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# UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

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Luca Ozzano

**The debate about same-sex marriages/civil unions in Italy's 2006 and 2013 electoral campaigns**

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# Abstract

Issues related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights have for a long time been taboo in Catholic Italy, and they began to be debated in the mainstream media only after the organisation of a gay pride march in Rome during the 2000 jubilee. In the years since, the subject has become a bone of contention between the centre-left and the centre-right parties. In particular, a heated debate developed before and immediately after the 2006 parliamentary elections, when the centre-left coalition included parties – such as the Partito Radicale (Radical Party) and Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation) – willing to approve a law giving legal recognition to same-sex couples, while, on the other hand, the centre-right relied strongly on ‘traditional values’ in order to garner votes. After that discussion, the issue was revived only during the campaign for the 2013 elections, when Nichi Vendola, the former Communist – and openly gay – leader of Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà (the Left Ecology and Freedom), included in the centre-left coalition, put the problem on the political agenda again, without success in policy terms. This article will analyse the frames adopted by the various political actors to address the issue in the two campaigns, trying to understand the peculiarities of the two phases of the debate. In particular, it will show that there has been an evolution in the political actors’ ideas of marriage that could lead to the adoption of a law on same-sex civil unions in Italy in the near future.

Keywords: same-sex unions, same-sex marriages, frames, Italy, elections

## Introduction

Italy is today a notable exception in Western Europe, where most countries have approved laws giving legal recognition to same-sex civil unions or registered partnerships, and in some cases even fully fledged same-sex marriages with the possibility for couples to adopt children (Franke 2006; Kollman 2007; Merin 2010; Paternotte and Kollman 2013; Sullivan 2009; Festy 2006; Lund-Andersen 2001; Waaldijk 2001; Waaldijk 2003; Wintemute and Andenæs 2001; Barker 2013). This peculiarity is mainly explained by the fact that Italy is a secular state in which, however, both the Catholic Church as an institution and Christian values maintain their importance, also in the political sphere (Garelli, Guizzardi, and Pace 2003; Garelli 2006; Garelli 2011; Marzano 2009; Diotallevi 2002). Notwithstanding secularisation processes, Catholic values are indeed deeply rooted in Italian culture, which explains – in relation to the issue dealt with in this article – the difficulties in accepting models of the family that diverge from the ‘traditional’ one based on marriage between a man and a woman.

Although in Italy there is still no legislation on the subject, issues related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights have been the topic of fierce debates throughout the 2000s, after a long period of silence on the issue (Rossi Barilli 1999; Pini 2010; Scappucci 2001; Moscati 2010). Sometimes, such discussions have been sparked by civil-society groups and movements,

particularly through the organisation of 'LGBT pride' rallies in major Italian cities; in many cases, the discussion has been started by statements by non-political actors such as Church representatives; in other cases, the discussion has been the effect of the influence of foreign developments, in other European countries and the US; finally, the debate has often been the result of draft legislation tabled on the floor of the Italian parliament with the aim of regulating the issue. This is, particularly, the case of the campaigns for the 2006 and 2013 parliamentary elections: in both cases, the centre-left coalition, favoured by the pre-election polls, included in its platform the legal recognition of same-sex couples (or at least, in the view of some of the centrist partners of the coalitions, bestowing certain specific rights on registered same-sex couples). However, in both cases, the narrow majority gained by the centre-left coalition prevented it from getting the drafts approved.

This contribution will compare the political debates about same-sex civil unions during the 2006 and 2013 election campaigns, by analysing the frames adopted by the political actors, as portrayed in the print media. Following a methodological section, two separate sections will analyse the debates during the two campaigns, and a comparative section will show not only the evolution in the positions of specific actors and in the frames they adopted, but also the evolution of the debate more generally. In particular, it will show that there was an evolution in the Italian political debate, with more and more political actors (also in the Catholic field) apparently convinced 'that the relationship rights of gays and lesbians are human rights' (Kollman 2007). Indeed, in 2006, many political actors regarded the demands of same-sex couples as private interests, not requiring regulation, and supported the Church's arguments, while in 2013, LGBT claims had gained much wider legitimacy and even many opponents of same-sex civil unions relied on frames and arguments based on opportunity, without denying that the issue was worth regulating. At the same time, the Vatican's influence on this issue significantly decreased, and within the Church itself relevant dissenting voices were also heard. The concluding remarks will show that the changes observable between the 2006 and the 2013 campaigns suggest the likelihood of the approval of a law on this issue in the near future.

The article focuses on the press as a public and non-spatial sphere which represents a kind of 'master forum' acting as a meeting point for all other relevant arenas (political, social, religious, legal and scientific), both because 'the players in all other forums also use the mass media' and because all of them '*assume* its pervasive influence' (Marx Ferree et al. 2002, 10, emphasis in original) since it selects the legitimate actors, voices and frames (Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson and Meyer 1996). In Italy, this process is particularly evident since mainstream newspapers are closely connected to powerful economic groups (which often, as in the cases of Silvio Berlusconi's

Mediaset group on the right, and the Repubblica/L'Espresso group on the left, have close relations with politics), while, on the other hand, most partisan newspapers are financed by political parties and groups. As shown in this article, this widespread political control of the media is crucial in enhancing the selection of voices from the political system rather than from civil society, thus often excluding or marginalising the voices of active LGBT organisations such as Arcigay, Arcilesbica, Rete Lenford, Associazione Radicale Certi Diritti and Gay Center).

