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How Does Political Knowledge Shape Support for Democracy? Some Research Based on the Italian Case

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Abstract: The traditional theory of democracy prescribes an informed citizenry as a crucial element of democratic politics. For this reason, political knowledge is seen as a functional and indispensable element of a viable democracy. In this article I analyse the effects of political knowledge on measures of democratic support by focusing on Italy, a country which is often characterised by low levels of support for democracy. Using ITANES survey data and applying structural equation models, I show that political knowledge has an increasing impact on confidence in institutions and on external political efficacy.

Keywords: political knowledge, Italy, democratic support, confidence, political efficacy, ITANES.

The decline of democratic support in consolidated democracies has always been a topic of animated debate in political science. It is possible to argue that over the last thirty years, on a global scale, the health of democracy has improved, as evinced by the increase in democratic consolidation worldwide. The evidence is ambiguous, however: if there has been a third wave of democratisation, with many Eastern countries adopting democratic systems, then public support for democracy has declined in the consolidated democratic regimes (Norris, 1999). Crozier et al. (1975) claim that the disintegration of civil order, weak political leaders and political alienation may bring about a future democratic crisis.[1] Even if they offer different interpretations to explain democratisation, most scholars acknowledge the crisis of democracy and the challenges of governing consolidated democracies. Indeed, various studies confirm that citizens have in recent years become more i) mistrustful of politics, ii) sceptical about institutions, and iii) disenchanted with the effectiveness of the democratic process (Dalton, 2004).

In this respect, Italy can be considered a paradigmatic case. In their comparative study, Almond and Verba (1963) defined civic culture as a psychological orientation that characterises the relationship between politics and the members of a society. By analysing citizens' attitudes, norms and beliefs, they found that Italians cannot be regarded as virtuous citizens: Italian political culture is characterised by weak attachment to and identification with the democratic regime. Furthermore, Italian citizens' participation in political life is limited. The average Italian citizen's lack of interest in politics and low level of information have negatively conditioned the relationship between the citizenry and the state, producing, in turn, a feeling of impotence on the part of the former. In particular, citizens do not believe that they can exert influence over decision making. This observation is not new, especially if we look at the study of Banfield (1978) who found that among Montegrano's citizens, low levels of public morality damaged the communal ethos[2] and produced social networks characterised by low levels of cohesion and cooperation.

Almond and Verba's study was strongly criticised on methodological grounds, and also because it was in evident contrast with results obtained by various Italian scholars (see Sani, 1989). However, more recent studies confirm that Italians' civicness does not seem to have changed even after many decades (see Cartocci, 2000; Putnam, 1993).

Many factors underlie democratic support. If we consider that political culture has an influence on civicness (Mannheimer and Sani, 1987) and that, in turn, civicness influences orientations towards the democratic process (Almond and Verba, 1963), then it is reasonable to argue that political culture has inevitably conditioned the Italians' perceptions of democracy. Since the 1990s, anti-party (Bardi, 1996) and anti-political (Mastropaolo, 2000) attitudes have become more pronounced. What is more, citizens largely mistrust the state and political institutions, expressing dissatisfaction with democracy, institutional performance and the overall malfunctioning of the system (Sani and Segatti, 2001). As a consequence of their general detachment from politics, Italian citizens may lack the capacity to exert effective influence over the political and democratic process (Bardi and Pasquino, 1995).

Some empirical results, however, point to the opposite conclusion. Sciolla (2004) found that, although there is a disconnection between citizens and the political class, political participation, trust in others, confidence in institutions and a sense of national identity, have increased since the 1980s. The same trend is registered for democratic support (Memoli, 2009). These aspects would seem to bring Italian citizens close to the same levels of civicness of other European countries.

Starting with the idea that political knowledge and democratic support are linked, in this article I analyse this relationship through various

indicators, making use of Italian National Election Study (ITANES) datasets (Istituto Cattaneo, 2001; 2004; 2006).

The components of democratic support

Some scholars argue that system-level changes, such as an increase in levels of education and the development of an urban middle class, facilitate democratisation (Weatherford, 1989). Others look at people's interpersonal relationships and argue that a high degree of trust, high levels of tolerance of others, and an interest in politics (Inglehart, 1990) contribute to the evolution of democracy. Considering the two different viewpoints, it is possible to claim that the democratic process is related to satisfaction with many aspects of life.

In the literature on democracy, its survival has been formalised in a retroactive systemic model (Luhmann, 2000) where citizens' feedback becomes the main element that can either reinforce and further consolidate democracy, or debilitate it. The first formal model was provided by Easton (1965; 1975), who described the main elements underlying democratic support. He emphasised the importance of citizens' evaluations of political institutions and their components (parties and political actors) on the one hand, and citizens' identification with the state on the other.

Easton classified political and institutional systems by emphasising the differences and similarities among three specific political objects: the political community, the regime and political authority. The political community represents the nation or the political system in broader terms, and is defined as a group of people oriented towards regulating their political relationships (Easton, 1965). The regime expresses ideals and the specific normative values of the political system (Dalton, 1999). An elaboration of the regime concept, proposed by Norris (1999) and Dalton (2004), distinguishes three levels of regime support: i) regime principles – the broad parameters within which the political system should function; ii) regime norms and procedures – rules or specific norms governing political actions; iii) regime institutions – orientations towards political institutions. The third object, political authority, is focussed in particular on the race through which political elites become state leaders.

