The Sufferings of the Ordinary Citizen

Alfio Mastropaolo
University of Turin

Abstract: What does the ordinary citizen think about democracy and about politics? This article, based on the initial findings of a study conducted at the University of Turin, tries to answer this question by employing the depth interview as a data-gathering technique. The point of departure is the lack of any affection for politics, but this study reveals that the citizen of the turn of the millennium is critical pour cause. His attitude to politics is much more nuanced than the opinion polls suggest. Broadly speaking, citizens' attitudes to politics can be thought of in terms of three main ideal types: the "estranged", the "detached", the "involved". The three types are compatible with the right-wing and left-wing divide, are not significantly affected by social location or income, and share a sense of dissatisfaction with politicians and public policies. Discontent with the workings of politics, however, does not so far seem to have had any great effects on election outcomes. But this malaise must be taken seriously, though there are no great ideas about how to deal with it. Presidentialism, federalism, the primaries, or even greater civic engagement will not placate the discontented. Rather, it will be necessary, once more to knit together social ties over a vast area. The transformation undergone by the parties in the last twenty years has eliminated a crucial agency for the maintenance of a democratic citizenry and has deprived politicians of an essential link with citizens, but also of a link between the national and local spheres, and even of a horizontal link between local spheres.

Keywords: ordinary citizen, democracy, media, opinion polls.

A research project

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) did not like opinion polls. Among other things he reproached them for projecting onto respondents the (political) viewpoint of the researcher – of oversimplifying reality by posing contrived questions that disorient the respondent and do violence to her point of view. Almost as if to pay tribute to his sense of frustration we have for some years now been carrying out a research project with students taking the specialist degree in Sociology at the University of Turin, employing as our data-gathering technique the depth interview. The theme of the research is: What does the ordinary citizen think about democracy and about politics?

The depth interview is not itself without its drawbacks. For one thing, it too involves creating an unnatural situation. And, while the respondent is free to interpret the questions and to work out the form of his answer, the

researcher has ample scope to interpret the resulting interview transcript, perhaps even more than the already considerable scope available to opinion-poll analysts. This is by way of saying that no one method can be regarded as being superior to others; that for our research we have adopted one of them, but that the conclusions we arrive at are those that ought to be typical of investigations generally and that is, they are open to subsequent verification.

The research does not make use of statistical sampling. It attempts merely to make contact with a group of social actors mixed in terms of social extraction, occupation, education, age and gender. A semi-structured interview is carried out with respondents, the interviewer adapting the schedule according to the progress of the interview and allowing each respondent as far as possible to respond freely to the stimuli they receive. The results cannot convey how the interviewees are distributed among a pre-defined array of alternatives. But they make it possible to reconstruct the ideal types to which respondents approximate. Analysis of the interview transcripts is not yet complete. But certain reflections and preliminary hypotheses can be suggested – ones supported by a far more solidly based body of research carried out in France on the same themes (Gaxie, 2002).

The point of departure for the enquiry is the lack, attested to by the polls, of any affection for politics. This is not just an Italian phenomenon (Hay, 2007; Diamanti, 2007). The image of the "critical citizen" is everywhere so widespread that for some observers there is no reason even to give it any special attention (Norris, 1999). Spoilt by democracy, the average citizen has apparently become fussy and hypercritical. Naturally, not everyone agrees with such a simplistic reading and there are those who reassure themselves by observing that, to judge from the polls, democracy itself at least enjoys widespread support. There is, it is true, little love for politicians or the parties, but on the other hand, citizens appreciate the unconventional forms of political participation (Grunberg, Mayer and Sniderman, 2002). In its own small way our investigation does nothing to contradict these findings. However, it reveals that the citizen of the turn of the millennium is in no sense an individual who is inherently critical but rather is one who is so *pour cause*. His attitude to politics is much more nuanced than the opinion polls suggest. Diffidence, mistrust and scepticism are not generic sentiments but are expressed, thought about and justified in a variety of different ways. Broadly speaking, our research suggests that citizens' attitudes to politics can be thought of in terms of three main ideal types which we will call the "estranged", the "detached", the "involved". The three reflect a criterion of centrality, and do not necessarily correspond with variations in social location or income.

