POLIDEMOS



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(edited by)

HYBRID ITALY

A Democracy amid Global Disorder

EDUCatt

DOI: 10.69117/POLIDEMOS.21.26.002

Democracy as an Instrument for Peace? An Investigation into the Italian Citizens' Opinions

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Abstract. This article presents and analyses the findings of the third wave of the Observatory on the State of Democracy survey, conducted by Polidemos in collaboration with Ipsos Doxa on a representative sample of the Italian population, with a focus on citizens' opinions regarding the relationship between democracy, peace and the international order. The survey data reveal a complex and internally differentiated picture that challenges both complacent and catastrophist readings of the current democratic crisis. While a majority of respondents express significant dissatisfaction with the functioning of Italian democracy, widespread distrust of the political class and the media, and the perception that politics has been displaced by economic and financial actors, these orientations do not translate into a rejection of democracy as a system of government. On the contrary, a plurality of citizens identifies the solution to the problems of democracy in a deepening of democratic participation itself – through instruments such as referendums and direct democracy – while favouring a gradualist reformist approach over radical change. The article further examines citizens' perceptions

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of the conditions for sustainable peace, showing that respondents prioritise a fair and balanced global economic system, free trade and the strengthening of supranational institutions over military solutions: nine out of ten respondents oppose an increase in Italian defence spending. About the relationship between democracy and peace, the article highlights a significant nuance: while a plurality endorses the Wilsonian assumption that a world of democracies is the most reliable guarantee of peace, a substantial minority maintains that peaceful coexistence between democratic and non-democratic regimes is also possible, with this scepticism towards the democratic peace thesis being especially pronounced among respondents identifying with the centre-right and right. Generational differences are also documented, with Generation Z showing a stronger preference for internationalist and supranational solutions. The article concludes by arguing against both defeatism and naïve optimism: the fundamentals of Italian democratic culture are holding, but the discontent visible in public opinion constitutes a precise and legible signal that governing elites are called to address.

Keywords: Italian public opinion; democracy; peace; democratic crisis; democratic peace theory; survey research.

1. *A world in turmoil*

For more than a century – conventionally, since the perspective outlined by Woodrow Wilson in his speeches concerning the United States' decision to enter the First World War – the increase in the number of democracies has been regarded as the preferred formula for ensuring the pacification of the international order. Although in alternating phases of advance and setback, a gradual expansion of democracy has taken place. In particular, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the number of democratic regimes, especially in the Western world, has increased significantly. However, in the past decade – as is now widely recognised – this trend has come

to a halt. On the contrary, we are witnessing evidence of democratic backsliding in several contexts. This regression is mainly analysed along two distinct yet interconnected trajectories. The first is linked to the crisis of the liberal international order, which appears in various ways, some of which would have been difficult to imagine only a few years ago, such as, for example, the marginalisation of certain international organisations. The second concerns internal factors within democratic systems, such as the rise of populist movements and parties, as well as a broader crisis in forms of political participation. In addition to this already troubling picture, there is a worrying statistic: according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, in 2024 there were 61 different state-based conflicts worldwide. We are therefore clearly entering a phase of profound transformation. The dominant interpretative frameworks that once seemed to guide epistemic communities in interpreting reality appear increasingly inadequate. In this context, developing new analytical tools becomes essential to avoid the risk of producing interpretations that are no longer aligned with the contemporary scenario.

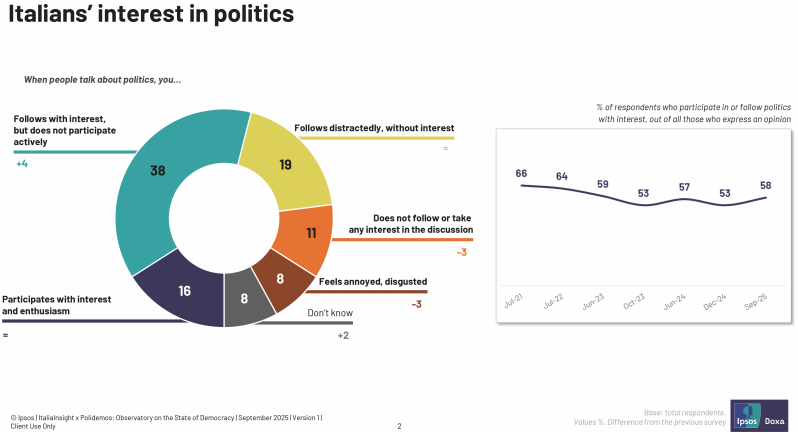
This article presents and analyses the findings of the third survey conducted by the Observatory on the State of Democracy carried out by Polidemos in collaboration with Ipsos Doxa[4] on a representative sample[5] of the Italian population. Its aim is to shed light on Italian citizens' opinion on a number of key

[4] The survey is part of the wider research project Dem.In.W.Peace: Democracy. An Investment in Welfare and Peace (Research Line D.3.2. 2023 of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore).

