

News and Events

A New Observatory: Monitoring Italian and European Political Communication

For many years, political communication was a marginal discipline within Italian political and sociological studies. Carlo Marletti – who was among the first in Italy to experiment with content analysis when he studied the 1958 election campaign, following suggestions from Merton, Berelson and Lazarsfeld – in his *Lectio Magistralis* at Bologna University on 30 April 2009 on ‘Political mediatisation and democracy in Italy’, looked back at how, in those early years, it was ‘only cultivated by a small group of scholars, who had considerable trouble persuading the scientific community to recognise their expertise’. Today, of course, the discipline has become organised and is open to new perspectives (systemic analysis, agenda studies, the impact of the new technologies). It is recognised and in the main deemed legitimate, although some diffidence still remains regarding what is too often thought of as a discipline of lesser standing within traditional political science.

In this cultural climate of acceptance but ‘with some reservations’, a group of scholars from Turin University, following in Carlo Marletti’s footsteps, has founded a new Observatory on Political Communication (OPC). Under the leadership of Franca Roncarolo, a group of young researchers and analysts are the protagonists of this initiative.

The OPC aims to provide on-going reflections on communication flows in the national and international spheres, especially but not only in the political field. It was set up on the occasion of the General Election of 2008, and systematically monitors election campaigns in the Italian media (press, television, Internet). Through the new Web portal *Political Communication Monitor* (<http://www.politicalcommunicationmonitor.eu>), the OPC makes the following resources freely available to experts, scholars, students and interested citizens: (1) the results obtained by monitoring the national media; (2) an organised collection of election propaganda material of the different parties (TV commercials; election posters; election programmes consultable through key words; opinion polls carried in the media) that will gradually be extended to include past campaigns and

elections; (3) reports and documentation of research carried out by the group in the field of political and other types of communication.

Since 1 March, in the run-up to the European parliament elections of 6-7 June, the Observatory has been carefully monitoring the attention paid by the Italian media to the issue of 'Europe'. It is using two tools for this: the 'barometer', which, providing an index of the immediate impact, is simply a way of 'taking the pulse' of European issues in the daily newspapers (*Corriere della Sera, la Repubblica, La Stampa, Il Giornale*), on news the bulletins of the seven generalist TV networks, and on the Web (Google, Google News, YouTube, Facebook). More traditional quantification instruments are being used to measure: (a) the visibility of Europe and the presence of European issues on the agenda of the main national newspapers and TV news bulletins; (b) the centrality that the European frame assumes in articles and TV features; (c) the presence of the chief Italian and international, institutional and political, actors discussing Europe and the European elections in the press and on the TV news, in order to map the themes touched upon in their speeches (concerning Europe or the elections).

While at present the OPC is concentrating on the media and European integration, the *Political Communication Monitor* portal will subsequently also be focussing on other lines of research on which the group is working: 'Safety and public debate', which explores the relationship between safety-related themes, citizens' perceptions and the role of the media at the local, national and European levels; 'Local information', which monitors the media system in Piedmont; 'Government communication and the permanent campaign', which integrates analysis of the elections with a study of the political-journalistic debate on the controversies connected with the Government's actions, developed in the media and elsewhere; and lastly 'Politics and the Web' to analyse the evolution of Italian political communication in regard to the new technologies.

Cristopher Cepernich
University of Turin

Polis: Young Researcher Competition – 2nd Edition

The journal *Polis, Journal of Research and Studies on Society and Politics in Italy*, promotes a competition for the best three articles written by young researchers in the field of Italian social science. Participants are invited to submit an article based on empirical research dealing with political, social, economic, or cultural phenomena (including comparative approaches) in contemporary Italy. Winners will have their articles will be published by «Polis» in 2010, receive a free two-year subscription to the journal and be

invited to present their work in a public seminar at the Istituto Cattaneo in Bologna. Evaluation of the articles will take into account originality of topic, quality of empirical analysis, and solidity of the theoretical framework. No specific topics, research methods, or theoretical approaches are preferred over others. The journal's editorial board will be responsible for evaluation. The submitted text must not have been published, not even in part, in other journals or books, nor have been submitted for publication to other journals. The competition is open to anyone who has yet to reach the age of 35 and is engaged in research. In case of articles with more than one author, this rule applies to each of them. Editing rules and criteria (length of text, bibliography format, etc.) can be found at the following website: www.cattaneo.org/polis.htm. The article should be sent via e-mail – by 15 November 2009 – to: polis@cattaneo.org; the accompanying message should specify as its object «Young Researcher Competition» and mention the submitter's name and e-mail address. Candidates will receive a message confirming reception of the article. Evaluation and communication of winners' names will occur no later than February 2010.

Debora Mantovani

Call For Papers: Political Studies Association (PSA), 60th Anniversary Conference, Edinburgh, 29 March–1 April 2010

Title: Party leadership in Western Europe: Strictly Personal?