At the same time, Easton distinguishes two types of citizen orientations: diffuse support and specific support. Similarly, Almond and Verba (1963) differentiate between affective and evaluative beliefs in 'the civic culture'. Diffuse support is defined as a deep-rooted set of attitudes towards politics and the working of a political system. Easton makes use of the concept of legitimacy by showing, on the one hand, the correlations between obedience and support for the state by citizens, namely political duty (Simmons, 1979), and on the other hand, the capacity of the state to keep and mobilise citizens' support for the existence and survival of

institutions (Simmons, 2001). Specific support refers to satisfaction with institutional outcomes, with political or state elites' actions, and with the results and effects of policies. According to this definition, specific support could be assimilated to the 'responsiveness' variable used by Pharr and Putnam (2000) as a proxy for 'democratic dissatisfaction'. The relationship between diffuse and specific support shows that they are not disconnected, particularly when they are longitudinally analysed (Adamany and Grossman, 1983).

The measures of democratic support are numerous, and they imply different knowledge mechanisms on the part of citizens. Here, I focus on measures related to political institutions, adopting two specific measures: confidence in institutions and a sense of political efficacy. Various studies use confidence in institutions as a specific measure of the affective quality of democratic support, and they apply it to two specific objects of analysis.

Some scholars consider only 'regime institutions' like Parliament, parties, the civil service and the military as public institutions (see Dalton, 1999), while others consider both public and private institutions such as the mass media, churches, etc. (Lipset and Schneider, 1983). Others refer to concepts like trust, reciprocity and cooperation to identify the causes of social malaise (see Dalton, 1996). For the purposes of this analysis, I adopt the first point of view, examining levels of trust in Parliament, political parties, the armed forces, the judicial system, the police and the civil service. The second measure I adopt relates to citizens' political efficacy. Campbell et al. (1954: 187) defined political efficacy as the 'feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process.' The concept suggests that in order to be successful, a democracy needs citizens to feel capable of expressing their wishes, and that the system should then respond to their wishes. At the same time, citizens should have a fair level of trust in the integrity and capacity of judgment of their leaders (see Almond and Verba, 1963). Thus, when citizens are able to express their views to political elites the health of democracy increases.

However, when their needs are absent from political consideration, the political system fails to reach real democratic capacity (Schur et al., 2002). Political efficacy, as shown by Iyengar (1980), is the most frequently used measure of widespread support, as it documents whether political institutions and public officials are responsive to the preferences and needs of citizens. Focussing on external efficacy,[3] I will now move to a more detailed discussion of measures of democratic support.

Confidence in public institutions and external political efficacy

Studies of consolidated democracies show that democratic support is declining everywhere (Newton and Norris, 2000), except in Italy. Taking

into consideration six major Italian public institutions from 2001 to 2006, confidence in the institutions has increased, but to different degrees (Table 1). Parliament is the institution that registers the greatest increase (+ 4 percent). The trend is also positive for the police (+ 2 percent) and is stable for the army. In 2006, at least 7 citizens out of 10 were very or fairly confident in these institutions. There was also a limited growth in confidence in the other institutions, with the exception of the civil service, for which there was a decline. The lowest level of confidence is registered in the case of parties, where only about 2 out of 10 people show some or a great deal of confidence. This result is indicative of general dissatisfaction with politicians. In general, Italians have positive attitudes towards national political institutions and confidence in them, although there are differences in terms of degree.

Table 1: Confidence in public institutions

	2001	2004	2006	Difference 2001-2006
Parliament	48[a]	48	52	4
Parties	22	22	23	1
Armed Forces	70	71	70	0
Judicial System	50	49	51	1
Police[b]	77	77	79	2
Civil Service	36	35	34	-2

Sources: ITANES (2001, 2004, 2006).
Notes:
[a] Table entries are percentage of respondents claiming to have 'some' or 'a great deal' of confidence in the institutions in question. Missing data are not included in the calculation of the percentages.
[b] Includes both police and carabinieri

If levels of confidence in public institutions are satisfactory, citizens' evaluations of public authorities are not in line. Using two measures of external political efficacy, we can see that Italians are characterised by dissatisfaction with politicians (Table 2). Observing this specific phenomenon over time, we find that political dissatisfaction is deeply rooted among Italians: the vast majority of them, almost 8 out of 10, are not satisfied with the political elite. From 2001 to 2006, Italians' external political efficacy was consistently low. The sharpest increase in dissatisfaction is registered among citizens who agree with the statement, 'People like me have no say' (-2 percent), while levels among those who agree with the statement, 'When they are elected, politicians lose touch with citizens', are rather stable over time. As already argued by other

scholars (see Segatti, 2006), we could conclude that the sense of political efficacy is low on the part of Italians and that its effects on the political process have consequences in terms of institutional responsiveness.

Table 2: External political efficacy

	2001	*2004*	*2006*	Difference 2001-06
People like me have no say	78	78	76	-2
Politicians lose touch	93	93	93	0

Sources: ITANES (2001, 2004, 2006).
Note: Table entries are the percentages of respondents agreeing (somewhat and completely) with the statements, "People like me have no say" and "When they are elected, politicians lose touch with citizens". Missing data are not included in the calculation of percentages.