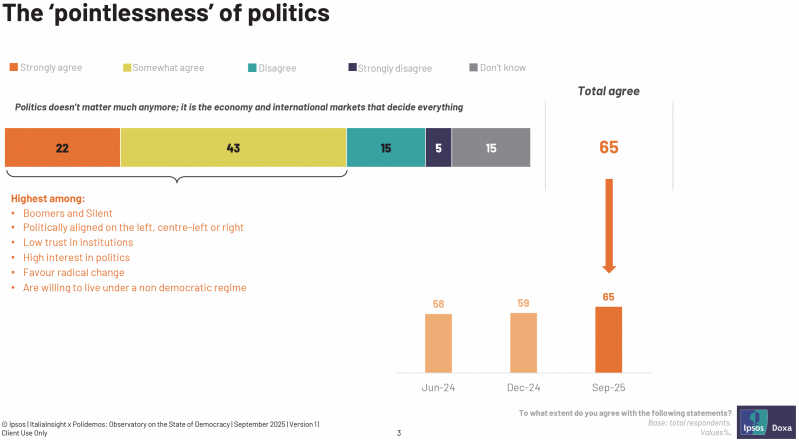
[5] Survey conducted by Ipsos Doxa for Polidemos among a random stratified sample representative of the Italian adult population, weighted by gender, age, educational attainment, geographical area of residence and size of municipality of residence. A total of 800 interviews (out of 3,757 contacts) were conducted online using the CAWI method between 22 and 25 September 2025.

issues, beginning with the role that democracy can still play in fostering a peaceful global order. In particular, the first part of the chapter will outline trends in public opinion regarding Italian politics, with particular attention to its assessment of the functioning of democracy. Notably, the democratic crisis outlined above appears to have prompted respondents to call for more democracy, and thus for democratic tools that enhance public engagement. The second part of the contribution will examine in greater depth the judgements concerning which instruments are considered most suitable for pursuing peace, focusing especially on the relationship between the democratisation of peoples, the international order and the global economic landscape. In conclusion, two main directions will be suggested as the outcome of the analysis of Italian citizens' opinions: on the one hand, the need not to characterise the increasingly discussed crisis of democracy in an undifferentiated manner or in apocalyptic terms; on the other, the need not to assume that the current scenario is positive, but rather to develop a set of corrective measures aimed at addressing specific dynamics, policies, and decisions that Italian citizens – far from indifferently – are able to identify as harmful to the future of democracy, both at the national level and beyond.

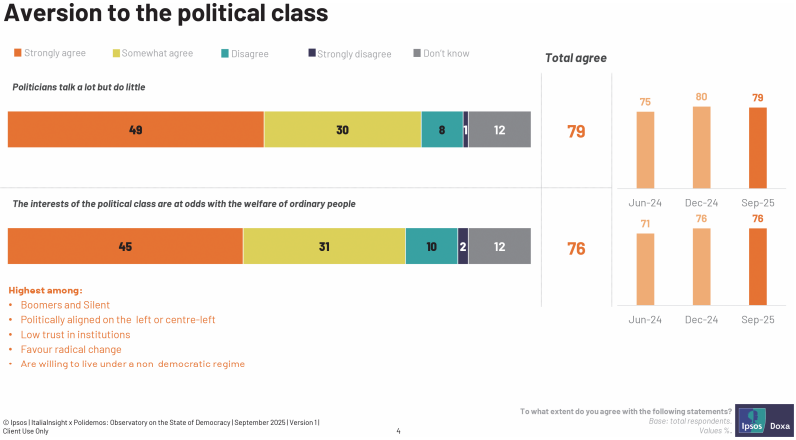
2. *The solution to the crisis of democracy? More democracy*