The research has been carried out by analysing a database of articles published in the most prominent Italian publications (independent ones, such as *Il Corriere della sera*, *La Stampa*, *La Repubblica*, as well as politically aligned newspapers, such as *Libero*, *Il Giornale*, *Il Secolo d'Italia*, *il Tempo* and *Il Foglio* for the centre-right, and *L'Unità*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *Pubblico* and *Liberazione* for the centre-left), and publications close to the Vatican's positions, such as *L'Osservatore Romano*, *L'Avvenire* and *Famiglia Cristiana*, in the months preceding the 2006 and 2013 elections.

The research relies on a database of about 1500 articles that discuss the same-sex unions issue (as well as connected issues, such as discussions about allowing same-sex couples to adopt children and on laws punishing homophobic crimes) and uses a text-driven coding scheme to understand the specific meanings attributed to the issue by the various actors.

This qualitative study is based on discourse analysis, a well-established tradition of studies exploring the interconnections between discourse and power (Foucault 1975; Fairclough 2001; Van Dijk 1993; Van Dijk 2007; Wodak 1989). Such studies, despite their differences, share the idea that discourse is related to the power relationships among actors, and that vocabularies, meanings and concepts are socially constructed and are the result of a conflict between opposing voices. More specifically, the discourse analysis in this work is carried out from a frame-analysis perspective (Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974; Gamson and Meyer 1996; Benford and Snow 2000). A frame is an analytical concept related to the attempts by actors to make sense of a situation, often as a result of interaction with other actors. Framing a situation means attributing meanings and sense, and setting up the vocabulary, the discursive arena and its rules, the legitimate set of arguments that can be involved in the negotiation process, as well as the possible alternative courses of action (Van Hulst and Yanow 2009; Van Hulst and Yanow 2014; Marx Ferree et al. 2002). Specifically, this work focuses on

1. The meaning and frames attributed to the issue.

2. The relations between events and the activation of frames (in terms of types of event, processes of framing and counter-framing, and the problematisation processes related to the issue; Bacchi 2012; Colebatch 2006).
3. The relationship between social and political actors and frames (Cefai 2007).

## **The state of the art**

Most of the European Union (EU) member states (with the exceptions of Italy and Greece) have adopted laws recognising same-sex couples: the forerunners, in relation to this issue, were Northern Europe's Protestant-majority countries (particularly Denmark and Sweden), which had already started to debate the first draft bills in the late 1960s, and started to recognise same-sex couples in 1989 (when the Danish law was approved). They were followed later, in the 2000s and 2010s, by most Southern European Catholic-majority countries. The influence on this evolution of the EU institutions (with the inclusion in the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam of an explicit condemnation of all types of discrimination based on sexual preferences, which 'created an explicit legal competence for the EU to combat' such discrimination) and the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) must not be underestimated (Roseneil et al. 2013, 172). Such role, as well as the role of the national courts, which in several countries have substantially widened the range of the rights granted to same-sex couples, has in turn been made possible by the work of a transnational network of LGBT activists and organisations, which emerged as far back as the 1950s, 'to persuade governments that the recognition of gay and lesbian relationships is a basic right that the state cannot withhold if it is committed to the non-discriminatory practices that are the hallmark of liberal democracies' (Kollman 2007, 331; Paternotte and Kollman 2013; Holzacker 2011), engendering a process of 'homo-normalisation' throughout the EU (Roseneil et al. 2013). The role of Europeanisation for LGBT issues is also highlighted by Kuhan, who points out, however, that Europeanisation must be understood 'as an open signifier which can be filled with meanings either in favour or against same-sex partnerships': a process encouraged, according to the author, by the absence of legally binding EU documents on this issue (Kuhar 2010). According to Kollman (2007), this international influence is moreover mediated by domestic factors (particularly, the legitimacy of international norms and religious practices): this might explain why some Western countries (including Italy) have not adopted legislation on this issue. The salience of religious influence is also highlighted by Moscati (2010) in her comparison of the Italian and the Spanish cases: according to her findings, while in the latter case the Catholic Church 'was related mainly to right-wing and conservative governments and parties', in Italy it 'exercises its power and influence

on all kinds of governments' (Moscati 2010, 62–63). More broadly, Engeli et al. contend that the emergence of 'morality politics' in a state depends on 'whether or not a conflict between religiously based and secular parties exists or has emerged in the party system' (Engeli, Green-Pedersen, and Larsen 2012, 3). The strength of religious faith is also highlighted by Rayside and Wilcox as one of the main differences between Canada (where same-sex marriage has been legal since 2005) and the US (where it is still unrecognised or completely illegal in most states) (Rayside and Wilcox 2011). Holzacker contends instead that the position of the national political elites and public opinion plays a crucial role in determining the mode of public discussion, which in countries with a high degree of hostility in both elites and the wider public (such as Italy and Poland) develops according to a 'morality politics' model, which 'involves highly salient issues with two competing coalitions often formed around religious beliefs and partisanship' (Holzacker 2012, 25; see also Engeli, Green-Pedersen, and Larsen 2012).

The idea of LGBT rights as human rights has been exactly the focus of a large part of the recent international debate, since LGBT organisations and the other forces supporting their cause mostly maintain this idea, while those opposing the legal recognition of same-sex couples usually reject it, framing the issue as a matter of private interests which is not worth regulating.

