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RECEIVED 17 July 2026
REVISED 27 August 2026
ACCEPTED 30 August 2026
PUBLISHED 17 September 2026

CITATION

Ceccarini L (2026) Once, '*Roma caput mundi*'. Now a microcosm of Italian politics.
Front. Polit. Sci. 8:1940915.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2026.1940915

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Once, '*Roma caput mundi*'. Now a microcosm of Italian politics

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Rome occupies a relevant place in Italian politics. As the national capital and the country's largest city, it has sometimes anticipated or mirrored national transformations, synchronised with others, and amplified or refracted still others. This article argues that Rome can therefore be understood as a microcosm of Italian politics and uses the city's electoral history to examine three decades of political change, from the collapse of the First Republic to the 2022 general election. The analysis focuses on five critical turning points—1993, 2011, 2013, 2018 and 2022—which together chart the transformation of Italy's political landscape. It examines the collapse of the First Republic, the emergence and eventual decline of the bipolar party system associated with the Berlusconi era, the rise of the Five Star Movement (M5S), and the growing strength of right-wing sovereigntist parties. Throughout, particular attention is paid to the increasing personalisation and mediatisation of politics, changes in political leadership, and the weakening of territorially based political loyalties. Drawing on evidence from mayoral elections, electoral geography, gender representation and patterns of electoral participation, the article shows how developments in Rome interlace wider national trends, making the city an especially revealing barometer of political change in Italy.

KEYWORDS

first, second and third Italian republics, Italian elections, Italian political transition, Italian politics, local elections, mayors, Rome

1 Introduction

Rome's political importance and complexity make it an ideal setting in which to scrutinise broader changes in Italian politics. As the national capital and the country's largest city, Rome has anticipated, reflected, and synchronised with political developments across Italy. It therefore provides an especially revealing case through which to understand the evolution of the Italian political system over the past three decades.

Meanwhile, the national-level analysis provides the context within which the urban case is situated and develops. We will therefore link the micro and macro levels by examining three political phases beginning in 1993. We will then refer to selected political events that happened in Rome to link the capital city to the country as a whole and to intertwine national and local politics.

The contributions to this Special Issue are united by the idea that many of the political and anti-political phenomena that have reshaped Italian politics were, in some cases, quite evident in Rome. Against this background, the city offers a valuable vantage point from which to examine the transition from the First Republic to the Second, and perhaps now towards a Third Republic.

This article explores how the principal electoral reforms introduced since the early 1990s have reshaped political competition at national, regional and local levels. Particular attention

is paid to reforms governing parliamentary, mayoral and regional elections, which provide the institutional framework within which the developments examined in this Special Issue have unfolded.

The article argues that the relationship between Rome and national politics is genuinely interwoven: at different critical junctures, the capital has *anticipated*, *amplified*, *refracted* or closely *mirrored* wider political transformations. Rome is therefore best understood not just as a mechanical predictor of Italian politics, but as an unusually sensitive metropolitan arena in which national shifts are often rendered visible in distinctive local forms. Thus, Rome is taken as a *microcosm*.

This Perspective article, therefore, proceeds on two interconnected levels. Sections 2–5 reconstruct the major transformations of the Italian political system that provide the macro-political context of the Special Issue, while selected Roman electoral episodes examine how those transformations were anticipated, amplified, or refracted in the capital city. Section 6 then brings these trajectories together through the contributions to the Special Issue.

The argument is not that Rome systematically precedes national change, but that its political and institutional centrality makes it a particularly sensitive arena in which broader transformations can become visible in distinctive forms.

2 1993: a crucial turning point

The political changes that transformed Italy during the following three decades can largely be traced back to the crisis of 1993. That year marked the collapse of the First Republic and created the conditions for the emergence of a new political order. The most visible symbol of this transformation came a few months later, on 26 January 1994, when Silvio Berlusconi announced, in what became a famous televised address, that he was entering politics and founding Forza Italia (FI). 2 months later, he led the party to victory in the general election of 27–28 March, inaugurating a new phase in Italian politics (Newell, 2018a, 2023).

Berlusconi's arrival accelerated a broader process that was already under way. Politics became increasingly personalised and media-driven, while political marketing assumed a far more prominent role than it had during the First Republic. These developments profoundly altered the conduct of political competition and the relationship between political leaders, parties and voters.

