

The Long Lasting Political Legacy of the Nazi Occupation of Italy

Nicola Fontana (London School of Economics), Tommaso Nannicini (Department of Economics and IGIER, Bocconi University; CEPR; IZA), and Guido Tabellini (Department of Economics and IGIER, Bocconi University; CIFAR; CEPR; Ces-Ifo)

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Introduction

What determines political attitudes of citizens? Material interests, is the standard answer given by economists. Of course, the real world is more complex than that, and political attitudes also reflect ideology and culture. A large literature, including many contributions to this ebook, presents convincing evidence that history leaves a lasting imprint in cultural traits, in many domains. It would not be surprising, therefore, if political attitudes were also shaped by specific past events in national histories.

The legacy of history on political attitudes is bound to be particularly important with regard to specific historical junctures, that happen when new parties are born and young generations form new political identities breaking with the past. Wars, and in particular civil wars, are examples of such critical junctures (see Mayhew (2004) and Sundquist (2011)). A democracy born out of a civil war inherits a legacy of polarization and conflict that puts it in a very different starting position, compared to one where political institutions evolved more gradually and peacefully.

In this chapter we summarize the main findings of Fontana, Nannicini and Tabellini (2016). In that paper, we study the events towards the end of World War II, when Italy was devastated by the Nazi occupation and a “civil war” that left about 200,000 Italian casualties between partisans, fascists, civilians, and individuals deported to Germany that never came back (Pavone, 1991 and Gentile 2015). These events had a profound and lasting impact on Italian politics. They shaped the Italian Constitution, the party system, the identity of political leaders, and political traditions and narratives for several decades. We explore the specific legacy of these events on election outcomes in the post-War era, and discuss possible channels of historical influence that operate through political attitudes of citizens and through party organizations.

The Italian civil war and Nazi occupation during World War II

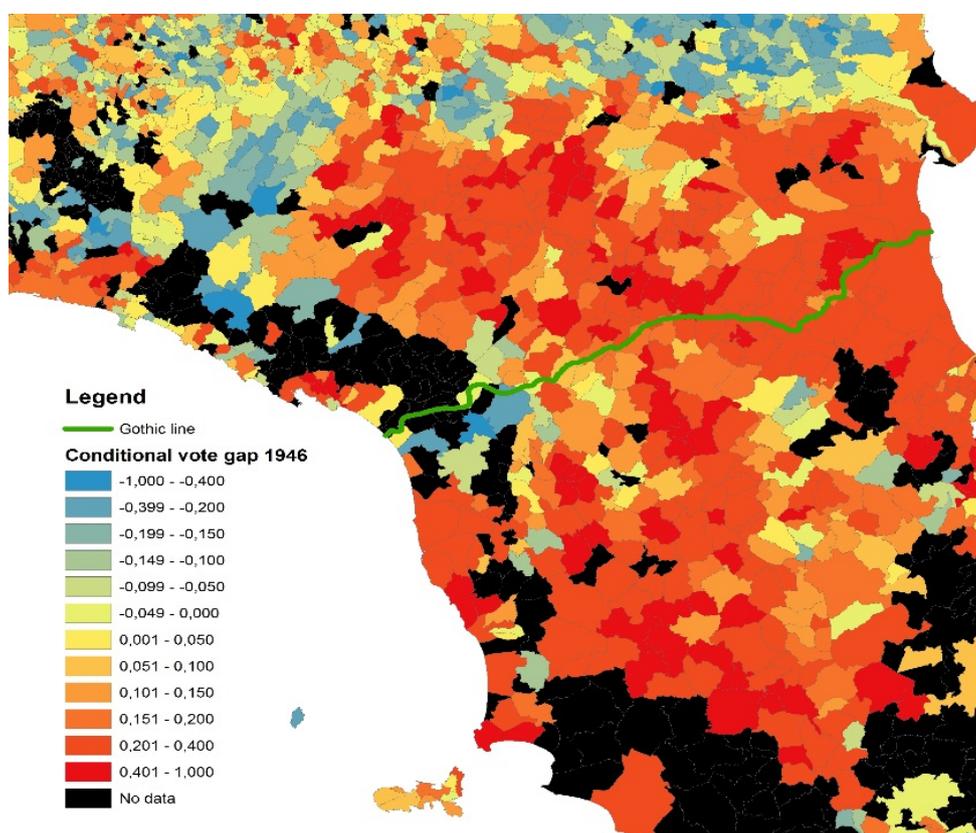
Between September 1943 and May 1945, Italy was a battleground between the Allies and the Germans. Italy itself was split, with resistance brigades fighting the Germans, and troops loyal to Mussolini helping them. The intensity of the war varied across Italy, since the Allies freed Southern and much of Central Italy almost immediately, while Northern-Central Italy remained under Nazi occupation for much longer. In particular, the battlefield between Germans and Allies remained stuck for about six months near the so called Gothic line, a line cutting Northern-Central Italy from West to East (the green line in Figure 1). In our paper we exploit this heterogeneity, to draw inferences about how the civil war and Nazi occupation influenced post-war political outcomes.