However, it is also important to emphasise that a part of the LGBT movement opposes the idea of homosexual marriage, on the basis of various arguments. Some contest same-sex marriage as a 'normalisation' of LGBT sexuality, which would harm the broader meaning of the movement for sexual liberation. Others instead oppose same-sex marriage on anti-imperialist grounds, since the push for marriage allegedly articulates a desire for the institutionalisation of LGBT sexuality in accordance with patterns sanctioned by the (imperialist) state (Franke 2006; Whitehead 2011; Barker 2013).

## **The frames**

From the Italian discussion on same-sex marriages/unions, at least five different frames adopted by the actors to deal with the issue emerge:

1. Same-sex partnerships as a matter of public vs. private interest.
2. Same-sex partnerships as an issue related to individual freedom.
3. Same-sex partnerships as an issue connected to state secularism.
4. Same-sex partnerships in terms of tradition vs. change.

## 5. Same-sex partnerships in terms of discrimination.

As shown in the following, these frames are used in very different ways by the actors involved in the debate, also as a consequence of the different sub-issues involved in them, related to the differences between the concepts of same-sex marriage, same-sex civil unions or registered partnerships, and also de facto couple or common-law marriage (the latter also encompassing unmarried heterosexual couples) that sometimes are dealt with by the same actor according to different frames (for example, I am in favour of same-sex civil unions because their legalisation would eliminate unfair discrimination, but I am against same-sex marriages because they are against religious law/tradition)<sup>1</sup>. Sometimes, as will be shown in the following paragraphs, the actors were deliberately ambiguous, not letting the audience know if they referred, for example, to same-sex partnerships or to de facto partnerships that might or might not also include partnerships between same-sex couples. View all notes; moreover, the connection of the issue to other issues (particularly the possibility of allowing same-sex couples to adopt children) has also helped to complicate the debate.

## **The 2006 election campaign**

The 2006 Italian parliamentary elections were held on 9–10 April, following a five-year term hegemonised by the centre-right government led by the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi and supported by his party Forza Italia (hereinafter FI), the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance, AN), the right-wing populist Lega Nord (Northern League, LN), the Christian centrist party Unione di Centro (Union of the Centre, UDC) and some minor groups. The same parties also participated in the 2006 campaign as members of the Berlusconi-led Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom, PdL) coalition. Its opponent, l'Unione (led by the progressive Catholic Romano Prodi), included as major partners the post-communist Democratici di Sinistra (Democrats of the Left, DS) and the Christian progressive party, la Margherita (the Daisy), together with many smaller leftist and centrist parties.

Although the actual campaign started at the end of 2005, same-sex civil unions and marriages had been a significant bone of contention between and within the two coalitions since the spring of the same year, when a fierce debate was sparked by the law on same-sex marriages promoted in Spain by the Zapatero government, as well as by the rigid stance taken on the issue by the president of the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (Italian Episcopal Conference, CEI), Cardinal Camillo Ruini. The discussion revealed the existence of contrasting positions in both coalitions. In the Unione, some



(especially the Communists and the Greens) explicitly approved the Spanish model of same-sex marriage; candidate Prime Minister Romano Prodi was against it, supporting instead the institutionalisation of same-sex civil unions (Patto Civile di Solidarietà, Pacs), while the centrist Unione Democratici per l'Europa (Union of Democrats for Europe) and the moderate wing of the Margherita were against any form of official public recognition of same-sex couples. Within the centre-right, the UDC, the LN and some other factions supported the Vatican's stance, strongly opposing any kind of recognition for same-sex couples, while the liberal wing of FI supported the idea of civil unions, and the AN leader Gianfranco Fini ambiguously declared himself in favour of the recognition of de facto couples (a statement variously interpreted even by AN members).

Although the debate was initiated in reaction to the Spanish law, other events, in the domestic field, also helped to keep it alive throughout the campaign. First, the party lists of the Unione included some prominent LGBT activists: Franco Grillini and Paola Concia, two well-known representatives of the LGBT community, ran for the DS, while the lists fielded by Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation, RC) included the future governor of the Apulia region Nichi Vendola and the transgender performer Vladimir Luxuria. Moreover, LGBT activists staged demonstrations and other public events (such as mock same-sex marriages in Rome and other cities) from the very early phases of the campaign (gri. 2005). During the campaign, some MPs supportive of the cause also re-submitted to Parliament bills already drafted in previous years and signed not only by centre-left politicians and activists, such as Grillini, Vendola, and the Green Party spokesperson, Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio, but also by some centre-right MPs, such as Chiara Moroni of the Nuovo Partito Socialista (New Socialist Party) and Dario Rivolta (FI) (Silla 2004; Gioventù 2006).

Among the political actors, on the centre-left the issue of the recognition of same-sex partnerships was at first framed in terms of non-discrimination, since 'a government must be concerned with the rights of all citizens' (Prodi) and 'in Italy there persist areas of unacceptable discrimination' (Francesco Rutelli) (Terracina 2005). However, the most outspoken supporters of same-sex partnerships' legalisation framed the issue also in terms of the common good, since same-sex unions would enhance the stability of the family (Grillini) and the growth of the country (Concia).

