How do established voters react to new parties? The case of Italy, 1985–2008

Mark N. Franklin a,b, Joost van Spanje c,*

a European University Institute, Via dei Roccettini 9, 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy
b Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 77 Massachusetts Ave, Cambridge, MA 02139, United States
c Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Article info
Article history:
Received 17 February 2011
Accepted 23 November 2011

Keywords:
Party system breakdown
New parties
Electoral cohort
Ideology
Perceptual agreement
Italy

Abstract
The Italian party system largely collapsed in the early 1990s, providing us with a natural experimental situation in which voters were confronted with new parties – indeed, with an entirely new party system. How did they react? This paper develops a number of expectations on the basis of existing theory and tests these expectations using a dataset consisting of election studies conducted in Italy between 1985 and 2008. We find that a new party system causes confusion as to where parties stand in left-right terms, making it difficult for voters to make their choices on the basis of ideological cues. The confusion is greatest among older voters – those already set in their habits of voting, but only the very oldest cohorts (containing voters over 60 years old) are significantly debilitated.

C2112011 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

Voting behaviour is generally supposed to be different in new democracies. One suggested reason for these differences (Brug et al., 2008; Eijk and Franklin, 2009) is that, in new democracies, all voters are new voters – with none having had the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills required by voters faced with the need to choose between political parties contesting an election. A supplementary explanation would be that, in new democracies, all parties are new – with none of them having leaders with the skills or experience required to get out the vote among natural supporters and (more importantly) failing to provide the stable cues that promote learning among voters regarding where parties stand. This idea has, however, not been tested in extant research for lack of suitable data spanning the establishment of a new party system.

A study of political developments in Italy over the past 40 years should shed light on the extent to which voting behaviour is different in new democracies because parties are new. The Italian party system largely collapsed in the early 1990s, providing us with a natural experimental situation in which voters were confronted with new parties – indeed, with an entirely new party system. This party system remained relatively fluid even until the present day, with new parties emerging, dissolving and reconstituting themselves at election after election. How did voters react?

Aside from its importance with regard to voting behaviour in new party systems, this question touches upon the quality of democracy. Models of representative democracy such as the Responsible Party Model (RPM) require – among other things – that voters make a meaningful choice at elections (Esaiasson and Holmberg, 1996). In order to do so, voters should be aware of the main differences between policy alternatives presented by the parties in their political system but how does this awareness come about? In particular, what happens when voters are confronted with new parties? That is the question this paper addresses.
In what follows, we start with theoretical considerations. After this, we formulate a set of hypotheses derived from our theoretical framework. While introducing the data to be employed, we show descriptive analyses that already provide some indications about the answers to our central research question. We briefly discuss the method used to test the hypotheses and present our findings. We conclude by summing up these findings and putting them in wider perspective.

2. Theoretical considerations

The actor at the core of this paper is the voter. How does the voter make her choice in the polling booth? In no political system do voters spend much time researching the details of the political alternatives on offer at an election. Most voters most of the time find shortcuts to the knowledge they need (Downs, 1957; Conover and Feldman, 1984; Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; Brug, 1997). They follow the lead of trusted sources, most frequently the social, religious, and political bodies that they are affiliated with or feel attached to (Beck et al., 2002; Cutler, 2002). In established democracies, the most important of these social reference groups, in terms of their influence at election time, are political parties (see also, Anderson and Just, 2012). Parties are, above all, the actors that give meaning to the political world by organizing the policies on offer and providing voters with simple menus of packaged alternatives that may change from election to election.