Our main empirical strategy compares municipalities just above and just below the Gothic line. The position of the line was determined by accidental military criteria, and municipalities close to but on opposite sides of the battlefield are very similar in most respects. The main difference between these municipalities is that those North of the line were exposed to a longer Nazi occupation and a longer civil war. Any difference in their post-war voting outcomes can thus be attributed to the longer duration of the foreign occupation and civil war.

A longer Nazi occupation strengthened the Communist Party

Post-war election outcomes are indeed starkly different North vs South of the Gothic line. In municipalities just North of the line, where the Nazi occupation lasted longer, the extreme left (communist) party is on average much stronger: its vote share in the 1946 election to the Constitutional Assembly is about 8 percentage points larger than just South of the line (after conditioning on the latest pre-war election outcomes that were held in the 1920s). Unconditional differences are even larger. The communist gain above the line is mainly at the expenses of the catholic party (the Cristian Democrats), although this finding is less robust, suggesting that the communist may also have gained votes from other moderate or center-left parties. Figure 1 illustrates the difference between communist and catholic vote shares in the area near the Gothic line in 1946, after conditioning on pre-war election outcomes in the 1920s. Darker red colours, indicating a stronger communist, are more frequent just North the line, while the opposite is true for darker blue colours, indicating a stronger catholic vote South of the line.

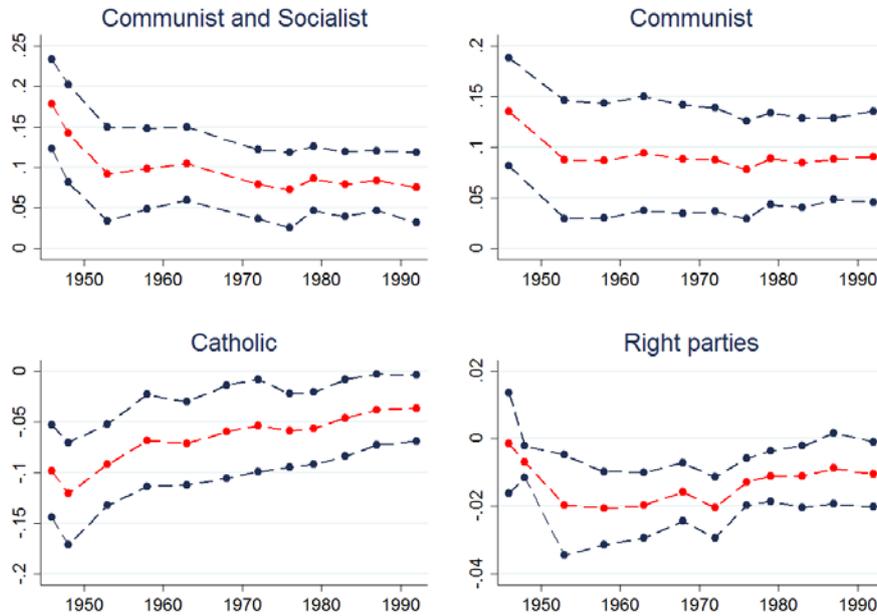
Figure 1: Communist – Catholic vote share in 1946, conditional on election outcomes in the 1920s.



Note: dark red: strong support to Communists, dark blu: strong support to Catholics, black: missing

These differences are highly persistent and last in subsequent national elections until the end of the First Republic in the early 1990s. Figure 2 considers post-war elections from 1946 up to 1992, and plots the average differences (and 95% confidence intervals) in vote shares between municipalities North and South of the Gothic line, after conditioning on absolute distance from the line. Municipalities North of the line are also less likely to vote for the extreme right wing parties linked with Mussolini supporters, although this effect is smaller and occurs later in time.

Figure 2: Differences in vote shares North and South of the Gothic line in post-war elections



Note: The red line depicts the point estimates (blue lines are 95% confidence intervals) of the coefficient on a dummy variable for being above the Gothic line, in a local linear regression that also controls for absolute distance from the line, as in standard spatial regression discontinuity design.

Possible mechanisms: partisan brigades and political organizations?

What mechanisms lie behind these large effects? One hypothesis, suggested in related work by Costalli and Ruggieri (2015), is that a longer Nazi occupation helped the communist (more than others) to build their party organizations. The Communist Party was much more active in the Resistance movement, compared to other political forces. Hence, where the Nazi occupation lasted longer, the Communist Party enjoyed a head start in building grass root party organizations, since it could exploit its links to the partisan movement.