Yet 1993 was important for another reason. Law No. 81 introduced the direct election of mayors and provincial presidents, fundamentally reshaping local government. Subsequent reforms extended similar principles to regional government, where directly elected regional presidents increasingly came to be described in the media as “governors”. Taken together, these institutional reforms strengthened executive leadership and further reinforced the growing prominence of individual political leaders.

Three closely related developments came to characterise the period that followed. Politics and communication became increasingly *personalised* (personalization) executive leadership acquired greater political significance (presidentialisation); and party leaders acquired heightened authority within their own organisations (leaderisation). Although these developments were common to many contemporary democracies (Manin, 1997; Poguntke and Webb, 2005), they assumed a distinctive form in Italy because they coincided with the collapse of

the traditional party system and the emergence of new patterns of political competition.

Rome provides an especially revealing vantage point from which to observe these changes. As the traditional political identities that had long shaped electoral competition weakened, new generations of voters became less attached to established parties and increasingly receptive to different political appeals. The capital therefore offers a particularly clear illustration of the transformation of Italy's political culture during the transition from the First to the Second Republic.

In this regard, it is worth recalling that Francesco Rutelli was the first mayor of the capital to be directly elected by the citizens, winning two rounds of local elections in 1993 and 1997. In 1993 Francesco Rutelli opposed Gianfranco Fini in a highly visible two-round contest that combined personalisation with continuing pluralism at the supply level (See De Rosa; Maestri; Fiorelli and Lomonaco in this Special Issue).

The Roman ballot itself already showed signs of a changing relationship between parties, candidates, and territory, with civic lists such as Alleanza per Roma and Insieme per Roma accompanying the two principal candidacies. In particular, the candidate's personal appeal of the winner, the *persona* factor, carried considerable weight and was a key element in both the choice of candidate itself and in explaining the vote outcome.

In this instance, Rome *foreshadowed* the context in which elections would later take place at the national level as well: a candidate-centred competition, a bipolar structure of the electoral contest, and a weakening of the exclusive organisational role of traditional party labels. Thus, Rome provided an early sketch of this new political logic.

The collapse of the First Republic also created political space for new issues and new forms of political mobilisation. The Mani Pulite (Clean Hands) investigations undermined the authority of the established political class (Newell, 2018a), while issues such as immigration, quality of life, gender and political disaffection assumed growing importance. In Rome, as elsewhere in Italy, these developments reshaped political competition and linked local politics more closely than ever to wider national debates.

3 2011: the end of a political cycle

The political cycle inaugurated by Berlusconi's entry into politics in 1994 came to an end in November 2011, when he resigned as Prime Minister (Newell, 2018b). President Giorgio Napolitano's decision to invite Mario Monti to form a technocratic government symbolised the exhaustion of the political order that had emerged after the collapse of the First Republic (Ceccarini et al., 2012). The bipolar structure of party competition that had dominated Italian politics for almost two decades had begun to unravel.

The formation of the Monti government reflected this profound transformation. Parties that had long defined themselves in opposition to one another found themselves supporting the same government, while established alliances fragmented. The Popolo della Libertà (PdL), the Partito Democratico (PD) and several centrist parties formed an unprecedented parliamentary majority. At the same time, long-standing allies found themselves on opposite sides. The Lega Nord (LN), previously Berlusconi's principal coalition partner, moved into opposition, as did Italia dei Valori (IdV), despite its traditional proximity to the PD. These shifting alignments illustrated the

increasing fluidity of the party system and the weakening of the bipolar logic that had structured Italian politics since the mid-1990s.

Yet the crisis of 2011 was not simply a consequence of financial turmoil or pressure from international markets. Rather, it marked the culmination of a much longer process during which the political order of the Second Republic had progressively lost coherence. The bipolar structure of party competition weakened as the parties that had sustained it became increasingly fragmented and internally divided. Traditional coalitions broke apart, the ‘personal party’ (Calise, 2010) lost much of its earlier vitality, and the cleavage between supporters and opponents of Berlusconi became less decisive than it had been during the previous two decades. At the same time, the distance between citizens and political parties continued to widen, contributing to the resurgence of anti-political sentiments.

