

Italy's Self-Image Problem

Roberta Cutillo (May 15, 2019)



A new book by the President of the Italian branch of leading research and analysis agency IPSOS, Nando Pagnoncelli, warns against the risks of governing through polls and reveals that Italians share a collective misperception of the country's situation, particularly regarding economics, migration, and crime rates.

"La penisola che non c'è" (the peninsula that isn't there) is the title of Nando Pagnoncelli's new book, an essay which reflects upon the growing reliance on polls within politics and warns of the potential threats of "sondocrazia," that is of using polls to govern.

As the President of [IPSOS](#) [2] Italia (a leading global market research and analysis agency,) Pagnoncelli is certainly qualified to discuss the topic. Some have even pointed out how it seems strange that a warning against polling comes from the head of a polling agency himself, but the



author argues for a more conscious use of such tools, in order to avoid political instrumentalization.

“Polls,” he writes, “should remain a tool for knowledge,” and not become “an oracle that points the way.”

As politicians increasingly focus on public opinion and how to win it over, the role of public polls, which determine and try to predict it, is changing. We see political leaders pursuing public consent as an end in of itself and, as they start to gain it, they can influence it.

One major issue that emerges from the analysis of public opinion is that often groups or even entire countries share a distorted perception of reality. This is particularly true in Italy.

It’s no news that Italians believe their situation to be worse than it actually is. Some time ago, for example, it was revealed that Italian citizens thought immigrants constituted 30% of the population while in reality they only represent 7%.

This misperception extends to various sectors. Amongst the 14 different countries analyzed by IPSOS, Italy was found to be the one with the most distorted self-image: overall, we believe that we are poorer, sicker, and more unemployed than we really are, that our economy is much more fragile and weak, and our crime rates higher.

One of the consequences of this is that, instead of correcting these misconceptions, the public discourse surrounding these issues actually enlarges them, creating a vicious cycle. We see this in the way the migrant and economic “crisis” are presented (sometimes sensationalized) by the media and, more alarmingly, by politicians.

Knowing what citizens already think and reinforcing it, allows politicians to gain their trust and eventually their consent because people like to be told that they are right. And if someone tries to contest certain claims, arguing that they are not accurate, political figures can easily respond by throwing the results of public opinion polls at them, as if they were in and of themselves proof of indisputable facts.

Though these considerations are quite bleak, Pagnoncelli ends his book on a positive note, claiming that younger generations, who are now starting to engage in politics, can resolve this situation by being aware of the problems we are facing. Public awareness is in fact the key to this issue and to the main aim of the book.



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