At a slightly higher level of sophistication, voters in established democracies also evaluate the political alternatives available to them in terms of higher order concepts such as liberalism and conservatism. In Europe the most commonly used higher order concepts of this kind are those of left and right. Policies are often typified in left-right terms, and parties locate themselves in relation to each other in the same terms. The new post-communist democracies seem to be no exception (Benoit and Laver, 2006; Marks et al., 2006). Quite complex political differences are customarily simplified to a position on a left-right scale, and citizens use the latter accordingly (Laponce, 1981; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Eijk and Franklin, 2009). What left and right exactly capture is difficult to say, since they subsume entire clusters of issue positions that change over countries and over time (Knutsen, 2002), but this is a major advantage when it comes to serving as an information shortcut for voters (see also Dahlberg, 2009).

It is true that countries differ in terms of the extent to which left-right orientations are useful to voters, and in some countries political discourse hardly mentions these concepts. However, a ready means exists to determine the extent to which the terms are meaningful. Voters can be asked to place the parties in their country in left-right terms. To the extent that they do so in a random and unstructured manner the concept will evidently be of little use in political discourse. On the other hand, to the extent that voters agree about where parties stand in these terms, left-right location will be a useful way to characterize a party system.

The difficulties voters have had, in some Central and Eastern European new democracies, in positioning themselves on a left/right dimension (Evans and Whitefield, 1993) do not apply to Italy. In Italy, concepts of left and right are deep-rooted. In Fig. 1, below, we will see that until the 1990s Italians shared a high level of perceptual agreement regarding the left-right locations of established parties, and that after the melt-down of their party system much the same level of agreement was rapidly re-established. One of the main parties actually called itself “Democratici di Sinistra” (“Left Democrats”) between 1998 and 2007, and current parties include “Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà” (“Left, Ecology and Freedom”) and “La Destra” (“The Right”).

But what happens when the party system changes? Will left-right location provide the needed cues in such a system? Research on the emergence of new party systems in Central

Fig. 1. Agreement over where parties stand in left-right terms, by party over time.
and Eastern Europe suggests that large mismatches may exist, after which citizens' votes gradually fall into line with their preferences (e.g., Szelenyi et al., 1996, 1997; see also Evans and Whitefield, 1995). But things might be different in Italy after its party system overhaul. In that country the voting population already possessed well-developed concepts of left and right, so adaptation to a new political environment might well have occurred more rapidly. Still, we would expect some disruption in the efficacy of left-right cues even there, reason why the Italian melt-down is worthy of study in these terms.

Will the evolution of this type of cue-taking be the same for all voters alike? This is not very likely. Young voters have an advantage over older voters here, as socialization involves political learning, and learning capabilities in general decrease above a certain age. Thus, our expectation is that older voters confronted with new parties will have greater difficulty in adapting to the new situation. Much research has established that learning is generally easier for younger members of an electorate (for a survey of the literature, see Eijk and Franklin, 2009; for a critical test, see Dinas, 2010). In addition, the youngest voters will not even have to adapt, as the new party system is the one in which they become socialized.

These considerations lead us to a small number of straightforward expectations relevant to new party systems. In the first place, we expect the extent to which members of an electorate agree on where parties stand to depend in part on the stability of their party system. Party systems that are new or in flux do not provide voters with a political context in which they can easily learn where parties stand. Without such learning it would be hard for voters to reach a high level of perceptual agreement regarding the left-right locations of parties. So our first two hypotheses are:

H1 The extent of perceptual agreement on where parties stand in left-right terms will be less when the political system is new or in flux; and

H2 The importance of left-right distance between voters and parties in patterning party choice will be less when the political system is new or in flux.

Perceptual agreement is the degree to which different voters position a particular party similarly on a left/right dimension. As a condition for voting on the basis of left-right cues, it has been found to be necessary that members of an electorate are largely in agreement about where parties stand (Oppenhuys, 1995; Eijk and Franklin, 1996, 2009; Brug et al., 2007). Perceptual agreement among voters does not guarantee accuracy, as many voters may be wrong simultaneously and in a similar way (Dahlberg, 2009). This happens only very rarely, however (Brug, 1997; Dahlberg, 2009). “Perceptual agreement among voters on parties' ideological left–right positions can thus work as a guarantor for successful political representation” (Dahlberg, 2009: 30).