By 2011, it had become increasingly difficult to speak of a coherent party system. Relations among parties had become unstable and unpredictable; the principal parties themselves were struggling with internal divisions and deteriorating relations with their allies; long-established coalition arrangements had given way to temporary alliances shaped largely by political contingency; and even the electoral rules governing political competition had themselves become the subject of political conflict. The system established after 1994 had not suddenly collapsed: it had gradually disintegrated.

Four long-term developments help explain this process. First, politics became increasingly personalised. Political competition came to revolve less around parties and programmes than around individual leaders.

A second development concerned the changing distribution of political authority. Successive institutional reforms strengthened executive leadership and encouraged increasingly personalised interpretations of political office: the *leaderisation* process.

A third development concerned the changing structure of party competition. The electoral-system reforms introduced in 1993 (the Mattarellum) and 2005 (the Porcellum), despite their important differences, both encouraged competition between broad electoral coalitions centred on rival candidates for the premiership. As a result, political competition increasingly took on a personalised and quasi-presidential character, with coalition leaders becoming the principal focus of electoral choice.

Finally, territory acquired renewed political significance. The Lega Nord initially made territorial identity the cornerstone of its political appeal through its advocacy of federalism and its defence of northern interests (Diamanti, 1995, 1996). More broadly, territorial politics became closely associated with institutional reform and with the growing political prominence of directly elected mayors and regional presidents during the so-called ‘season of mayors’. Together, these developments reinforced the territorial dimension of political competition even as many of the traditional territorially-based loyalties inherited from the First Republic were beginning to weaken.

The cumulative effect of these developments was to undermine the political order established after 1994. By the time Berlusconi left office in 2011, the conditions that had sustained the Second Republic for almost two decades had largely disappeared, opening the way to a new and more fragmented phase of Italian politics.

Within this lively and ever-changing context that characterised this second political phase, the case of Rome does not offer a foreshadowing of what subsequently occurred at the national level, but rather demonstrates a *synchronisation* with the 2008 general election (See D’Amelio and Mariotti; Quattromani and Di Gregorio in this Special

Issue)—the last held in this political cycle considered in this article. In 2008, national and municipal elections were held concurrently; the territorial distribution of support for the main national parties closely overlapped with that of the corresponding mayoral candidates.

This year’s local elections, won by Giovanni Alemanno, leader of a centre-right list, do show a strong correlation with political alignments and electoral geography at national level. This point highlights the complexity and shifting nature of the Rome—Italy relationship during the key stages following 1994. The election therefore represents an episode of *synchronisation* rather than *anticipation* (See De Rosa in this Special Issue), illustrating how strongly national and local competition could still align at the end of the bipolar cycle.

4 2013: the electoral earthquake

The general election of 24–25 February 2013 marked a decisive turning point in the evolution of the Italian party system (Diamanti et al., 2013). More than any previous election, it exposed the erosion of the territorial and political foundations on which the Second Republic had been built. The patterns of electoral competition that had dominated Italian politics for almost two decades were no longer capable of containing the profound changes taking place within Italian society.

The electoral map revealed both continuity and change. Traditional political strongholds remained visible, but their electoral significance had weakened considerably. New political forces emerged, most notably the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), whose distinctive yellow displaced many of the familiar political colours that had previously defined the Italian electoral landscape. Politics in Italy had long been rooted in stable territorially-based identities; the 2013 election demonstrated that these loyalties were rapidly weakening.

Their erosion was evident across the political spectrum. Every major party associated with the Second Republic lost support in areas that had once formed the core of its electoral base. The Partito Democratico (PD) suffered losses even within the traditional ‘Red Belt’, while the centre-right saw its support decline in northern Italy and Sicily, regions that had been central to Berlusconi’s electoral success since 1994.

The Lega Nord provides perhaps the clearest illustration of this transformation. Having emerged during the final years of the First Republic and survived its collapse, the party had successfully replaced the Christian Democrats as the dominant political force in much of the ‘White Belt’ of north-eastern Italy (Diamanti, 2009). Yet in 2013 its share of the vote was halved, illustrating the weakening of even the most deeply rooted territorial political identities.

