Findings of a survey on the 2006 Italian expatriate vote in Australia

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Introduction

In a bold and unprecedented step, in 2001 the Italian State passed an electoral law which granted Italian citizens living abroad the right to vote in Italian national elections and to elect their own members of parliament to represent them in Rome (12 deputies and 6 senators out of 945 parliamentarians). Since 2003, Italian elections and referendums have taken place around, including Australia. There are currently nearly 3 million eligible Italian voters overseas, of which some 97,000 live in Australia.

The aim of this paper is to offer a clearer picture of the array of views and opinions of expatriate Italians in Australia in relation to their understanding of the meaning and consequences of having the right to vote and elect representatives for their ‘home’ country parliament. This is based on the data primarily collected through a questionnaire distributed among overseas Italians living in Australians and voted in the Italian elections of April 2006.

Literature review

Various aspects of the Italian presence in Australia have been well documented in the historiography of migration and Italian studies. Italians themselves have been the subject of several studies. They have been interviewed and questioned about their working lives and migrant experiences. While there is an impressive amount of literature on Italian migration experiences in Australia, it is still evident the absence of studies examining the political views of Italians in Australia.

Italian electoral behaviour and its engagement in Australian public life has in small part been the research focus of a few scholars and practitioners (Jupp 1966; Carli 1982; Di Nicola 1984;
Collins 1992). From Italian-born first generation arrivals of the early post-war period through to Australian-born second, third and ensuing generations, their political views about both Australia have evolved and changed, but rarely thoroughly examined. In addition, almost no study has been conducted on Italian-Australians’ views about homeland Italian politics. With the advent of the expatriate vote and parliamentary representation for Italian passport holders, regardless whether born in Italy or overseas, an understanding of this phenomenon has become worthy of study. The views of expatriate Italians in the area of citizenship, national loyalty and voting beyond borders are especially unknown. This study will help fill this gap in the literature and break the ice, so to speak, in a whole new area of enquiry.

**Structure of the survey questionnaire**

The survey was divided into seven parts with a total of 37 questions, 17 of which were fielded with a Likert selection 1 to 5 answer (where 1=equals ‘strongly disagree’ and where 5 equals ‘strongly agree’), 12 were multiple choice questions, 7 were ‘yes’ and ‘no’ questions, and the remaining was an open answer question. The seven sections of the questionnaire included questions on: 1) voting eligibility and behaviour; 2) opinions, attitudes, procedures; 3) the elected representatives from Africa-Asia-Oceania-Antarctica; 4) voting rights and parliamentary representation of Italian citizens overseas; 5) impact of the overseas Italian vote; 6) national loyalty, and 7) demographics and comments.

The last question was dedicated to the ‘comments’ section in the event there were any. The comments section turned out to be highly significant. Several of the commentaries provided were later been included in a book that Bruno and I published late last year.

**Delivery of the questionnaire**

The survey was released nationally for public participation and completion in June 2007. It was closed nine months later, in March 2008. The survey was aimed at Italians who were resident in
Australia and were eligible to vote in the Italian parliamentary elections of 2006. At the time of release, the survey was, to the best of our knowledge, the first of its kind for Italian expatriates.

In order to appeal to the highest possible number of potential respondents, the format of the survey questionnaire included an online (electronic) version and a hardcopy version. The online questionnaire was available in either Italian or English. The hardcopy version included a bi-lingual text in Italian and English. In doing so it allowed for greater distribution and participation across different cohorts of Italian expatriates, especially reaching those who were not computer literate or familiar with internet-based technologies.

Clearly the concentrations of eligible Italian voters in Australia would differ greatly from city to city and from State to State. In cities such as Melbourne there were significantly larger numbers of Italian voters as opposed to significantly smaller numbers in Tasmania or the Northern Territory. The survey did not seek to obtain participation across the wider constituency of Africa-Asia-Oceania-Antarctica (AAOA). Notwithstanding this would have been a worthwhile undertaking, it was beyond our reach in terms of resources available. After all, Australia alone houses 62% of eligible Italian voters in the larger Italian constituency outside of its borders.