Furthermore, we expect adaptation to the new situation to be easier for younger cohorts of voters. Older voters will be more affected by lack of agreement on where parties stand, with consequentially less ability to use left-right distance as a cue helping them to decide how to vote. We do not, however, have very clear expectations for the age at which it would be harder for voters to adapt to a new party system since there has been little theorizing and virtually no empirical investigation of this point. Still, our final hypothesis can be expressed as:

H3 Among older voters, left-right distance between voters and parties will have a weaker effect on party choice than among younger voters when the political system is new or in flux.

It is of course possible that projection occurs. Projection means in this context that voters place themselves on the basis of where they position particular parties (Judd et al., 1983). This can be due to either a voter positioning him- or herself closer to a party s/he likes (assimilation, see Sherif and Hovland, 1961), or a voter adopting a party's position (persuasion, see Granberg and Brent, 1983). Thus, the positioning of oneself in a left/right dimension may be based on ex post rationalizations on the basis of considerations other than the issue positions as presented by the parties. As the degree to which projection occurs is not expected to differ systematically according to the entrance of new parties, we have no reason to expect this to contaminate our findings. More generally, if placement in terms of left and right would be merely projection, this would render the concept meaningless and of no utility to voters. In our data this is not the case, however.

3. The natural experimental setting

The Italian context provides us with a natural experimental situation in which new and established voters alike were confronted with an avalanche of changes. In order to investigate these changes, we use data sets from five election studies. The studies we employ were fielded in 1985, 1990, 1994, 2001 and 2008.

The changes with which we are concerned began in the late 1980s, culminating in unprecedented party system change in 1992 and 1993 (Bardi, 1996; Morlino, 1996; Newell and Bull, 1997). Two major parties, Christian Democracy (DC) and the Socialist Party (PSI), suddenly disappeared while several new ones emerged, among which the Northern League, LN (Gilbert, 1993), and the Communist Refoundation, PRC (Kertzer, 1996). The established parties that remained turned themselves into new entities, such as the Social Movement (MSI)'s change to National Alliance, AN (Ignazi, 1996; Newell, 2000), and the Communist Party (PCI)'s transformation into the Democrats of the Left, DS (Kertzer, 1996). In 1993, the Italians were also confronted with a new electoral system as their longstanding list-PR system was replaced by a Mixed Member Proportional system in

---
1 We study four Italian National Election studies as well as data from a study of a European Parliament election conducted two months after the Italian national election of 1994 – an election critical to understanding Italian developments but for which no suitable Italian national election study was conducted. Additional Italian National Election studies were either conducted too long before the period of interest or did not contain suitable variables.
which Italians were required to cast two ballots – one for the party they preferred and one for a candidate running in the constituency in which they resided (D’Alimont, 1998; Reed, 2001; Bartolini et al., 2004; Forestiere, 2009). This institutional change is expected to have contributed to their confusion.

Moreover, changes did not end in 1993. Over succeeding elections, pre-election pacts started to become the norm, with groups of parties promising to govern together in a coalition government. Should their group win sufficient seats, and these proto-coalitions changed from election to election in a kaleidoscopic fashion. In 2006 several parties changed their names, and the names of the left- and right-proto-coalitions also changed. The Italian case thus offers a natural experimental setting, with a pre-1990 structure being shaken in the late 1980s and destroyed in 1992–1993, with aftershocks that were still likely to be confusing voters even up to 2008. We can thus investigate the impact of this major supply-side change on voting in general, and see how different electoral cohorts reacted to the shake-up of their party system. In a sense Italy became a new democracy again in the 1990s, and we ought to be able to learn a lot from that.

