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Discussion Paper Series

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**Discussion
Paper No. 10
October 2017**

ISSN: 2280-9767



CRISEI - Università di Napoli - Parthenope

Università degli Studi di Napoli - Parthenope

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Explaining voting behaviour in the 2016 Italian constitutional referendum

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Abstract

At the end of 2016, a crucial constitutional reform was rejected by referendum in Italy. The vote, coming after the UK's European membership referendum and the US presidential election, may have significant implications for both Italy and the European Union. The object of this paper is to investigate whether and to what extent socio-economic, demographic and political factors influenced voting behaviour. Our analysis shows that political and socio-economic variables were the main drivers of the referendum result. Demographic variables had a weaker effect. These findings suggest that the merit of the constitutional reform proposal had little relevance in explaining voting behaviour. The political reasons were common to the whole country. Other determinants of the referendum outcome varied in different geographical areas. In particular, demographic variables were more important in Northern and Central Italy. Socio-economic aspects were less relevant, although statistically significant, in the South.

Keywords: Constitutional reform, referendum, political parties

JEL Classification: D72; H10; P16

I. Introduction

This paper aims to identify the reasons for the success of the ‘no’ vote in the Italian constitutional reform referendum held on 4 December 2016. The reform proposed to change the composition, power and size of the Italian Parliament, and the allocation of powers between central government and local administrative authorities. It was viewed as an important opportunity for the country to implement the structural reforms required after years of slow economic growth. Italy is a weak point for the European Union (EU) with large amounts of public debt and high levels of bad debts in the banking sector. Rejection of the referendum question could therefore affect the economy and political stability of the entire EU. The most obvious beneficiary of a government defeat was considered to be Movimento 5 Stelle. Its economic views were unclear, and it had already announced plans to hold a referendum on Italy leaving the Euro.

Some post-referendum surveys suggested that voting behaviour was defined along demographic lines. Older and retired citizens were generally in favour of reform and younger, unemployed, self-employed and blue-collar citizens against it (Osservatorio Demos, 2016). Most commentators, however, agreed that citizens had not voted on the merit of the reform proposals. Instead, they had mainly followed the political party for which they normally voted, or expressed a protest vote against the ‘elite’. Centre-left parties generally supported the referendum, while the right-wing, leftist, and populist groups opposed it. Around 37% of voters supported political parties in favour of the reform in the 2013 general election. Questions asked in constitutional referenda are often difficult for many citizens to understand, so voting behaviour is more likely to reflect broad political views.

Some post-referendum analyses proposed reasons for the outcome of the referendum. David (2016) suggested that the higher percentage of ‘no’ votes in Southern Italy may be because of the employment, income and quality of life gap between north and south. Istituto Cattaneo (2016) and Del Monte (2017) suggested that the outcome was linked to voters’ adherence to particular parties. Regalia and Troncone (2017) stressed the territorial differences in voting behaviour: in Northern Italy, adherence to a party was more important, but unemployment was crucial in the South. A Demos survey (2016) suggested that the vote was driven mostly by political affiliation: in a hypothetical repeat referendum, 84% of Partito Democratico voters, the main government party, would vote ‘yes’, while 83% of Movimento 5 Stelle voters, 73% of Lega Nord voters, and 68% of Forza Italia voters would vote ‘no’. The parties supporting reform would get 34.7% of total votes and against 65.30%. This article contributes to this debate and to the literature on national referenda (see, for example, Ahlfeldt et al., 2017; Streicher et al., 2016; Matti and Zhou, 2016) through an econometric analysis

assessing the impact of socio-economic, political and demographic factors on the referendum outcome.

II. Data

The econometric analysis was at provincial level (NUTS-3 level), the second-level administrative division in Italy. It drew on data from the historical archive of elections (Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs), the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) and the Institutional Quality Index database developed by Nifo and Vecchione (2014). The final sample included 106 observations.

The model's dependent variable was the share of 'no' votes (*Vote for no*). The explanatory variables were based on previous studies. The model included the proportion of the adult population with a bachelor's degree or higher (*Higher education*), and the rate of unemployment at two points in time: in 2015, to reflect the current labour market situation (*Short-term unemployment*), and as an average over the period 2004–2008, to measure long-term unemployment before the economic crisis (*Long-term unemployment*). As a proxy for socio-economic conditions, we also included the Institutional Quality Index, a composite indicator that measures the quality of Italian institutions and assumes higher values for better institutions. The explanatory variables for political factors were '*No*' parties and *Regional council*. '*No*' parties was the proportion of votes for parties opposing the current government in the 2013 general election (all parties except Partito Democratico, Scelta Civica con Monti, Centro Democratico, Futuro e Libertà and Unione di Centro). *Regional council* was a dummy indicating the regions governed by parties not forming the majority government or whose leader supported the 'no' vote. The demographic variables included percentage of voters aged 18–45 years (*Young*) or female (*Female*), and the change in the foreign-born population between 2013 and 2016 (*Foreign change*). The empirical model was estimated using ordinary least squares regression. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis.¹