Three ideal types

The "estranged" ideal type corresponds to those who have extremely vague understandings of political matters; who have few opportunities for any kind of contact with the world of politics or politicians; who struggle to distinguish the right from the left; who refuse, even, to express any opinions ("I have no education and no understanding of politics"); who are most likely to abstain from voting, or who vote to please relatives, friends, acquaintances or some political agent. Concentrated in the age categories at the extremes of the life cycle (the elderly outside the labour market, the young waiting to enter it), poorly educated, more provincial than urban, the "estranged" are not necessarily ones who are socially marginal or have low incomes. Yet, they have a vision of politics that is hazy, distant, simplistic, one drawn from television images – more from entertainment programmes than from the studios of anchormen like Bruno Vespa and Michele Santoro, never mind from news broadcasts –, a vision focused on some personality given a high profile by the media (often thanks to his striking actions) or on some especially noteworthy event. Not that their lack of efficacy renders their voting choices a chance affair without rhyme or reason, but certainly it does not allow them to explain their outlooks with detailed arguments of any description – these outlooks oscillating between indifference and scepticism, diffidence and resignation.

The second ideal type, the one corresponding to the "detached", represents those citizens who are quite well informed politically; who quite frequently read newspapers and watch political documentary programmes on television; who have opportunities for contact with the world of politicians and politics as the users of services, or because of involvement in initiatives of the local council or the neighbourhood, or some other form of participation; who are able to make judgements, even if generic and stereotypical, often corroborated by their own personal experience. When probed by the interviewer, initially critical judgments about public services and their provision can become more positive or more negative in the light of the respondents' personal experiences. Consequently, their judgments about politics and its functioning are often interconnected: this service is provided satisfactorily, but not that one; this party better represents my interests than that one; this policy responds better than another to the needs of the young, of workers, of women, etc. Again, having occasionally met specific political figures, and having been able to appreciate their merits or realise their powerlessness, they express judgments about them which, as a consequence, become less hasty. A local politician may be the object of an appreciative judgment denied to national politicians, but with regard to the latter, the detached are able to formulate judgments that are more or less positive in accordance with their television appearances. Including those with average levels of education but also university

graduates, the detached often feel they have better things to do than to concern themselves with politics. Political concerns play a small role in their everyday existences or their working lives: it does not connect with them and they do not seek to connect with it. They thus talk about it only occasionally, though that does not prevent them from distinguishing between the performance of one government as compared to another or from having different expectations of one political grouping as compared to another. Though they do so inconsistently perhaps, they turn out to vote, choosing on the basis of a reasonable degree of understanding, or else justifying their choices in terms of distinct value judgments.

Finally, the "involved" ideal type represents the politically informed citizens; those who keep abreast of political developments, who read newspapers and watch current affairs broadcasts on television; those who consistently turn out to vote; those who are not averse to some form of political activism, nowadays often of a non-party political kind, or who at least express a willingness to be active or to be drawn into activity; those who talk often about politics with friends or work colleagues, who are able to articulate their attitudes and to express value judgments in some detail. The ease with which they engage with political issues is often a function of their levels of education, but an effective alternative, which transforms the potentially "estranged" and "detached" into citizens who are "involved", is political and trade-union activism, even if it is only past activism. They do not all perceive politics in the same way: there are those who are dissatisfied with the performance of politicians and accuse them of a lack of probity; those with perceptions coloured by nostalgia for happier times; the resigned ("politics is difficult, the means available to policy makers these days are few and far between") and the hopeful. Not only that, but their frustrations are not generic ones. They are dissatisfied in some respects but often satisfied in some other respects. They distinguish clearly between the right and the left, while viewing critically the growing similarity in behaviour and policy offerings between the two. But there are even those who, despite the growing similarities, consider the distinction to be still significant. The involved make judgments both about governing politicians and those belonging to the opposition. Sometimes they accuse them of submissiveness; at other times they continue to place their trust in them. They distinguish between the local and national institutions of government. When they fail to vote, they justify their abstention in terms of some political reason. They claim to abstain in order to make a protest, to give expression to their discontent or their sense of powerlessness. The behaviour of politicians, their indifference to the problems of the country or ordinary people, is a keenly felt reason for discontent, as is widespread corruption, the impunity enjoyed by politicians, their inability to adhere to the principles they claim to be guided by, or even to keep their election promises.