To assess our hypotheses, we calculated a measure of perceptual agreement regarding where parties were located in left-right terms for each party in each year (using the method described in Eijk, 2001). This is a measure that ranges from maximal disagreement (−1) to maximal agreement (+1). We use this measure instead of the standard deviation, as the standard deviation misrepresents the peakedness of a distribution (Eijk, 2001). As a first indication of the way in which the arrival of new parties impacted the Italian political system, Fig. 1 plots the extent to which there was agreement about where parties stand in left-right terms for each party separately over time. Perceptual agreement measures are party-level variables, so it is not possible to distinguish between different groups (e.g. age cohorts) of supporters of different parties in regard to these measures. The graph shows that, between 1985 and 1990, perceptual agreement scores for two established parties fell, indicating more uncertainty about where these parties stood in left-right terms (partly balanced by an increase in agreement for a third established party). The main change in Fig. 1 is the appearance of new parties, about which the voters had to find out where they stood in terms of left and right. In 1990 a major new party burst upon the scene, the Greens (FdV), about which agreement as to its location was quite low. By 1994, perceptual agreement regarding the location of FdV had improved, though not enough to match the scores of remaining established parties. Moreover, two additional new parties joined the fray in that year, Forza Italia (FI) and Northern League (LN), about whose left-right locations there was quite low agreement (particularly in the case of LN).

Note that, in Fig. 1, we use information about fewer parties than in the models we will evaluate below. This is because for many parties we do not have several consecutive data points, which makes them unsuitable for graphic display. The total number of parties used in Fig. 1 is 7, whereas in our models we use information about 20 parties.

For parties that were established at the start of our period we see constant or declining perceptual agreement scores after 1990. By contrast, for supporters of new parties we see generally increasing scores over time from the point at which each new party is established. A marginal exception is FI, which, in elections after 2001, fought under a joint banner together with its allies (though we retain the old label in Fig. 1), perhaps creating some confusion over its left-right location.

The consequences of this wholesale rebirth of the Italian party system for overall levels of agreement regarding the left-right locations of political parties are shown in Fig. 2. There we see that the level of perceptual agreement regarding all parties taken together dropped considerably in 1990 and then dropped further in 1994. The level recovered in 2001 (though not to the level seen in 1985) but had once again declined somewhat by 2008 under the impact of further name changes (and perhaps also a new change to the electoral system, which happened in 2006). Fig. 2 shows overall level of perceptual agreement across all parties taken together. The numbers on which Fig. 2 is based are (non-weighted) averages by election year. The scale ranges from −1 to +1, just as does Eijk’s agreement measure (but see footnote 12).

The drop in the overall level of perceptual agreement between 1985 and 1994 was from 0.67 to 0.57, or by about a fifth of its 1985 level (see Fig. 2). This major change in the extent to which voters were in agreement about where parties stood had considerable effects on their ability to use left-right cues in deciding which party to support, as we shall see. Though the extent of perceptual agreement shown in Figs. 1 and 2 cannot be disaggregated by age cohort, as already mentioned, since it is a systemic measure calculated for each party on the basis of all those voting, still the response to these changes can be disaggregated by including interaction terms in our estimation models – an important element in our research.

4. Methods

What was the consequence for Italians in terms of their voting behaviour? In our data (see footnote 1) we computed distances of individual respondents from mean left-right locations of each party (separately for each year), created affinity measures by employing bivariate logit analyses (separately for each year),2 reshaped the data by stacking it

