

# **NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING IN ITALY: WHAT NEXT AFTER THE 2004 LOCAL ELECTIONS?**

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## **Abstract**

The 2004 election cycle in Italy has marked the decline – though not the defeat – of Silvio Berlusconi’s center-right coalition. More interestingly, however, these elections can be seen as the first step in the move from a mass-media-oriented, unidirectional, “modern” style of campaigning, as envisioned and exemplified by Berlusconi himself, to a more participated, grassroots-based, and technology-savvy “postmodern” campaigning style, embraced by center-left candidates in local elections. This paper analyzes both these trends, casting light on the increasing ineffectiveness of television- and mass-media-oriented modern campaigning techniques and investigating the innovations introduced by successful center-left local candidates over the 2004 election cycle. The analysis clarifies the differences between the notion of postmodern campaigning as it has emerged in the English-language literature and the peculiarities of its development in the Italian political, social, and communications landscape. A historical framework is provided in order to explain the political communication outlook in Italy and to make preliminary hypotheses as to why “postmodern” techniques might better suit the current and future environment and how they might be integrated to more traditional media techniques.

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## **1. Premodern and modern campaigning in Italy: a brief history**

Over the last decade, a significant amount of comparative research has dealt with the issue of how political campaigns are developing around the world as a response to social, cultural, political, legal, and technological changes (Farrel 1996; Norris 2000, 2002; Blumler & Kavanagh 1999; Farrell & Webb 2000; also see Swanson & Mancini 1996; Gunther & Mughan 2000). Such literature has also discussed, and more often than not rejected, the hypothesis of an “Americanization” of political campaigns in Western democracies (for instance, Scammell 1998; Plasser & Plasser 2002). The purpose of this paper is to apply the theoretical framework developed by such research to the past, present, and future of Italian political communication and campaigns.

Pippa Norris (2000) first suggested that campaigns be classified as *premodern*, *modern* and *postmodern*. Premodern campaigns were characterized by a prominent role for parties and partisan means of communication (party newspapers, party literature, door-to-door canvassing), which in turn meant that the main effect of campaigns was to mobilize partisan voters through social networks and selective exposure to propaganda. Modern campaigns were marked by the advent of television and mass communication, which, together with the weakening of party ties and partisan organizations, gave way to a more candidate-centered politics (Wattenberg 1991), “catch-all” parties (Kirchheimer 1966) and professionalized campaigns ran mostly through television ads designed by political consultants (Thurber & Nelson 2000). Postmodern campaigns are characterized by a fragmentation of the news audience – caused by technological developments that allow a multiplication of media, outlets, and formats – permanent campaigning and increasing professionalization, but also by a revival of traditional campaign activities such as door-to-door canvassing and direct voter contact, although powered and augmented by cutting-edge techniques such as micro-targeting and consumer research.

We know that different countries might incur in some of these transformation at different times, some more rapidly, some more slowly, depending on political, institutional and cultural factors, so how does Italy compare to other Western democracies with respect to these developments?<sup>1</sup>

From the fall of the Fascist dictatorship and the re-establishment of democracy after World War II until approximately the mid-Sixties, Italian campaigning was solidly premodern. Two mass political parties, the Christian Democratic Party and the Communist Party, dominated the grassroots thanks to their vast and well organized reservoir of party workers. Partisan press, direct voter contact and party propaganda techniques made up most of the campaigns' communications, whose main effects was therefore of strengthening pre-existing attitudes through social networks and partisan communication channels more than to target and persuade the "median" or "swing" voter. The party, more than candidates and leaders, was the subject of campaign communications. As a result, voting was mostly influenced by ideology and sub-cultural identities (i.e., living in certain parts of the country was a more powerful predictor of vote choice than class divisions) and most citizens engaged in "affiliation voting" (Parisi & Pasquino 1977; see also Diamanti & Mannheimer 2002). "God can you see you, Stalin cannot", was a very popular slogan employed by the Christian Democratic Party to tap into voters' ideological loyalties and social ties more than to their appetite for issue discussion or their desire to identify with popular and likeable leaders.

In 1954, the public broadcasting system *RAI* aired the first national television program and soon started regular broadcasts. Arguably, it was not until at least a decade later that the changes brought about by television would started trickling down to parties, candidates, and the electorate. The parties first understood television through the old lens of propaganda and set out to make it into a pedagogic medium, out of admiration for European models such as British BBC ("to informed, educate, and entertain"), but also of desire to control the hearts and minds of the public in order to maintain

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive history of political communication in Italy, see Cheles & Sponza 2001.

consensus (Padovani 2005). As a consequence, the transformative political power of television was tamed for some time by regulators and network executives who made legally monopolist public television a moderate, mainstream, culturally conservative outlet, which mostly reported on public officials and institutional affairs with a “sacerdotal” attitude (Blumler & Gurevitch 1987) that rarely challenged the power elites and often was turned by them into a medium through which politicians could send each other signals by talking over the heads of the public. However, television also changed the dynamics of political communication by providing a forum through which party leaders and candidates could address all the electorate at a wholesale level, at a time when deep transformation in the economic and social structures of the country started weakening the partisan and sub-cultural ties that had been a key feature of the politics of the past.