Table 3: Components of democratic support

		Factor 1[a]	Factor 2
		Confidence in public institutions	*External political efficacy*
People like me have no say		-.022	*.777*
Politicians loose touch		-.071	*.763*
Parliament		*.728*	-.192
Parties		*.633*	-.314
Armed Forces		*.681*	.271
Judicial System		*.688*	-.120
Police		*.705*	.189
Civil service		*.653*	-.116
Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin Test[b]	0.762		
Barlett's Test (Sig.)[c]	0.000		
Eigenvalues after rotation		2.797	1.458
% of variance explained		35.0	18.2

Source: ITANES (2006)
Notes:
[a] Extraction carried out using Principal Components, while the structure of each factor is obtained by varimax rotation; [b] the KMO measures the sampling adequacy; [c] Barlett's Test examines whether the correlation matrix is an identity matrix.

Focusing our attention on 2006 and using the same indicators analysed above, I constructed two additional indexes to obtain one measure of confidence in public institutions and another of external political efficacy. As we can see in Table 3, the results of factor analysis show the presence of two specific dimensions: the first one, explaining 35 percent of the variance, represents confidence in public institutions, while the second, explaining 18.2 percent of the variance, represents support for the political authorities. The reliability analysis confirms that the items considered in the factor analysis and those of which the scales (two measures) are composed are acceptable in statistical terms. Starting from these initial results, in the following section I analyse political knowledge among Italians. Then, I estimate the effects of political knowledge and other socio-demographic variables on democratic support.

Italians and political knowledge

Informed citizens are considered a central pillar of democratic theory and a crucial element of democracy (see Dahl, 1979). Therefore, citizens should have a minimal understanding of the political system through which they express their preferences and elect their representatives (Niemi and Junn, 1998: 1). Some scholars argue that citizens have little incentive to gather information about politics in order to improve their political choices. However, civic competence is important because it affects the stability of democracy (Almond and Verba, 1963).

Thus, the question I aim to answer is: what kind of political knowledge do people have? Political knowledge has been associated with 'the knowledge level of citizens with whom one is having a politically-centred conversation' (Dow, 2009: 122). However, it is hard to conceptualise and define, and difficult to measure. Political knowledge has been defined as 'the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory' (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 10–11). The possession of factual information appears to be more than just an episodic feature; it is a specific competence that characterises some citizens. Most studies agree that citizens should be aware of their own political context, but not all scholars agree on how to define citizens' political knowledge. Some researchers refer to the political system in general (see Milner, 2007) or to political circumstances related to election campaigns, or to policy positions (see Prior and Lupia, 2008). Other scholars suggest that political knowledge is based on events, developments, people in the political sphere (Garramone and Atkin, 1986), or on factual knowledge about major political figures (Dow, 2009). Some scholars identify the main components of citizens' political knowledge as civic knowledge and policy knowledge (Heath et al., 2002), while others refer to knowledge of both national and international affairs (Mondak, 1995). As we can see, the definitions of

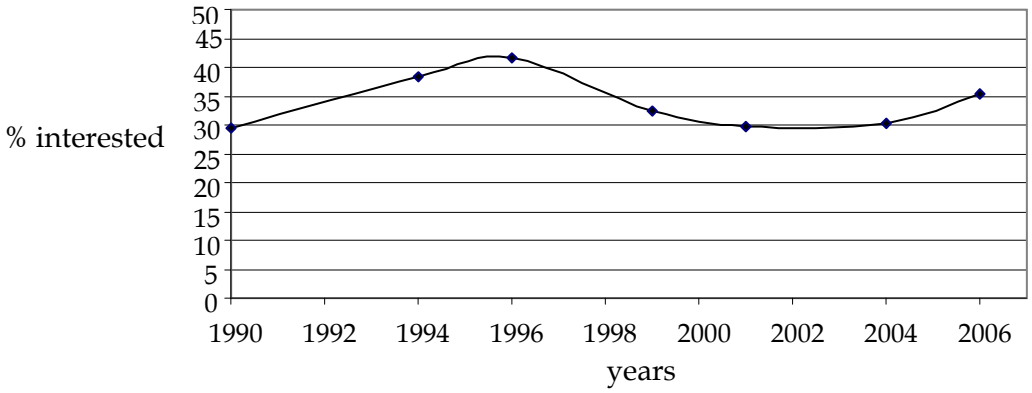
political knowledge differ both in terms of context and content. They are influenced by researchers' goals, but also by the availability of survey data.

There are two main approaches to measuring political knowledge (Lewendusky and Jakman, 2003). It is possible to use an individual item and assess the respondent's level of knowledge on the item. It is also possible to adopt a series of factual questions or questions on the placement of parties or candidates in order to build a knowledge scale, along which respondents are ranked according to the number of questions they answered correctly. Both methods have drawbacks, but following Zaller's suggestion (1992) and taking into consideration the availability of data, for the analysis of political knowledge in Italy I will consider two separate aspects of knowledge: factual knowledge and ideological awareness.

Before focusing our attention on political knowledge, we need, however, to understand if people have the ability, motivation and opportunity to learn about politics (Luskin, 1990). The multiple communicative stimuli that characterise society give citizens the possibility to know, directly or indirectly, about politics. Furthermore, considering the large amounts of money which political actors invest in political communication to orient citizens' opinions, citizens' political involvement should also be significant. Looking at some indicators, we can affirm that Italians are not blind to politics (see Segatti, 2007), but surely they are not very interested. In the period between 1990 and 2006, there was little growth – 6 percent – in political interest among Italians (Figure 1), with a peak in 1996 (41.7 percent). This increase was strongly influenced by media discourse (from 1992 to 1996 there were many TV debates about political scandals in Italy). Subsequently, political interest receded to its 1990 levels, but then in 2001 it began slowly to increase. With the Bancopoli financial scandals (2005),[4] involving many politicians, there was a new surge of interest. Considering the trend, we can argue that the attitudes of people reflect curiosity more than political interest. Between 1997 and 2004, the media shifted attention to other events, and citizens also lost interest in politics.