---

2 In order to address our research questions we need to be able to evaluate the grounds for choice of a generic political party rather than choices for specific political parties. The question we address is thus not ‘what makes people vote for party A?’ but rather ‘what makes people vote for a party?’ This approach requires the data to be stacked, with each case corresponding to the choice made by a specific voter for a specific party (to vote for that party or not). In such a dataset the independent variables need to be conceptualized as measures of the extent to which voters with the characteristic or concern represented by that variable feel an affinity for each party. So union members are characterized as having an affinity for socialist parties, Catholics for Catholic parties, and so on, with the extent of each affinity (except for left-right proximity) being registered by predicted values of the dependent variable (y-hats) obtained when that variable is regressed (using ordinary logistic regression) on the independent variable concerned. See Eijk and Franklin (1996) for a similar procedure which, however, had the advantage of an interval-level dependent variable and so could use OLS regression to create its affinity measures. In the case of left-right proximity we were able to compare the left-right location of each respondent with the left-right location assigned on average to each party, and code the closeness (on a ten-point scale) between the two.
separately for each year (on stacking, see Stimson, 1985; Eijk and Franklin, 1996, 2009), and used available data to impute (by least-squares estimation) all missing data on dependent and independent variables (King et al., 2001).³

Since our model is a version of a discrete choice model, it would have been appropriate to employ conditional logit analyses with generic party choice as the dependent variable (see footnote 2). As multiple party observations pertain to each respondent, we expect dependencies in the data which violate the assumptions associated with ordinary logit analysis. Conditional logit corrects for such dependencies by taking account of the clustering by respondent, focusing on the intra-respondent choice process (McFadden, 1984). However, in order to test for interactions with age, a discrete choice model could not be employed (since age of respondent does not vary across the choices made). For that analysis (Model B in Table 1) we needed to employ a random effects model. In order to guard against method effects we also estimated Model A using random effects and report those results in Table 1 Model A. We observed only trivial differences between the findings for random and fixed effects.

The independent variables of primary interest are our measures of perceptual agreement for each political party in each of the years under investigation (1985, 1990, 1994, 2001 and 2008), together with left-right distance and the interaction between the two. Our expectation, based on past findings, is that – to the extent that agreement about party locations makes this possible – voters will choose parties to support that are close to them in left-right terms. So we expect negative effects of left-right distance and that these effects will be greater when perceptual agreement is high. These effects should become less after 1990, however, especially among older voters, if we are correct in thinking that a new party system will make it harder for voters to employ left-right cues. Findings in previous literature (e.g., Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Lubbers et al., 2002) tell us that, in order to properly specify a model predicting party choice, we need to include the following control variables: political interest,⁴ issues (for which we use respondent’s left-right location as a surrogate due to the absence of comparable issues across election studies), age,⁵ frequency of church attendance,⁶ employment status,⁷ marital status,⁸ gender,⁹ and subjective sense of belonging to the working class.¹⁰

In all analyses, we use Eijk’s (2001) coefficient A to measure perceptual agreement concerning left-right party placement. This is a party-level variable, as already mentioned, so that our measure of perceptual agreement pertains to the particular party voted for. We are thus investigating the effects of knowledge about the left-right locations of particular parties on choices to support those

³ Variance of imputed values was inflated randomly to match the variance of the non-missing data on each variable, assuring us against spurious increases in variance explained.