The obscure object of discontent

All three ideal types are compatible (in ways that vary quite significantly) with right-wing and left-wing attitudes. But they are different from each other. They imply different degrees of familiarity with politics and different capacities to react to and make judgments about it. What is constant across the three types is a critical stance towards politics. Each ideal type expresses different types of criticism, differently justified. Though commonplaces abound, they sit alongside judgments autonomously arrived at. Nor is it the case that commonplaces invariably predominate. On average (and this too is a feature shared by the three ideal types) judgments of the quality of public services – and especially education and health – are highly positive. Finally, all three ideal types concur in terms of the basic aspects on which dissatisfaction with politics focuses: politicians and public policies.

Let us start with the policies. Judgments are not uniform, even though a significant dividing line can be perceived. Probed about it, almost all respondents maintain that a well-functioning democratic regime is one that makes possible the provision of certain basic social services and facilitates honesty in fiscal matters on the part of citizens. But judgments about the tax regime are anything but uniform, such that there emerges a basic opposition – closely reflecting the left-right distinction – between those in favour of welfare provisions and willing to bare the costs through the tax system (possibly because they are dependent on earnings from employment and thus lack any opportunities for tax evasion) and those demanding tax reductions even while remaining strongly attached to the continued provision of welfare services. Those believing they can do without the services are a very small minority who hardly show up at all among our interviewees.

That public policies give rise to selective expressions of discontent is hardly surprising. That taxi drivers and self-employed professionals did not like the Prodi government's strictness in fiscal matters is as understandable as the discontent aroused among teachers by the education cuts imposed by education minister, Mariastella Gelmini. Those who still believe in the general interest could at least debate whether the arguments of the former group are stronger than those of the latter or vice versa, but in neither case would the Government ever have been able to obtain unanimity. One can in fact take issue with the way in which such measures have been adopted recently, which is perhaps part of the problem that interests us here. A bit more discussion and explanation of the policies adopted, a bit more public debate, in Parliament and outside, would help not only to refine certain measures but also to render them more acceptable. Decisiveness, which has for some time been an attribute politicians have sought to exemplify, often seems like a retort, not to say a vendetta, which

in its haste forgets the extent to which those on the receiving end of public policies have sensibilities that are intricate and ambivalent. Social stratification is no longer as it once was, and there can be contrasting social locations represented within the same nuclear family – with the risk that children or husbands gain advantages from policies that disadvantage parents or wives. The effect is to engender in everyone the sense of unity that comes from shared feelings of hostility towards politics.

The other great issue provoking discontent is the behaviour of politicians. Here we encounter blanket condemnations leaving no room for appeal, and complex judgments. Respondents variously absolve those belonging to the political grouping to which they feel closest while condemning those from which they feel most distant; condemn both and vote holding their noses; show comprehension for both sides. Yet one complaint crops up constantly: politicians are distant and privileged and put their own interests ahead of those of the electorate. There do exist those willing to admit that politics is a vocation requiring dedication and effort, that the responsibilities are great and that there exist politicians attentive to the needs of ordinary people. But the image is predominantly one of distance and privilege. Is such an image inevitable – or might some modification of it at least be possible?

A certain degree of distance between governors and the governed is inherent in the division of labour between the two. Politics, as Bourdieu (2000) has taught us, is a separate field. In that respect it is like many other areas of social life. It has its own logic, rules, codes and conflicts: all of which generally seem abstruse to those observing them from the outside. There are actions, processes and linguistic expressions that are difficult to decipher without knowledge of the particular sphere in which they manifest themselves. Democratic political processes were meant to help reduce such opacity but they were not successful. Rather, they brought with them an additional negative aspect. In a democracy, citizens' attitudes towards politics are very strict from a normative point of view. Even those willing to ask favours of the politicians they know view politics as a public service. It could not be otherwise. It is on this basis after all that the legitimacy of democratic politics is founded. Paradoxically, the ordinary citizen is more willing to accept the involvement in politics of one who is independently very wealthy – "He's rich so he won't steal" – without paying particular attention to any conflicts of interest, than she is to accept the idea that politicians might obtain, from their work, impunity or certain pay benefits. The fact remains that today's politicians actually do enjoy privileges of this kind: especially Italian politicians.

