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*“Il fait bon voir de tout leur sénat ballotter. Il fait bon voir partout leurs gondoles flotter”*¹. The famous Joachim du Bellay’s sonnet belongs to a political rhetoric about Venice that started to be forged at the end of the Middle Ages, praising the splendour and wealth of the Serenissima, as the refinement of its political organisation. Venetian rulers, foreign visitors, humanist writers and political thinkers contributed to a tradition which remained efficient for many centuries, and which have contributed to create what have been called the myth of Venice². The Venetian “constitution”, based on the balance of power, the principle of collegiality, the constant use of voting and the sophistication of institutions were at the centre of their considerations.

Venetian institutions were complex ones, constantly evolving from their implementation in the twelfth century until the end of the Republic in 1797. At the end of the fifteenth century, there were more than 750 offices reserved to nobles (or patricians)³. Regular elections were organised to fulfil these positions, and once elected, patricians had to share power and take collective decisions in collegial assemblies. As a consequence, voting was one of the most common political practices, used to elect as to take decision⁴. But as we shall see, as by capillarity, there were many other opportunities to vote in Venice, within local communities, parish churches, guilds or confraternities. Voting seemed everywhere in the lagoon: it could take many different forms (compromise, drawing lot, secret vote or voiced one), and was employed by patricians as well as *cittadini* and *popolani*⁵.

This chapter considers these different practices, focusing on voters, procedures and uses. Doing so, it aims at shedding light on the nature of the Venetian political culture and the common principles that were shared by the population of the city. On the one hand, voting was used in elections, to chose and designate rulers and representatives, and to equally allocate political functions which could either be seen as privileges, resources or duties. For attractive functions, desired by many, vote helped

¹ Joachim du Bellay, *Les Regrets*, 1558, sonnet CXXXIII.

² Angelo Ventura, “Scrittori politici e scritture di governo”, *Storia della cultura veneta*, vol. 3, Vicenza, Neri Pozza 1981. About the myth, Robert Finlay, *Politics in Renaissance Venice*, Londres, Benn, 1980, esp. p. 27-37; James S. Grubb, “When Myths Lose Power: Four Decades of Venetian Historiography”, *The Journal of Modern History*, 58-1, 1986, p. 43-94.

³ Andrea Zannini, “L’impiego pubblico”, in *Storia di Venezia. Dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*, vol. 4, Alberto Tenenti, Ugo Tucci (ed.), *Il Rinascimento. Politica e cultura*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1996, p. 415-463; p. 461-2: in 1493, there were 514 offices in Venice (*uffici di città*); 138 offices in the maritime empire (*uffici di fuori in Stato da mar*) and 113 offices in the territorial state (*uffici di fuori in the Stato da terra*).

⁴ For a recent synthesis of the question: Olivier Christin, *Vox populi. Une histoire du vote avant le suffrage universel*, Paris, Seuil, 2014.

⁵ Brian Pullan, “‘Three Orders of Inhabitants’: Social Hierarchies in the Republic of Venice”, in Jeffrey Denton (ed.), *Orders and Hierarchies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1999, p. 147-168.

decide fairly between the different applicants and chose the best and more qualified candidates. For functions that were considered dangerous, costly or too demanding, voting was a way to constrain reluctant candidates to take their share of the burden. On the other hand, voting was an essential step in the decision-making process, to take political and legal resolutions, which intended to lead to the best possible resolutions, and to govern accordingly to the opinion and choices of the majority.

Beyond the effectiveness of vote and the role of the procedure, the practice of voting was also an essential part in the definition of political communities. Determining who could vote, when and how, was a way for rulers and inhabitants to establish the limit of their groups, to determine political and social belonging on the basis of shared rights and duties. The legal definition of the patrician group itself was based on the membership to the Great Council (Maggior Consiglio): one belonged to the assembly because he was from a noble family and his family was a noble one because it could sit in the assembly. And being a member of the Great Council meant having the right to elect magistrates and to vote laws. But even for the ordinary people, who were excluded from political institutions, to belong to a parish or a guild could give the ability to vote within these institutions. Deciding together how to defend common interest, and who would be in charge to do so, helped create the feeling of belonging to a community, and contributed giving this group its identity.

Voting was a sign of politicization, as it implied debates and the necessity to express choices, and to chose between them. As such, it obliges us to wonder who can be considered as political actors in Venice, if we focus on this practice. To be sure, ordinary people were excluded from power and political institutions, but they were still able to express an opinion and to act collectively to take decisions⁶. The study of voting in Venice is indeed a good way to shed a new light on the political culture of the lagoon inhabitants, considered as a whole.

A Shared Power

In the middle of the twelfth century, Venice negotiated its definitive independence from the Byzantine Empire, which had until then claimed political authority over the lagoon. Venice became a commune, with its own institutions, which were rapidly monopolized by a group of rich and influential merchants who managed to keep power for themselves. They formed the Great Council, “the sovereign body of the state”⁷, and through a well-known political process called the *Serrata* (closure), they gradually limited the access to the institution before closing it definitively. The process, which occurred from the end of the thirteenth century to the first decades of the fourteenth, led to the definition of an hereditary nobility⁸. The group became the only one authorized to rule institutions and exercise power.