⁴ Political interest was measured on a scale from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (4).
⁵ Age was measured in years.
⁶ Church attendance was measured on a scale from “never” (1) to “weekly” (5). Using dummy variables for each category of church attendance does not change our results but complicates the model.
⁷ Employment status can take up two values, either 0 (“no”) or 1 (“yes”).
⁸ Not married is coded ‘0’, married is coded ‘1’.
⁹ Gender is coded ‘0’ for female, and ‘1’ for male.
¹⁰ Respondents who indicate they belong to the “working class” are identified with a ‘1’, all others with a ‘0’.
Table 1
Predictions of discrete party choice from random effects (HLM) models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model A Coefficient</th>
<th>s.e.</th>
<th>Model B Coefficient</th>
<th>s.e.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party size (proportion seats won)</td>
<td>8.649</td>
<td>(0.099)**</td>
<td>8.823</td>
<td>(0.104)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y-hat left-right position of respondent</td>
<td>1.009</td>
<td>(0.048)**</td>
<td>1.088</td>
<td>(0.040)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y-hat political interest</td>
<td>1.418</td>
<td>(0.090)**</td>
<td>1.377</td>
<td>(0.092)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y-hat age</td>
<td>3.213</td>
<td>(0.149)**</td>
<td>3.255</td>
<td>(0.156)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y-hat church attendance</td>
<td>2.212</td>
<td>(0.108)**</td>
<td>2.450</td>
<td>(0.115)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y-hat employment status</td>
<td>1.272</td>
<td>(0.295)**</td>
<td>1.109</td>
<td>(0.297)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y-hat marital status</td>
<td>4.405</td>
<td>(0.286)**</td>
<td>4.304</td>
<td>(0.296)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y-hat gender</td>
<td>2.727</td>
<td>(0.253)**</td>
<td>2.991</td>
<td>(0.262)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y-hat self-perceived member working class</td>
<td>2.299</td>
<td>(0.240)**</td>
<td>2.025</td>
<td>(0.254)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptual agreement on left-right position of party</td>
<td>2.157</td>
<td>(0.148)**</td>
<td>2.137</td>
<td>(0.148)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-right distance from party</td>
<td>–3.434</td>
<td>(0.417)**</td>
<td>–6.424</td>
<td>(0.510)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptual agreement * Left-right distance from party</td>
<td>–4.962</td>
<td>(0.702)**</td>
<td>–2.138</td>
<td>(0.735)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older (over 60)</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>(0.016)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older * Left-right distance from party</td>
<td>–0.234</td>
<td></td>
<td>–0.234</td>
<td>(0.042)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-1990</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>(0.040)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-1990 * Older</td>
<td>–0.193</td>
<td></td>
<td>–0.193</td>
<td>(0.422)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-1990 * Left-right distance from party</td>
<td>1.723</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.723</td>
<td>(0.245)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-1990 * Older * Left-right distance from party</td>
<td>1.160</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.160</td>
<td>(0.469)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of observations</td>
<td>111,800</td>
<td></td>
<td>111,800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>13,975</td>
<td></td>
<td>13,975</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R-squared</td>
<td>0.429</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.432</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi-square</td>
<td>31044.74***</td>
<td></td>
<td>31269.70***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>–20695.76</td>
<td></td>
<td>–20583.28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significant at *p = 0.05, **p = 0.01, ***p = 0.001 (two-tailed).
Source: Own calculations based on Itanes 1985 (N = 2074), 1990 (1500), 2001 (3206), and 2008 (3000) along with EES 1994 (N = 1000).

parties. We expect parties whose positions are widely understood to benefit from Downsian proximity voting, as people use this understanding to locate parties that are close to them in left-right terms.11

Our measure of perceptual agreement is scaled as a proportion of perfect agreement or disagreement, so that it is bounded between – 1 (maximum disagreement) and + 1 (maximum agreement).12 Our other variables generally vary from 0 to 1, some because they are dummy variables that only take on those two values and others because they are measures of affinity between individual-level characteristics and party support. Since these measures are y-hat predictions of the values of a dummy dependent variable, they are necessarily measured on the same 0–1 scale. Size of party is also measured on the same scale, as a proportion of national parliamentary seats won. Only distance from party in left-right terms is measured on a quite different scale, with values that can range from 0 to 9, so we rescaled that variable by dividing it by the maximum value found in the data.

---

11 Of course it is also possible that people identify their own left-right locations on the basis of knowing the locations of parties that they vote for on other grounds, as discussed earlier; and this no doubt happens to some extent. It is not possible to establish the extent of this contamination with our research design, and we follow customary research procedures when we assume that effects are largely in the direction theorized.

12 In practice we find no negative agreement scores in our data, so effectively it becomes a 0–1 measure of agreement, where 0 implies no perceptual agreement and 1 implies perfect perceptual agreement.

13 Because we had no theoretical basis for presupposing any particular cutting-point for this measure, we also estimated models that defined older voters as those above 30 and those above 45. The estimates showed that the largest differences in patterns of party choice were between respondents over the age of 60 and younger respondents.

