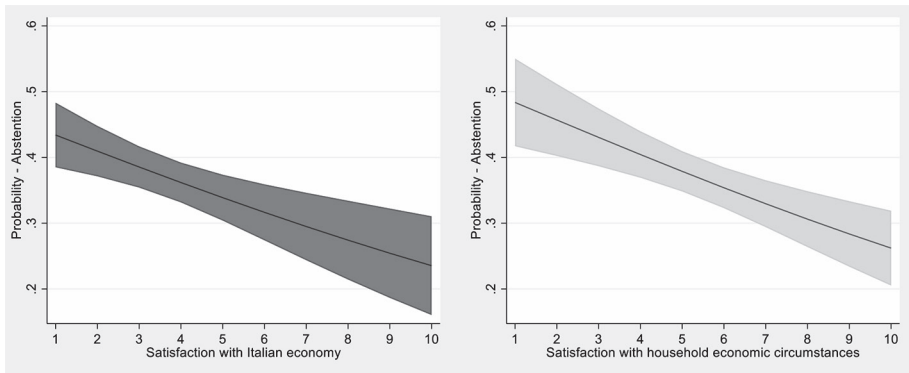
Additionally, the prevalent mistrust in political parties, assessed through the question about the feasibility of a party-less democracy, was a significant factor in the propensity for electoral abstention. Conversely, the question concerning direct democracy versus representation did not yield a significant effect. This outcome is likely attributable not so much to the type of democracy citizens prefer but rather to the criticism of the actors interpreting it, primarily the political parties and their leadership. This is an aspect that recalls the idea of the *critical citizen*³⁴. This type of citizen is someone who is distrustful towards the main actors of institutionalised politics and dissatisfied with the ruling class's performances. Nevertheless, s/he does not question the principles of democracy and is willing to embrace innovative forms of participation that bring about important changes in the relationship between politics and society.

Finally, cultural malaise, measured in our analysis through attitudinal variables linked with international migration, did not seem to have discernibly influenced electoral abstention. When such sentiments were prevalent, the electorate found the vote for FdI a more compelling choice³⁵, particularly

given its largely expected success. Moreover, FdI appeared to resonate with this segment of the electorate to a greater extent than one of its allies, the League, which had previously capitalised on cultural malaise in the 2018 election but was perceived to have faltered during its time in government.

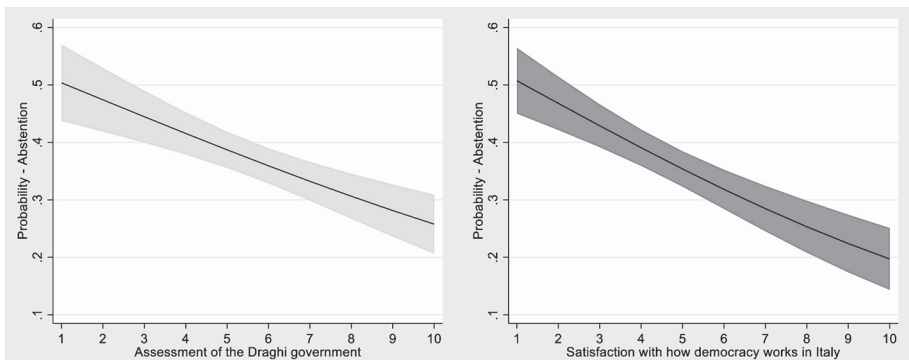
Fig. 3 - Predicted Probability of Abstention According to Different Levels of (Sociotropic and Egotropic) Economic Satisfaction – Logistic Regression Models (Models in Table 1)

70



Source: LaPolis Electoral Observatory, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, October 2022 (base: 1,315 cases)

Fig. 4 - Predicted Probability of Abstention According to Different Levels of Democratic Satisfaction and the Assessment of the Draghi Government – Logistic Regression Models (Models in Table 1)



Source: LaPolis Electoral Observatory, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, October 2022 (base: 1,315 cases)

Conclusions

Increasing abstention rates represent a relevant and alarming phenomenon in many mature democracies, although not always with consistent trends across different countries and territorial levels. The recent trend in Italy has been particularly striking, given the almost-universal participation rates that used to characterise the country in the not-so-distant past. Our analysis has attempted to study the multifaceted *ma-laise* underpinning electoral abstention. The decision not to participate predominantly emerged as a deliberate choice, anchored in the interplay between economic insecurities and political discontent.

For a relevant segment of Italian voters, abstention might be perceived as the «sole viable option». In the past, the significance associated with elections had a different influence on voters' behaviour. However, a robust sense of «civic duty» no longer sufficiently compels them to participate, especially when confronted with the perceived absence of satisfying alternatives. Fleeing the ballot box then becomes a *rational* approach that overrides the traditional political culture, as revealed by the weak level of participation among the younger demographic; this highlights how trends change across generations.