Is somebody sowing discord?

The question remains: Why is dissatisfaction with politicians and politics so widespread? And why, if politics is unpopular not only in Italy but

everywhere, is it more unpopular in Italy than elsewhere? Let us dwell on this question. Avoiding the national tendency to dramatise, which often contaminates both questions and answers, we should take seriously one fact in particular, a fact not revealed by opinion polls because they cannot reveal it, and that is, that in few countries of the world is it as habitual to speak badly of politics as it is in Italy. It is a very long-standing national pastime, one that began before Italy became a nation and that, with varying degrees of intensity, has been constantly practiced since then. "*Piove, governo ladro*" (Its raining thief of a government) is an expression whose meaning cannot be adequately conveyed when translated. In the parlance of Italians – and in the parlance of the educated strata no less than in that of the less exulted strata – politics equals corruption, *trasformismo* (converting into a mark of shame a practice that was by no means without its virtues) and inefficiency. Is it any wonder that Italians are afflicted by a critical predisposition that is almost unique, one such as to reduce the value of poll-based research, and to see to it that they emerge from any comparison without rivals?

Not only that, but in Italy politics is practiced by denigrating politics itself while seeking its root-and-branch reform. Unfortunately, the past gets forgotten in all of this. In the 1980s no one remembered the terrible effects of the anti-parliamentary rhetoric of a century before. Thus it was that in 1992-94 the so-called First Republic fell noisily – and chaotically – more for the furious campaign of denigration to which it was subjected than for its undeniable but remediable defects. Fifteen years later, the two major contenders for leadership of the country continue to compete by evoking the (undoubted) conflict of interests of the one and the communist arrogance of the other. That both have some idea about the future of the country is probable. But frankly, aside from what has already been initiated, it is difficult to discern how a majority capable of further reform might be constituted. Or at least the contenders refuse to make it clear, aiming, rather, to focus on their respective defects. This, when all is said and done, represents a significant saving for them in terms of any pressure to offer deeper, more serious arguments.

That such a specifically Italian disease fails to reassure spectators of the show is beyond doubt. What impression must citizens have of politics when it presents itself in such terms? This partly explains the gap with other countries revealed by the polls. Fortunately, other countries have taken action to make up for the delay and close the gap. Beyond Italy's borders too politics has for some time had a predilection for anti-political events, actions and utterances. The politician who dons the mask of the man in the street, who denigrates politics, who, as recently happened in the French presidential elections, promises in the event of success to establish mechanisms to enable citizens to supervise the work of parliamentarians

(for some unknown reason deemed unreliable), does a disservice to his own reputation and those of his colleagues, not to mention politics itself. At this point it is necessary to bring into the picture the behaviour of the media and especially of television.

Television has its rules and they are rather rigid. Among the most fundamental is the obligation – one internalised by programme makers but also by newspaper editors – always to seek to increase the size of the audience. As is well known, it is the size of the audience that determines the volume of advertising revenue, which determines the television companies' capacity to remain in the market – while it is the audience the elicits the consecration of political personalities as celebrities, politics-as-spectacle, scandal-mongering, the investigation and revelation of the private lives of governors both actual and aspiring. To denigrate politics, thus, makes for a good show, as does the eccentricity of the many politicians who pass themselves off as ordinary people. If that were not enough, even people's dissatisfaction with politics becomes the stuff of spectacle, with the media putting it on show, highlighting by contrast the virtues of the non-political, or of the apparently non-political, represented by civil society.