On the other hand, when at stake were not civil unions but fully fledged Spanish-style same-sex marriages, both the positions of the actors and the frames they adopted changed, with many actors (especially within the centrist parties of l'Unione) aligning with the Vatican in its defence of 'traditional' marriage and the family. The most usual statement, in this case, was a twofold one: actors stated that on the one hand, it was necessary to eliminate unfair discrimination by granting

certain rights to same-sex couples, while, on the other hand, they affirmed that legislators should give priority to the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman (Rosy Bindi) and rejected the idea of a 'blind aping of marriage' (Rutelli) (Cesaretti 2005). As a consequence of this divergence, the platform of l'Unione did not explicitly mention the issue, while in statements by members of the coalition, the field to regulate was often widened also to include unmarried heterosexual couples (a strategy which, as explained by Holzacker 2012, 31, was also supported by relevant LGBT organisations such as Arcigay). This way, it was possible to provide wider legitimacy to the issue, by declaring that it regarded millions of people demanding recognition of their rights.

While the centre-left was torn by the issue, the centre-right seemed willing not to be involved in the discussion (Berlusconi, in particular, barely mentioned it and when he did, he did so in quite neutral and dismissive terms). On the other hand, Fini's stance in favour of legal recognition of de facto couples to eliminate an element of unfair discrimination was supported by some prominent centre-right politicians (Stefania Prestigiacomo, Sandro Bondi), intellectuals (Massimo Teodori) and newspapers (*L'Indipendente*, *Il Foglio*). Those who opposed the recognition of same-sex couples adopted many different frames and arguments: in terms of religious message/natural law ('de facto couples are an act against nature and are the first step towards the dissolution of a values-based society', Roberto Calderoli, LN); in legal terms ('Pacs are against the Constitution', Riccardo Pedrizzi, AN); and in terms of State–Church relations (as part of an alleged anticlerical struggle, also including the referendum on assisted procreation and the availability in Italy of the RU684 day-after pill) (Maggiolini 2005; Tito 2005; e. g. p. 2005; Feyles 2005). Among the centre-right newspapers, however, the harsher in condemning the supporters of same-sex civil unions was *Il Giornale*, owned by Berlusconi's family, often adopting positions very similar to the Vatican's. Newspapers belonging to the centre-right area also explicitly rejected a politically correct point of view, by frequently making puns about the centre–left alliance as a 'de facto union' and labelling as 'divorce' any quarrel between the centre-left leaders.

Among the non-political actors, the most active in the debate was undoubtedly the Catholic Church, with its very detailed condemnation of every kind of recognition of same-sex couples based on a 2003 document enacted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2003). Despite some dissonant voices, such as that of the editor of *Famiglia Cristiana* magazine, father Antonio Sciortino, and the Bishop of Ivrea, Luigi Bettazzi, the Vatican and its newspapers were almost monolithic in opposing not only same-sex marriages, but also civil unions (defined by the Church hierarchy as 'small marriages'), rejecting thus the distinction between the two institutions that many

centrist politicians had made. The Church's arguments were mainly based on two frames: on the one hand, same-sex marriages were allegedly against divine law and, consequently, against natural law prescribing that marriage must be directed towards procreation; on the other, their legal recognition would harm society, both jeopardising 'the family, an "un-relinquishable" institution of society', and would allegedly help to spread homosexuality among young people, just to please a small homosexual lobby (Ruini 2006; D'Agostino 2006).

The interventions on the issue by the Catholic Church from the early stages of the campaign – and particularly two speeches on the subject by the CEI president, Cardinal Ruini, and by Pope Benedict XVI just a few weeks before the vote – had a strong influence on the debate. Indeed, they not only contributed to the wider discussion on the issue, but sparked a debate of their own, related to the appropriateness and the legitimacy of the Church's intervention in Italian political affairs. While most of the centre-right and part of the centre-left were ready to support the right to intervene of the Church hierarchy (or even to describe the Church's behaviour as a fair reaction against an 'anticlerical' and 'nihilist' left allegedly wanting to confine religion to the private sphere), some factions within l'Unione (particularly the Radicals, the Communists, the Greens and some Socialists) vehemently attacked the Pope and the CEI president, on the grounds that their alleged attempts to influence the choices of MPs were an infringement of the principle of the separation of Church and State. Some representatives of the centre-left even spoke of an 'inquisition' (Daniele Capezzone, Partito Radicale): to which other members of the coalition replied by defining their stance as 'secular fundamentalism' (Bindi, DS) (Angeli 2006; Casadio 2006).

After the elections, the narrow majority gained by the centre-left gave the centrists a 'golden share' in the coalition and prevented the short-lived government led by Romano Prodi from approving a law on this issue, which in the following years virtually disappeared from the political debate.

## **The 2013 election campaign**

The issue of same-sex civil unions came to the fore again only in the campaign for the February 2013 election, which was a very long and unusual campaign, one that had substantially started already in November 2011, when Berlusconi was forced to resign as a consequence of both a worsening economic crisis and a series of scandals involving his public and private life. President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, thus nominated as new prime minister the economist Mario Monti, who formed a transitional government supported in Parliament by all major parties except the LN.