The principal agent of change, however, was a challenger party (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020): the Movimento 5 Stelle. Founded outside the traditional structures of party organisation and mobilised largely through the internet, the M5S successfully channelled widespread anti-political sentiment through a distinctive form of digital populism (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013). Its appeal cut across established ideological and territorial divisions, attracting voters from every part of the political spectrum. Winning more than a quarter of the vote at its first general-election outing, the movement fundamentally altered the territorial geography of Italian electoral competition.

The 2013 election therefore represented much more than the arrival of a successful new party. It demonstrated that the traditional ideological, social and territorial foundations of voting behaviour had

weakened profoundly. As these long-established loyalties dissolved, the party system became increasingly fragmented, bringing to an end the bipolar structure of political competition that had characterised the Berlusconi era.

Against this background, Rome *amplified* this fundamental shift. In the 2013 general election, the M5S won 27.3 per cent in the capital, slightly above its already exceptional national result (25.6 per cent), with support exceeding 30 per cent in 44 Roman toponymic zones and becoming especially strong in the outer periphery (See D'Amelio and Mariotti in this Special Issue).

3 years later, the 2016 mayoral election marked a further step. The M5S candidate, Virginia Raggi, a young female lawyer from Rome, won the election and thus transformed this challenger party into a governing force (See Quattromani and Di Gregorio; Fava in this Special Issue).

Rome therefore did not anticipate the emergence of the M5S as a national force, which dates back to 2013; rather, the 2016 election *pre-figured* its subsequent transformation from an anti-establishment party to a party of the establishment.

5 2018 and 2022: completing the transformation

5.1 The 2018 election

The 2018 general election confirmed that the changes first revealed in 2013 were not temporary but reflected a fundamental restructuring of the Italian party system (Bordignon et al., 2018). The tri-polar pattern of competition that had emerged in 2013 endured, while the electoral balance shifted decisively towards parties challenging the established political order. Rather than reversing the fragmentation of the party system, the election consolidated it.

The Movimento 5 Stelle emerged as the largest single party, winning almost one-third of the vote and confirming the strength of anti-establishment politics. At the same time, Matteo Salvini completed the transformation of the Lega from a regional movement into a national right-wing party. The slogan 'Italians First' replaced the party's earlier emphasis on northern regional identity, while hostility towards immigration, the European Union and the euro became central themes of its political message. The once ubiquitous slogan *Roma ladrona* ('thieving Rome') quietly disappeared as the Lega itself entered national government. By 2018, the party had quadrupled its vote share and become one of the dominant forces in Italian politics.

The election also demonstrated the strength of populist politics. Although the M5S and the Lega represented different strands of populism, both successfully channelled widespread dissatisfaction with the established political class. Their contrasting political styles were captured by two memorable images: Salvini's *ruspa* (bulldozer), directed against Roma camps and irregular immigration, and Grillo's *aprisca-tole* (tin opener), intended to "open up" Parliament and dismantle the political establishment. Together, these parties gave electoral expression to a broad anti-system mood that had first become apparent in 2013.

The election was held under a new electoral system, the Rosatellum, introduced in 2017. It represented the fifth attempt since the early 1990s to redesign Italy's electoral rules, following the

Mattarellum, Porcellum, Consultellum and Italicum (the last of which was never used). Frequent changes of electoral law have become one of the defining features of contemporary Italian politics, reflecting repeated attempts to stabilise a party system that has remained persistently fluid.

At the time of writing (June 2026), this process continues. Parliament is considering yet another reform—the proposed Stabilicum—which is expected to determine the distribution of seats at the 2027 general election. Although based on proportional representation, it would incorporate a majority bonus, once again illustrating Italy's continuing search for institutional arrangements capable of reconciling proportional representation with stable government.

5.2 The 2022 election

The 2022 general election marked the culmination of the political changes that had been unfolding since 2011 (Bordignon et al., 2023). While it confirmed many of the trends already evident in 2013 and 2018, it also marked the beginning of a new phase in Italian politics. The centre-right coalition secured a comfortable victory, with Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) emerging as the dominant force at the expense of its coalition partners. Following years of steady growth, Giorgia Meloni led her party to an almost eightfold increase in its vote share, reaching 26 per cent (Vampa, 2023). By contrast, Matteo Salvini's now fully national Lega suffered significant losses. Forza Italia also followed this trend after the 2001 general elections, when it reached an all-time high.