⁶ Filippo de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007; Claire Judde de Larivière, *La révolte des boules de neige. Murano face à Venise, 1511*, Paris, Fayard, 2014.

⁷ Robert Finlay, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁸ Stanley Chojnacki, “La formazione della nobiltà dopo la Serrata”, in *Storia di Venezia. Dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*, vol. 3, Girolamo Arnaldi, Giorgio Cracco, and Alberto Tenenti (eds.), *La formazione dello stato patrizio*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1997, p. 641-725; Gerhard Rösch, “The Serrata of the Great Council and Venetian Society, 1286-1323”, in *Venice Reconsidered. The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797*, J. Martin et D. Romano (ed.), The Johns

At the end of the Middle Ages, there were around 2,000 members in the Great Council, where general decisions were voted, but most importantly where elections took place, to fulfil the numerous offices and magistracies ruled by patricians⁹. They had to run collectively the city, and the territorial state in the Mediterranean and in Italy (Stato da Mar e Stato da Terra). Power was shared in order to prevent certain families from seizing power for themselves, as often had been the case elsewhere in Italy. The multiplication of institutions and the rapid rotation of posts (in general 1 to 2 years) meant the absence of specialization; the patricians ruled without favouring a certain type of office or jurisdiction. This also prevented factions or family groups from seizing certain institutions or considering a specific area as their own specialty. The potential influence of these pressure groups was thus limited by the fragmentation of offices and duties.

Electing the doge

The only magistracy occupied by a single person was the most prestigious one, the doge, who was elected for life after having demonstrated its abilities along a long career.¹⁰ It was the only office that was not subject to a division of power or a mandate limited in time which explains in part the recourse to a specific and complex procedure of election. It combined drawing lots and vote, and became one of the most successful political topos linked to Venice. The doge was not the ruler of the city but the representative of the city's sovereignty, which the noble elites incarnated as a group, like a collective figure of prince. He did not neither rule the patriciate, but can be considered as its emanation. He represented the power that the group possessed collectively.

The election of the doge was organized in the Great Council, and implied a long process combining phases of vote and phases of drawing lot. The aim was to constitute a college of 41 patricians who would finally participate in the election, and who would represent equally the different groups of interest. Thirty members of the assembly, aged

Hopkins University Press, Baltimore-Londres, 2000, p. 67-88; Victor Crescenzi, *Esse de maiori consilio: legittimità civile e legittimazione politica nella repubblica di Venezia : (secc. XIII-XVI)*, Rome, Istituto Palazzo Borromini, 1996.

⁹ There is an abundant secondary literature about political institutions and elections in Venice. This chapter is mainly based on Giuseppe Maranini, *La costituzione di Venezia*, 2 vol., Venise, 1927, especially vol. II, p. 106-129; Andrea Da Mosto, *L'Archivio di Stato di Venezia, indice generale, storico, descrittivo ed analitico*, Rome, Biblioteca d'Arte, 1937; Frederic C. Lane, *Venice. A Maritime Republic*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973 esp. p. 87-117 and 251-273; Mario Caravale, "Le istituzioni della Repubblica", in *Storia di Venezia. Dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*, vol. 3, *op. cit.*, p. 299-364, esp. p. 326-356; Giuseppe Gullino, "L'evoluzione costituzionale", in *Storia di Venezia. Dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*, vol. 4, *op. cit.*, p. 345-378; A. Zannini, "L'impiego pubblico", *op. cit.* About procedures, see the descriptions in Marin Sanudo, *De origine, situ et magistratibus urbis venetae ovvero la citta di Venetia (1493-1530)*, Milan, 1980, p. 240 sq.

¹⁰ For a general framework, see Gino Benzoni ed., *I dogi*, Electa, Milan, 1982. More recently, about the electoral procedure and its effectiveness, Miranda Mowbray, Dieter Gollmann, "Electing the Doge of Venice: analysis of a 13th Century protocol", *HPL-2007-28 R1*, 2007 (online); Claire Judde de Larivière, "Ducal Elections, Institutional Usages, and Popular Practices: Drawing Lots in the Venetian Republic", Yves Sintomer ed., *History of drawing lots*, Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2018 tbp.

over 30, were drawn by lot and were then isolated in a room. A new drawing of lots was held among them so as to select only nine out of the thirty. These nine patricians then elected forty other patricians (seven votes out of nine were required to be elected). After this first election, the nine returned to the Great Council Hall with a list of the forty candidates they had elected. Their names were publicly announced so as to verify that they belonged to different families, since it was forbidden for two members of the same family – brothers, fathers, cousins, uncles – to be part of the same electoral committee. After this first phase of the election, there were seven other similar phases in succession combining a lottery and voting. The forty patricians met in turn and twelve of them were drawn by lot. That twelve then elected twenty-five patricians, of whom nine were drawn by lot. These nine patricians elected forty-five patricians, among whom eleven were drawn by lot. The latter, in turn, elected forty-one patricians. It was this group of 41 who formed the committee charged with electing the doge.