The early Eighties saw the first real transitions to a modern form of political campaigning. Even though they never had a dramatic impact on campaigns, the first television political ads appeared in the general election of 1983 (Pezzini 2001). A new generation of party leaders emerged that sought to build a direct relationship between voters and the leader, thus becoming the real symbol of the party, more than ideology or historic party symbols. The media started to move the focus of their coverage from political and ideological issues to policy and personality issues (Roncarolo & Marini 1997), and campaigns started to be centered more on the “material value” of the candidate than on the “symbolic value” of the party or ideology (Mazzoleni 1992). The electorate became less attached to traditional partisan, cultural and social ties and more open to “opinion voting” (Parisi & Pasquino 1977), which meant that some voters were willing to change their vote according to the issues or the candidates that the parties presented them with in the campaign. As a consequence, campaigns started relying on polls to get a sense of the electorate’s attitudes and opinions and to partially modify their message accordingly..

Such process was dramatically accelerated by the sweeping success enjoyed by Silvio Berlusconi's soaring media conglomerate, *Fininvest* (later *Mediaset*) which by the mid-Eighties owned three of the six national TV networks together with a multitude of print publications. The mission of Berlusconi's media conglomerate was not to defend some form of public interest, but to achieve commercial success through high ratings and advertising revenues. Through its three networks, *Fininvest* pursued and attracted different kinds of audiences, from the urban youth to traditional downscale urban and suburban women, to a more mainstream audience of middle- and upper-middle-class urban residents, who were lured by the idea of modernity that *Fininvest* embodied through a more informal and spectacular style and the massive supply of programs and formats imported from overseas (Mignone 2000).

When, at the beginning of the Nineties, the party system that had dominated Italian politics for almost five decades collapsed under bribery scandals (see Green *et al.* 2002), Berlusconi's ascent to power could be seen as a natural result of the development of modern campaigning. Because of his business experience, Berlusconi was the best-equipped person to handle the techniques of modern campaigning, such as marketing, branding, image-making, polling, market research, advertising, and public relations. He founded a party that at first looked more like an advertising or P.R. agency (Poli 2001), and was aptly dubbed "medial party" (Calise 1996). The center-left coalition could not compete well in a media and campaign environment that it did not understand (and control) as well. Berlusconi's message and techniques, largely drawn from his previous business experience, seemed to be more modern and better suited to their times (Abruzzese 1994), as mass communications, and television in particular, was the framework in which campaigns were waged (Newell 2002).

Berlusconi's political accomplishments in the 1990s is so deeply rooted in the success of his commercial networks starting from the 1980s that it is no surprise that researchers found a strong correlation between television viewing habits and the vote. Specifically, the more people favor

Berlusconi's commercial networks, the more they tend to vote for the center-right coalition, while watching the public service broadcasting correlates as strongly with voting for the center-right coalition (Itanes 2001). While Berlusconi has interpreted these results as a sign that public networks are biased against him and his coalition, they can be much more reasonably interpreted as a result of viewers' selective exposure choices based on long-standing values that are cultural more than political and reflect the different social compositions of the two electorates (Cacciagli & Corbetta 2002).

## **2. 2004 Part I: The slow twilight of modern campaigning**

On June, 13, 2004, and two weeks later in some local runoffs, the results of the European and local elections showed the first signs of a change in the effectiveness of modern political campaigning. The center-right coalition lost about three percentage points compared to the 2001 general elections (though it made slight gains compared to the previous 1999 European elections), but the most relevant result was the significant loss of votes by Silvio Berlusconi's party, *Forza Italia*, which came from 25.2% of the total in 1999 (and 29.4% in 2001), to a meagre 21% in 2004. Such results were interpreted more as a personal defeat of Berlusconi's than as a negative retrospective verdict on the performance of the government he presided and the coalition he led, since both coalitions got roughly the same amount of votes in the European elections. Moreover, the center-left won most of the local elections that were held on the same day, with highly significant symbolic successes by challengers such as Sergio Cofferati for mayor of Bologna, Michele Emiliano for mayor of Bari, Filippo Penati for president of the Province of Milan, and Renato Soru for governor of Sardinia.