The political background to this campaign was significantly different from the one of 2006. First, the party system was no longer bipolar: now it also included Monti's new centrist coalition and the rising Five-Star Movement (M5S), a populist party refusing to place itself on the left/right spectrum, led by the controversial comedian Beppe Grillo. On the other hand, internal competition within the two major coalitions was less relevant. On the centre-left, the stage was dominated by the Partito Democratico (PD), created in 2007 by a merger of the DS and the Margherita, in alliance with the small, and more radical, Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà (the Left Ecology and Freedom, SEL), led by the former Communist governor of the Apulia region – and openly gay – Vendola. On the centre-right, FI and AN had also merged to create the PdL, still led by Berlusconi, and still allied with the LN. All the other parties included in the two coalitions were either regional parties without a national appeal or spin-off parties (such as the Centro Democratico (Democratic Centre) on the centre-left and Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) on the centre-right) created by the major parties to try to seize votes from some particular constituencies. The technocrat-turned-politician, Monti, led a centre coalition including his new party Scelta Civica (Civic Choice) and two former components of Berlusconi's coalition: the Christian centrist UDC led by Pierferdinando Casini and Fini's new party Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia (the Future and Freedom for Italy, FLI). Besides the already mentioned M5S, the competition also included the radical-left coalition, Rivoluzione Civica (Civil Revolution), and the ultra pro-free trade list, Fare per Fermare il Declino (Action to Stop the Decline).

The issue of same-sex civil unions was, as in the 2006 case, the subject of fierce discussion from the very early stages of the campaign, and, again, the debate was sparked by both international and domestic factors. While seven years earlier Spain had been regarded by many Italian legislators as an outlier for its recognition of same-sex marriages, now the issue was openly debated in the legislatures of many states, including the US, France and even the UK (led by a Conservative government), while most European countries had legalised civil unions or registered partnerships for same-sex couples. This trend had also been explicitly supported in November 2012 by a resolution of the European Parliament: as shown in the following, this created an international background which strongly influenced actors' choices of frame. On the other hand, in the domestic political field, LGBT people were no longer cast in the role of fringe activists, this thanks to the rise of Vendola (who was also a contender, in primaries held in November 2012, for the leadership of the centre-left coalition, garnering about 15% of the votes) as a major national political leader. As in 2006, other LGBT activists (Concia in the PD and Grillini in Rivoluzione Civile) were part of the campaign, which was also revived by some controversial sentences, as well as by statements of the Church hierarchy – statements which, however, unlike the 2006 campaign, were mostly made only

in the final stages of the campaign. New draft legislation was submitted to Parliament, not only in relation to the recognition of same-sex couples, but also to other LGBT issues: this was the case, particularly, of a bill aimed at punishing homophobic crimes, which was rejected by Parliament – not for the first time – in November 2012, sparking a lively debate.

The frames adopted by the centre-left politicians supporting a law on same-sex civil unions still regarded the absence of a law on the issue as unfair discrimination and a legislative void requiring to be filled. However, most of them now pointed to the examples of other Western countries and to the standards suggested by the EU institutions, to maintain that Italy had to become a member of ‘the civilized nations’ and that ‘the Italian Middle Ages’ had to end; or, even, that the Italian standard in terms of rights was close to that of ‘an Islamic republic’ (Vendola); at the same time, they labelled those opposing same-sex unions as ‘allied to the most dangerous and anti-European right in the whole Europe’ (Concia) (Roselli 2012; Casadio 2013; Marra 2012; Concia 2012). A wider consensus on the acceptability of a law on same-sex civil unions, if not marriages, was also shown by the positions of many centre-left centrists, who now framed their opposition not in terms of religious or natural law, but rather in terms of appropriateness and priority. In their view, legalising same-sex partnerships might be fair, but, unlike the US, ‘Italian society is not ready’ (Giuseppe Fioroni); moreover, in times of economic crisis, the real priorities allegedly are ‘the economic recovery, the defence of jobs, and support for the family’ (Franco Marini) (Picariello 2012; Labate 2012). The debate – not only within the centre–left coalition – was, however, shifted by Vendola’s coming out about LGBT marriage and parenting during a speech at a national meeting of the PD. On this occasion, he shouted: ‘I want to be able to marry my partner’, while during an interview some days later he declared: ‘I think we must fight for the recognition of the right of same-sex couples both to marry and to adopt. I think that Italian society is ready for homosexual marriages and adoptions’ (Marra 2012; Sappino 2012). While drawing much criticism not only from those who opposed Vendola on these issues, but also from LGBT activists such as Concia – accusing Vendola of exploiting the issue of LGBT rights for electoral purposes – these statements represented a turning point in the campaign. After it, only a few voices dared to deny the right of same-sex couples to the recognition of certain basic rights, while even same-sex parenting was no longer regarded by many as a taboo not to be discussed. More broadly, the press coverage of the campaign was now marked by ‘domestic’ portraits of LGBT candidates such as Vendola and Concia, described as decent middle-class people, leading a quiet life with their partners. For example, Vendola’s partner Ed Testa released an interview to the magazine *Vanity Fair* in which he also described his private life with SEL’s leader (Sabbadini 2012). As in 2006, the debate also focused on specific proposals: in particular, the centre–left coalition again displayed a wide range of

positions and only after long discussions did its members reach an agreement on a bill modelled on the German law, proposed by the coalition leader, Pierluigi Bersani.