Alternating drawing lots and elections sought to avoid corruption and prevent clans from imposing their influence. Even the most powerful patricians, despite their efforts, could not hope to control the choices of voters at all stages of the proceedings. Moreover, by isolating the electoral committees in separate parts of the Doge's Palace, contact between the members of the Great Council and the electors was avoided and the latter could not be pressured by the former. But beyond the mathematical effectiveness of the process, its ritual dimension was as important as the results. It showed of the fight against corruption, and staged the collective participation of the whole group to a long and sophisticated process. Whether its effects were due to the laws of probability or the illusion of impartiality, the procedure did have the consequence of limiting fraud and asserting that corruption was not tolerated in that system. The ducal election functioned because it imposed a discourse of equality that the patricians adhered to and believed in. The ritual existed to make that discourse of equality manifest to all—the fact that it lasted for so long is proof of its effectiveness.

Political elections

For other political elections, the procedure was less complex and relied mainly on vote, even if drawing lot could be used at different stages of the process. There were two main types of election in Venice: those reserved to the Signoria and the Consiglio dei Pregadi (Senate), two smaller assemblies, which had to decide for the most important magistracies; those which occurred in the Great Council, where vote was taken by the entire group of patricians¹¹. In both cases, elections did not imply that one voted for his favourite candidate, but that each voter expressed an opinion about each candidate, voting positively or negatively, yes or no, for or against.

The most important elections were reserved to the Signoria (the ducal council, including the doge, six ducal councillors and the three heads of the Forty) and the Senate (which gathered its own members and those of other assemblies, between 180 and 300 men at the end of the Middle Ages, with a quorum of 70¹²). At the end of the Middle Ages, the Senate nominated and elected around 150 offices (for example ambassadors, *provveditori* i.e. commissioners, and magistrates in military matters), through a procedure called *scrutinio*. But not all members of the Senate could vote or propose

¹¹ The jurisdiction of each assembly, the electoral procedure and the functions of the different institutions constantly evolved and adapted to circumstances. What follows is a general presentation, that should be refined for details.

¹² Robert Finlay, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

laws¹³. Some senators had to propose names of candidates, and the whole assembly had to vote for or against the propositions made by their peers. The candidates with the highest scores (the highest numbers of yes which could not be fewer than the no) were elected.

All the other offices, and the majority of them, were attributed in the Great Council described by chronicler Marin Sanudo as “the lord (*signor*) of the city, and it creates all the offices and magistracies of the city and all the councils”¹⁴. The assembly gathered every Sunday and the afternoon was spent in “balloting”, i.e. vote. In general, nine elections were held at the beginning of each session. The positions to be fulfilled had been announced before by city criers at Rialto and San Marco. For each function, there was an age limit both for voters and for candidates. Because of the size of the Great Council, voters could be numerous, and even too many to ensure a peaceful process. In early sixteenth century, the size of the institution started to be excessive, and sometimes come close to 2,500 members. But it was quite rare to see all of them present in a session, and in general many patricians were absent, either because of their business or political duty outside Venice, either because they did not participate any more to the political life¹⁵.

In the documents, voting was called “a bossoli e ballotte”, literally, with boxes and ballots. Ballot boxes were small or large repositories, sometimes called “hat” (*cappello*)¹⁶. Until the fifteenth century, they were open boxes, then from the end of the century, they were closed or covered in order to avoid any attempt of fraud. This new model of box, which took some years to be adopted, became widespread and insured the secrecy of the procedure. The two compartments were hidden under a lid, and voters could deposit their ballot in one of them without being seen. They had to pass their hand above the two compartments, and then dropped the ballot in the yes or no compartment. Ballots were round or oval balls or tokens, the size of a cherry or slightly larger, originally made of wax, and then metal or cloth.

The election usually followed three steps, in which nomination, vote and drawing lots were combined. First, an initial procedure aimed at constituting the electorate committee, selecting the patricians who would be in charge of choosing the candidate. For each election, four electoral committees (*mani*) of nine members were constituted, and lottery was used to constitute each of them. Second, the committee had to propose – by conciliation or voting – a list of potential candidates as it was not to patricians themselves to officially apply for a position. Third, the Great Council voted to decide between the different candidates proposed by the different committees, each voter deciding on each candidate.

The whole procedure took place in the very large room of the Great Council, in the Doge’s Palace. At one side of the room, at the tribune, was installed the Signoria,

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 60; F. C. Lane, *op. cit.*, p. 258-260. For the list of offices elected in Senate, A. Da Mosto, *op. cit.*, p. 37-8.