The election also confirmed the decline of several of the parties that had dominated the previous decade. The Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), the outstanding winner in 2018, lost more than half of its electoral support, although it remained an important political actor. On the centre-left, the Partito Democratico (PD), led by Enrico Letta, failed to broaden its electoral appeal after unsuccessful attempts to construct a wider *campo largo* coalition. At the same time, it faced competition from the new centrist alliance between Azione and Italia Viva (Az-IV), led, respectively, by Carlo Calenda and the former PD leader and Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. Taken together, these developments reinforced the long-term transformation of the Italian party system that had begun a decade earlier.

The election therefore raises a broader question. Is Italy still living through the long transition that followed the collapse of the First Republic, or have the political developments that began between 2011 and 2013 ushered in a new phase that can legitimately be described as a Third Republic? Whatever answer is given, the political actors that dominated the Second Republic have either disappeared, been transformed, or lost much of their former influence. The bipolar pattern of competition that characterised Italian politics for almost 20 years has given way to a far more fragmented and fluid political landscape. New political actors, many of them drawing on different forms of populist mobilisation, have replaced the television-centred politics of the Berlusconi era with new styles of communication and political organisation. As argued elsewhere (Ceccarini and Newell, 2019), the elections of 2013 and 2018 had already signalled the emergence of a new political phase; the 2022 election confirmed that this transformation was now well advanced.

Several features of the 2022 election deserve particular attention:

Electoral volatility, indecision and abstention. One of the defining characteristics of the election was the exceptionally high degree of electoral uncertainty. Many voters postponed their electoral choice

until late in the campaign, while others switched their support from one party to another. As a result, the election recorded the third-highest level of electoral volatility in post-war Italy, exceeded only by the elections of 1994 and 2013. These developments were consistent with trends already visible in both the 2013 and 2018 elections, when levels of voter indecision had risen markedly compared with those recorded in 2006 and 2008 (Ceccarini et al., 2023).

A further source of uncertainty resulted from the constitutional reform approved in the 2020 referendum, which reduced the number of Members of Parliament. The consequent redrawing of single-member and multi-member constituencies meant that candidates represented much larger territorial areas than before, particularly in single-member districts. This inevitably increased the distance between voters and their parliamentary representatives. Electoral systems do more than translate votes into seats; they also influence how citizens perceive political institutions and representation, and these perceptions, in turn, shape electoral behaviour.

The election also confirmed the long-term decline in electoral participation. Abstention reached an unprecedented 36 per cent of the electorate (Bordignon and Salvarani, 2023), representing the sharpest fall in turnout in the history of post-war Italy. Although declining participation had been evident for several decades, the scale of abstention in 2022 underlined the growing disengagement of many citizens from conventional electoral politics and provided further evidence of the weakening relationship between voters and political parties.

The Persistence of a Tri-/Quadripolar Party System. Before the 2022 election, many observers believed that Italian politics might return to bipolar competition. Enrico Letta, leader of the Partito Democratico (PD), sought to build a broad centre-left alliance (*campo largo*) capable of challenging the centre-right coalition. Relations between the PD and the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) had gradually improved following Giuseppe Conte's election as leader of the movement, their joint participation in the Conte II government (2019–2021), and their subsequent support for Mario Draghi's technocratic government (2021–2022). Taken together, these developments appeared to lay the foundations for a more stable bipolar alignment.

That expectation proved short-lived. Although the Draghi government enjoyed support from an exceptionally broad parliamentary majority—including the Lega, Forza Italia (FI), the PD and the M5S—disagreements over its political agenda increasingly strained relations between the PD and the M5S. The controversy surrounding the M5S's role in the events that led to Draghi's resignation ultimately destroyed the fragile understanding between Letta and Conte and precipitated the early election of September 2022.

As the election approached, widespread expectations of a centre-right victory further complicated the prospects for opposition cooperation. The emergence of the 'Third Pole,' led by Carlo Calenda and Matteo Renzi, further fragmented the centre-left without displacing the M5S as the third-largest political force. Instead of returning to bipolar competition, the election produced a party system characterised by four significant political competitors.