If the media have a considerable effect on political interest, then the frequent use of some media also has a considerable effect on political information (Table 4). We can see that from 2001 to 2006 Italians' use of the media to obtain political information increased; however, it still remained very low. Italian citizens i) do not like to talk about politics; ii) do not like to read political articles; iii) do not like to follow political news or political debates on the radio.[5] The data show not only citizens' lack of interest in certain types of information source, but also their low levels of confidence in these sources as means of obtaining information about politics. However, while radio is rarely used to obtain political information, television appears to be uncontested as the preferred channel of information: 8 out of 10 citizens follow the news on television every day.

Figure 1: Political Interest (1990-2006)



Note: Table entries are percentage of those who are somewhat interested or very interested in politics. Missing data are not included in the calculation of percentages.

Sources: Eurobarometer Cumulated (1973-1999); ITANES (2001, 2004, 2006).

Table 4: Use of the media to obtain political information (%)[a]

	2001	*2004*	*2006*	Difference 2001-2006
Talk about politics	31	33	38	7
Read articles about politics	18	18	22	4
Follow news on television	83	84	85	2
Follow political debates or news on the radio	22	23	25	3

Sources: ITANES (2001, 2004, 2006)

Notes:
[a] Missing data are not included in the calculation of percentages;
[b] Row entries are the percentages responding "a few times per week" and "every day";
[c] Row entries are the percentages responding "often" and "always";
[d] Row entries are percentages responding "every day";
[e] Row entries are percentages responding "once per week"

This result not only confirms, as argued by many scholars (see Ciacagli and Corbetta, 2002), the power of television and the citizen's lack of interest in active cultural consumption (i.e., the press), it also shows the relative confidence that people have in television (Table 5). In fact, comparing confidence in newspapers with confidence in television, we can see that although confidence in the former ones has increased, in 2006, people had

far more confidence in television (57 percent), particularly in privately owned channels,[6] than in newspapers (36 percent). Bearing in mind that from 2001 to 2004, the owner of the largest private television channels was Silvio Berlusconi, we can conclude that in Italy, the use of television is not only a means of obtaining political information, but also reflects a political choice.

Table 5: Confidence in the media (%)

	2001	*2004*	*2006*	Difference 2001-2006
Press	34	35	36	2
Television (public and private)	56	58	57	1
Public television networks	44	46	45	1
Private television networks	49	51	49	0

Source: ITANES (2001, 2004, 2006).
Note: Table entries are the percentages answering "some" and "a great deal" of trust. Missing data are not included in the calculation of the percentages

We have seen that Italians have little interest in politics and that they do not make much use of the press or radio to acquire political information. This leads us to ask about their levels of political knowledge. To explore interviewees' political knowledge, I focused on the period 2001-2006, making use of two conceptual dimensions. The first one is factual knowledge, for which I used five questions, three of which concern the leaders of the political system while the other two concern the electoral system. The second one is a measure of ideological awareness. Here, I used four indicators based on the ability to place correctly the top political parties in the Italian national elections on a 10-point ideological scale.[7] Following the conventional practice (see Luskin and Bullock, 2004), I combined incorrect and 'don't know' responses. Results show that there is a clear difference between factual knowledge and ideological awareness (Table 6). In general, levels of political knowledge increase over time, but with clear differences across its internal dimensions. Italians' scarce factual knowledge is evinced by a percentage of correct answers that is lower than the percentage of correct answers to the questions regarding ideological awareness. This demonstrates that citizens know more about the party system than they do about the individuals actually running it. Just 7 out of 10 respondents knew the name of Prime Minister, or who elects the President of Republic, while this number decreased to 4 out of 10 when they were asked about other important political figures or general facts about the political system. The opposite holds true for ideological awareness: 8 out of 10 people could correctly place the political parties

along the left-right political spectrum. But in spite of the extent of government control of private and public media when Berlusconi was Prime Minister, citizens' knowledge of parties' ideological placements has not increased.

Table 6: Measures of political knowledge, %

	2001	2004	2006	Difference 2001-2006
Factual knowledge				
Can you name the current Prime Minister is?	60	64	69	9
Can you name the current President of the Chamber of Deputies?	40	42	48	8
Can you name the current Foreign Minister?	37	39	43	6
Can you tell me who elects the President of the Republic?	61	63	69	8
Can you tell me how many members the Chamber of Deputies has?	15	16	19	4
Ideological awareness				
Where would you place the Democratici di Sinistra?	84	85	88	4
Where would you place Rifondazione Comunista?	86	87	90	4
Where would you place Alleanza Nazionale?	85	86	88	3
Where would you place Forza Italia?	88	89	91	3
Mean number of questions answered correctly (0=none answered correctly; 9=all answered correctly)	5.8	5.9	6.3	0.5

Sources: ITANES (2001, 2004, 2006)

Combining the two measures of political knowledge to create an additive index[8] (a nine-point scale), the distribution of respondents is skewed towards the second half of the scale with an average value of six in 2006. Thus, more than sixty percent of respondents show greater-than-average knowledge. Hence, we can argue that the level of political knowledge of Italians is not low, and their level of political sophistication is significant.[9]

As previously stated, political interest enables people to obtain information, and is consequently a means of increasing one's political knowledge. Many studies of participation have found that a person's interest in politics contributes to the likelihood that he or she will be involved in the political process (Verba et al., 1995). Many models of political behaviour as well as attitudes to voting have been understood through this powerful explanation of political interest (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). For instance, some scholars, investigating the link between political knowledge and political interest in Britain, have found a uni-directional effect from interest to knowledge. Accordingly, interest in politics leads to knowledge about political issues, while the causal relationship does not run in the opposite direction (see Tilley et al., 2004).