¹⁴ Marino Sanudo, *Cronachetta (1493)*, Venice, 1880, p. 233 translated and quoted by R. Finlay, *op. cit.*, p. 59. The list of the magistracies elected in the Great Council is in A. Da Mosto, *op. cit.*, p. 31-33. The description of the procedure is in F. C. Lane, *op. cit.*, p. 258-265.

¹⁵ Zannini, “L’impiego”, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

¹⁶ Reinhold C. Mueller, “Nel segreto dell’urna. La riforma della procedura elettorale adottata nel 1492 dal Consiglio dei dieci di Venezia”, *Quaderni Veneti*, vol. 2, n°1-2, 2013, p. 219-228.

presided by the doge. Three large bronze urns were placed in front of them, and each was monitored by one of the doge's counsellors. Placing them high on platforms was done to make sure that no one could look inside. For the selection of the committees, about 800 balls of silver and thirty golden balls were placed in the two side urns. The middle one contained twenty-four balls of silver and thirty-six golden ones. The first random drawing, done according to the benches on which the patricians were seated, decided the order of their passage to draw from the urns. The benches were placed on four sides of the room, in four directions symbolized by well-known spaces in Venice: Piazza San Marco (north), the island of San Giorgio (south), the Arsenal quarter of Castello (east), and the Broglio, a space located in front of the Doge's Palace on the Piazzetta (west). The patricians each rose in turn and proceeded to the side urns. If they drew a ball of silver, they would return to sit down. If they drew a golden ball, they would then draw again in the central urn: if that ball were silver, they would also return to sit down; if it was golden, they were then on the electoral committee. A notary cried out the person's name, and another in the middle of the room repeated it to ensure that the great number of patricians present heard it. This was done to verify that two members of the same family had not been appointed to the same electoral committee. The candidates who had drawn two successive golden balls then had to sit on a special bench near the doge, turning their backs on the other members of the Great Council to avoid receiving instructions by signs on how to vote.

Once the electoral committee had been appointed, its members had to swear before the Grand Chancellor (the head of the Chancery) to carry out their mission impartially. Two secretaries came to escort them to a small room where the election would be held (four separate rooms therefore for the four committees). The members were seated in order of their age. The youngest of the nine electors was given a list of the nine posts to be filled, arranged in hierarchical order and preceded by a number. A secretary read out the current electoral laws, recalling in particular those against fraud. He then placed nine balls in an urn with the numbers corresponding to the positions to be filled. Each person drew a number and this established which patrician would be in charge of the election for which office.

For the first post, the patrician who had been appointed had to suggest the name of a candidate, who could be a member of his family, or even himself. Then the committee proceeded to vote. With six 'yes' votes, the candidate was elected; otherwise, another name has to be suggested and then voted on. The election continued until nine patricians were appointed to the nine positions. Once the election was over, the electoral committees did not return to the Great Council – the two secretaries communicated the results to the Grand Chancellor by giving him a note with the candidates proposed by each committee. The Chancery then verified that all the candidates were eligible for the office for which they had been elected, by consulting the registers of magistrate lists (in Venice, there was the *contumacia*, a forced time during which one could not fill the same post again). For each post, the Great Council was finally presented with four potential candidates, and the assembly voted after the members of the candidate's close family had left the room. The person who received the most approval votes was elected. Once elected, it was difficult to refuse the position. Political functions were considered as a civic duty that patricians owed the community. Therefore, they had to accept their nomination, and if it was not impossible to decline, it was poorly considered.

The three steps of the election (forming the committee, proposing candidates, voting) were equally important, and constituted an additional precaution against corruption. The multiplication of phases of vote were considered as another way to limit

fraud, as rituals and public gestures also helped make acceptable by all the results and the sense of the election. The procedure was strictly controlled by the citizen magistracy of Segretario alle Voci, who had to register the result of the vote, and keep lists of election to the ordinary and extraordinary functions. Segretario alle Voci was part of the Chancellery, a large and efficient para-political institution essential to the proper functioning of the political machine. As in any large medieval state, it was in charge of producing and keeping the official documents, as well as to check the legality of electoral and procedural process within patricians institutions¹⁷. It was ruled by the citizen class, *cittadini* or bourgeois, and its chief was the Grand Chancellor, often considered as the equivalent of the doge for the non-noble inhabitants.

The elections held in the Signoria, the Senate and the Great Council decided of the composition of all the other institutions. But in turn, these councils and magistracies could organise elections. Some elected their own head, voting or by drawing lot. It was for example the case of the three courts of the Forty (Quarantia Criminale, Quarantia Civil Vecchia, Quarantia Civil Nova) who had the task of electing their three chiefs. These positions were decisive as they were members of the Signoria. Some institutions also had to elect subaltern officers, chosen among poor patricians who needed these stipendiary functions to survive. It was for example the case of the "*nobili da poppa*", young noblemen who boarded the merchant galleys to participate to their military defence¹⁸. They were elected in Quarantia Criminale among patricians aged more than 18. The same assembly also had to proceed to the recruitment of some of the Chancery staff, notaries and secretaries. An electoral committee was designated by lottery, and had to propose candidates, before a vote happened on each name. The ones with the majority of "yes" were elected. Rulers knew the strategic importance of these secretary, and fraud was as controlled as for political functions. The Council of Ten also elected its own secretaries, before controlling the whole Chancellery; the Collegio (the steering committee of the Senate) voted to elect, among others, the scribes who served on merchant galleys¹⁹.