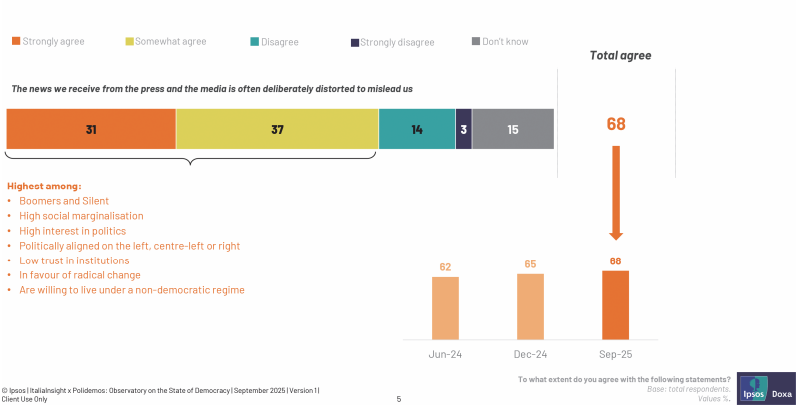


Although the prevailing narrative often tends to portray the Italian population as indifferent and disengaged from public affairs, the data provide a more complex and differentiated picture. While 19% of respondents declare themselves uninterested in and even irritated by politics, a clear majority (73%) follow political developments. Among these, however, only 54% express a genuine interest. Notably, the percentage of respondents who both follow and are interested in politics is five points higher than the two lowest levels recorded in October 2023 and December 2024. Yet, even within this group, active engagement remains limited: only 16% (of the previous 54%) declare participating in politics with interest.



The partially positive levels of public interest in politics are not accompanied by a corresponding attribution of value to its role. Indeed, 65% of respondents agree with the statement that politics no longer has a significant impact on the global scenario, having been replaced by the economy and the financial markets. What is particularly striking about this finding – beyond the cross-cutting political preferences from which it emerges – is that this perception of politics is held precisely by those who show a high level of interest in it. In other words, a paradox emerges: the citizens most interested in political affairs are also those who tend to attribute limited effectiveness to the current forms of politics, democracy in particular.

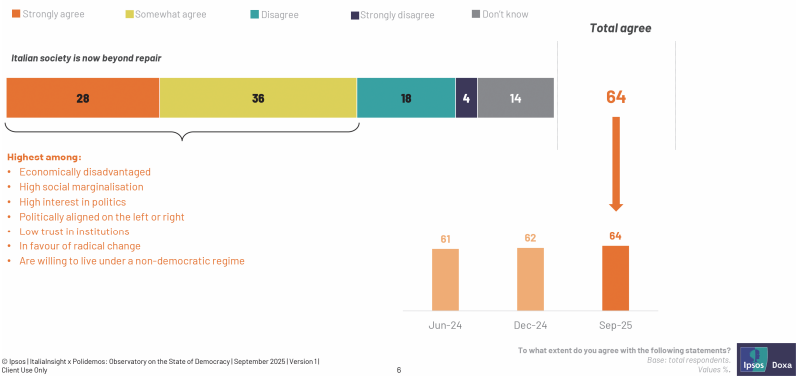




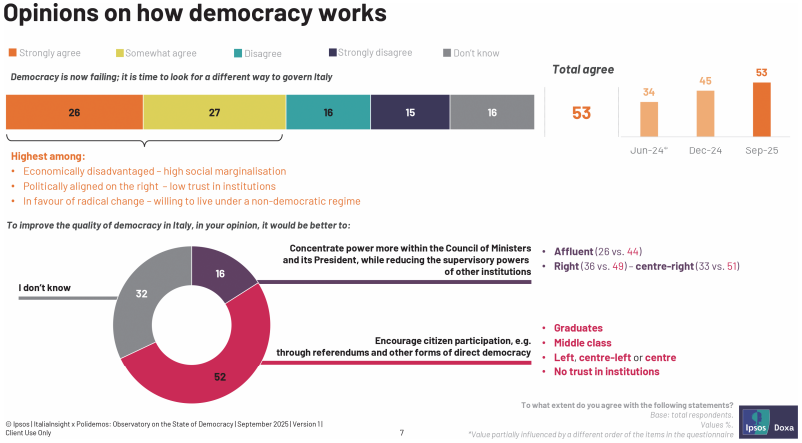
A similarly critical picture emerges in public evaluations about key actors of the political sphere, broadly understood to include the political class, the press and the media. With regard to the political class, 79% of respondents believe that politicians rarely succeed in addressing or influencing the country's most pressing problems, while as many as 76%