The evidence does not support this hypothesis, however. First, the presence of active partisan brigades was balanced on both sides of the Gothic line – although, of course, partisan brigades remained active for longer North of the line. Second, the effect of a longer duration of the German occupation on the communist vote is not stronger in the areas of operations of the partisan brigades. In other words, the presence of partisan brigades does not seem to matter for the votes gained by the Communist party above vs below the line. Third, the extreme right wing parties, that were obviously more free to organize themselves North of the line, did not benefit from this greater freedom, on the contrary they garnered more support South of the line (see Figure 2).

Possible mechanisms: Citizens attitude and violence?

A second hypothesis is that a longer exposure to civil war and foreign occupation could directly affect voters' political attitudes, making them more willing to side with political forces that opposed the enemy, namely the Communist Party. This mechanism is consistent with other studies which have shown that exposure to civil conflict reinforces group identification (Blattman (2009), Bellows and Miguel (2009), Canetti and Lindner (2015), Balcells (2011)), or that emphasized the persistence of political and social attitudes over time and across generations (Acharya et al. (2013), Avdeenko and Siedler (2016), Voigtlander and Voth (2012), Fouka and Voth (2013)).

To assess the validity of this hypothesis, we collected data on the intensity of Nazi and Fascist violence against civilians and partisans, as well as on the location of two particularly violent German divisions, that left a “blood trail” behind them. Contrary to our expectations, observed violence is not stronger North of the line. The reason is that several atrocities were also committed by German troops while retreating behind the Gothic line.

Nevertheless, exploiting variation in the intensity of violence throughout Italy and not just around the Gothic line, we find that exposure to violence during WWII is robustly associated with a persistent increase in the communist vote shares. The order of magnitude of the increase in the communist vote share varies between 1 and 3 percentage points, depending on the proxy for violence and on the election years (throughout we control for several features of municipalities, such as the vote shares of different parties in the 1920s, population size, the share of illiterates, the region to which the municipality belongs and other features).

These correlations cannot be taken as entirely causal. It is possible that elite troops were deliberately sent in areas with stauncher Italian opposition and more local communist support, so that there could be some relevant omitted variables. According to the description by Gentile (2015), however, this does not seem likely. The location of these special divisions was generally driven by military or logistical concerns (the war against the Allies, or the need to rest and train new conscripts). Although not conclusive, therefore, these results support the idea that Nazi violence induced citizens to identify with radical political forces willing to resist the enemy, namely the communists. Overall, the mechanism seems to operate through citizens’ attitudes rather than organizational (supply-side) advantages.

The Allies or the Germans?

The Gothic line separated the German troops from the Allies. There is thus another possible interpretation of our findings: that they reflect the presence of the Allies South of the line, rather than the longer German occupation and civil war North of the line. The Allies (and the US commands in particular) favoured the Catholics over the Communists. This bias could be reflected in the Allies propaganda or in their support of specific political organizations, thus affecting both the demand and the supply side of Italian post-war politics.

To evaluate this interpretation, we exploit the heterogeneity in the composition and location of the Allies troops. US forces were located in the Western part of the Gothic line, while Commonwealth troops were located in the Eastern part. Arguably the US commands were more concerned about post war political outcomes than their Commonwealth counterparts (that besides the British divisions also included, Canadian, South-African and Indian divisions). Thus, the difference in voting outcomes between municipalities North and South of the line should be stronger in the Western part of the battlefield, where the US troops were located, than in the Eastern part. But the data do not display this pattern, particularly with respect to the communist vote, suggesting that we are really capturing an effect of the German occupation and of the civil war.

Concluding remarks

The civil war and the Nazi occupation occurred at a critical historical juncture, just before the birth of a new democracy and the establishment of a new party system. For the first time in a generation, Italian citizens were choosing political affiliations and forming political identities. The traumatic events of the civil war and of the Nazi occupation shaped the newly born political system. Where the foreign occupation and the civil war lasted longer and were more intense, the radical left

emerged as a much stronger political force. This effect was not just a temporary reaction to the war traumas, but persisted until the early nineties, leaving a legacy of left wing political extremism in the Italian political system.

What accounts for these large and persistent effects? Although we don't have a definitive answer, the historical evidence suggests that the mechanism operates through citizens' attitudes. Exposure to a longer and more violent foreign occupation led voters to identify with the political force that stood up most forcefully against the enemy and that in the end won the civil war, namely the Communist Party.

To further corroborate this interpretation, in November-December 2015 we conducted a random survey of about 2500 individuals residents in 242 municipalities within 50 km from the Gothic line. Memory of the civil war is stronger North of the Gothic line and amongst individuals who have a left wing political orientation. There is also some weak evidence of mildly more anti-German attitudes North of the line. These findings too are suggestive that the mechanism underlying the reduced form effects operates through political attitudes and the memory of the Nazi occupation.

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