The erosion of the traditional 'Red Belt' reinforced this development. For decades, central Italy had provided the territorial backbone of both the First and the Second Republic's centre-left. By 2022, however, that electoral distinctiveness had weakened considerably, continuing a trend already visible in 2018. Although some continuity with the electoral geography of the previous election remained, the prospect of a stable two-bloc system appeared increasingly remote.

Resentful citizens, populism and anti-political actors. The 2022 general election followed a legislature inaugurated by a significant and unprecedented populist experience, in the wake of the Lega's and the M5S' electoral success in 2018. As already noted, these two formations had given political voice to widespread popular discontent—a form of resentment with explanations of varying nature: economic, cultural and political.

Their votes were interpreted as those of the so-called "losers of globalisation" (not just them). Both parties could be classified as challenger parties. They were rewarded by the electoral outcome as opponents of the grand-coalition governments that had succeeded each other since 2011. Only Giorgia Meloni's party and a handful of left-wing parliamentarians opposed this last broad coalition: the technocratic government led by Draghi.

That legislature was also marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw Italy among the countries worst affected by the contagion. However, those living in precarious economic circumstances bore the brunt of the crisis. They felt themselves "forgotten" and "left behind." And it is based on this idea that they probably cast their votes.

The 2021 Roman mayoral election illustrates the *refraction* perspective in the relationship between Roman and national politics. A fragmented four-candidate first round gave way to a decisive runoff victory for Roberto Gualtieri—centre-left coalition candidate and Democratic Party member—despite the centre-right candidate placing first in the opening round (See Quattromani and Di Gregorio; Mestri in this Special Issue). Candidate credibility, coalition reach, and second-round expandability all proved consequential alongside national partisan alignments.

The Roman outcome thus did not *foreshadow* the centre-right's 2022 victory; rather, it demonstrates how local institutional rules can *refract* broader national configurations.

6 Rome and Italy: bound by a double thread

The developments traced in this article suggest that Italian politics has evolved over the past three decades through a series of gradual adjustments rather than according to any coherent programme of institutional reform. Although debate about constitutional and electoral reform has been a constant feature of political life, institutional change has generally reflected the immediate interests and calculations of political leaders and parties rather than a shared long-term vision of Italy's political future. Politicians have repeatedly invoked the language of new 'republics,' yet these claims have rarely been accompanied by the constitutional transformations that such labels might imply.

Against this background, Rome provides an especially revealing perspective from which to observe the evolution of Italian politics. The capital does not simply mirror developments taking place elsewhere in the country. Rather, political change in Rome has frequently anticipated wider national trends while at the same time reflecting the broader transformation of the Italian political system. It is in this sense that Rome can be regarded as a *microcosm* of contemporary Italian politics.

The contributions collected in this Special Issue examine different dimensions of that relationship. De Rosa analyses the evolution of

Rome's local political system, focusing on electoral participation, electoral volatility and the changing structure of political competition. His contribution highlights both the growing fragmentation of the political landscape and the close relationship between developments in Rome and wider national trends.

Maestri approaches the question from a different perspective, by examining the electoral symbols and discussing the growing personalisation of local electoral competition. His analysis shows how locally based electoral lists (*civic* lists) have increasingly become vehicles for supporting individual mayoral candidates rather than expressions of collective political identities, illustrating the broader personalisation of Italian politics discussed throughout this article.

Fava's contribution examines the evolution of mayoral elections following the introduction of direct elections under Law No. 81/1993. He argues that, after an initial period during which the reform strengthened the relationship between citizens and their directly elected 'first citizen', its capacity to mobilise voters has gradually weakened. The institutional innovations that once appeared transformative no longer generate the same levels of political engagement, nor have they succeeded in reversing declining electoral participation or the erosion of public confidence in local politics.

The reform of local government introduced in the early 1990s was itself a product of the anti-political climate that accompanied the collapse of the First Republic. The introduction of direct mayoral elections gave rise to what became known as the 'season of mayors', strengthening the political prominence of local leaders and creating a closer relationship between citizens and their directly elected 'first citizen'. Paradoxically, however, the longer-term outcome was not the restoration of confidence in representative politics that many had hoped for. Instead, this period culminated in the emergence of new forms of populism and anti-political mobilisation. In this sense, developments in Rome reflect a broader process that has affected Italian politics as a whole: the gradual delegitimisation of the political class and of representative institutions.