Nationally, the 2004 campaign saw the first signs of decline in Berlusconi's model of modern campaigning, while at the local level, several campaigns by center-left candidates successfully employed some of the techniques and approaches that can be considered part of postmodern campaigning as we have previously defined it. As a result, these elections can be interpreted as the

twilight of modern campaigning and the dawn of postmodern campaigning, even though, as we will see, these developments are far from seamless and complete.

Other than the overall results of the election, three episodes at the national level point out the declining effectiveness of the modern, mass-mediated techniques that were so crucial in Berlusconi's success between 1994 and 2004. First, Forza Italia launched a massive poster advertising campaign in all Italian cities, featuring Silvio Berlusconi and the results of the first three years of the government he presided. Such technique was credited with a huge impact in the general election of 2001, Berlusconi swiftly occupied most of the advertising spaces and thus caught the center-left parties by surprise, which gave him the opportunity to define the tone and the agenda of campaign discourse with one of the few media available (given the violation of TV spots for most of the time of the campaign). Berlusconi tried to execute a similar campaign in 2004, but he was soon imitated by the center-left main list, *Uniti nell'Ulivo*, led by European Commission chairman Romano Prodi. Moreover, the posters turned out to backfire on Forza Italia, as a study by Coesis Research proved. According to the study, 80% of the people surveyed remembered seeing Forza Italia's posters, but only 21% of the total thought that they increased their intention to vote for the party, while 57% said they would make them less likely to vote for it and 23% had no opinion (Coesis Research 2004). The poster campaign was swiftly aborted and replaced by a more sober one, still featuring Berlusconi as the main appeal.

Failing to replicate his 2001 success with poster advertising, Berlusconi went back to television. He was, again, looking for a replica of the winning tactics of 2001, when he signed a "Contract with Italians" while being guest of the most rated Italian political talk show, *Porta a Porta* (curiously meaning "Door to door"). On that occasion, the show was viewed by 3.6 million people. Between February and April, 2004, Berlusconi appeared three times on the same show, garnering falling ratings of 2.3, 2.2, and 1.7 million viewers, lower than the program's average (De Gregorio 2004). Viewers seemed to reject this strategy of over-exposure through television, as if Berlusconi had reached a

saturation point. Moreover, the Prime Minister was vastly criticized for mandating that no member of the opposition be invited to those broadcasts, again repeating a tactic that he successfully started employing after the 1996 elections.

The most meaningful sign of the differences between modern and postmodern techniques, and of Berlusconi's imperfect understanding of the latter, took place on the eve of election day, when the Office of the Prime Minister sent a public-utility text message to millions of cell phones simply reminding voters when the polls would be open. This message was formally and institutionally correct and unquestionable, though analysts believed that the center-right coalition would be the one most damaged by a low turnout, and some critics complained about the costs that taxpayers would have to pay for such communications. However, the cell-phone text message, although it came from an institutional source and not from Berlusconi's party itself, triggered a vigorous negative reaction by the receivers, who replied, often angrily, that they wanted to be left alone or that they did not want to be bothered by what they considered propaganda. Soon, fake vote reminder messages derisive of Berlusconi started to circulate in what was a typical viral diffusion of peer-to-peer communication.

In sum, the Office of the Prime Minister had used a highly personal, horizontal, on-demand, and non-hierarchical medium to communicate in an impersonal, vertical, intrusive, and hierarchical way. He was employing the techniques of broadcasting and modern campaigning on a platform that is much better suited to peer-to-peer communication and postmodern campaigning. Hence the angry reaction of most of the public, which could be hardly explained based only on the sheer content of the message.

That Forza Italia's disappointing performance was largely a result of flawed communication strategies and techniques, together with wide dissatisfaction with the direction of the country, was apparent. In the aftermath of the campaign, one of the most prominent Italian sociologists and newspaper commentators wrote: "The myth of the winning leader, of politics as marketing, with no territory, no parties and no popular participation, has fallen apart in the hands of its inventor. It would be a paradox



if the center-left would be the only one who continues to be fascinated by it” (Diamanti 2004).

However, at least at the national level the center-left did not show any significant change in its campaigning style and techniques, which it struggled to adapt to the modern era during the 1990s. As a consequence, the European elections did not yield results that the center-left could really cheer for. It was at the local level that the most significant changes were seen, which resulted in a much larger electoral success.

### **3. 2004 Part II. The dawn of postmodern campaigning, Italian-style**

The local campaigns of center-left candidates Sergio Cofferati (mayor, Bologna), Michele Emiliano (mayor, Bari), Filippo Penati (president of the Province, Milan) and Renato Soru (governor, Sardinia) all unseated incumbent officers or coalitions and all introduced significant innovations in the ways political campaigning is realized. We can identify five essential features that were common to all of them, though each campaign had its own specific qualities.