5. Results

The results of our hierarchical model to explain party choice are shown in Model A of Table 1. It is clear from that model that all expected effects occur: In addition, the model fit is satisfactory with a pseudo R-squared of 0.429, suggesting that our model is relatively well-specified. Effects of all variables are highly significant and substantively powerful.14 Effects of perceptual agreement are strongly positive, suggesting that parties whose left-right positions are well-known generally receive more support than parties whose positions are less well-known. Effects of distance from party in left-right terms are negative, as expected, and much magnified in the case of parties about which perceptual agreement is high.

Model B of Table 1 introduces dummy variables for age and period, and interactions between these variables and our variables of primary interest. Only two of these effects are significant: the interaction between post-1990 and left-right proximity is positive, implying less (negative) effect of this variable after 1990, and this same interaction in third-order interaction with older voters is also positive, implying that older voters are particularly debilitated after 1990 in their ability to choose between parties in left-right terms.

14 The extraordinarily strong effect of party size must be viewed while allowing for the fact that no party in the Italian parliament comes anywhere near to receiving all the seats in that legislature, which is the party strength that would be needed to realize in full the strong effect that this coefficient implies.
These effects are not small. Using Gary King’s Clarify (Tomz et al., 2002) to estimate the quantities of interest, we find the proportion supporting a party increasing by 50 percentage points (from 0.067 to 0.569) when perceptual agreement regarding that party shifts from its minimum to its maximum, for older voters after 1990 when all other variables are held at their mean values.15 For both young and old, changes in the level of perceptual agreement from election to election (quite extensive for most parties, see Fig. 1) will have had considerable effects on the level of support for those parties. None of the parties still present in 2008 saw much less than a 20 percent change in the proportion of those who agree on where it is positioned – downward for the PCI, upward for all others. Several parties saw more change than this and one (FdV) actually saw an increase of 35 percent. Changes in perceptual agreement of 20+ percent imply around a 10 percent effect of perceptual agreement on electoral support. Other variables (distance from party, ideology, usually conceived of in terms of ideology, responsible party model, require that voters make meaningful choices between policy alternatives (Esaiasson and Holmberg, 1996). Voters can make these meaningful choices based on information short cuts (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998), of which the most important one is ideology, usually conceived of in terms of ‘left’ and ‘right’ (Eijk et al., 1992, 2009). When parties harvested votes based on loyalties of voters to social groups. Only from 1994 onwards did Italy become a country in which voters would be free of the social straightjacket imposed by cleavage politics (Franklin et al., 1992, 2009). Without such freedom, perceptual agreement regarding party left-right locations would be largely irrelevant. Still, during this period, and extending until 1994, we do see left-right distance having significant and strong effects in the expected direction – effects quite consistent with a political system in which loyalties are primarily to social groups. Only after 1994 does perceptual agreement become a pre-requisite for left-right distance to take effect. What we see in 2001 and 2008 are strong effects of the interaction between perceptual agreement and left-right distance, (even as the effect of left-right distance itself falls below the level of achieving statistical significance). This indication of a different basis for party choice might only be so clearly visible in a polity in which established parties had repositioned themselves or disappeared.

So our findings not only lend support to the hypotheses that motivated this research but also document a change in the bases of Italian party choice in line with the analyses reported for other countries in the chapters of Electoral Change (Franklin et al., 1992, 2009).

6. Conclusion

Models of representative democracy, such as the responsible party model, require that voters make meaningful choices between policy alternatives (Esaiasson and Holmberg, 1996). Voters can make these meaningful choices based on information short cuts (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998), of which the most important one is ideology, usually conceived of in terms of ‘left’ and ‘right’ (Eijk

15 This effect of perceptual agreement on electoral support was, perhaps surprisingly, somewhat smaller (46 percentage points) among younger voters. However, this is mainly due to differences in the levels of proximity to parties for voters of different ages (older voters tend to be closer to the parties they support, providing more leverage for changes in perceptual agreement to have effect).