Media logic poses a very significant challenge for politicians (Roncarolo, 2008). But equally, the media represent, for the world of politics, a not inconsiderable resource for communicating with citizens. What politician, which party can forego making use of it and concede to rivals a formidable competitive advantage? The problem resides in the fact that the logic of televised politics has (everywhere) been accepted without qualification. The large parties were already in difficulties because of the social changes affecting their followers; as organisational apparatuses they were worn out. So, dazzled by the media, they externalised basic activities like electoral marketing, and hastily dispersed militants, activists and members. According to two well-known students of parties, the party-in-office (located in representative institutions and in local and national executive bodies) has obscured the party-on-the-ground (Katz and Mair, 2002). Only now are some showing signs of a change of heart. The Northern League has equipped itself with a dense network of highly active local bases. And Forza Italia has re-established the old network of relationships on the ground of the DC and its allies, even though combining it with a framework inspired by Bonaparte-ism. In any event, the damage done by the hasty dismantling of the parties is two-fold: for citizens, the politics they are most familiar with is the ephemeral and fatuous politics of the television shows, which is precisely that which most arouses their sense of having been abandoned and their critical attitudes; for politicians, communication from the top down is heavily influenced and distorted by media logic and not very effective. Or it is effective only in the short term.

Let us think about it

Let us pause. Discontent with the workings of politics does not so far seem to have had any great effects on election outcomes. Notwithstanding what some like to argue, the elector when she votes does not reward those who have governed well or promise to govern well, nor does she punish those who have governed badly or threaten to govern badly. If this were the case, Obama would have won a long time ago. We can debate at length what it is that determines voting choices, but inertia remains predominant (Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2002). The median elector, certainly more volatile than in the past, shifts only among parties belonging to the same coalition, which he chooses for the long term on the basis of his own personal political history and the social, cultural and working environments in which he finds himself. The effects of information about current affairs are not to be overestimated by imagining a voter who is well informed or who reasons, ponders and decides. The discontented elector at most abstains. And it is the abstainers who determine the final outcome. Even the most recent general elections have failed to register significant shifts from one coalition to the other, showing only marginal adjustments. Aside from the choices of coalition, which have been decisive, the side that has won has done so because it has managed to mobilise its electorate more than the other one has. And the increased rate of abstention that was registered at the last election as compared to the one before was due to a fall in turnout among those on the centre left: this had nothing to do with any generalised dissatisfaction with politics.

This does not mean that generalised discontent has no costs, notwithstanding the claims of those who deny this on the grounds of its ubiquity, thus apparently rendering it banal. However widespread, discontent is not, our research suggests, a fashion or a whim. It is a shared attitude based on concrete problems and perceptions of them. If democracy is to be taken seriously, then citizens must be taken seriously too and there are also good reasons for thinking that discontent with politics is poisonous. That is, how can one not be afraid that mistrust of politics will gravely damage the community – leaving aside its de-legitimating effects, which are always difficult to evaluate and whose consequences are remote? If the man in the street mistrusts politicians and often disparages them, with the possible exception of those he votes for, how can one imagine that government activity will not be deeply discredited? And how will it be possible to avoid the temptation to 'do it oneself'? What is one to say, for example, when political action among civil-society actors is reduced to the extreme forms of protest typical of the Nimby movements? Something is definitely not working. Not to mention the risks of barbarism: as in the case of the do-it-yourself racism that is flourishing all over Italy. If the citizen believes that political representatives take care only of their own interests

and that nothing good can come from them, then she turns in on herself, or tries to go it alone, perhaps induced by those political entrepreneurs who wallow in her malaise. Let us be careful. Otherwise what will come to pass will be much crazier than the Beppe Grillo-inspired demonstrations which, as vehicles of political expression, merely testify to the malaise of their participants.

Final remarks

The malaise must be taken seriously but there are no great ideas around about how to deal with it. If discontent with politics is a problem shared by all the advanced democracies, then there is none from which anything can be learned. There is nothing to stop the attempt being made to deal with the problem alone, even though there is one thing we can learn: the need to reduce the costs of politics, which in Italy are higher than anywhere else. Reducing the costs to the European average would be a popular idea.[1]