There was a clear intention to promote the questionnaire as thoroughly as possible and to reach eligible Italian expatriates far and wide across the country. The spread of the survey in the online format provided for easy reach to computer-equipped distant parts of the country. On the other hand, it also meant that the potential participants needed to have access to a computer and some level of computer literacy. Many elderly Italians were thought to either lack adequate access to a home and public computer, or struggle with the computer generated survey questionnaire. In these instances, we provided hardcopies of the survey questionnaire to all known localities where eligible Italian voters were concentrated. These included pension offices, Italian social clubs and Italian emigration associations and organisations. To reach these localities, it also included tracking down remote centres in regional Australia, getting in contact with local Italian representatives, such
as honorary consuls, Italian religious orders and the like, and to encourage them to distribute the survey questionnaire as widely as possible.

Finding expatriate Italians eligible to vote and to invite them to participate in our survey was easier said than done. Our initial request to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to have access to the overseas electoral list for Australia (strictly for research purposes) was rejected. Interestingly enough, according to the response provided by the Italian Embassy in Canberra on behalf of the Ministry, the electoral list was only available for electoral campaign purposes and, in limited circumstances, for indeed ‘research purposes’.

In substitution for the lack of access to the overseas electoral list, we worked our way through every possible location of Italian voters. Names randomly picked from publicly available sources, such as phone books were used to produce our mail out of questionnaires. In order to overcome the lack of verifiable sources in tracking down potential participants, a greater number of questionnaires were however distributed by mail than initially planned. According to the 2006 Australian Census and the number of eligible Italian expatriate voters in Australia for the Italian elections of that year; we assumed that approximately one in eight Australians with an Italian-like surname was a potential eligible voter and hence potential respondents.

The number of hardcopy questionnaire forms sent out to postal addresses throughout Australia reached the figure of approximately 6,000, while some 1,000 email addresses were used for electronic mail out. The final return of valid questionnaires (both online and hardcopy) was 613. The number of valid questionnaires gathered represents a statistically valid sample of the potential number of respondents to the survey. In Australia, for the 2006 Italian elections, 94,520 ballots went sent out to as many eligible voters. Of the ballots sent by the Consulate officials, 39,032 (or 41.29 percent) were returned.

Of the 613 responses 68.5 percent were received in hard copy and the remaining 31.5 percent were received online. There are a number of considerations to bear in mind before moving on to survey findings. The first consideration is the number of valid completed questionnaires
received: does it represent a sizeable sample which may be deemed acceptable for statistical and analytical purposes? Literature on this issue indicates that the sample size of 613 completed surveys of a total cohort of 94,520 is valid for statistical and analytical purposes.

Another consideration regarded the ‘representation’ of the sample size. Is it representative of the 94,520 eligible voters? Some of those who completed the questionnaire may be regarded as being the most interested and passionate about this survey, while others less engaged and lukewarm towards the survey may have not. It could be argued that all voluntary surveys face this very issue, meaning that only the interested will be keen in completing it.

There might appear to be other potentially distorting factors in the survey responses, such as high levels of pensioner responses (27 percent) or exceptionally high levels of tertiary qualified respondents (45 percent), which may not correspond to the ‘real’ demographics of the average profile of the Italian voter in Australia. However, a demographic profile of the eligible Italian expatriate voter is at best incomplete. Data obtained by the Embassy of Italy in Canberra reveals a partial picture, such as the number of dual citizens, minors (hence not eligible to vote), born in Italy and in Australia, or the *ultra-centenari* (aged 100 or more) and gender balance. Thus it would be difficult to depict a ‘real’ demographic picture of the Italian voter.

**The typical respondent**

Who typically filled in our survey? Our typical respondent can summarily be described as: pronominally male, aged 40 years or more and one who has obtained year 12 schooling or its equivalent. He also is likely to be born in Italy, live in Melbourne and has an excellent command of Italian (mostly a mother tongue level of language proficiency). He emigrated to Australia some 25 years ago or before that.

Two cohorts of participants filled out our survey questionnaire more than others: Participants of 75 and over dominated the sample with 34.4%, followed by those in the age group of
It is also interesting to note that there only about 6.5% of participants who fell in the 61 to 74 age group. Finally close to 25% of the sample were below 40 years of age.