#### A. Direct, contact- and labor-intensive campaigning

As an open counterpoint to the center-right mass media-intensive techniques, center-left local campaigns relied mostly on door-to-door canvassing, volunteer contact, and direct give-and-take between the candidate and the citizens, in an explicit reference to the ever-lasting value of “retail” campaigning. Often poorly funded, these campaigns were able to draw large groups of volunteers, often not coming from the party rank-and-file and with little previous political experience, but mobilized by and committed to the candidate’s campaign. For instance, Sergio Cofferati relied on 737 volunteers in a town that has 300,000 inhabitants (Vaccari 2004). Filippo Penati explicitly said that the best way to reach citizens was for the candidate to speak directly to them. Campaigns organized events that allowed citizens to directly address the candidates, such as town-hall style meetings and candidate

tours across the city neighbourhoods. Often, live performances by various artists accompanied the candidate (both in Bari and Bologna), again in contrast with mediated ceremonies that entertain the audience without involving it into the conversation.

Communicating mostly through the grassroots and volunteer networks was a rational strategy for the center-left, which has historically had a stronger organizational presence than the center-right but a much smaller capability to raise funds, but it also had a symbolic meaning after a decade in which the center-left had seemed to be more interested in developing professional media expertise than in maintaining and upgrading its mobilization networks, a tendency mirrored in the behaviour of many contemporary parties (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000), but which also contributed to the erosion of consensus among the party's traditional base of activists.

#### B. Innovative media techniques and rhetoric styles

Center-left candidates cannot compete on an equal playing field with the center-right in terms of financial and media resources, both nationally (mostly in the form of Berlusconi's direct and indirect control of most nationwide TV networks) and locally (as center-right campaigns are usually better funded). Other than by resorting to direct voter contact by the candidate and volunteers, local center-left campaigns employed innovative media and rhetorical techniques to break through the clutter and tap into voters' interests.

For instance, Renato Soru – who is founder and CEO of Tiscali Spa, the most successful Italian internet company – and Sergio Cofferati were the first two candidates with nationwide recognition to open their personal weblogs. Though still experimental, and not significantly updated and expanded after the election was over, these were the first experiences in that sense in Italian politics and were widely reported by the media and used as a tool to attract attention and engage in dialogue during the campaign. The blogs were full of comments by enthusiastic supporters who appreciated the opportunity

to interact with the candidate and with one another in a badly longed for open space of discussion and participation.

Michele Emiliano's campaign in Bari was widely recognized as the most creative in the 2004 cycle with respect to TV ads. Emiliano's ads employed a *cinema-verité* format that emphasized the strong relationship between the candidate, the territory and the local people. The ads gained most visibility through the candidate's web site, which in turn attracted publicity on the local and national media. Renato Soru's TV ads were also high in creativity and spread mostly through viral diffusion and word of mouth.

More generally, the communication style adopted in all the campaigns' paid communications was strikingly different from the modern model of constantly repeated, catchy, and simple slogans. Though mostly brief, the advertising copy generally employed more "oblique" (Floch 1990) rhetorical devices, which called for active interpretive involvement of the viewer rather than passive reception of small bits of information. Especially Cofferati, Emiliano and Soru employed "open" texts (Eco 1989) which provided some "gaps" that could be filled in by active readers' supplying their own meanings to them. Such call for the public's involvement in the campaign communication was profitable in the long run. Although at first the messages seemed to be too complex for the average voter to understand them, or even notice and remember them, most of them ended up becoming popular "mantras" thanks to the dynamics of appropriation by the viewers, both individually and collectively. People started repeating them and using their formulas in different circumstances, thus contributing to a viral spread of the core messages that also reverberated through the media. There seems to be a difference between a "difficult" communication and an "intelligently involving" one, and the center-left has managed to tap into the latter more so than in the past, when it rather inclined to the former.

Such an approach to communication is strikingly different from the unidirectional, "shotgun" style of modern campaigns, which tends to place a premium on simple messages and has a sceptical

view of how voters can get involved in the discourse. This attitude is best summarized by Silvio Berlusconi's famous statement that "The public must be treated like an 11-year old kid, not even so bright... when you talk to Italian people, remember that you are talking to some guys who barely finished grade school, and did not even do their homework", which he uttered once at a convention of his advertising agency and would significantly influence his political campaign philosophy later on.