So, what is the relationship between political knowledge and political interest in Italy in 2006? Of course, motivation affects how much political information people are willing to acquire and clearly plays a role in how people answer these questions (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). However, survey research suggests that motivations of different kinds can also influence response quality. The motivation at the base of political interest is built both on interest in learning about politics and on interest in or frequency of participation in political activities.

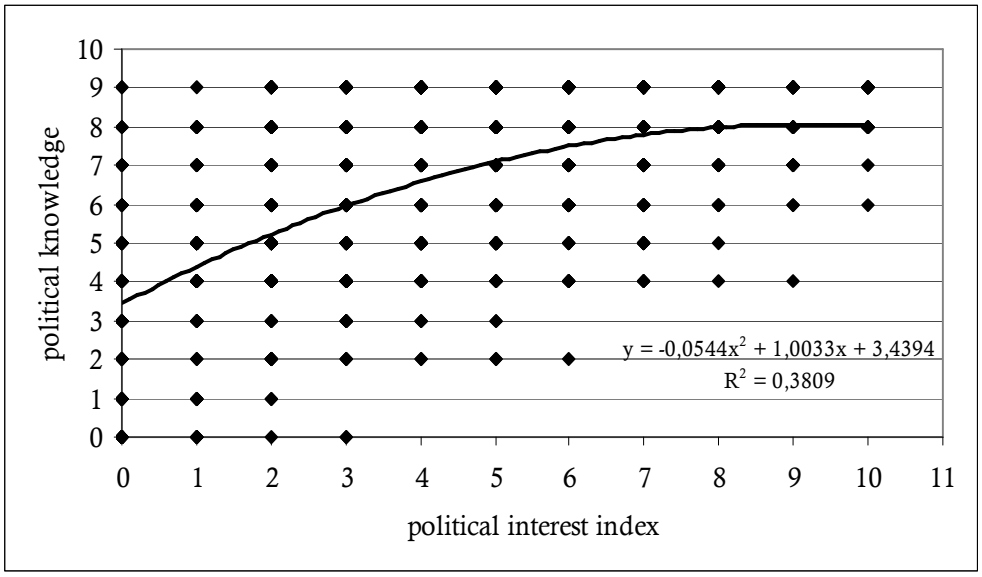
For this reason, I made use of the degree of interest in politics, the frequency with which citizens talk about politics and the propensity to read political articles, in order to construct an additive index of political interest.[10] The distribution of respondents in terms of the index reveals low levels of political interest and shows that Italians are not very interested in political affairs and the political system in general.

Estimating the effect of the political interest index on political knowledge using polynomial regression (Figure 2), I found that the effect is not very strong (R-square: 38.1 percent).[11] This result is not unexpected, especially if we consider two aspects: first, the low level of political interest in general that characterises Italian citizens; second, the way information was gathered. American research shows that when asked about their interest, as in our case, 75.9 percent of citizens reported that they followed politics most or some of the time; however, when political knowledge questions were asked, the percentage expressing interest dropped to 57.4 percent (see Schwarz and Schuman, 1997).

Instead, citizens' political knowledge is significantly influenced by various socio-demographic and contextual aspects. Among Italians, men have more political knowledge than women. This confirms that gender differences in political socialization shapes the participation styles of men and women in the political sphere. Politics appeals more to citizens who are employed – who have corresponding opportunities to meet with colleagues and discuss current affairs on a daily basis. Their networks, rooted in both the workplace and in family and friends, provide them with

access to various outlets of information. Citizens with high levels of education have a greater capacity to follow political events and a better knowledge of the political system than the less-well educated.

Figure 2: Political interest and political knowledge (%)



Source: ITANES (2006)

Citizens' political knowledge is related to the activities they undertake during various stages of their adulthood. An inverted U characterises this relationship: the two tails of the curve represent the youngest and oldest groups (those aged 65+), both of which have low levels of political knowledge. The youngest group has limited competence, while those in the oldest group are uninterested, most likely because they have stopped working and gone into retirement. Also, geographical context affects political knowledge. In the Centre and North of Italy, where social culture, political culture, political activism and the economy are more developed, political knowledge is higher than it is in the South.

Italians are clearly informed about politics, but their knowledge tends to be of a generic kind: As reported in table 6, they have higher levels of ideological awareness than they do factual knowledge. Furthermore, knowledge is not ephemeral and is not just related to electoral periods. Comparing the results for the election years 2001 and 2006 with those for the non-election year 2004, levels of political knowledge are similar. We can conclude that Italians' political knowledge (but not their political interest) is rather developed.

In the following section, I explore the impact of political knowledge and socio-demographic factors on confidence in institutions and external political efficacy, our two measures of democratic support.