The waning strength of «civic duty» can be attributed to various factors. Our analysis highlights the growing disillusionment with politics and its perceived detachment from citizens' concerns, especially the economic ones. Within this framework, while the traditional normative link between participation and democracy may be under strain, it is premature to herald its demise. However, given our findings, the surge in non-voting cannot be optimistically interpreted as a «positive» development as suggested by scholars like Jones or Lipset³⁶. Abstainers may self-critically view their non-participation. However, they do not feel as «guilty» as they used to. They might also feel that their vote will be inconsequential, given that they believe in the absence of representatives who resonate with their concerns or are equipped to address them.

After all, the idea of intermittent voting³⁷ is not new and has been part of the election ritual in the Italian context for decades. A cyclical and considerable electoral volatility, an increasingly competitive electoral market, and the constant presence of voters searching for «newness» (leaders, messages, political contents) are now a constant in the Second Republic. *Liquid voting*, whereby traditional parties have lost their solid social, territorial, and identity bases³⁸, has also made electoral campaigns crucial to winning elections and convincing late deciders and *last-minute*

voters³⁹. Thus, electoral slogans and promises unlikely to be realised once the winner rises to power have contributed to feeding political malaise, which weighs heavily on the likelihood of abstention.

When the classical demographic mechanisms and the consequent generational turnover intertwine, driving transformations in political culture, they come into contact with economic insecurity and ontological uncertainties within specific segments of a globalised society. Voting behaviour is inevitably affected. While perhaps not offering definitive evidence, the Italian case, which, to a certain extent, is reflective of other Western democracies, certainly offers clues about the reasons and *malaises* as to why many have fled the ballot box.

72

Note

¹ B. MANIN, *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997; trad. it. B. MANIN, *Principi del governo rappresentativo*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2010.

² C. TRIGILIA, *Le subculture politiche territoriali*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1981; I. DIAMANTI, *Mappe dell'Italia politica: Bianco, rosso, verde, azzurro... e tricolore*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2009 (I ed. 2003).

³ R. MANNHEIMER, G. SANI, *Il mercato elettorale. L'identikit dell'elettore italiano*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1987.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ The term «Second Republic» was originally coined by journalists to suggest the idea of a regime transition, even though the essential features of the 1948 Constitution remained in place.

⁶ M. TARCHI, *Italy: the promised land of populism?*, in «Contemporary Italian Politics», Vol. 7, 2015 – N. 3, pp. 273-285; V. METE, *Anti-politics in Contemporary Italy*, Routledge, London and New York, 2023.

⁷ P. NATALE, *Una fedeltà leggera: i movimenti di voto nella seconda Repubblica*, in R. D'ALIMONTE, S. BARTOLINI (a cura di), *Maggioritario finalmente? La transizione elettorale 1994-2001*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2002.

⁸ Those registered in the Anagrafe Italiani Residenti all'Estero (A.I.R.E.).

⁹ R. D'ALIMONTE, S. VASSALLO, *Chi è arrivato primo?*, in ITANES, *Dov'è la vittoria? Il voto del 2006 raccontato dagli italiani*, il Mulino, Bologna, pp. 13-33.

¹⁰ L. CECCARINI, I. DIAMANTI, M. LAZAR, *The end of an era: the crumbling of the Italian party system*, in «Italian Politics», n. 27, 2012.

¹¹ F. TRONCONI, M. VALBRUZZI, *Populism Put to the Polarisation Test: The 2019-20 Election Cycle in Italy*, in «South European Society and Politics», vol. 25, 2020 – n. 3-4, pp. 475-501.

¹² G. PASQUINO. *The formation of the government*, in L. CECCARINI, J. L. NEWELL (a cura di), *The Italian general election of 2018: Italy in uncharted territory*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, pp. 297-315.

¹³ The grand coalition Draghi government (2021-2022) was opposed only by Giorgia Meloni's party and a handful of parliamentarians on the left.

¹⁴ A. CHIARAMONTE, V. EMANUELE, N. MAGGINI, A. PAPARO, *Radical-Right Surge in a Deinstitutionalised Party System: The 2022 Italian General Election*, in «South European Society and Politics», vol. 27, 2022 – n. 3, pp. 329-357.

¹⁵ The main novelty was represented by the electoral debut of the centrist Azione-Italia Viva (A-IV) list, which won 7.8% of votes.

¹⁶ G. GASPERONI, *I sondaggi pre-elettorali: malcontento per il voto anticipato e previsione di un esito ineluttabile*, in ITANES (a cura di), *Svolta a destra? Cosa ci dice il voto del 2022*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2023.

¹⁷ G. BOCCIA ARTIERI, F. GIGLIETTO, A. STANZIANO, *Citizens' Engagement with the 'Seaside Campaign' on Instagram and Facebook*, in F. BORDIGNON, L. CECCARINI, J. L. NEWELL (a cura di), *Italy at the Polls 2022. The Right Strikes Back*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2023, pp. 79-103.