Wherever they were held, and whichever importance they could have, these procedures were watched and monitored by specific institutions in order to prevent fraud and corruption. In 1517, a new magistracy was created to monitor the electoral practices, the Censori²⁰. The incipit of the decree establishing the magistracy insisted on the principles and values that the magistracy had to defend. Elections had to designate those who "by merit, integrity and good procedure had deserved" their position (*per meriti, probità, et bone operazion sue li hanno meritati*). The rhetoric of excellence, impartiality and equality as the one of fairness and justice, were essential of the Venetian political discourse. This was obviously not enough to avoid corruption, and the topos of the perfection of Venetian institutions was overturned in the 1980s

¹⁷ Andrea Zannini, *Burocrazia e burocrati a Venezia in età moderna: i cittadini originari (sec. XVI-XVIII)*, Venice, Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti, 1993; Filippo de Vivo, "Coeur de l'Etat, lieu de tension. Le tournant archivistique vu de Venise (XVe-XVIIe siècle)", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 68, 2013, p. 699-728.

¹⁸ Frederic C. Lane, "The crossbow in the nautical revolution of the Middle Ages", *Explorations in Economic History*, 1969, vol. 7, 1-2, p. 161-171.

¹⁹ A. Zannini, "L'impiego", *op. cit.*, p. 444.

²⁰ A. Da Mosto, *op. cit.*, p. 177; G. Gullino, "L'evoluzione", *op. cit.*, p. 377, note 232.

historiography by a denunciation of a diffuse fraud²¹. In a more balanced way, recent studies have reconsidered the whole question, incorporating in the frame and analysing lobbying and debates, the question of parties and factions, and the role of information²².

Taking decision

Patricians were elected by a vote, and once elected they had in turn to vote to take decisions. Their job consisted in governing the city, deliberating, enacting laws, arbitrating conflicts, dispensing justice, according grace, giving fiscal or commercial privileges. Collegial magistracies always implied a vote, at some point of the decisional process. The definition of quorum and majority, as well as the procedure, depended on each institution. For any proposition put to the vote, patricians had three possible choices: yes, no, abstention (*si, no, non sinceri*). To be accepted, the proposition had to receive a majority of yes, and no more than a third of no. Voting was a daily activity as archives documents show. Every proposition submitted to a vote was written down with the number of ballots received.

Courts of justice also voted in order to decide sentences²³. They were many of them, collaborating together and following different proceedings, with or without investigation, witnesses questioning, torture etc. The Lords of the Night (the *Signori di notte* monitoring the streets, especially at night, and acting as a court in some cases) voted to establish the guilt of defendants, before deciding a sentence. The cases investigated by the Avogaria di Comun (the Comune attorney, and the main court of appeal) ended with the preparation of an *intromissio*, the prosecution case, which was presented before the court, generally the Forty. A debate could take place, before a first vote occurred, to establish the culpability of the defendant; a second one decided the nature of the punishment. The same happened in the severe Council of Ten: after the investigation, the council had to vote yes, no or to abstain to act against the accused. The simple majority was enough to decide the prosecution and to establish the sanction. Debates were not recorded, and it is rare to have documents about the content of deliberation, but sometimes, the repetition of votes, prove the difficulty of the assembly to find an agreement on the decision to take²⁴.

It is finally interesting to note that the familiarity with voting encouraged patricians to make private use of the procedure. For example, in 1533, Bartolomeo Bragadin wrote his will, leaving some money to the poor members of his *ca'* (the large noble family sharing the same name). In order to decide who would have benefited from this donation, the family members had to vote, as the will stipulated²⁵.

²¹ Donald E. Queller, *The Venetian Patriciate, reality versus myth*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1986; R. Finlay, *op. cit.*, p. 27-28 ; 196-226.

²² See in particular, for a later period, Dorit Raines, "Office seeking, broglio, and the pocket political guidebooks in Cinquecento and Seicento Venice", *Studi Veneziani*, 22, 1991, p. 137-194; F. De Vivo, *op. cit.*, p. 25-45; Claire Judde de Larivière, "Du Broglio à Rialto: cris et chuchotements dans l'espace public à Venise, au XVI^e siècle", *L'espace public au Moyen Âge*, P. Boucheron, N. Offenstadt ed., Paris, Presses universitaires de France, « Le nœud gordien », 2011, p. 119-130.

²³ Guido Ruggiero, *Violence in Early Renaissance Venice*, New Brunswick NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1980, p. 18-39.