Same-sex civil unions were also one of the main issues in the discussion between the centre-left and the new centre coalition led by Monti: while in the early stages of the campaign there were rumours about a possible alliance between the two coalitions, many comments highlighted the incompatibility between Monti's and Vendola's positions both on civil rights issues and particularly on LGBT rights. Monti was in a difficult position, since one of its allies, Casini's UDC, explicitly highlighted its Catholic identity, while Fini (with his new party, FLI, created after the split from the PdL) again took a liberal stance, showing openness towards 'new models of the family' that did not exclude same-sex partnerships (AGL 2012). As a consequence of this situation, after the centre coalition was crafted, its leaders mostly avoided mentioning same-sex unions and related issues. On the one hand, the absence of civil-rights issues from Monti's agenda was harshly criticised by the centre-left, while even Berlusconi (as shown in the following) was timidly open to the issue of same-sex unions. On the other hand, in January 2013, some newspapers close to the centre-right, such as *Il Giornale* and *Libero*, launched a very strident campaign against Alessio De Giorgi, an LGBT activist included in Monti's lists (and therefore labelled by such publications as 'Monti's gay icon') (Indini 2013), whose website had allegedly been involved in murky affairs involving prostitution and child pornography. As a consequence of this campaign, De Giorgi was ultimately forced to drop his candidacy, while during a television show Monti some weeks later finally pronounced himself in favour of 'strengthening homosexual couples' civil rights' (Marincola 2013).

As for the centre-right, its campaign reached a turning point with Berlusconi's opening on the issue in early January 2013. Previously, the members of the coalition had mostly kept silent on issues related to LGBT rights, with the exception of a letter signed in August 2012 by 173 centre-right MPs. This latter argued that most LGBT claims were not grounded, since several individual rights were already granted by existing laws, and framed the issue in terms of protection of the traditional family/culture and defence of the Constitution (Fornari 2012). However, while during the 2006 campaign most conservatives opposing the legal recognition of same-sex couples had adopted the Catholic Church's 'natural law' frame, now they more and more frequently relied on merely legal arguments, based on the idea of the family as a 'natural association based on marriage' (as defined in article 29 of Italy's constitution): this, according to the centre-right, made impossible any legal recognition of same-sex marriages. This position was also upheld by those in the other coalitions (such as Enzo Carra of the UDC and Bindi and Fioroni of the PD) who supported same-sex civil unions while opposing fully fledged marriages.

As already mentioned, the debate within the centre-right was shifted in early January 2013 by Berlusconi's unexpected endorsement of same-sex unions, sparking a lively discussion, both within the centre-right, and outside it (particularly among LGBT rights activists, suggesting that Berlusconi's move had been demagogic rather than one driven by real conviction). This position was interpreted by the main centre-right newspapers (including *Il Giornale*, owned by Berlusconi's family) as 'a warning' to the Church, which was tending to cast its weight in favour of Monti's coalition (Cacioppo 2013; Cuomo 2013; Specchia 2013; Il Foglio 2013a).

Another change in the centre-right's position during the later stages of the campaign was a frequent shift in focus from the domestic to the European arena (especially after a couple of controversial sentences of the Italian Corte di Cassazione and the ECHR),<sup>2</sup>. The first had assigned to an Italian woman the custody of her son despite the fact that she lived with a same-sex partner. The ECHR sentence instead explicitly granted same-sex partners the right to adopt their partners' children, in countries where this right is granted to unmarried heterosexual couples (Paci 2013; Il Foglio 2013b). View all notes with many conservative politicians and intellectuals now framing the issue in relation to freedom of the individual from state control and the desire of the European institutions to bring about an allegedly relativist and secular harmonisation of the member states' legislation (Il Foglio 2013b). This frame was also supported by the authoritative columnist of the Vatican-related newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, Lucetta Scaraffia, who had already advanced it some years before in a book (Roccella and Scaraffia 2005), portraying Catholics as the last stalwart of liberty against 'an ideology based on the politically correct that is invading every world culture, also thanks to the United Nations' (Scaraffia 2012). This position was also encouraged by controversial resolutions and sentences of European institutions related to other issues, such as the 2009 ECHR sentence banning the crucifix from Italian public schools (later reversed in a 2011 appeal judgement).

In any case, while in the 2006 campaign the Church had managed to impose its frame regarding heterosexual marriage – allegedly sanctioned by natural law – as the only basis for the family, now it apparently felt surrounded by hostile forces, and struggled to demonstrate that the legal recognition of same-sex couples was not to be regarded as an aspect of modernity. Therefore, both the Pope (in his 21 December speech on the subject) and conservative columnists such as Ernesto Galli della Loggia widely quoted the Chief Rabbi of France, Gilles Bernheim, who had proposed positions on same-sex civil unions and parenting that were very similar to the Catholic Church's (Galli della Loggia 2012; Pope Benedict XVI 2012). The Church's newspapers, such as *L'Avvenire*, also highlighted the massive demonstrations against the new law on same-sex marriages instigated

by France's Prime Minister, François Hollande, to try to demonstrate that a wide range of social strata – and even many LGBT people – opposed the law (De Remigis 2013; Scaraffia 2012). Of course, the Vatican still framed the issue in terms of natural (revealed) law, but this no longer appeared to be the main argument, since the issue was also frequently framed in terms of the common good (also in relation to the education of the younger generations) and in terms of state/church boundaries. On the other hand, many more critical voices were heard, also within the Church, and especially during the early stages of the campaign: openings on the issue came not only from well-known progressive prelates, such as father Andrea Gallo and father Luigi Ciotti, but also from Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini (who had been the main representative of the 'liberal' wing of the Church in the 2005 conclave), the Bishop of Ragusa Paolo Urso, and even more ambiguously, the high-level CEI representative, Cardinal Vincenzo Paglia (Martini and Marino 2012; Vecchi 2013; Cazzullo 2013).