Table 7: Structural variables and political knowledge (mean scores)

	2001	2004	2006	Difference 2001-2006
Gender				
Females	4.9155	5.0769	5.4981	0.5826
Males	6.5583	6.6950	7.1138	0.5555
Employment				
Unemployed	5.2790	5.4042	5.8673	0.5883
Employed	6.2457	6.4385	6.6566	0.4109
Educational attainment				
No school	1.3077	0.0000	- -	- -
Some elementary school	3.2453	3.1325	3.4500	0.2047
Elementary school certificate	4.6918	4.7449	5.0347	0.3429
Junior-high school certificate	5.2706	5.3860	5.6105	0.3399
Vocational diploma	5.8641	6.0252	6.0769	0.2128
High-school certificate	6.6550	6.8157	6.9813	0.3263
Degree	7.7065	7.9273	7.8053	0.0988
Age				
18-24	5.3425	5.5101	5.6932	0.3507
24-44	5.7773	5.8378	6.0307	0.2534
45-64	6.2091	6.3287	6.6556	0.4465
65 and over	5.0836	5.3780	6.2775	1.1939
Geographical area				
South	5.1685	5.3685	5.7880	0.6195
Center	6.1860	6.3099	6.5189	0.3329
North	6.0171	6.2033	6.2775	0.2604

Sources: ITANES (2001, 2004, 2006)
Note: Table entries are mean political knowledge scores (from 0 to 9) for the various sub-groups.

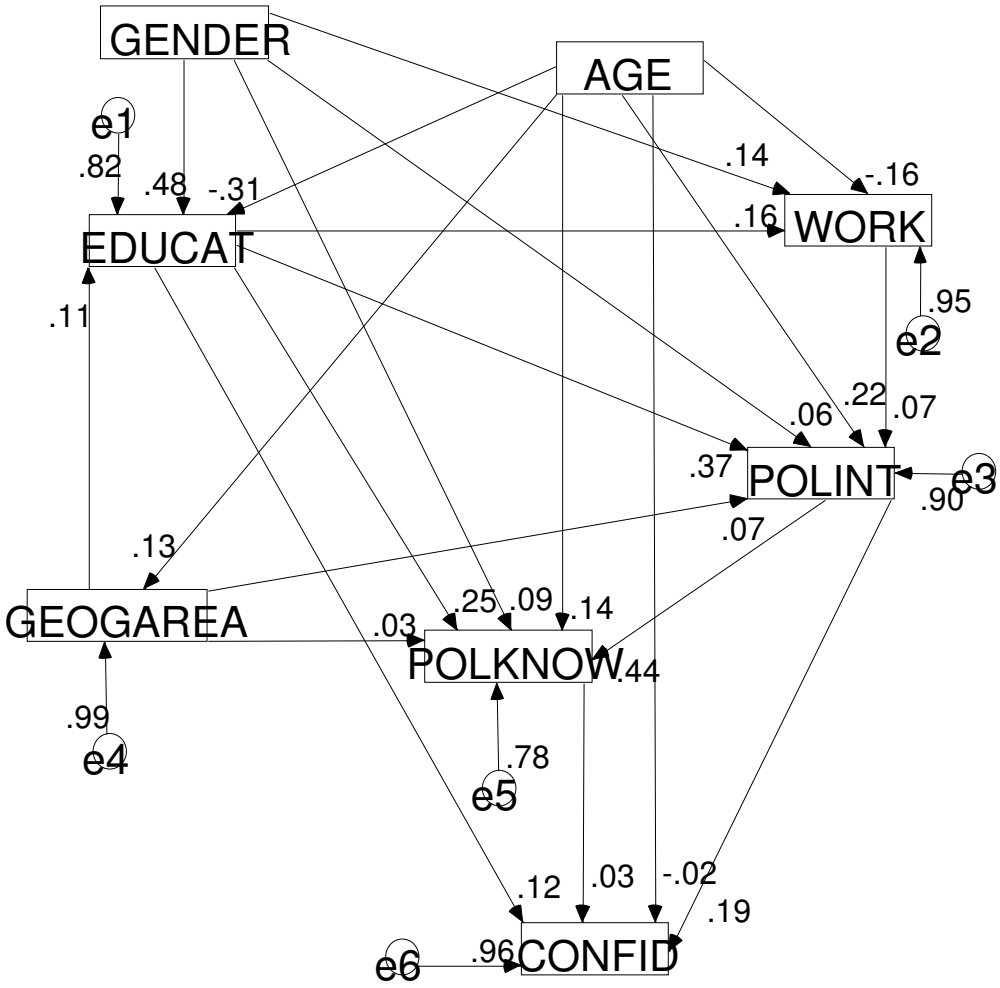
Political knowledge and democratic support

Many studies have examined the relationship between political knowledge (Luskin, 1990) and structural factors (Rose, 2002, Table 7); Bennet, 1989). These have shown that men have higher levels of political knowledge than women (Garand, Guynan and Fournet, 2004); that the young are less well informed than older people (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 159); that education improves individuals' ability to understand political events (Niemi and Junn 1998); that political interest affects political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). In order to explore the impact of these factors on political knowledge and on our two dependent variables, I make use of the ITANES data for 2006. To compare their effects, I constructed two similar explanatory models using the variables gender, age, education, work, geographical area, the index of political interest, and political knowledge. In this way, we can examine both the relative impact of the above variables on political knowledge, and the effects of all variables on democratic support.