Convenors: Duncan McDonnell (Turin) and James Newell (Salford)

The Italian Politics Specialist Group and the French Politics and Policy Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association envisage sponsoring a workshop on the above topic at the Association's annual conference to be held in Edinburgh in March/April 2010.

For several years there has in most western European democracies been a growing 'personalization' of political leadership as a result of well-known processes of change having to do with

- the role of the mass media in rendering the lives of the individuals who walk on the public stage much more visible than they ever were in the past and allowing politicians to present themselves not just as leaders, but as 'one of us';
- the switch from 'party-' to 'candidate-centred' campaigning – declining ideological conflict having shifted attention from position to valence issues and thus to candidates' competence; television and other electronic media, by allowing candidates to appeal directly to voters,

having diminished the requirement for good party organisation and thus the attention to party itself in campaigns;

- the role of declining ideological conflict in shifting the political battleground to the terrain of morality – with parties increasingly attempting to compete by fomenting scandal – and thus a growing focus on matters of personal integrity.
- the rise of ‘personal parties’, founded (or re-launched) and led by individuals, with political communication strategies being almost entirely focussed on these leaders.

But while the causes and concomitants of personal *leadership* have been much explored, much less attention has been paid to its possible effects in terms of the significance of individual *leaders*. Consequently, fundamental questions remain unanswered – not least the question of whether the heightened *focus* – in political competition – on leaders and their personal qualities has been accompanied by any growth in their actual *power*. This raises a range of closely related questions, such as: If their power *has* increased, to what extent, in seeking to understand political processes and processes of political change, must we now pay greater attention than we once did to matters of political agency as compared to matters of structure? What are the factors that account for the emergence and growth of unusually powerful party leaders? That is, what are the factors that obstruct and enhance their efforts to act as significant agents of change?

We invite papers exploring, from a single-country or a cross-national perspective, any of these themes. We are especially interested in studies of personal party leadership which could shed light on the Italian experience and the extent to which the role of an unusually powerful leader like Silvio Berlusconi represents a uniquely Italian phenomenon as opposed to being merely a rather extreme example of a more widespread, cross-national phenomenon. However, papers that explore the foregoing themes by drawing on alternative comparisons in Western Europe are equally welcome.

Paper abstracts (circa 250 words) should be e-mailed by 1 September to: Duncan McDonnell (duncanmcdonnell@yahoo.com) and Jim Newell (j.l.newell@salford.ac.uk). For more information, please visit the conference website at: www.psa.ac.uk/2010/.

Call For Papers: Political Studies Association (PSA), 60th Anniversary Conference, Edinburgh, 29 March–1 April 2010.

Title: Morality, political scandals and the detachment of citizens from the political process

Convenors: Daniele Albertazzi (Birmingham), James Newell (Salford) and Umut Korkut (University College, Dublin)

Since the early 1990s in many democracies there have been growing levels of public concern – fuelled partly by high-profile scandals – about the standards of conduct of public office-holders. This is no better exemplified than by the scandal surrounding MPs’ expenses in the UK, the recent allegations concerning the conduct of Silvio Berlusconi in the area of personal morality in Italy or the mayhem in Budapest in 2006 after the leaking of a secret speech by Gyurcsány delivered to his party delegates. Of course, these affairs are very different in many respects and timing. What they have in common is that they have ultimately been driven by the perception that the alleged wrong-doing has cheapened the democratic process, resulting in more or less significant losses of authority for the political actors involved. Against this background, important for an understanding of contemporary democratic processes and their quality is knowledge of the role of political scandals and public concerns about probity in the growth of anti-political sentiments, declining turnouts and other manifestations of citizens’ detachment from the political process. Comparisons in particular between Eastern and Western Europe would seem to have much to offer: while they have shown the aforementioned signs of citizens’ detachment, scandals and public concerns seem to play different roles in each case: for example, though the issues at stake in the British MPs’ expenses row and Berlusconi scandals have had much in common, their consequences in terms of voting behaviour and parties’ electoral fortunes have so far been rather different. And in Hungary, a leaked speech can even raise doubts about the legitimacy of an elected government.

We invite offers of papers that draw on East and West European cases or both to explore any aspect of the relationship between citizens’ political engagement on the one hand, and scandals and concerns about probity, on the other – bearing in mind that the relationship between the two almost certainly goes in both directions and is very likely to be reciprocal. Papers might have a very specific focus, such as this or that election outcome, or they might be much broader, ‘think pieces’. What is important is that they should point to at least some conclusions generally relevant for our main variables of concern.

Paper abstracts (circa 250 words) should be e-mailed by 1 September to: Daniele Albertazzi (d.albertazzi@bham.ac.uk), Jim Newell (j.l.newell@salford.ac.uk), Umut Korkut (umut.korkut@ucd.ie). For more information, please visit the conference website at: <http://www.psa.ac.uk/2010/>.