²⁴ See for example C. Judde de Larivière, *La révolte*, *op. cit.*, p. 266-267.

²⁵ Sanudo, *I Diarii*, *op. cit.*, vol. 58, col. 50-51, 17 April 1533.

Local communities

Patricians had the monopoly of political authority, and voting was closely associated with this privilege. Nevertheless, they did not have the monopoly of voting. One should not conflate political power and political practice. Ordinary people had an opinion, debated about political events, and took part as well in many institutions, where they had many opportunity to vote. In the lagoon, there were several local communities who had their own institutions even though still subjected to the authority of Venice, represented by the figure of the rector or *podestà*. Torcello, Burano, Malamocco or Murano were among these small islands, populated by workers, fishermen and peasants, who formed organised communities²⁶.

The example of Murano is an interesting one, with a population of circa 4,000 inhabitants at the end of the Middle Ages, men and women involved in different activities, artisans, glassworkers, servants, fishermen or peasants²⁷. At the end of the thirteenth century, the island obtained its own statutes, a set of rules reshaped in 1502, and which defined the community's laws and local institutions in charge of its governing²⁸. The general assembly, the Arengo, gradually gave way to a restrictive Council of Thirty, called by the statutes "the thing most necessary to the needs" of the island²⁹. Its members debated, voted, and passed laws submitted by the *podestà*. To smooth decision-making, five magistrates (two judges, two economic magistrates and a chamberlain) were elected from within the Thirty to form a *banco*, a subcommittee to assist the *podestà* in matters of greatest weight. There were also, in the island, other magistrates and sub-committees as the procurators of the Churches (*procuradori deleghiesie*) or the deputies for the Needs of the Town (*procuradori per li bisogni della Terra*); there were as well officials who had to help them govern (a chancellor, a public crier, and a *cavalier* i.e. a policeman). All of them were appointed by the *podestà* and/or elected by the members of the Thirty.

The statutes clearly described the way elections had to be organised. They appeared as varied and complex as they were in Venice. The procedure to renew the Council of Thirty, for example, was the object of the second chapters of the Statutes. It happened every five years, and aimed at ensuring that the island's leading families had fair representation. The *podestà* had to convoke the current council, with a quorum of at least two third of its members. The *podestà* and the five members of the *banco* had to name "fifty among the best citizens of the island" (10 by the *podestà*, 8 for each other). The chancellor had to write down their names on a sheet of paper, before reading them at loud to the Council, explaining that they would have had to chose the "best, and more competent, and more loyal to the land (*terra*)". Then he had to prepare 50 small pieces of paper (*bollettini*), and put them in a box. The *podestà* draws them one by one, and for each name, the vote occurred, yes or no, meanwhile the chancellor wrote down secretly the result on another sheet of paper, under the supervision of the *podestà*. The box had to be placed on the table of the tribunal, and covered; besides were the 30 ballots (or the number of voters that day); each voter came, took a ballot, and placed it within one of

²⁶ Ermanno Orlando, *Altre Venezie. Il dogado veneziano nei secoli XIII e XIV (giurisdizione, territorio, giustizia e amministrazione)*, Venice, Istituto Veneto di Scienze Lettere ed Arti, 2008.

²⁷ C. Judde de Larivière, *La révolte*, op. cit.

²⁸ "Statuto de Muran del 1502", in Gherardo Ortalli, Monica Pasqualetto, Alessandra Rizzi ed., *Statuti della laguna veneta dei secoli xiv-xvi*, Rome, Jouvence, 1989, p. 209-287.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, book I, chap. 2, p. 238-240.

the compartment, yes or no, being careful to pass his hand above each compartment in order to keep secret his vote. Everyone was held to vote “according to his conscience” and family members could not nominate or vote one another. They even had to leave the room when the vote for a member of their family occurred. Finally, it was clearly stipulated that the result of the vote for each name had to remain secret; just the result was announced. The 30 candidates with the most numerous result were elected.

From the end of the fifteenth century, one had to be citizen of Murano (*cittadino di Murano*) to be able to join the Council of Thirty. This personal status started as a social recognition of the superiority of certain inhabitants, because of their wealth and worthiness. It became a legal one during the sixteenth century and was stabilized in 1602 with the establishment of a Golden Book. But the citizenship of Murano was different from the one of Venice, which was reserved to men not working with their hand. In Murano, opposite, the citizenship gathered glassworkers and artisans, as did the medieval Muranese institutions, who were in the hand of non-nobles. It reveals that in Murano as in other local communities of the lagoon, councils, assemblies, offices and magistracies were also controlled by commoners, who had to decide collectively about the fate of their territory, and to vote on a regular basis, as the documents they produced show.