## **Comparison of the 2006 and the 2013 campaigns**

These concluding remarks will compare the discussion on same-sex civil unions in the 2006 and 2013 Italian election campaigns, with specific attention being given to three dimensions: the general tone of the debate detectable in the media, the actors involved and the frames they adopted.

In terms of coverage, the most striking mismatch is the treatment of the issue of same-sex unions itself. In 2006, the legalisation of this institution was evidently regarded by most Italian political actors as a fringe idea, supported by governments (such as Zapatero's cabinet in Spain) widely regarded as extremist and anticlerical, and, in Italy, only by a handful of radical leftists and by some liberal centre-right politicians and columnists. In contrast, in 2013, the issue seemed to have become more mainstream, as shown not only by the positions of the main political actors, but also by the wider coverage provided by the press, showing LGBT leaders such as Vendola and Concia as decent middle-class people and interviewing their partners. Moreover, issues that were previously regarded as unacceptable – such as same-sex parenting and adoption – were discussed more openly during the 2013 campaign, although most actors were still against their legalisation.

This change seems to mirror evolution in the opinion of the average Italian citizen, since surveys carried out on the issue since the early 2000s show a slow but significant increase in the people favourable at least to same-sex civil unions (if not marriages), from about 45% in 2005–07 to about 55% in 2012–13 (with strong opposition only in some segments of the population, such as the elderly and the centrist Catholic voters). However, political factors must not be underestimated. On



the one hand, there was a relevant difference between 2006 (when the main supporters of same-sex civil unions were LGBT activists who had become politicians mostly to promote this single issue) and 2013 (when Vendola, as the leader of one of the main national parties, helped LGBT identity to emerge from the closet, with more public visibility, and the integration of the issue in a wider platform including other civil and social rights).

On the other hand, the fragmentation of the party system into several competing coalitions (with Berlusconi's PdL and Monti's Scelta Civica, battling for the same Catholic constituency) changed the dynamics of the interplay between the coalitions. The most evident effect of this factor was Berlusconi's endorsement of same-sex marriage (after dismissing the issue for a long time as irrelevant) in an explicit attempt to blackmail the Church after its support for Monti had become clear.

When we look at the actors most actively engaged in the debates during the two campaigns, we also notice that the Church took a much lower profile in 2013 than in 2006. While in the 2006 campaign it had been one of the main players, monopolising the anti same-sex marriage side with frequent speeches by the Pope and by CEI's President, Ruini, in the 2013 campaign it entered the fray only in September 2012, after the debate had been monopolised for months by the political left. This is even more striking since in the first nine months of Monti's government many voices favourable to regulation of the issue of same-sex partnerships had been heard within the Church itself, without an official reply on the part of the hierarchy. On the other hand, the Church was able in both cases to influence the positions of several actors: first of all the UDC and more broadly the centrists on both the centre-right and the centre-left. Paradoxically, its influence – especially in 2006 – seemed to be stronger on the centre-left, divided by the coexistence of LGBT activists and centrist politicians, such as Rutelli and Clemente Mastella, eager not to displease the Vatican. On the other hand, the centre-right in 2006 managed to exploit the issue without taking an official stance, while in 2013 Berlusconi even used it to throw Monti's centrist coalition into disarray. The Church was instead the main non-political actor able to influence the debate. The role played by LGBT activists outside political parties was instead less clear: on the one hand, they were often crucial in sparking new waves of debate through the organisation of mass events and other actions; on the other hand, their positions and their frames (unlike those of LGBT political actors such as Vendola) were rarely regarded as relevant by the main political actors engaged in the debate, although they were often quoted in newspaper articles dealing with the issue. Therefore, although in recent decades they have played a crucial role in raising the awareness of both the population and the political actors of the

issue of same-sex civil unions, their impact on the positions of the political actors and their frame choices must not be overestimated.

In terms of frames, we can see some relevant differences between the two campaigns. In 2006, the main frame was set by the Church, opposing same-sex marriage as an act against 'natural law', and stating that marriage could only be between a man and a woman and directed at procreation. The Church also refused to draw a distinction between same-sex marriages and civil unions, on the grounds that giving legal status to civil unions would represent a first step towards dissolution of the 'traditional family' and, consequently, of the whole of society and its institutions. This frame was widely accepted in all the main parties of the centre-right coalition, but it was also adopted by many on the centre-left. Indeed, while the centre-left supporters of same-sex unions framed the issue mainly in terms of non-discrimination and human rights, many centrists who were part of the coalition struck a balance by adopting the non-discrimination frame in relation to same-sex unions (or, at least, in relation to the recognition of certain basic rights to same-sex couples), and the 'natural law' frame in relation to same-sex marriage and adoption.

On the other hand, in the 2013 campaign, the context of the debate changed on both the international and the domestic levels, since the field of countries recognising same-sex couples had broadened to include most European countries and even some US states (with the crucial endorsement of President Obama). Therefore, the burden of proof was no longer on the supporters of same-sex civil unions as in 2006, when they had to demonstrate that their legal recognition was not against common sense or public decency. On the contrary, now the opposing field had to explain why Italy should not approve a law already enacted in the main Western countries (and even, as highlighted by the centre-left, by non-Western countries such as Cuba, as well as by conservative governments, such as Cameron's cabinet in the UK). The main frame proposed by the supporters of same-sex unions was therefore the need to overcome Italy's backwardness in terms of human rights. On the other hand, the opposite field was mostly silent in the early stages of the campaign, and when it started to react, it mainly relied on arguments trying to demonstrate that a law legalising same-sex unions would be an imposition of organised minorities – or even of an international conspiracy aiming at destroying the traditional society to impose the 'gender' philosophy – while the real majority of common citizens as well as social groups were allegedly against it. However, the defence of 'traditional' marriage by the Church appeared weaker on this occasion, not only because of the presence of many more dissenting voices within the Church itself, but also since some prelates opposing the recognition of same-sex partnerships decided not to rely on 'natural law' or 'tradition' arguments, but rather – just like some centrists on the centre-left – to

assert that there were other priorities, thus implicitly accepting the idea that same-sex supporters were right in principle. Quite interestingly, especially after Berlusconi's statement in support of some kind of recognition of same-sex couples, the Vatican found little support by the political centre-right, while the main arguments in its support were proposed by some authoritative columnists not close to the political parties.