### C. The leader as a listener and a mediator

Modern campaigning emphasized the role of the candidate as the sole leader, stressing his/her charismatic traits and trying to build the idea of a one-on-one mediated relationship between the leader and (every single member of) the public. The leader stands above the crowd as a superior personality, though it might occasionally let the public take a closer – and carefully stage-managed – look at a certain representation of who he/she is as a person (Meyrowitz 1985). Such is the kind of bond that Berlusconi successfully created when his political movement was born in 1994. Center-left local campaigns in 2004 openly criticized such view, instead defining leadership as the ability to credibly listen to and mediate between the different constituencies and voices within the electorate.

In order to credibly interpret such a role, the candidate has to distance himself from the model of the "mediated presidency" which is a staple of modern political communication, and instead set his/her role as one of discussion, negotiation, and search for common ground. Michele Emiliano called himself "the mayor-tailor", and Sergio Cofferati's style was described as the "mayor-concertmaster" (Grandi & Vaccari 2004). Center-left candidates generally refused to engage in excessive mediated personalization and stressed the value of the participatory networks they were building rather than their personal appeal.

As a consequence, the main campaign performance of this kind of electioneering style does not involve *speaking* or *acting*, but above all *listening*. Through the willingness and ability to listen to

citizens' concerns and to engage in dialogue with them the candidate becomes a credible embodiment of his constituents. So, for instance, Filippo Penati claimed that "Those who get to know me personally get to vote for me", Sergio Cofferati spent forty days at the beginning of his campaign touring all the neighbourhoods of Bologna and meeting citizens and local associations, Michele Emiliano was featured in a *cinema-verité* TV ad as he says to a voter: "If you're a citizen and have a problem I want to be close to you and talk about it with you so we can find a way out of it". "It is impossible", the voter replies sceptically. "Why is it impossible?", answers the candidate, "Look at my face. I have always been close to you because I have always been on the streets, close to the people", a reference to the candidate's past career as a high-profile public prosecutor in Bari.

#### D. Participation versus populism

Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) note that populism has become a permanent trait of the current political communication environment, which is reflected in new communication formats such as popular talk shows and infotainment programs that market themselves as "giving voice to real people", and the phenomenon that Mazzoleni and colleagues call "newsroom populism", the tendency of the media to cater to people's disenchantment for politics and entertainment needs more than their need for accurate, substantive information and their respect for political institutions (Mazzoleni *et al.* 2003; see also Mutz & Reeves 2005).

During the Nineties, Silvio Berlusconi and many other center-right leaders benefited from adopting populist messages and tactics. Berlusconi especially stressed his entrepreneurial roots and skills and claimed to be superior to "ordinary politicians who have never worked a single day in their life". Similarly, Umberto Bossi and the populist movement *Lega Nord* openly denounced "the big thieves in Rome" and labelled all politicians as corrupt and distant from "the people". Even though

some leaders and movements on the left seem to have caught up over time with populism (Tarchi 2003), anti-politics sentiments in Italy mainly remains a tool of center-right strategies.

At the same time as political disaffection has grown, thus providing fodder for populist arguments (Livolsi & Volli 2003), civic engagement and political participation through social movements have not decreased, but rather increased over the last decade. Italian citizens have historically shown a “schizophrenic tendency” (Millefiorini 2002) in the way they participate in politics. From a normative and affective standpoint, Italians have consistently thought that people should be able to actively have a say in politics and they have also responded to surveys that they would like to be personally more involved in the realm of politics. At the same time, they have also shown great distrust in the possibility that political parties can efficiently and transparently mediate their demands and provide a viable forum for democratic participation. This imbalance between demand and supply of political participation also helps explain why an entire party system could be easily wiped out in the early Nineties and replaced for at least a decade by a media-centered form of representation, in which political participation meant identifying with a leader displayed through the media more than actively engaging in politics personally (Mazzoleni 2000). However, disillusion towards this kind of mediated representation and populist arguments is growing, especially within the progressive electorate.

Local center-left campaigns successfully tapped into these sentiments by stressing the core democratic value of “participation” as a response and an antidote to mediated populism. Even if they were running local campaigns, the simultaneous campaign for the European elections helped local center-left candidates emphasize the similarity between their center-right opponents and their leader, Silvio Berlusconi, with his mass-media and populist techniques. Sergio Cofferati explicitly talked about “a plebiscitary model, practiced both in Rome and Bologna” (by his opponent, Giorgio Guazzaloca,

who employed a “rose garden”-like strategy, see Grandi & Vaccari 2004), and defined participation and bilateral communication as the antidote to its ills:

The plebiscitary model needs to concentrate the media and turns complexity into slogans. It produces illusions, not dreams, which can lead to disappointment if they are not fulfilled. Participation, on the contrary, needs direct and bilateral relationships... Such communication cannot but start from the territory. We must build small networks that add up to a wider network... The most ancient communication tool is the word and we need to rediscover it. Politicians and institutions need to talk to citizens. A strange thing usually happens to me: because of my previous work [as leader of the main Italian workers’ union] I used to have a lot of media exposure. This made citizens perceive me in an unreal dimension. People who only know you through the media can hardly believe who you are, how you act, how you do your job. People who know you because they only saw you on TV are the ones that need the most to know you through direct contact. In mediated forms where there is no dialogue, you lose a sense of one’s self.<sup>2</sup>

Concretely, the emphasis on participation resulted in four kinds of campaign endeavours.