Education, age and political interest are positively related to political knowledge. Analysing the first model (Figure 3), from a statistical point of view, there is a strong impact of structural and behavioural variables such as education and political interest on political knowledge. Education also has a strong effect on political interest: the more citizens are educated, the greater their political interest (beta=0.37). Men have greater interest in politics than women and they are also more educated. The effect of gender on the dependent variable shows an evident gap between men and women. Furthermore, a person's employment status helps explain his level of political knowledge. Those who are employed are more interested in politics than those who are not (beta=0.22). This result confirms that work-related social networks stimulate political interest and are a pre-condition for both obtaining political information and discussing daily political events. However, even though adults aged between 45 and 64 years are less educated than younger citizens, they are more interested in politics and they have a good level of political knowledge. In other words, over time, citizens acquire a degree of political competence that increases as they mature, but which then declines after 65 years of age.

A clear difference emerges when comparing geographical areas: moving from southern to northern Italy, the number of citizens that have interest in and knowledge of politics increases. We can observe that political knowledge has a positive impact on confidence in public institutions, although its intensity is not very high (beta=0.03). Political interest and education have the same sign, but they have more explanatory power than political knowledge. Excluding age, all the variables have – either directly, or indirectly when their effect is mediated by other variables – a positive impact on confidence in public institutions. And although their

Figure 3: Model of confidence in public institutions



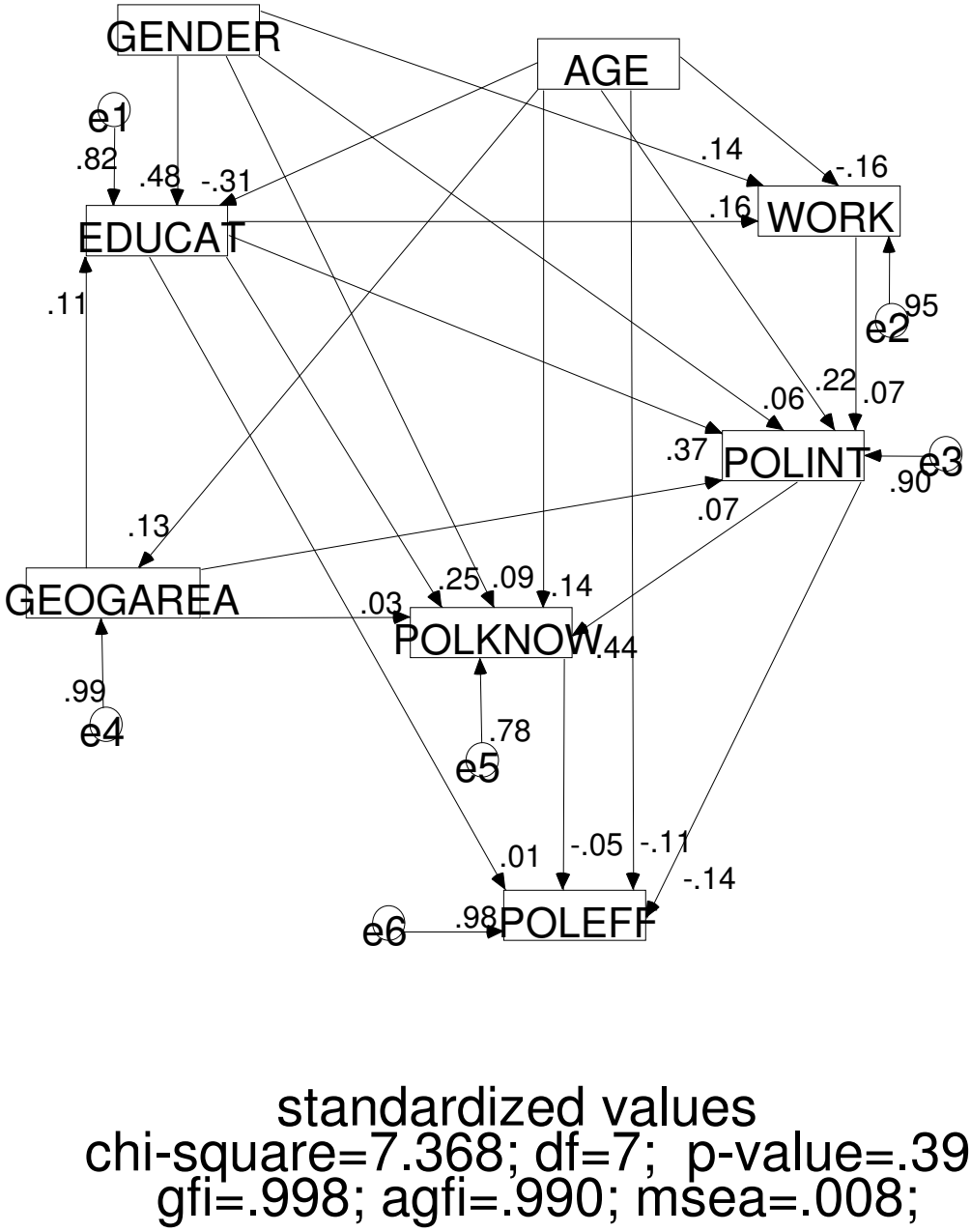
Source: ITANES (2006)

betas are not very high, the significance of this first model is satisfactory (p-value=0.499).