The fragmentation that transformed the national party system was also evident at the local level. Fiorelli and Lomonaco discuss how Rome's electoral arena has become more complex and increasingly *entropic* due to fragmentation and political volatility, with growing party heterogeneity and polarisation. Although they do not establish a direct causal relationship between entropy and declining voter turnout, their analysis suggests that this fragmented pattern of competition is related to rising political disaffection and, in some cases, deeper resentment towards established political actors. These attitudes have, in turn, created a climate conducive to the growth of anti-political voting in the capital, mirroring broader developments across Italy.

Rome, therefore, not only sometimes *anticipates* national political change. As the country's capital and principal political and media centre, it often provides the clearest expression of wider national trends.

Although Rome shares many institutional characteristics with cities such as Milan and Turin, its unique political and symbolic status gives it a distinctive place within the Italian political system. Quattromani and Di Gregorio's contribution illustrates this by examining Rome as an electoral constituency. Their analysis explores how successive electoral systems have shaped political competition in the capital across local, national and European elections over the past

three decades, demonstrating how institutional change has interacted with broader transformations in Italian politics.

Electoral participation also includes the decision not to vote. As Truglia's contribution shows, abstention can itself represent a meaningful political choice. At the national level, electoral participation has declined steadily, reaching its lowest level in the 2022 general election. In Rome, however, abstention is even more widespread and displays a clear geographical pattern. Turnout remains highest in the more affluent central districts, while participation is substantially lower in the city's peripheral neighbourhoods. In this respect, electoral participation reflects the unequal social and economic geography of the capital. The peripheral districts increasingly resemble the 'left-behind places' identified in other European democracies, displaying distinctive political attitudes and patterns of electoral behaviour that differ markedly from those of the city centre.

Successive reforms of Italy's electoral system have not eliminated these territorial differences. Indeed, the introduction of direct mayoral elections in 1993 may, in some respects, have made them more visible by accentuating the uneven distribution of political attention and campaign resources across different parts of the city. At the same time, it would be unrealistic to expect electoral institutions alone to overcome long-standing social and territorial inequalities.

D'Amelio and Mariotti's contribution explores these patterns through a longitudinal socio-spatial analysis of electoral behaviour in Rome. Their findings identify two principal territorial divides. The first is a concentric divide separating the historic centre and the inner urban ring from the peripheral districts beyond the Grande Raccordo Anulare (GRA). The second is a radial divide following the routes of the ancient Roman consular roads extending outwards from the city centre. These long-established spatial patterns continue to shape Rome's social, economic and political geography. Although political competition has evolved in response to the emergence of new parties, more personalised styles of campaigning and changing patterns of leadership, the city's underlying territorial structure continues to exert a powerful influence on electoral behaviour.

Representation also extends beyond territorial inequalities. Farina's contribution examines the position of women in Rome's political institutions, placing the city in comparative perspective alongside other Italian cities, regions and selected international cases. Although gender quotas have increased the numerical representation of women, particularly at local level, they have not translated into a corresponding increase in women's influence over political decision-making, especially at the national level.

Nor has greater descriptive representation necessarily produced broader changes in the political agenda. Issues affecting women continue to be addressed primarily through policies focusing on gender-based violence, personal safety and related concerns, rather than through wider programmes of institutional or social reform. Women have become more visible within representative institutions, but they remain under-represented in the principal centres of political power. Rome reflects a broader pattern that continues to characterise Italian politics.

Rome is therefore much more than the setting for the studies brought together in this Special Issue. As Italy's capital, it provides an exceptional vantage point from which to observe and compare the

country's political evolution. Developments in the city have sometimes anticipated, synchronised or reflected and, at times, refracted the transformations that have reshaped Italian politics over the past three decades. In this sense, Rome remains, in its own distinctive way, a microcosm of Italian politics: a place where the tensions, contradictions and changing dynamics of the national political system can be observed as they emerge.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

LC: Writing – original draft.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was not received for this work and/or its publication.

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