16 It might be thought that before 1990 there would be little variation between parties in the extent of perceptual agreement regarding their positions, explaining why perceptual agreement had little effect; and indeed in 1985 the standard deviation is only 0.06. This nearly doubles, to 0.14 over the next two elections. But this does not explain the 1985 anomaly because, by 2001, the variation in perceptual agreement had returned to 1985 levels even while still retaining its new importance as a pre-requisite for proximity voting.
and Niemoller, 1983; Brug, 1997; Eijk and Franklin, 2009).

Ideological voting requires familiarity with a country’s party system. In established democracies, young voters are different partly because they have not yet learned their way around their party systems. They are more easily influenced by the arrival of new parties because they have not yet learned habits of voting tied to parties of longer standing, they more readily change their party allegiances even among existing parties, and their behaviour is in general less structured in terms of regularity and predictability (see also: Brug and Kritzinger, 2012; Wagner and Kritzinger, 2012; Walczak et al., 2012). It has been suggested (Eijk and Franklin, 2009) that voting behaviour in new democracies differs from behaviour in established democracies in just the same way that behaviour among new voters in established democracies differs from behaviour of established voters in established democracies. Put simply, in new democracies all voters are new.

Testing this proposition in new democracies is difficult because in none of these countries do we have baseline surveys of party choice conducted before the advent of democracy to serve as points of comparison for the behaviour of voters when the new regime comes into being. Italy provides us with a crucial natural experiment in which an established democracy experienced the arrival of a new party system. What we see in Italy, in 1990 and beyond, confirms and even adds nuance to the expectations we had for politics in a new democracy. We expected voters in a new party system to evince less agreement on where parties stand in left-right terms (H1), and to make less use of left-right position when making party choices (H2). We also expected the oldest cohorts to be least flexible in adapting to the new party system (H3). Although differences between generations tend to be small (just as in Walczak et al., 2012; Wagner and Kritzinger, 2012), all these expectations have been confirmed by the Italian experience. In addition we established that only the oldest cohorts (those aged over 60) lack adaptability, which is encouraging if we wonder how long a new party system remains in flux. At least in the Italian case the country does not have to wait for the passing of all voters who were above the age of 30 when the new system arrived. Only the oldest voters showed notably less adaptability than voters in general, and those voters can be expected to have largely been removed by natural processes within twenty years of the new system coming into being.

If these findings were to apply to democracies in which there was no prior democratic experience at the time the new system came into being, it suggests that a new party system can become consolidated in as little as twenty years, though this would depend on the extent to which parties take up settled positions that are not frequently changed. Evidently this is a condition that varies very much as between different new democracies, and we see signs in the Italian case that fluidity of a new party system can reduce the ability of that system to develop the ‘normal’ patterns of ideological voting that serve to anchor a party system and give it stability.

The changes the Italian party system has gone through over the last two decades seem to have also spurred a process that occurred across Western Europe (Franklin et al., 1992, 2009): the loosening of the (socio-structural) ties that almost automatically bound a voter to a particular party. The left-right dimension has been structuring party competition in Italy to an increasing degree since the major party system change in 1993. This may have been due both to the implosion of major religious and class-based parties, and to electoral changes, which were conducive to the formation of a bipolar party system (D’Alimonte, 1998; Reed, 2001; Bartolini et al., 2004; Foresti, 2009). Italy provides us with an unusual laboratory for viewing these processes at work since it lost the established parties that, in most countries, continued to receive support from older voters. In this as in so much else it appears to have more in common with new democracies than with established ones.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Wouter van der Brug and an anonymous referee for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

References


Spanje, J.H.P.v., 2010. Parties beyond the pale. Why some political parties are ostracized by their competitors while others are not. Comparative European Politics 8 (3), 354–383.