We now move to the second measure of democratic support (Figure 4). Analysing only the second part of the graph, namely the impact of the

independent variables on external political efficacy, we can see that all the variables, except education, have a significant effect on the dependent variable.[12] Political interest and age are the best predictors of political efficacy. In particular, with maturity, political disaffection increases among

Figure 4: Model of external political efficacy



Source: ITANES (2006)

Italians (Memoli, 2009). In turn, the effect of political knowledge on political efficacy is almost twice as great as it is on confidence in institutions.

The differences in terms of betas between the two models of democratic support depend on the fact that the second conceptualisation of democratic support (external political efficacy) is more detailed than the first one. While in the first case, confidence is related to institutions, in the second case, external political efficacy is related to institutions and individuals (politicians) too.

To conclude, comparison of the models shows that socio-demographic indicators influence political knowledge. Over time, the political knowledge of citizens increases, also as a result of their levels of education. In turn, political knowledge contributes to an increase in democratic support. This relationship seems to characterise especially the North and the Centre of the country. Finally, although the impact of political knowledge on the two measures of democratic support is limited, it is still relevant enough to show that political information is an important component when it comes to explaining citizens' political-system support.

Conclusion

In this study, I have used the Italian case to analyse the impact of political knowledge and other explanatory variables on two specific measures of democratic support (confidence in public institutions and external political efficacy).

The findings reveal that Italians are not very interested in politics in general and that they prefer to obtain political information through television, a passive channel of communication (see also Legnante, 2007). Not only is television (especially private television) the preferred medium, it is also the one in which people have most confidence.

As for the political knowledge of Italians, more than 60 percent of respondents have above-average levels of knowledge, especially highly educated men between 25 and 64 years of age. Results also show that political knowledge, though rarely used to explain democratic support,[13] is actually a valid measure both in terms of significance and variance explained. This is true even in those cases where levels of democratic support are not very high, as in the case of Italy.

Just three years ago, Gomez and Travaglio (2008) analysed the relationship between Italian citizens and their political system (institutions, political class, and so on) and they summarised their results in the book *Se li conosci li eviti* (If you know about them then you can avoid them). The writers, emphasising the lack of responsiveness of politicians, show the dark side of the Italian political system. However, the analysis presented in this article tends to qualify their conclusion. In fact, even if the behaviour of

some members of the political class is open to criticism, citizens, especially those who know about the political system, appear to have confidence in institutions and to be able to express their views about the political elites. Although the effects are not particularly great, at least in the Centre and the North, the more citizens know about the political system, the greater their political support.

Notes

[1] The study conducted by Crozier et al. (1975) is the first analysis at an international level of democratic support and it also represents an inevitable step towards understanding how democratic support changes over time.

[2] Communal ethos can be defined as the social relationships among families and between families and outsiders.

[3] Internal political efficacy refers to a person's self-perception as being capable of understanding politics and competently participating in political activities, whereas external efficacy is the belief that public officials and political institutions are responsive to citizens' demands (Miller et al., 1980: 253).

[4] For more information see: http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bancopoli.

[5] If we compare our 2006 results with data from other European countries, using one of the Eurobarometer datasets (65.2), the assertions about Italian citizens are confirmed. In fact, the percentage values for Italian citizens are always lower than European average percentage values.

[6] In 2001 and 2004, the owner of the largest private television network, Silvio Berlusconi, was Prime Minister.

[7] The answers are correct if respondents place the parties on the correct side of the scale – for example, if they place Rifondazione Comunista on the left side of the scale.

[8] With factor analysis we obtained a unique factor (extraction method: maximum likelihood) with an eigenvalue equal to 3.489 and percentage of variance explained equal to 34.9 percent. Cronback's Alpha is equal to 0.8375.

[9] The frequency distributions of factual knowledge and ideological awareness show that the number of citizens who answer correctly on ideological awareness is higher than that those who answer correctly on factual knowledge. Obviously this difference is conditioned by the period when the survey was conducted: in 2001 and 2006 there were elections in Italy, but not in 2004. It is also true that comparing 2001 to 2006 factual knowledge increased twice as much as ideological awareness. The difference between the two indicators remained but it was reduced.

[10] Factor analysis confirms that the variables can form an additive index. The results, in terms of reliability levels, are satisfactory (Cronbach's Alpha=0.803).

[11] The regression was applied considering only valid cases. Variance equal to 36.1 percent was obtained considering the data for 2001.

[12] The variable POLEFF (external political efficacy) is coded in an inverse way. Thus, when the impact of the independent variables on POLEFF has a negative sign, it means that they have a positive effect on external political efficacy.

[13] In the most important studies on democratic support, political knowledge has never been used as an explanatory variable (see Norris, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2004). But it is also very difficult to find cross-sectional studies where survey respondents are simultaneously asked questions on political knowledge and democratic support.

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Appendix

Description of variables used in the structural equation model[13]

Gender
The modality of response, after recoding, was: 0 Woman, 1 Man

Education
Question wording: 'What is your educational level?' The modality of response, after recoding, was: '0 - Never went to school' to '7 - Graduate or university diploma.'

Age
Question wording: 'Could you tell me when were you born?' The modality of response, after recoding, was transformed to age in years: 18 - 96

Political knowledge
This is an additive index in which modalities go from 0 (low political knowledge) to 10 (high political knowledge)

Political interest
It is an additive index in which modalities go from 0 (low political interest/information) to 26 (high political interest/information)

Confidence in public institutions
It is an additive index in which modalities go from 0 (low confidence) to 18 (high confidence)

External political efficacy
It is an additive index in which modalities go from 0 (high political efficacy) to 4 (low political efficacy).