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

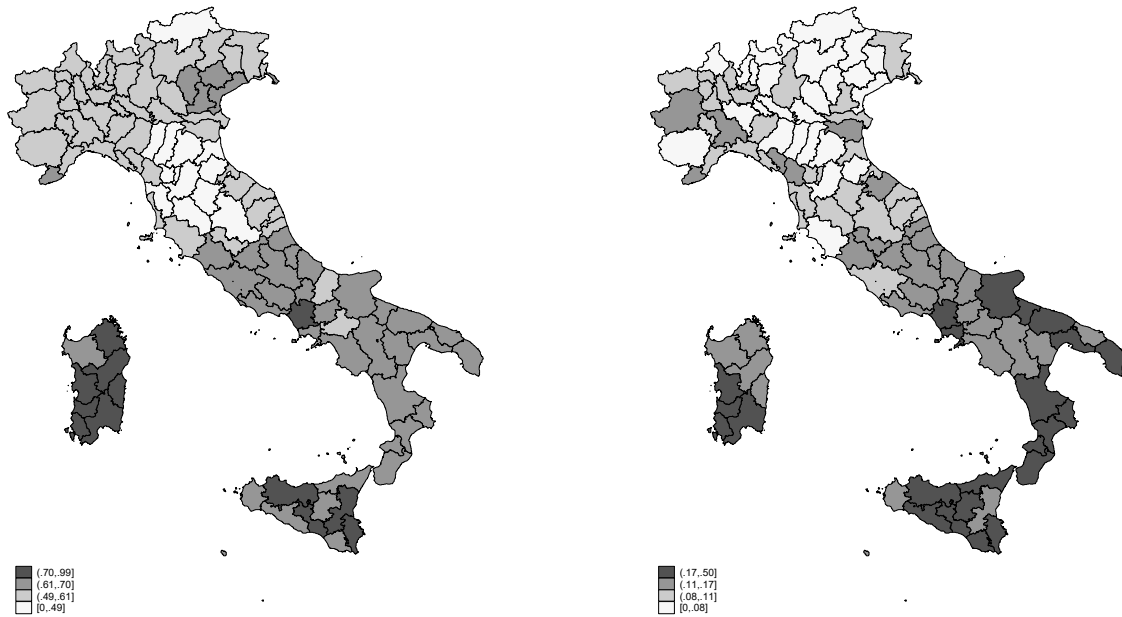
	Mean	Std. dev.	Minimum	Maximum
Y (<i>Vote for no</i>)	0.59	0.07	0.35	0.73
Short-term unemployment	0.12	0.05	0.03	0.31
Long-term unemployment (<i>n</i> = 103)	0.07	0.04	0.02	0.17
Higher education	0.07	0.01	0.05	0.13
'No' parties	0.63	0.07	0.46	0.98
Regional council	0.27	0.44	0	1
Young	0.32	0.01	0.28	0.37
Female	0.51	0.00	0.50	0.52
Foreign change	0.15	0.13	-0.07	0.56
Institutional quality index (<i>n</i> = 103)	0.60	0.21	0.14	0.90

¹ The choice of the reference year for the explanatory variables was limited by data availability at local level. *Institutional quality index* was from 2004, *Female* and *Age* from 2016, and *Higher education* from 2011.

Note: Number of observations: 106

The proposal was rejected by 59.11% of voters. The ‘no’ vote was particularly high in some southern regions, such as Sardinia (72.2%) and Sicily (71.6%). The only regions with a majority of ‘yes’ votes were Tuscany (52.5%), Emilia Romagna (50.4%), and Trentino (53.9%), all of which traditionally elect left-wing parties. Such territorial heterogeneity is depicted in Figure 1a, which show the distribution of the ‘no’ vote across Italian provinces. Figure 1 shows the spatial distribution of ‘No vote’ and rate of unemployment, indicating a high correlation between the two variables (0.75).

Figure 1. ‘No’ vote and rate of unemployment at provincial level (NUTS-3 level)



Source: our elaboration

III. Results

The estimates of the model specifications are shown in Table 2. Model 1 includes only socio-economic factors as explanatory variables, Model 2 adds political factors, Model 3 demographic variables and Model 4 *Institutional quality index*. Each model was estimated with both short- (columns labelled a) and long-term unemployment (columns labelled b).

The most important factors affecting voting outcome were short- and long-term unemployment, which were statistically significant in all models. The coefficients were slightly higher for long-term unemployment and suggested that if the rate of unemployment increased by 1%, the ‘no’ vote would increase by 0.63–1.37%. In Model 4, the coefficients were lower, especially for *Short-term unemployment*. This is because of the high negative correlation (about -0.85) between the unemployment variables and *Institutional quality index*. The adjusted R^2 of Model 1 was relatively

high (0.52–0.55), suggesting that unemployment itself explained more than 50% of the ‘no’ vote. Education was not a significant factor in any model.