argue that political elites pursue interests that conflict with the common interests. Even the media and the press are evaluated critically. Indeed, 68% of respondents believe that the information they convey is not only often distorted, but deliberately so. Taken together, these findings suggest that in Italy the central issue lies less in levels of political interest *per se* and more in the ways in which politics and democracy are practised. In particular, concerns focus on the quality of political representation, closely followed by the functioning of the media sector.

The decline of Italian society

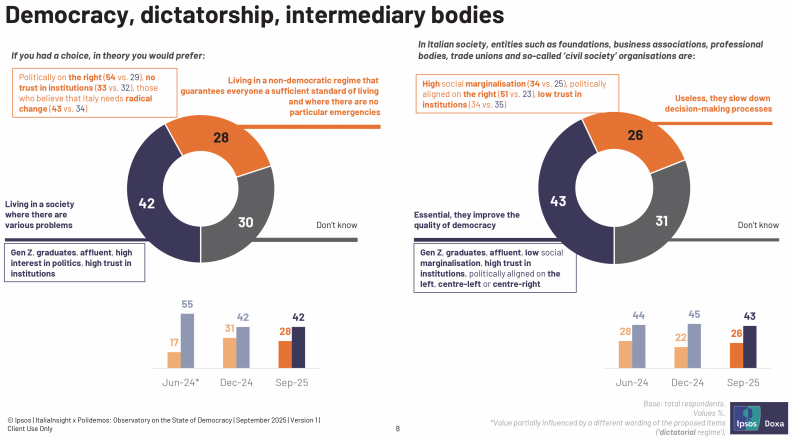


The pessimism evident in Italian citizens' views on politics is also reflected, albeit to a lesser extent, in their perceptions of Italian society: 64% of respondents believe that Italian society is now in decline, describing it as a "broken" society.



Having clarified the broader context within which this survey is situated, the following data focus more specifically on Italian democracy. The first noteworthy aspect concerns opinions regarding its functioning. A majority of respondents (53%) believe that democracy is now compromised and that, as a consequence, it is necessary to find alternative ways of governing the country. However, this result should not be oversimplified. While the level of concern is significant, widespread dissatisfaction and distrust towards politics and the political class (65% and 79% of respondents, respectively) do not translate into outright hostility towards democracy itself. This suggests that a significant proportion of disillusioned or disengaged citizens are not willing to sacrifice the democratic system. If, therefore, democracy is not called into question by nearly half of respondents, this implies that the improvements needed in the Italian political system must be implemented within the democratic framework. Indeed, according to 52% of respondents, the solution to improve the quality of democracy is not to abandon it, but rather to implement it

using more democratic tools such as referendums and other forms of direct democracy. We can therefore conclude that, for at least one in two respondents, the solution to the problems of democracy lies in an increase in democracy itself.

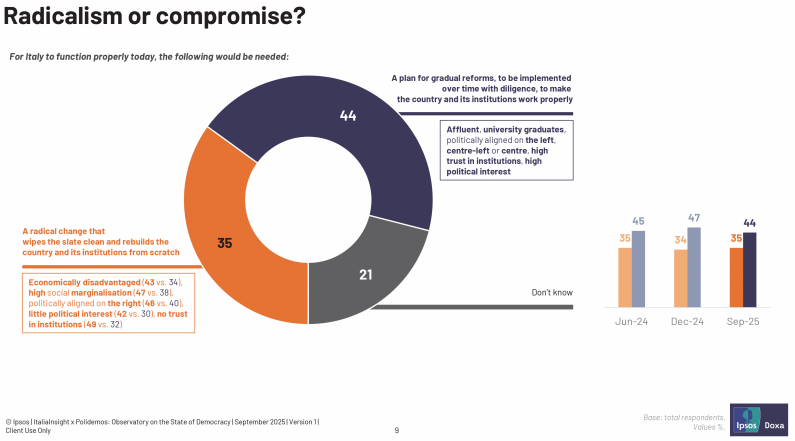


When the issue of maintaining the democratic system is pushed to its limits, respondents display less certainty than in the opinions previously examined regarding its functioning. Faced with a choice between a society characterised by various problems and a non-democratic regime capable of guaranteeing everyone an adequate level of well-being and the absence of major crises, a significant proportion (30%) of respondents are unable to answer, while an equally substantial share (28%) declare themselves willing to give up democracy. This finding points to a decline in the proportion of citizens who support democracy "unconditionally" (42%), that is those who would choose it not only for the results it produces, but also for its intrinsic value. This is an element that should not be overlooked and that requires careful reflection, especially