## **Concluding remarks**

Discussion of the issue of same-sex marriages/civil unions is a clear demonstration of the difficulties in dealing with certain issues related to sexuality in a country such as Italy, still partly marked by a 'traditional' Catholic culture. What is striking in this debate is not the influence of religious values – which is indeed a common feature of many Western countries, including the US – but the direct influence on politics still enjoyed by the Catholic Church as an institution. This was true especially in the 2006 campaign, when the Church was very explicit in its action towards centrist politicians within the centre-left coalition, managing to persuade them to change their stances, and to prevent real agreement on a proposal aimed at legally recognising same-sex unions. It is not surprising, therefore, that a relevant part of the debate was focused not on the issue of same-sex unions itself, but on the legitimacy of the Church's intervention in Italian politics. On the other hand, in 2013, the influence of the Church was apparently weaker both as a consequence of a general evolution towards the acceptance of LGBT identity and as an effect of the changes that had taken place both in the party system and in the Church hierarchy.

Interestingly, in both campaigns, the influence of the Church seemed to be even stronger on the centre-left – torn by the conflict between its different souls – than on the centre-right, where Berlusconi's charismatic leadership has often proved able on the one hand to reconcile internal differences, and on the other to set the tone of the debate, sometimes by preventing certain issues from coming onto the agenda of the coalition, and at other times by taking unpredictable stances, able to disrupt line-ups previously regarded as stable.

Another broader feature of the Italian public sphere highlighted by this research is its strongly reactive nature: indeed – despite the relevance also of domestic political dynamics, such as the multiplication of coalitions – both in 2006 (with the Spanish example) and in 2013 (with the general trend towards the recognition of same-sex partnerships sweeping many Western and non-Western countries) the international environment was crucial in creating the discursive opportunity structures that shaped the debate. While in 2006 this meant the possibility for the supporters of

same-sex civil unions to put forward their ideas and proposals, in 2013, it meant the widespread idea (common to most political actors, despite their differences) that the recognition of some LGBT rights was a matter of justice: which helped partially to remove the Catholic Church and its frame from the centre of the debate. In terms of Europeanisation, the results of this article might thus signal a slow alignment of the Italian debate on LGBT issues to the European public sphere (Bärenreuter et al. 2008): this is particularly difficult in the case of debates marked by a strong influence of the national cultural and religious identity. This shift, with a large number of actors ready to recognise LGBT rights as human rights and their non-recognition as an instance of unfair discrimination, might signal the possibility in the near future of an alignment with the rest of Western Europe with the approval of a law on the subject by the Italian parliament.

Finally, in relation to the international debate on framing processes and public policy formation, the results of the analysis of this debate seem to support the positions of those who regard framing as a process resulting from the interaction of actors in the debate, constructed during this interaction, rather than a stable world view of the actors (Van Hulst and Yanow 2014). This is clearly shown both by the shifting allegiances of several actors and by the processes of framing and counter-framing during the two campaigns: in particular, while during the 2006 campaign Catholic legislators mostly relied on the Church's doctrine of 'natural law', in 2013, confronting a new widespread consciousness of LGBT rights as human rights, they mostly dropped the 'natural law' frame to adopt arguments related to timing and opportunity.

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## **ORCID**

*Luca Ozzano* <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2675-9344>

## **Notes**

1. Sometimes, as will be shown in the following paragraphs, the actors were deliberately ambiguous, not letting the audience know if they referred, for example, to same-sex partnerships or

to de facto partnerships that might or might not also include partnerships between same-sex couples.

2. The first had assigned to an Italian woman the custody of her son despite the fact that she lived with a same-sex partner. The ECHR sentence instead explicitly granted same-sex partners the right to adopt their partners' children, in countries where this right is granted to unmarried heterosexual couples (Paci 2013; Il Foglio 2013b).

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## Author information

### Luca Ozzano

Luca Ozzano is assistant professor of Political Science at the University of Turin, in Italy. He is currently convenor of the ‘Politics and Religion’ standing group of the Italian Political Science Association (SISP) and member of the board of both the ECPR standing group and the International Political Science Association Research Group on Religion and Politics. His main research interests lie in the relation between religion and politics in contemporary democracies, with particular attention to political parties and transnational movements and to the Italian and Turkish cases. He has published papers in journals such as *Democratization*, *Mediterranean Politics*, *European Political Science* and *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, and he recently co-edited, with Francesco Cavatorta, the book *Religiously Oriented Parties and Democratization* (Routledge 2014). In 2015, Routledge will publish his book (co-written with Alberta Giorgi), *European Culture Wars and the Italian Case. Which Side Are You On?*.