For the rest, if there still exist those who believe that a further major (reforming) shake-up of institutions will help to make politics more palatable, then they are mistaken. It won't be presidentialism that placates the discontented, nor federalism. Perhaps the latter will please some political groups. But it will not be the teaching of regional dialects that improves the relationship between citizens and the world of politics. Let us not kid ourselves. In such a scenario, problems would be transferred from centre to periphery, instigating a frenetic process of buck-passing between the two. And with regard to presidentialism, prime-ministerial government and the rest – that is, all those solutions advanced by those who think there is too much democracy and that for the citizens' benefit the revered institution of the monarchy should be revived, for the time being fortunately only on an elected basis – many are now discovering, resentfully, what happens when too much power is given to a single individual. In addition, remedies of this kind give a further push towards the personalisation of politics, producing further de-institutionalising effects. To the abstract quality of institutions, personalisation juxtaposes the seemingly concrete quality of the words and actions of the leader – which, however, drain the same institutions of authority and credibility by subordinating them to fluctuations in the leader's own popularity.

Not even primaries will help a great deal (the recent ones having ultimately revealed merely the extent to which ordinary people are willing to place their trust in politics) and neither will any deliberative expedient, which can, it is true, be useful for consulting citizens about specific, narrowly defined issues, but not for reviving democracy. Nor will it be enough to cultivate local civic engagement by encouraging voluntary associations as Robert D. Putnam (2000) famously suggests. Rather, it will be necessary, as one of his most authoritative critics argues, once more to

knit together social ties over a vast area (Skocpol, 2003; Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002). That is to say, what would be desirable would be a few steps backwards. The transformation undergone by the parties in the last twenty years has eliminated a crucial agency for the maintenance of a democratic citizenry; it has deprived politicians of an essential link with citizens, but also of a link between the national and local spheres, and even of a horizontal link between local spheres. True, that set of links had long been gravely weakened and everything suggests that society, given what it has become, will not allow it to be revived, despite now needing it. Yet between the personal-media oriented party, and the mass party *d'antan* some point of convergence might, possibly, be found. To find out if this is the case, one has to try.

Translated by James L. Newell

References

Bourdieu, P. (1984), "L'opinion publique n'existe pas", *Questions de sociologie*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, pp. 222-235.

Bourdieu, P. (2000), *Propos sur le champ politique*, Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon.

Crenson, M. and Ginsberg, M. (2002), *How America Sidelined its Citizens and Privatized its Public*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Diamanti, I. (2000), "La Democrazia degli Interstizi. Società e partiti in Europa dopo la caduta del Muro", *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 3, 387-411.

Gaxie, D. (2000), "Les critiques profanes de la politique. Enchantements, désenchantements, ré-enchantement", in J.-L. Briquet and P. Garraud (eds.), *Juger la politique: entreprises et entrepreneurs critiques de la politique*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

Green, D., Palmquist, B. and Schickler, E. (2002), *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identity of Voters*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Grunberg, G., Mayer, N. and Sniderman, P.M. (eds.) (2002), *La démocratie à l'épreuve: une nouvelle approche de l'opinion des Français*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.

Hay, C. (2007), *Why We Hate Politics*, Cambridge: Polity.

Katz, R. and Mair, P. (2002), "The Ascendancy of the Party in Public Office: Party Organisational Change in XXth Century Democracies", in R. Gunther, J. R. Montero and J. Linz (eds.), *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 113-135.

Norris, P. (ed.) (1999), *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Putnam, R. D. (2000), *Bowling Alone. America's Declining Social Capital*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

Roncarolo, F. (2008), *Leader e media. Campagna permanente e trasformazioni della politica in Italia*, Milano: Guerini.

Skocpol, T. (2003), *Diminished Democracy*: *From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

---

[1] Let us please not drag commonplaces like populism and anti-political sentiments into this! Someone recently suggested bringing the average cost of Italian parliamentarians (€1,531,000) down to the level of their Spanish counterparts (€257,000) and halving the number of ministers and undersecretaries, as happened in France, paying them the same amount as is paid to Sarkozy: about €6,000 per month. The saving would amount to €1,060,000,000. (www.sbilanciamoci.org/forum2008/fin2009_centopunti.pdf). This would be enough to eliminate a large proportion of the indiscriminate cuts imposed by the current government on schools and universities and to allow a more considered evaluation of measures to achieve savings and the more efficient use of resources.