



italian political science

THE PROFESSIONAL REVIEW OF THE ITALIAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

ISSN 2420-8434

(<http://italianpoliticalscience.com/>)

Winning in Europe: The REScEU project

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Francesco Zucchini interviews Maurizio Ferrera (<http://users.unimi.it/ferrera/sw/newhome.php>), Professor of Comparative Welfare State at the University of Milan and an ERC Advanced (<http://erc.europa.eu/advanced-grants>) grant-holder.



Zucchini: What is the project that won the ERC funding?

Ferrera: The project is entitled “Reconciling Economic and Social Europe: the role of ideas, values and politics (Resc -EU). It aims at investigating the origin and evolution within the EU of four lines of distributional conflict:

1. the conflict around market-making and market-correcting at the level of supranational institutions;
2. the conflict around EU jurisdiction/powers, on the one hand, and jurisdiction/sovereignty of national governments, on the other, in particular on fiscal and social policies;
3. the conflict between countries/systems characterized by generous welfare/high tax burden (West) and countries/systems characterized by poor welfare/low taxation (East);
4. the conflict between core countries and peripheral countries on the size and mechanisms of financial solidarity.

The analysis of these conflicts and their intertwinement will be framed in a neo Weberian theoretical perspective. This perspective not only considers macro processes and “structural” constraints, but aims at reconstructing and explaining the logic and rationality (epistemic, value-based, instrumental) of the relevant policy actors. The empirical analysis will be based on case studies, using process tracing and event structure analysis. The project will collect and analyze opinion data (an original survey of twelve countries and blog sentiment analysis will be carried out), data about political behavior “intellectual” debate about the nature of below you find the abstract of the project

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Z: Is it the first time that you propose a project

F: The first time for ERC funding. However, I was Unit Coordinator in the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh total (since 2001) of about € 500.000.

Z: Before winning the funding had you been a

F: I have been ERC evaluator and evaluated about a dozen opinions in the past decade. I never joined the European framework programs because of hindsight, maybe I made a mistake. The selection is slow. Although panels operate with a logic that is clear that the sensitivity of each evaluation (and the forth) reflects national traditions that are different from the panel evaluators are no longer co-opted. The Italian political science community should

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Z: Do you think there are research programs within the area of social and political sciences which are more advantaged or more likely to be financed with funds from the EU?

F: The Framework Programs and the next Horizon 2020 emphasize the issues related to the goals of the so-called EU 2020 Strategy and to the agendas of the various DGs of the Commission: social and public policy in general, public administration, decision-making processes, public opinion, social inclusion and cohesion, governance, social and institutional innovation etc. I would not forget also strands of funding for more applied research, especially on social issues, labor market, energy and environmental policies, education and so on. You have to have the patience to periodically check the websites of the Commission and other EU institutions and comb through the various calls for proposal and tenders that are published almost every day. As for ERC (the “flagship” institution for research funding), the range of topics is actually open-ended: any research project, as long as it is broad, can find space and reception in calls at various levels. The calls for new grants in 2014 are going to be published soon. I urge all colleagues to consider applying.

Z: The quality of the project is obviously a necessary condition, but we suspect it is not a sufficient condition to win European funding. What practical advice can you give to other Italian political scientists? As a national scientific community what have we not yet figured out about the European selection process?

F: It is not easy to understand what are the other factors, in addition to quality, which help to determine the decisions of the panel. I limit myself to reflecting on my experience with the ERC. In this case, the panel not only evaluates the project, but also the curriculum of the applicants. At least for the advanced grants, there are minimum “thresholds” in terms of publications, career, “honors” and so on. Therefore the evaluators know the name of the applicant. They do not evaluate a project in an anonymous form but they associate it to his/her profile. In the evaluation grids, panelists are specifically asked to give an opinion on this profile as well as on the ability of the candidate to carry out the project, to supervise researchers and other staff, to manage the team, to actually build the proposed networks, to acquire the participation of other senior academics and so on. In short, with the same project quality, the best-known scholar, more visible, with higher reputation and the one who is better placed in the international networks has more chances to win. Perhaps unconsciously, the very fact that an evaluator knows the applicant well just to have already met him or her at conferences or in meetings about other projects becomes an advantage. Of course, eventually also “luck” is important.

For Italian scholars, the lesson to be drawn is clear: more internationalization, more presence (even “physical”) in conferences, panels, seminars around Europe and the world, more networking, more integration in large multi-national projects. Publishing in high impact factor journals is a necessary condition but it is not sufficient. Internationalizing your profile is costly. You have to acquire a very good knowledge of English and maybe even of French and German, you have to spend energy and money, and sometimes you have the feeling of wasting time. The right mix between publication and participation is difficult to identify and may vary from

scholar to scholar and according to different career stages. Nevertheless, especially for young people, it is good to be aware of the problem and to have an agenda.

