

Minimum income Italian-style. The ancient roots of a persistent hostility and the voters attitudes about

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The paper deals with the ‘citizenship income’ (Reddito di cittadinanza, RdC), the minimum income scheme introduced by the Conte government early in 2019.

As known, Italy was the last country in Western Europe to fulfil this gap in social assistance and its implementation represented an important shift in the history of the Italian welfare state. However, since its very beginning, the RdC has given rise to several debates and harsh criticisms both between and within the main Italian political parties. So much so that one of the first economic decisions taken in spring 2023 by the newly formed center-right government led by Giorgia Meloni has been the reform of the minimum income scheme and, as of January 2024, its transformation into a significantly different measure (called ‘Inclusion allowance’).

This choice comes directly from the results of the 2022 parliamentary elections, in which the reform (or even the repeal) of the Reddito di cittadinanza has been one of the main issues discussed by political parties during the electoral campaign. Indeed, the proposal of the RdC downsizing reform, ending with its complete abolition, united not only all the right-wing political forces but also some liberal, pro-market parties and part of centre-left coalition.

What are the reasons that explain the wide consensus existing in the electoral party manifestoes on this specific policy? Does it exist a cross-party political rejection of minimum income schemes in Italy and a widespread attitude against ‘undeserving’ poor?

The main hypothesis tested in the paper is that the refusal for universalistic policy measures for all poor comes from a strong, long-lasting pro-labor culture within the Italian welfare state. This can explain, on the one hand, the specific Italian model of poverty (Paugam 2005; Morlicchio 2012; Saraceno et al 2020), in which the stigmatization of the undeserving poor also depends on that “unstable neo-corporativism” that has characterized the relationship between trade unions, employer’s associations and political institutions (Crouch 1993). On the other hand, the refusal of minimum income schemes for all poor is linked to the path-dependent tradition of extreme fragmentation of the Italian social assistance. The result is that, until very recently, the contrast of poverty in Italy has mostly relied on categorical measures with specific sub-target: elderly poor, disable poor, poor household with minors.

Against this backdrop, the aim of the paper is twofold. On the one hand, the paper intends to investigate the structural reasons that, until a few years ago, prevented and strongly delayed, especially in comparative perspective, the introduction of such a social assistance measure in the Italian context. On the other hand, through the analysis of a survey conducted on the eve of the 2022 parliamentary elections, the paper will try to examine whether, in light of the criticism raised by the implementation of the RdC, those long-term delay factors are still present in public opinion and, more specifically, within the electorates of the different political parties, including those with a supposedly progressive or Social-democratic orientation.

The data analyzed are based on an original survey conducted by Youtrend on 1,400 respondents with CATI method; the results expected intend to shed light on the attitude of the Italian electorate towards universalistic policy measures for all poor, even as a consequence of the cultural perspective on poverty and its stigmatization.