Parishioners

Another local institution where vote and election were used was the parish, and in Late Medieval Venice, local priests could be chosen by parishioners. This practice appeared in the twelfth century, when the neighbours (*convicini*) of San Matteo di Rialto asked the right to chose their priest³⁰. But it was only at the beginning of the fifteenth century, that the phenomenon seemed to happen again. The *ius electionis* appeared in 1436 and became a general practice in Venice from 1470s. In general, the vote was reserved to a *major pars*, i.e. the richer patricians and citizens, who represented a small part of the inhabitants of the parish. The vote could be pronounced at loud or “*a bossoli e ballotte*” o “*per balotas*” with bulletins.

But before establishing who could vote, many debates took place within parishes³¹. Inhabitants discussed who could vote: owners of estate or simple inhabitants, “honest men” or anyone, illegitimate sons or only legitimate ones, only men or also women? From a parish to another, the content of these debates show an ability to discuss what gave people the legitimacy to vote and what it meant to be part of the community. In the vast majority of cases, patricians managed to exclude other inhabitants, even though a trial organized in Murano in 1508 after a chaotic election in the Church of Santi Maria e Donato shows that ordinary people and simple workers regularly took part to these elections³². But even if simple inhabitants were generally excluded, the fact that the debate took place show the possibility of a collective discussion about what it meant to belong to the territory. Deciding who could vote or not was a way to delineate the political and civic community. The final resolution was taken in February 1526, when the pope Clement VII enacted the “Clementine Bull”

³⁰ About this question, see the recent book about Pascal Vuillemin, *Parochiæ venetiarum. Les paroisses de Venise au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Garnier, 2017, p. 139 et suiv.; here p. 142.

³¹ Numerous examples of these debates in G. B. Gallicciolli, *Delle memorie venete antiche profane ed ecclesiastiche*, Venice, 1795, vol. IV, p. 256-308.

³² C. Judde de Larivière, *La révolte*, *op. cit.*, p. xx

recognizing to Venetians the right to elect their priest and fixing the procedure of the election³³.

The parish was one of the most important local institution for the ordinary people, one of the most inclusive, one of the closest and more intimate one. It defined a space, a community of inhabitants, a shared interest and identity. But other organisations and institutions also played a decisive role in the social life of inhabitants, which were based as well on the principles of shared decision, collegiality and solidarity.

Guilds and confraternities

Guilds and lay confraternities were among the most important social organisations in Late Medieval Venice, as they were in many other cities³⁴. They were regulated by statutes, called *mariegole* in Venetian (from *matricola*, rule) and produced an abundant documentation composed mainly of rules, deliberations, accounts and trials. In these documents, references to vote are constant: to elect new members and representatives, or to take decision in order to regulate the institution's activities. Some institutions accepted the vote of women when other refused it, some reserved the vote to the most important members, i.e. masters, when others were more inclusive. The general chapter (*capitolo generale*) gathered the members (or some of them, depending on each institution). In general, it had to assemble twice a year, in the *albergo*, the common room often adjacent a church. Most of the time, that is where and when elections took place. The different *mariegole* shared some common electoral rules, which often combined vote and drawing lots, but each of them gradually settled its own specific layout³⁵.

Some professional guilds were more open than others, allowing sons of members to become automatically members themselves. Others reserved to current members the right to vote to include new ones. It was the case of the boatmen's guild of the ferry of San Pietro di Chioggia, who accepted application from candidates, as far as they were competent, had experience, and owned a boat of good quality and fitted out³⁶. They had to be approved "a bossoli e ballote" by the other members. In the wool guild (*arte della lana*), at the beginning of the sixteenth century, in front of the high number of foreign candidates, it was decided that the chiefs of the guild had to vote to accept them³⁷.

³³ Pascal Vuillemin, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

³⁴ Giovanni Monticolo, *I capitolari delle arti veneziane sottoposte alla giustizia e poi alla Giustizia vecchia dalle origini al MCCCXXX*, Rome, Forzani, 1905; Richard Mackenney, *Tradesmen and Traders. The World of the Guilds in Venice in Europe, c. 1250-c.1650*, London, Sydney, Croom Helm 1987, esp. p. 21-28; Francesca Ortalli, *Per salute delle anime e delli corpi : scuole piccole a Venezia nel tardo Medioevo*, Venice, Marsilio, 2001; Patricia Fortini Brown, "Le Scuole", in *Storia di Venezia. Dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*, vol. 5, Alberto Tenenti, Ugo Tucci (ed.), *Il Rinascimento. Società ed economia*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1996, p. 307-354.

³⁵ Giorgetta Bonfiglio Dosio, "Le arti cittadine", in *Storia di Venezia. Dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*, vol. 2, G. Cracco, G. Ortalli ed., *L'età del comune*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1995, p. 577-625, p. 599-601.

³⁶ Biblioteca del Museo Correr, *Mariegole*, 61, fol. 12, chapter 4.

³⁷ *La Mariegola dell'arte della lana di Venezia (1244-1595)*, Andrea Mozzato ed., Venice, Il Comitato editore, 2002, vol. 2, p. 421-2, chapter 729.