Our typical would have voted in the elections of 2006 and would most likely vote again in the next elections. This person was pleased to have voted in the election and would have almost certainly have voted for the party/coalition and less likely to have voted for the candidate alone. Our typical respondent was not happy with the role played by the Consulate/Embassy and was only just sufficiently informed about the elections in terms of information flow. Moreover our typical profile only just felt comfortable about the clarity of the policies of the candidates, and that the best way to be properly informed about the candidates and their policies was from the Italian press followed by radio.

Our profile knew who the current Italian parliamentary representatives were in 2006 but was less aware of their policies. Interestingly, our profile felt less ‘in touch’ with these representatives. The typical respondent was only just convinced that Italians should have voting rights overseas and was neither in agreement or disagreement as to whether Italians overseas should participate in referendums (as opposed to the actual elections).

The profiler was also just convinced that Italians should elect their own parliamentary representatives and felt that Italians in Italy would not be in agreement with the vote to Italians abroad. Our profiler also felt that the vote to Italians abroad would not make the Italian government more stable and was unsure if the vote to Italians in Australia would bring benefits to the Italians in Australia.

Overall our typical respondent felt that voting in the Italian elections would make them more attached to Italian politics or make them more in tune with Italy and their cultural heritage. Yet, voting in the Italians elections would not make them less attached to Australian politics or to Australia and its values.

I would like now to further analyse the questions regarding the voting rights and parliamentary representation and the national loyalty issue. This has been done by using SPSS.
analysis. As for the question about citizens residing overseas having voting rights in Italian elections, the age group of 41 to 60, had the highest mean of 3.75. This would indicate that this age group was the most concerned group of participants in wanting to exercise their democratic right (the right to vote in Italian elections).

It is interesting to note that those participants who were 61 and over had a lower mean than those immediately younger to them. This may infer that these older participants were not as concerned as their younger ones about rights to vote in Italian elections. One would expect a direct relationship between age and having voting rights. There seems to be lower means for those below 40 years of age, but the tipping point was for those above 41 years up to 60.

On a gender basis, there was a statistically significant difference between males and females. This was confirmed by carrying out an Independent samples t-test which showed that males had a higher mean of 3.74 and females had a mean of 3.37 (sig. level of >0.001). This further reiterates that males felt more passionately towards citizens residing overseas having voting rights in Italian elections.

As for Italian citizens residing overseas having the ability to elect their own parliamentary representatives in Italy, the responses seems to have a similar pattern to those about having concerns for voting rights in Italian elections. The means for the issue about parliamentary representation ranged from as low as 2.8 to a high of 3.57. On closer observation, the means for all age groups were lower than that of the voting rights in Italian elections. This would suggest that the participants did not see the aspect of electing their parliamentary representation as important as having voting rights in Italian elections.

On the national loyalty issue, the younger generation seem to be more attached to the Italian politics by having voted for the Italian elections as compared to older age groups. The younger generation may feel a greater sense of loyalty for the fact that they may want to claim national affinity and loyalty as compared to the presence of latent loyalty among the older generation.
The younger participants felt more acculturated to Italian heritage by having voted in the Italian elections. This finding seems to echo the earlier aspect of claiming national loyalty as compared to inherent loyalty amongst the older generation.

The aspect of voting in the Italian elections and being less attached to Australian politics; seem to have a positive relationship in terms of the age groups. The younger participants had lower means than the older ones. This would suggest that the older participants felt less attached to Australian politics than the younger ones. It could also possibly be that the younger ones have a closer affiliation to the Australian politics as they were nurtured in Australia. From a perspective the participants’ country of birth it was seen that there was a statistically significant difference between those who were born in Italia as compared to those born in Australia. This was confirmed by carrying out an Independent samples t-test which showed that Australian born had a higher mean of 1.98 and Italian born had a mean of 1.74 (sig. level of >0.05). This further reiterates that Australian born respondents felt more affiliated to the Australian politics. Here it is assumed that the Australian born were of the younger generation, and such felt more passionately towards Australian politics.

**Conclusion**

The survey sought to investigate the voting behaviour, the opinions and attitudes of a rarely surveyed cohort of people, namely Italian citizens living in Australia and the way in which they engage with homeland politics. The Italian elections of April 2006 offered an excellent opportunity that we couldn’t miss. The survey findings show this constituency is a complex one. It shows that factors such as age and gender may present some statistically significant differences among Italian nationals in Australia.