First of all, the identity of the candidates mattered. Sergio Cofferati was the former leader of the largest workers’ union in Italy. Renato Soru is a successful new media entrepreneur. Michele Emiliano was a high-profile public prosecutor. Filippo Penati was the only “pure” politician among the candidates we are discussing, as he was the mayor of a large industrial community in the surroundings of Milan. The candidates’ personal stories were a significant part of the campaigns in that they were not those of some “typical politicians”, but of people coming to public service from different walks of life. On the other hand, the candidates never implied that politics is not a value in and of itself, and that “civil society candidates” or “citizen politicians” should take over the political process. Rather, they stressed the value of politics as participation.

Thirdly, participation was a core part of the campaign message. All center-left candidates whose campaigns we are analyzing included a reference to “participation” as their basic governing philosophy among the core issues in their platforms.

Finally, as a practice, participation was employed to draft the coalition’s platform. Michele Emiliano wrote his platform after conducting the “Forums for Bari”, town hall-style meeting focused

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<sup>2</sup> Speech by Sergio Cofferati at the Urbino University: “Partecipazione e politica: una questione di comunicazione”, February, 24, 2004, accessed on line at <http://www.sergiocofferati.it/modules/news/article.php?storyid=118> (in Italian).

on specific issues where citizens could contribute their ideas and see them concretely shape the conversation. Whenever someone expressed an idea, it would be written down in a post-it note and attached to a big drawing board in the middle of the room. All the ideas would then be summarized and further developed by the candidate's policy team. Sergio Cofferati held nine neighbourhood assemblies, five thematic citywide forums, and one final two-day convention to define his platform. In all the occasions the candidate introduced the meeting and then let citizens and experts express concerns and proposals, while saying at the end of each meeting, "The most important thing that happened tonight is not that you listened to me, but that you listened to one another". Renato Soru explicitly asked for citizens to contribute to his platform both through live meetings and internet tools such as email and his blog.

Thirdly, participation took concrete form in the relationship between the candidates, social movements, and local civil society. Candidates ran under the banner of wider coalitions, made up not only of political parties but of local civic committees, associations, and social movements who directly took part to campaign events and in some cases, most notably Renato Soru and Michele Emiliano, contributed to the definition of the platform. This opening towards movements and local avenues of civic engagement helped solve a dilemma that center-left parties could not address effectively at the national level in the 2004 cycle, i.e., the lingering fracture between civil society and political society in Italian politics (Livolsi, forthcoming). By engaging organized citizens and movements directly, the candidates inoculated themselves from the populist-flavored criticism to "politicians disconnected from civil society" that most social movements at the national level routinely profess. It is, however, proving more difficult than most thought to turn this campaign practice into a governing tool, since governing institutions still entails much tighter constraints to popular participation than campaigning does. In the local 2004 election cycle, however, "campaigning", rather than "government" was "of the people, by the people and for the people".



### E. New forms of value-based local identity-building

Identity is an increasingly crucial question in contemporary political communication (Giddens 1991; Bennett 1998). Arguably, part of the appeal of Silvio Berlusconi and his center-right coalition between 1994 and 2004 resided in the creation of new forms of political identity that could replace the old ideological and sub-cultural bonds that were a staple of the previous party system. There are three main sources of this identity-based appeal. The first is identification with the leader – i.e., Berlusconi himself – and with the cultural and social lifestyle models that he embodies, which in turn draw mostly from the culture of success, entrepreneurship, show-business, and entertainment that his personal story best represents and that his networks contributed so much in divulging in the Eighties and Nineties. The second is a form of close-gated localism best represented by populist Lega Nord Party and its leader Umberto Bossi. Such party represents a significant constituency in the North of Italy, dissatisfied with politics, concerned with taxes and government size, and suspicious, to the point of racism, to diversity, both from overseas “boat people” immigrants and to fellow Italians from different communities. Lega Nord advocates a form of federalism that would give local authorities control over education curricula and law enforcement and would significantly tighten immigration control. The third is, in partial discordance with the second, patriotism, as advocated by another center-right coalition party, *Alleanza Nazionale* (a distant cousin to the heirs of the Fascist Party), which recently launched a membership drive under the slogan: “We were just a few to call Italy our motherland. Now we are the majority”.