Guilds were headed by chiefs, representatives and judges, the precise number and name of which changed from one institution to another (*gastaldi, degani...*). Their election could be organised by the general chapter or reserved to a smaller group of masters, combining votes and drawing lots, and often organized the day of the patron saint. There were usually two voting steps: the first one to designate the electoral committee, the second one for the election itself. These chiefs or representatives were in charge of the association, and as such, were the ones in contact with patricians and institutions. Their mission made necessary that the best officers would be elected and in a fair way. The election, once again, was supposed to guarantee that the choice of the majority would be respected, and allow to chose the most able candidates to defend the common interest of the association. But these missions of representation were also considered as difficult ones, and there were not always particularly looked for: they involved time and money, and the responsibility they gave could become a problem in a difficult political or economic time. So the election could also aim at constraining some to take their responsibility. The *mariegole* made quite difficult to refuse an election, as in the bakers' guild, which ordered that "if somebody has been elected *gastaldo*, he cannot decline"³⁸.

Procedures of election evolved over time, and changed from one association to another. For example, from the end of the thirteenth century, in the glass-makers' guild, for example, the departing *gastaldo* had to choose twenty men among whom five were drawn by lot, and these five were to elect the new *gastaldo*. In the caulkers' guild, nine electors were drawn by lot among members over 25 years of age and having resided in Venice for at least 10 years. Those nine elected the guild's representatives³⁹. In the bakers' guild, the election took place at the beginning of each year. The incumbent steering committee had to designate five of the "best men", three from the side of Rialto and two from the side of San Marco, and these had to vote⁴⁰. In 1536, the Savi alle Acque in charge of the water of the lagoon decided to gather the representatives of fishermen, to solicit their opinion concerning certain decisions related to the management of the lagoon⁴¹. The vote had to be organised in different places and communities, San Nicolo and Sant'Agnese in Venice, but also the islands of Murano and Burano. In each community, fishermen had to chose "two of the oldest fishermen, sensible and practiced or former fishermen". They were elected for two years to give their "opinion" to the Savi alle Acque. To be able to vote, fishermen had to be at least 40 years old and had to take the oath that they would choose the best of them.

In lay confraternities as well, *scuole grandi* as *scuole piccole*, members had regularly to vote⁴². In the Scuola di Sant'Orsola, in fifteenth century, the general chapter gathered the second Sunday of December to vote for their representatives (*gastaldo, vicario* and 10 *degani*) who had to start their mission on the 1st January; then again the second Sunday of June, they gathered to elect their officials (one secretary and two *degani*) who started their functions the 1st July⁴³.

Finally, apart from elections, guilds and confraternities members voted to take decisions. Once again, within a common framework, every institution had settled its own

³⁸ Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Arti, 446, Pistori, fol. 4, chapter 27.

³⁹ Giorgetta Bonfiglio Dosio, *op. cit.*, p. 599.

⁴⁰ Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Arti, 446, Pistori, fol. 2v^o, chapter 13.

⁴¹ Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Podestà di Murano, 187.

⁴² F. Ortalli, *op. cit.*, p. 18-36 ; P. Fortini Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 324-330.

⁴³ P. Fortini Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 351, note 78.

rules. Sometimes, *gastaldi* and other representatives were the only ones who could decide through vote, sometimes it was the whole chapter, sometimes the best part of it. In July 1397, the chapter of furriers (*varoteri*) gathered in San Giovanni di Rialto, and 31 members (*gastaldo* and *compagni*) voted⁴⁴. In 1554, the Cinque Savi – the patrician institution in charge of the regulation of arti – decided that the *gastaldo* and other representatives of shoemakers (*calegheri*) had to take their decision in front of the chapter, in order to give the opportunity to everybody to debate and then vote⁴⁵. Many *mariegole* insisted on the necessity for the members to give their opinion before any vote happened⁴⁶.

Conclusion

As these different examples show, vote was part of a common Venetian political culture, shared by patricians and *popolani*. As soon as a group of persons had to take a collective decision after a debate, vote was the easiest way to decide between divergent points of view. It fitted well the Venetian ideology and political ideals. It was also an efficient procedure as its diffusion and its durability in the lagoon traditions attest. The ubiquity of vote allowed the inhabitants to defend an idea of the common good, which obviously differed from one institution or one social group to another. But the same rhetoric and the same horizon of expectation were shared. As a sign of politicization, vote can also be considered as an indicator of the way ordinary people could act and talk about politics. Even if deprived of power and excluded from the main institutions, they had a political ability, within certain communities or associations, that were sometimes even more important for them, as they directly concerned their everyday life. Voting within these institutions was a proof of a political ability, not necessarily linked to power, but an evidence of a collective agency.

⁴⁴ G. Monticolo, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 405, 27 July 1397, chapter 96.

⁴⁵ Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Arti, 27, Calegheri, fol. 11, 15 October 1554.

⁴⁶ For example, Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Arti, 446, Pistori, fol. 43 v^o, chapter 141.