in light of the international context. Further insight into how citizens understand democracy emerges from the second set of data. When asked about the role that civil society organisations such as foundations, business associations, professional bodies and trade unions can play within the democratic system, 31% of respondents are unable to provide an answer, while 26% view them primarily as obstacles to effective decision-making. However, the 43% of respondents who view them as actors capable of creating better conditions for democracy should not be underestimated. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is the correlation between these positions. It is difficult not to notice that both the proportions and the socio-demographic segments that identify most strongly with these opinions display a clear convergence.

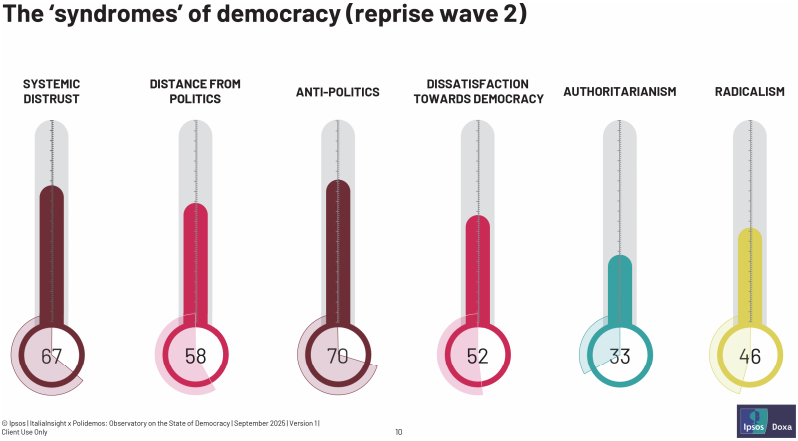
Those who consider a non-democratic regime preferable tend to assign little or no value to civil society organisations. Conversely, respondents who favour democratic systems, even when these are perceived as flawed, tend to regard such organisations as essential to the quality of democracy.

Taken together, the findings of the two sets of data therefore suggest that those who are inclined to sacrifice democracy generally do not consider civil society organisations to be useful, even though – according to the Constitution itself – they should play a central role in the structuring of Italian democracy. In light of this, it can therefore be argued that respondents who attribute intrinsic value to democracy recognise the decisive role that civil society organisations can play.



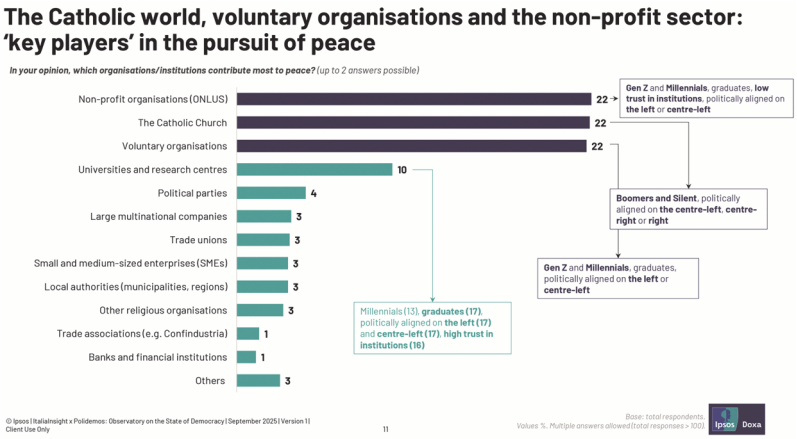
Further confirming the interpretations provided, namely, that scepticism towards political parties and politics does not automatically translate into a willingness to abandon democracy, the survey indicates that a plurality of respondents favour a gradualist approach. Specifically, 44% support the implementation of incremental reforms over time as a means of improving the country's situation. By contrast, just over one-third of respondents (35%) advocate more radical changes to the defining features of contemporary Italian society. While this may appear as a reassuring finding, it should be treated with caution. Indeed, it should be noted that, if one combines the percentages of citizens who would choose radical change with those who were unable to provide an answer (21%), the resulting total exceeds the proportion of citizens who would adopt a more "reformist" approach.