At the national level, the center-left has so far failed to articulate its own identity politics, and the center-right message has appeared to be both more modern (because of the personal appeal of its leader as a “man of his times”) and more reassuring (because different parties addressed questions of identity both at the local and the national level). However, local center-left candidates in 2004 found an effective way to articulate identity through the re-discovery of ties with the territory.

Renato Soru ran for governor of Sardinia by putting “Sardinia” as the starting point of his platform. Michele Emiliano similarly spoke of the value of “being from Bari” and having dealt first-hand with the problems of the city as a prosecutor. Filippo Penati stressed his experience as the mayor of a large community and his knowledge of the territory and the people living there. A particularly interesting case is that of Sergio Cofferati, who was not born in Bologna nor had he spent there any significant part of his life before announcing his candidacy for mayor. Running against an incumbent who led a local civic party and made of his “Bolognesity” his main campaign appeal, Cofferati did not shy away from the issue, but made it a centrepiece of his campaign by saying that he had “chosen to be a citizen of Bologna” in the name of an ideal that was embodied by the fifty-year-long tradition of center-left administrations and that had been abandoned by the incumbent (Grandi & Vaccari 2004).

The candidates’ interpretation of citizenship were strongly rooted in values: anti-fascism, civility, democracy, participation, and dialogue. Candidates carefully stressed the relationship between their policy proposals and their values, thus establishing a stronger bond with the electorate.

Local identity was articulated not as closure, fear of diversity, or contrast with the national government, but as a driving force to participation, innovation, and community building. Instead of the “gated localism” (Bauman 1998) that comprises a significant part of the center-right message, especially in the North, local center-left candidates articulated a vision of “participatory localism” that tapped into a widespread desire for control of one’s local conditions, reviving communities, empowerment through participation, and identity maintenance and management in a global world. By asking citizens to get involved in their local communities, and by portraying themselves, through their particular background, personal histories and campaign styles, as mediators and facilitators to that process from the campaign into government, center-left candidates were able to propose a new vision of identity politics, at least at the local level.

#### **4. Conclusions and discussion: What is next?**

The 2004 local elections could mark the beginning of some forms of postmodern campaigning in Italy, and a preliminary analysis of the 2005 local election cycles, where 14 out of 20 governors were elected, seems to confirm the same trends in the development of campaign styles and in the positive results for center-left candidates who adopt them. The center-left seems to have found a more congenial environment in this era of campaigning than the center-right, just as Berlusconi's center-right was much better positioned in a campaign atmosphere that matched its leaders' skills and resources much more closely.

It is obviously too early to establish if a permanent shift in campaigning styles and techniques in Italy has occurred, just as it would not be accurate to portray postmodern campaigning in Italy as identical to the form this idealtype is taking in other countries, such for example as the United States. In order to shed further light on these issues, we now consider what Pippa Norris (2000) identifies as the mediating factors that influence the way campaigning evolves across time and space and try to forecast how these could impact future developments.

One set of issues is the regulatory environment. In 2004 candidates ran for local, directly elected offices. In the general elections of 2006 the names of the coalitions' leaders will not be officially on the ballot (though they could be in the coalitions' symbols, such as Berlusconi's in 2001) since the Prime Minister is not elected by voters directly but by the Parliament. This electoral rule, however, should not make the general elections less personalized than the local ones, given the national prominence of the two coalition leaders. However, three quarters of the Parliament are elected through a district-based majority system, where the quality of local candidates and their organization can bring some added value to the national coalition "brands". This will place a premium on grassroots organization and candidates' local appeal in those districts that will be most closely contested and will determine which coalition controls the Parliament.

Another important aspect of the regulatory environment are the norms concerning campaign communications. Currently, a law passed by the center-left government in 2000 does not allow paid 30-second TV advertising and prescribes equality of treatment for parties and coalitions in most information outlets.<sup>3</sup> This means that the most viable ways for candidates to spread their message will still be through the earned media and direct voter contact. Some creative forms of paid advertising or stage-managed gimmicks will still be valuable, but they would have to be particularly innovative. The internet might become more relevant if candidates and parties consciously engage in dialogue with their voters and if they start to tap into the medium's proven effectiveness as an organizing tool. Also, ads are completely legal on the web, which could offer candidates an opportunity to make them available on line and spread them to their supporters and the media through viral techniques.