As Italians, we are also negatively affected by the delay of our academic system and its administrative organization. Many foreign universities have support structures that help the applicants not only in the technical and organizational aspects, but also in preparing the proposals. I'm not talking about the scientific content, but about other ingredients which are very important for winning, such as the balance between basic and applied research, the composition of the team, the partnerships, the multi-disciplinary character of the proposal, etc.).

These structures have very sophisticated skills, they know the mechanisms of decision-making in Brussels and the officials of the organizations that provide the funding. They somehow get the evaluations of the projects that win, even from other universities, in order to understand what are, in fact, the evaluation criteria, the aspects that strike the attention of the evaluators. They organize seminars to train applicants, they invite them to present and discuss the draft proposal with other colleagues. A political scientist cannot learn useful scientific contents from a physicist but he/she can be inspired by his/her way of setting up the team, organizing the project, presenting it, even visually. It's not easy to win an ERC grant at the first shot. Many grants are indeed awarded to scholars who have already applied before and make good use of the suggestions the evaluators gave them in the first round. The structures that I am talking about organize the so-called "post mortem" sessions, designed to reflect on the reasons for the rejection, on the opportunities for re- submission.

My project involved a partnership between the Centro Einaudi in Turin and the University of Milano (UNIMI). This was my luck. I could rely upon a structure of University of Torino (sponsored by the Compagnia di San Paolo) that gave me an outstanding help to define the overall framework of the project and to expand the breadth and ambition of my original idea. Without this help, this idea would not be considered "high risk, high yield ", which is what ERC wants.

Z: Is there a specific difficulty of the Italian political scientists to obtain European funding or is it just an Italian difficulty?

F: Political and social sciences have typically a share of the budget which is much smaller than other disciplines. Horizon 2020 will promote the cross-discipline integration. We will have to make an effort (Italians sometimes are a bit "picky") to interact with economists, historians, lawyers and even the experts of life or physical sciences (e.g. by offering our skills on decision making, institutions, the social and political implications of change in general).

Z: The funding is very significant. How broadly will it be used?

F: Approximately 500.000 will be used to reimburse the University of Milano for my labor costs. So for 4 years I will be able to work only on the project for half of my job time and for another year I can work fully on the project by taking a sabbatical. About one million will be used to recruit other researchers at UNIMI and the Centro Einaudi. About 300.000 for a survey and other forms of opinion survey. The rest for travel, conferences, secretary, dissemination, overheads and so on.

Z: Are you concerned about the administrative burden that the financial report entails?

F: Quite worried, but I trust in the possibility of recruiting a project secretary. Moreover the new General University Manager has promised a substantial upgrading of University administrative offices (UNIMI).

Z: For the social sciences in general, and political science in particular, it is not a good period in terms of funding, not only in Italy. What can we do to raise awareness with regard to the utility of our research?

F: In Italy mass media are the only channel for reaching public opinion at large. For political scientists, however, using the mass media may be a double-edged weapon. An economist can

say foolish things without sounding like a smoke-seller, but we run the risk of sounding foolish even when we say smart things. It is a consequence of the low level of institutionalization of political science, still barely recognizable even in its name (in the singular). Perhaps it is more fruitful to try and press on policy makers, in Italy and in Europe, (We have more audience and reputation in Brussels than in Rome or Milan) in order to be considered a full-fledged bearers of expert knowledge, useful for public, collective decisions. Perhaps a greater effort of SISF and ECPR on this issue could improve our reputation, on which also funding for basic research ultimately depends.



Purpose of the RESc-EU Project:

Reconciling Economic and Social Europe: the role of ideas, values and politics

The welfare state (WS) and the EU are two precious legacies of the XX century. Their mutual relationship has been however fraught by unresolved tensions (and a potential “clash”), which the recent crisis seems to have markedly exacerbated. The project purpose is to develop a new theory on the genetic roots of such tensions, their temporal swings, the possible institutional solutions and their political pre-conditions.

The WS serves essential economic, social and political functions. The EU (EMU in particular) is in its turn essential for growth and jobs, but tends to undermine the WS’s very institutional foundations. When, how and why did the initial “elective affinity” between the two spheres start to weaken? Is “reconciliation” possible and how? The project will focus on the intellectual and political dynamics of both WS-building and EU-building. Drawing on Weber’s insights on the relationship between values, ideas, and politics, a new framework will be elaborated, aimed at reconnecting these three elements in the explanation of change, thus breaking new grounds in institutional theories. Extensive empirical work will be carried out, based on a multi-disciplinary approach (political science, political philosophy, policy analysis, law and economics). Detailed case studies will reconstruct the logic of key past junctures, such as the crisis of the 1970s, the years between the Amsterdam and the Lisbon Treaties, the post-2008 crisis. Public attitudes on the EU’s social dimensions will be tapped through a survey and a “Blog Sentiment Analysis”. Academic and expert networks will be involved as well as EU policy makers, in order to discuss the scientific and policy implications of the project results. Policy documentation, assessment and proposals will be produced through an observatory (“EUvisions”) for systematic data collection and analysis on (social) EU-building “in action”.

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