The 'syndromes' of democracy (reprise wave 2)



This summary figure, intended to measure the "temperature" of several indicators useful for understanding the state of health of Italian democracy, offers a more nuanced picture than might initially be expected. While levels of pessimism and aversion towards politics and the system clearly exceed half of respondents, they decrease significantly when dissatisfaction concerns not the political system as a whole but democracy itself. A similar pattern emerges with regard to authoritarian alternatives: fewer than half of those who express systemic distrust and aversion to politics would be willing to embrace an authoritarian option. Although this may be seen as a reassuring sign for the resilience of democratic systems, the finding requires careful qualification. When the authoritarian option is replaced by the prospect of radical reform, support rises markedly, reaching levels nearly comparable to dissatisfaction with democracy. All of this points to a rather widespread demand to embark on a path of change within the Italian political system.

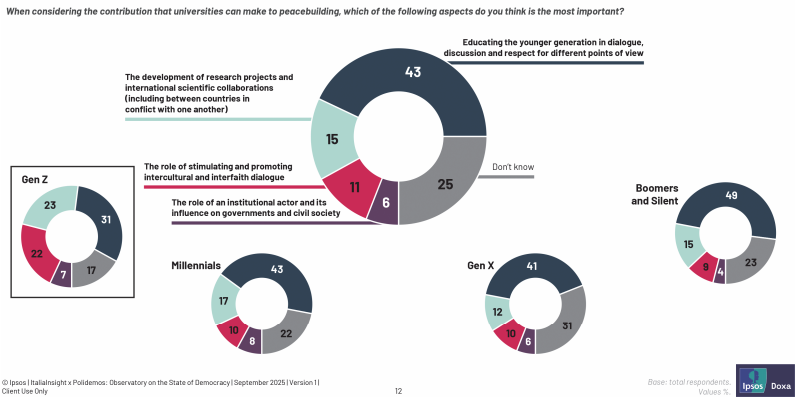
3. *Who builds peace? What tools ensure it?*



When asked which organisations and institutions contribute most to peacebuilding, citizens' responses provide several interesting insights, particularly regarding the role they attribute to different actors. First of all, it is not surprising that the three entities considered most involved in promoting peace are – each with 22% – non-profit organisations (ONLUS), the Catholic Church and voluntary organisations. Universities and research centres rank fourth, traditionally regarded as spaces for education and training grounded in a culture of peace and dialogue. However, only 10% of respondents believe that universities can play an effective role in promoting peace. This suggests that Italians tend to favour solutions characterised by "direct" interventions in conflict areas, such as humanitarian aid, while showing less confidence in the contribution that academic culture can provide. Two further trends are particularly noteworthy. The first concerns the perceptions citizens have of political actors in the broadest sense: political

parties (4%), trade unions (3%) and local authorities (3%) are widely considered as having limited influence in fostering peace. A similar pattern emerges in the economic sphere. Large companies and multinationals (3%), as well as banks and financial institutions (1%) are not regarded as key contributors to peacebuilding, pointing to a perceived disconnect – at least in public opinion – between economic actors and the prospects for peace.

How do universities contribute to peacebuilding?

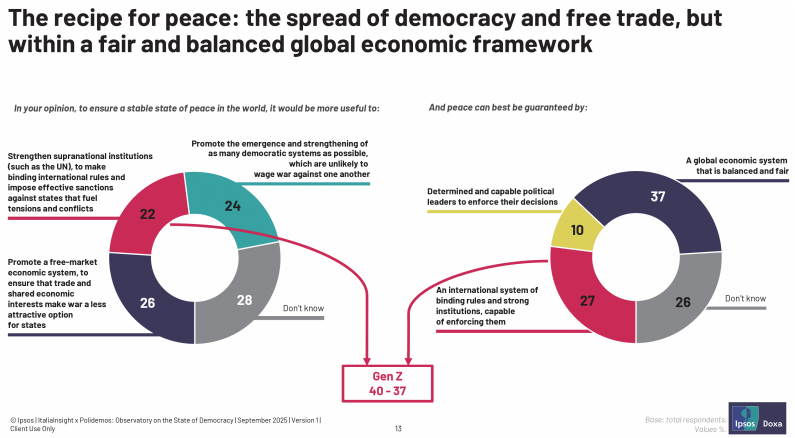


It is particularly appropriate to reflect on the contribution of universities to peacebuilding. When asked to identify the most significant aspects of the university system in this regard, almost half of respondents (43%) pointed to the education of younger generations in dialogue, debate and respect for differing viewpoints, thus emphasising the cultural dimension of higher education institutions.