Political factors were statistically significant in Models 2–4. Both variables had a positive coefficient, meaning that the proportion of opposition party supporters influenced the outcome. This suggests that the effect of party affiliation was quite strong, and that voting behaviour may not have been directly linked to the referendum question.

Both *Young* and *Female* were significant: younger citizens were more likely to oppose reform, and women to support it.² *Foreign change* only had a very weak effect, and was statistically significant in just one model (Column 3a). This suggests that anti-immigration sentiment had only a marginal role in the result. The increase in the adjusted R² of Model 3 was very low, suggesting that demographic variables had a weaker effect than socio-economic or political ones.

The index of institutional quality negatively affected voting: provinces with better institutions were more supportive of the constitutional reform. This variable was statistically significant at the 1% level and the adjusted R² of Model 4 increased above 0.7.

Table 2. Determinants of the share of ‘no’ votes in the 2016 Italian constitutional referendum

<i>Y = Vote for no</i>	(1a)	(1b)	(2a)	(2b)	(3a)	(3b)	(4a)	(4c)
Short-term unemployment	0.963*** (0.102)		0.895*** (0.161)		0.705*** (0.223)		0.491** (0.251)	
Long-term unemployment		1.377*** (0.118)		1.284*** (0.199)		1.232*** (0.278)		0.630** (0.273)
Higher education	-0.507 (0.400)	-0.365 (0.383)	0.057 (0.332)	0.157 (0.318)	-0.002 (0.336)	0.341 (0.339)	-0.102 (0.307)	0.087 (0.310)
‘No’ parties			0.330** (0.161)	0.321** (0.161)	0.319** (0.156)	0.301** (0.139)	0.258* (0.154)	0.256* (0.153)
Regional council			0.027** (0.012)	0.027** (0.012)	0.027** (0.012)	0.029** (0.012)	0.033*** (0.012)	0.032*** (0.011)
Female					-0.760 (1.027)	-1.871*** (0.910)	-1.804** (0.962)	-1.600** (0.840)
Foreign change					0.098* (0.057)	0.019 (0.050)	0.049 (0.053)	0.012 (0.049)
Institutional quality index							-0.169*** (0.039)	-0.146*** (0.038)
Observations	106	103	106	103	106	103	103	103
Adjusted R ²	0.520	0.556	0.621	0.653	0.630	0.659	0.695	0.703

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Constant term included but not shown. ***, **, * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels.

² The variable *Young* is not included in Tables 2 and 3 because of the high correlation with unemployment variables. However, bivariate regressions indicated that younger citizens mostly voted ‘no’, and that this was statistically significant only in Northern and Central Italy.

We also investigated whether the determinants of the ‘no’ vote were the same in different geographic areas. We split the sample into two groups, for Southern Italy and the rest of the country (Northern and Central Italy), along the socio-economic divide between the two.

The estimates for the two groups are shown in Table 3. This model used only the most relevant independent variables from the previous analysis. The model fit was higher for the rest of Italy (adjusted $R^2 = 0.46$) than for Southern Italy (adjusted $R^2 = 0.25$). *Female* was only significant in Northern and Central Italy. Unemployment and political reasons remained important determinants of the referendum outcome in both areas, although the coefficient of *Long-term unemployment* was lower in the south. The quality of the institutions affected voting behaviour only in Northern and Central Italy. This could be because of the strong correlation between unemployment and the quality of institutions, which was more obvious in the Southern sub-sample (0.6 vs. 0.2).

Table 3. Determinants of the share of ‘no’ votes in Southern vs Northern and Central Italy

<i>Y = Vote for no</i>	Southern	Northern and Central Italy
Long-term unemployment	0.577*** (0.244)	1.305*** (0.446)
‘No’ parties	0.317*** (0.115)	0.272* (0.161)
Female	-1.712 (1.436)	-1.681* (0.905)
Institutional quality index	0.010 (0.040)	-0.316*** (0.058)
Observations	36	67
Adjusted R^2	0.254	0.461

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Constant term included but not shown. ***, **, * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels.

IV. Conclusion

Our analysis showed that socio-economic and political factors significantly affected the results of the 2016 Italian constitutional referendum. Other variables, such as gender and age, also affected the result but to a lesser extent. Anti-immigration sentiment had a marginal role, perhaps because people did not see a link between the referendum question and the migration problem. Our analysis also showed that political and socio-economic variables were important in explaining the referendum vote across the whole country, but demographic variables were only important in Northern and Central Italy.

These findings suggest that the merit of the constitutional reform played a minor role in the result. One important implication of this study is that the 2016 Italian referendum probably did not reflect citizens’ views on constitutional reform, an issue affecting the quality of institutions and economic

development of the country. It is therefore important to establish legal and procedural conditions to ensure that voting behaviour better reflects views on referenda questions.

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