¹⁸ A previous analysis on these data, for what concerns electoral flows, can be found in chapter 4 of the ITANES' edited volume on the 2022 election, from which this paragraph on electoral flows towards abstention partially draws figures and theoretical evaluations. See: L. DE SIO, A. PAPARO, *Tra vittoria del centrodestra e M5s più che dimezzato: l'analisi dei flussi elettorali*, in ITANES, *Svolta a destra? Cosa ci dice il voto del 2022*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2023, pp. 63-72.

¹⁹ L. DE SIO, A. PAPARO, *Tra vittoria del centrodestra e M5s più che dimezzato: l'analisi dei flussi elettorali*, in ITANES, *Svolta a destra? Cosa ci dice il voto del 2022*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2023, p. 67.

²⁰ Yet, once again, outside the two main coalitions.

²¹ L. DE SIO, A. PAPARO, *Tra vittoria del centrodestra e M5s più che dimezzato: l'analisi dei flussi elettorali*, in ITANES, *Svolta a destra? Cosa ci dice il voto del 2022*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2023, p. 71.

²² I. DIAMANTI, *Mappe dell'Italia politica: bianco, rosso, verde, azzurro... e tricolore*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2009.

²³ For figures and theoretical considerations on these electoral flows, see: F. BORDIGNON, L. CECCARINI, I. DIAMANTI, *Le divergenze parallele. L'Italia: dal voto devoto al voto liquido*, Laterza, Bari-Roma, 2018, ch. 4.

²⁴ For a more detailed sociodemographic analysis of abstention in the 2022 Italian election, and a discussion on the methodological issues pertaining the study of abstention through survey data, see: F. BORDIGNON, G. SALVARANI, *Outside the Ballot Box: Who Is the Italian Abstainer?*, in F. BORDIGNON, L. CECCARINI, J. L. NEWELL (a cura di), *Italy at the Polls 2022. The Right Strikes Back*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, 2023.

²⁵ The survey was conducted two weeks after the election day (field: 10-20 October 2022) by the polling institute Demetra using a mixed-mode method of interviewing: CATI, CAMI, CAWI. With 1,315 cases, the national sample reflects the gender, age, and territorial distribution of Italy's voting-age population. Post-stratification weights have been applied to correct for bias in terms of education and to ensure that the self-declared abstentions' distribution matches the election outcome.

²⁶ ITANES, *Svolta a destra? Cosa ci dice il voto del 2022*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2023.

²⁷ With an upper secondary school degree.

²⁸ R. MANNHEIMER, G. SANI, *La conquista degli astenuti*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2001.

²⁹ Non-respondents and those claiming to have cast an invalid (blank or null) ballot were excluded from the analysis.

³⁰ G. PASSARELLI, D. TUORTO, Not with my vote: turnout and the economic crisis in Italy, in «Contemporary Italian Politics», n. 6(2), pp. 147–158, 2014; D. TUORTO, *Undeprivedged Voters and Electoral Exclusion in Contemporary Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, 2022.

³¹ S. J. ROSENSTONE, *Economic Adversity and Voter Turnout*, in «American Journal of Political Science», n. 26(1), 1982, pp. 25-46.

74 ³² On this, see the previously cited volume F. BORDIGNON, L. CECCARINI, I. DIAMANTI, *Le divergenze parallele. L'Italia: dal voto devoto al voto liquido*, Laterza, Bari-Roma, 2018.

³³ *Ivi*.

³⁴ P. NORRIS, *Introduction: The Growth of Critical Citizens?*, in P. NORRIS (a cura di), *Critical Citizens. Global support for Democratic Government*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999.

³⁵ For an empirical analysis supporting these conclusions, see: F. BORDIGNON, L. CECCARINI, *New and Old (Global) Cleavages, Crises and Wars*, in F. BORDIGNON, L. CECCARINI, J. L. NEWELL (a cura di), *Italy at the Polls 2022. The Right Strikes Back*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, 2023.

³⁶ See: M. W. H. JONES, *In Defense of Political Apathy*, in «Political Studies», 2, 1954, pp. 25-37; S. M. LIPSET, *Political Man. The Social Bases of Politics*, Doubleday & Company, New York, 1960.

³⁷ G. LEGNANTE, P. SEGATTI, *L'astensionista intermittente, ovvero quando decidere di votare o meno è lieve come una piuma*. Polis, 15(2), 2001, pp. 181–202.

³⁸ V. CUTURI, R. SAMPUGNARO, V. TOMASELLI, *L'elettore instabile: voto/non voto*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2000.

³⁹ L. CECCARINI, I. DIAMANTI, *The election campaign and the 'last-minute' deciders*, in «Contemporary Italian Politics», vol. 5, 2013 – n. 2, pp. 130-148.