At the same time, a notable proportion of respondents (25%) were unable to provide an answer, suggesting a degree

of uncertainty or limited awareness of the broader role universities might play.

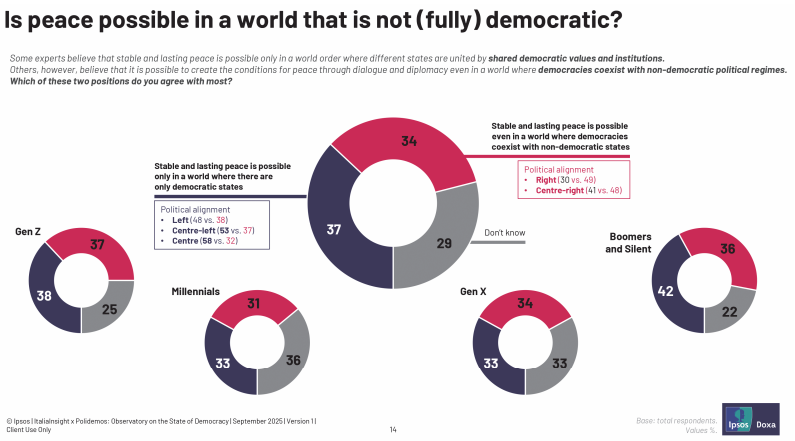
A final point worth highlighting concerns a novelty introduced by Generation Z: while older cohorts display relatively consistent patterns in their responses, Gen Z, whilst still prioritising the educational aspect, values it to a significantly lesser extent (31%), in favour of placing greater emphasis on the role of promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In fact, for Gen Z, this percentage doubles (22%).



When broadening the analysis to identify the conditions considered as necessary to promote peace, some unexpected patterns emerge. Notably, the promotion of a free-trade economic system ranks first (26%), despite the growing criticism it has attracted in recent years for its impact on contemporary societies. This "economic solution" is followed, just two percentage points behind, by support for strengthening democratic systems and promoting the

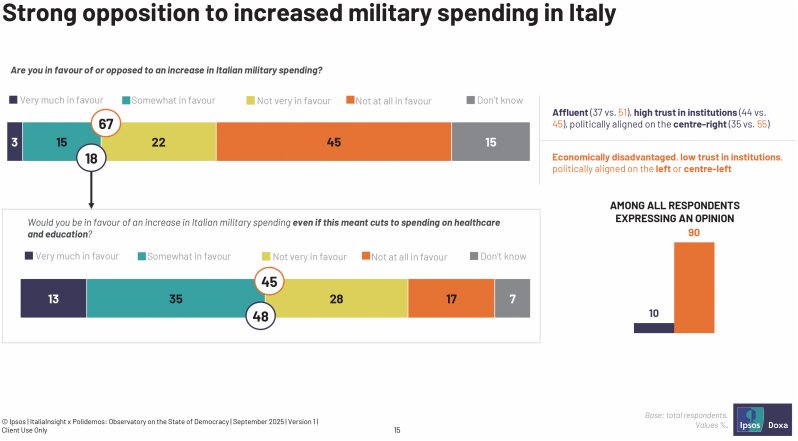
democratisation of non-democratic countries. Closely aligned with these (22%), we can note the view for which the key to peace lies in strengthening supranational institutions such as the United Nations. A comparable distribution emerges when respondents are asked which actors are best placed to guarantee peace. In this case, a similar proportion of respondents believes that this guarantee should come from institutions and rules that transcend national borders (27%). Once again, the data suggest that the strongest safeguard against conflict may lie in the economic system, particularly in a global system that is balanced and fair (37%).

