

BOOK REVIEW

Political Party Funding and Private Donations in Italy

by Chiara Fiorelli. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2021. 156p.

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Political finance is a difficult subject, both empirically and theoretically. Following the money is difficult; it takes a much greater effort to establish some basic numbers than in other areas of political science. Theoretically, political finance has often been isolated from the centre of political science and, indeed, from the centre of any other discipline. Chiara Fiorelli's excellent book overcomes these challenges to provide us with a slew of basic data that contribute to one of the defining debates of European political science.

The book provides an exhaustive analysis of private donations received by Italian parties in 1987, 1994, and 2013 and uses them to assess the extent to which Italian parties are still connected to society. So, political finance is not an explanation for the party system, as in the cartel party thesis, or a factor in corruption. Instead, the size, provenance, and destination of private donations are used as indicators of the nature of the parties, like, for example, party membership numbers or party organizational structures. The sharp changes in the nature of the Italian party system and political finance arrangements make for a rich case study. It is these changes that motivate the selection of years. 1987 is the last election year before the 'Tangentopoli' scandal destroyed the post-war party system and the generous system of public funding. The 1994 election was the first one of the new era and 2013 was the most recent when the research began.

The early chapters discuss an impressive (and, indeed, almost frightening!) range of literature. Although some sections are almost too conscientious in referring to relevant scholarship, the main focus is on the cartel party thesis. In using private donations to assess the capability of parties to connect to society, Fiorelli introduces a concept and a measure that can potentially be used in any representative democracy. The connective capability of a party consists of diversity (the range of interests donating to the party) and intensity (the number of donations). She generates an index that insightfully compares the connective capability of the parties at any given time. Unfortunately, the way the index is constructed does not allow comparisons across time, which is a pity, given the longitudinal emphasis of the cartel thesis and much of the party literature, as well as the long and interesting time period studied in the book. Nonetheless, in future research, it should be possible to rework the index so that it is comparable across time and even has an absolute meaning. In spite of this limitation, Fiorelli makes a convincing argument that the parties' connective capability has declined across time.

Personalization is the next most important discussion in the book. Here again, the decline of the party is documented. Donations to candidates relative to donations to the party itself rise over time and undermine the coherence and autonomy of political parties. Private money in Italy appears to have favoured the likely winners, not the incumbents. It is hard to tell from this whether donors sought influence with the incoming government or instead were disinterested supporters in tune with public opinion. There did not appear to be a clear ideological bias in donations over time. However, the left tended to receive fewer, but larger, donations.

Fiorelli rightly concludes that the implications of her work are alarming for party democracy in Italy. The analysis of private donations highlights the isolation of parties. They received small numbers of donations from a narrow section of society. In fact, it was often candidates, rather than parties, that received donations. Unusually, the argument seems more relevant to Italy's present than it was to the periods from which the evidence was collected. Public funding in the usual sense has been abolished; all that remains is a tax benefit for donors. It is hard to be optimistic that Italian parties will somehow discover social and financial support to fund their activities adequately while maintaining their independence from rich individuals and sectional interests.

This is a vital book for political finance and party organization scholars. It was beyond the scope of the study to consider why Italy might have developed different patterns of private donations to her neighbours. This is partly because there have been few national case studies on the scale of this one. Nonetheless, hopefully, other scholars will conduct comparable studies so that we can start taking the money in European politics seriously.