A second set of mediating factors is the party environment. Party organization and membership in Italy seem to be recovering from the downhill trends of the Eighties and Nineties. Because campaign regulations prohibit the most expensive form of communication – TV ads – and because party financing in Italy is limited and still mostly public, parties will likely continue to engage in labor- rather than capital-intensive activities. The main center-left party, Democratici di Sinistra, reported an increase in membership in 2004. Berlusconi's Forza Italia has consolidated and developed some organizational skills at least in some regions (Poli 2001). At the end of 2004, Berlusconi claimed to be preparing a revival of his party through the recruitment of young volunteers that would manage the grassroots operations in 2006, and has opened a whole new branch of the party for that purpose.

Today's political participation, however, does not resemble old-school "political machine" activities, where people saw themselves as party activists and were willing to commit a significant part of their life to working in partisan, tightly controlled hierarchies that required constant, dependable and

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the center-right has repeatedly announced that the law would be changed in order to allow paid TV ads, but as of this writing no significant action has been taken in Parliament or by the government. Changing the law would naturally benefit Berlusconi, since he is the owner of the three most rated commercial networks in the country and would basically have to pay the airtime to himself.

unquestioning commitment. Today, especially among younger cohorts, participation is mostly seen as a “volunteer” rather than a “membership” endeavour, where a premium is placed on non-hierarchical environments, flexible commitments, receptiveness to volunteers’ feedback and knowledge, and issue- or candidate-based participation rather than blanket commitment to a party or an ideology. In that regard, the role of the internet as an organizational tool might be especially valuable to appeal to those particular individuals.

The third set of mediating factors involve the media and campaign professional system. As Angelo Mellone and Luigi Di Gregorio (2004) have noted, Italian politicians have not fully embraced the professionalization of politics and thus have not allowed the development of political consultancy as a profession. Parties and candidates, however, have recruited and trained some media experts and tend to create internal communication staffs rather than outsourcing the job to independent players (Farrell & Webb 2000). Candidates in the 2004 cycle, however, often resorted to advertising agencies to help with the most creativity-intensive campaign endeavours.

It is the structure of the media system, however, that mostly influences political communication in Italy. Since Berlusconi’s entrance into politics, television ownership assets have become the subject of a bitter partisan battle, which is reflected in the voters’ preference for private (for center-right voters) or public networks (for center-left voters). In a media system whose history and culture quite neatly fit Dan Hallin and Paolo Mancini’s idealtype of the “Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist” media system (Hallin & Mancini 2004; see also Mancini 2002), where partisanship and political collateralism in the media are commonplace, the continuing arguments about media fairness that are nowadays part of the political back-and-forth could only further undermine the media’s capability of median-voter persuasion and strengthen their potential for reinforcement of pre-existing attitudes, mostly via selective exposure.

This leaves it to the candidates and their strategists to decide whether to appeal to their base or to the “median” and “swing” voters, and it also places a high premium on those few media outlets that still enjoy some credibility among the voters regardless of their partisanship. If history will have any bearing on the future, Silvio Berlusconi can still be expected to be more creative and effective at stage-managing events in the traditional broadcast media and in dealing with the press, and surely would be the candidate most benefited if the law banning TV ads were overhauled by his majority. The center-left, on the other hand, clearly seems to be more capable of taking advantage of grassroots activities, alternative broadcast media, and the new media. Whether or not each coalition will decide to play on its strengths or to make inroads in enemy territory will be a crucial campaign decision.

The fourth mediating factor is voter attitudes and behaviour. As noted by Mellone and Di Gregorio (2004), the center-left and center-right coalitions have so far been relatively impermeable, with most voter volatility taking place within the coalitions rather than between them. However, the two coalitions now compete on an even or almost even playing field, thus making marginal votes and marginal districts more relevant than in the past. Moreover, it is not clear the electorates in Western democracies are becoming more secularized and “de-aligned”, as implied by some theorists of postmodern campaigns (Norris 2000, 2002). As the 2004 US Presidential elections have shown (Nelson 2005), the postmodern campaign environment might well lead to a revival in ideological voter alignment. However, first appraisals of the 2005 local election cycle in Italy underscore a significant increase in inter-coalition voter volatility compared to previous elections.

As was discussed in this paper, there seems to be a significant ongoing “postmodern” shift in the way political campaigns take place in Italy, and so far the center-left has taken advantage of it at the local level. However, the 2006 general elections will be national – though district-base Parliamentary elections will determine the outcome – and thus at least theoretically more suited to the more “modern” strategies and tactics that the center-right has so far had an edge on. Whether the center-left can

successfully employ postmodern techniques in a national, more mass media-dependent environment, and whether the center-right can recover some terrain in the developing new campaign environment, are the key questions that will likely determine the outcome of the 2006 campaign and in turn shape the political communication environment in Italy for the next decade.

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