Finally, confirming a trend already observed, there is a widespread lack of confidence in the ability of political leaders to act as guarantors of a peaceful global order (10%). On this issue as well, generational differences stand out. In particular, Generation Z shows a stronger preference for internationalist solutions, placing greater trust in supranational institutions (40%) and systems of international rules (37%) as effective instruments for ensuring peace.



When investigating the relationship between democracy and peace, the majority of respondents (37%) believes that peace is both possible and sustainable only within a global order made up of democratic states. However, this view is closely matched by those who argue that democracy does not automatically guarantee peace, and that peaceful coexistence is also possible in a world where democratic and non-democratic regimes coexist. This position is supported by a significant 34% of respondents, calling into question a long-standing assumption of twentieth-century political thought – most notably associated with Woodrow Wilson – that more democracy necessarily leads to more peace. In this regard, it is interesting to observe how respondents are positioned along the political spectrum. While respondents identifying with the left, centre, and centre-left tend to uphold a strong link between democracy and peace, those on the right and centre-right express greater scepticism. Among the latter, a majority does not view the absence of democracy in certain states as a decisive obstacle to the maintenance of global peace.

Strong opposition to increased military spending in Italy



Finally, the third survey conducted by the Polidemos – Ipsos Doxa Observatory on the State of Democracy focuses on public opinion about the relationship between democracy and the use of military force. Overall, the Italian people can be broadly described as pacifist and sceptical towards military spending, since nine citizens out of ten are in no way favourable to an increase in military spending in Italy. More specifically, 67% of respondents are not in favour of increased military expenditure, compared to 18% who instead consider such an increase necessary.

Despite the overwhelming majority of those who do not believe that increased military spending is conducive to peace, it should be noted that those who support the opposite view do so with conviction. Indeed, of the 18% of respondents who declare themselves in favour of increasing military expenditure, 48% would maintain their stance even if it required cuts to key areas such as healthcare and education, compared to 45% who would not.

4. *Neither defeatism nor naïve optimism*

Although it is becoming increasingly common – and communicatively effective – to invoke a pervasive systemic crisis, the data from the third survey conducted by the Polidemos – Ipsos Doxa Observatory on the State of Democracy suggest a far less apocalyptic scenario. While the overall picture is certainly not a reassuring one, it shows that Italian citizens – despite identifying numerous shortcomings in both the political and economic systems – are not willing to abandon democracy. Moreover, respondents do not appear to adopt a defeatist view of the interdependencies linking democracy to the global economic order. In essence, it can be said that the fundamentals

are holding, even though serious critical issues remain. This leads us to argue that political and governing elites should finally recognise that the discontent observable in public opinion is not an indistinct feeling of mistrust, but a signal that certain dynamics, certain policies and certain decisions are not shared because they are regarded as harmful to the future of the country.

Lastly, it will be in the management of the ongoing international crises, and above all in responding to the re-emergence of dynamics typical of war, that the ability of those holding political and institutional responsibility to continue guaranteeing peace – both a prior and a necessary condition – will be measured.

"If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." Tancredi's celebrated maxim in *The Leopard* has long served as the master key to Italian politics: a country where every rupture seems to dissolve into continuity, every revolution into restoration. But does the formula still hold?

Since October 2022, Italy has been governed by the first executive in the history of the Republic led by a party with roots in the post-fascist tradition — an experiment watched with alarm, curiosity and hope across Europe and beyond. Three years on, the balance sheet confounds both the catastrophists and the reassured. The most stable government in decades has completed none of the institutional reforms it promised; yet Italian democracy has quietly shifted — in the governance of dissent, the control of public media, the externalisation of migration, the symbolic politics of culture and memory.

Drawing on original survey research and in-depth analyses of foreign policy, environmental commitments, protest and cultural institutions, this volume charts the transformation of Italian democracy within a world in disorder: multiplying wars, a deepening global democratic recession, a transatlantic alliance in turmoil. Its thesis is captured in a single formula: hybrid Italy — a democracy in which institutional continuity and illiberal drift coexist, and in which Tancredi's maxim now runs in reverse. Everything stays the same, precisely so that things can change.

A book for anyone seeking to understand not only where Italy is going, but what its 'laboratory' reveals about the future of democracy in Europe.

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e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (produzione);
librario.dsu@educatt.it (distribuzione)
web: libri.educatt.online
ISBN: 979-12-5535-607-3



euro 14,00