

The Transformation of Italian Democracy

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Abstract: The history of post-Second World War Italy may be divided into two distinct periods corresponding to two different modes of democratic functioning. During the period from 1948 to 1993 (commonly referred to as the First Republic), Italy was a consensual democracy; whereas the system (commonly referred to as the Second Republic) that emerged from the dramatic changes brought about by the end of the Cold War functions according to the logic of competitive democracy. The transformation of Italy's political system has thus been significant. However, there remain important hurdles on the road to a coherent institutionalisation of the competitive model. The article reconstructs the transformation of Italian democracy, highlighting the socio-economic and institutional barriers that continue to obstruct a competitive outcome.

Keywords: Italian politics, Models of democracy, Parliamentary government, Party system, Interest groups, Political change.

Introduction

As a result of the parliamentary elections of 13-14 April 2008, the Italian party system now ranks amongst the least fragmented in Europe. Only four party groups are represented in the Senate and five in the Chamber of Deputies. In comparison, in Spain there are nine party groups in the Congreso de los Diputados and six in the Senado; in France, four in the Assemblée Nationale and six in the Sénat; and in Germany, six in the Bundestag. Admittedly, as is the case for the United Kingdom, rather fewer parties matter in those democracies in terms of the formation of governments: generally not more than two or three. However, the 2008 elections marked a true break in the Italian system of party representation. During the period from 2006 to 2008, 14 parties mattered in the Italian Chamber of Deputies, although, if one includes the various micro-personal splinters that had formed within the largest parties, the number rises to 20. During the crisis of the centre-left government of Romano Prodi in 2008, the governing *Unione*, heir to the Olive-tree coalition (*Ulivo*) had come to consist of no less than 11 parties. No large European democracy has ever witnessed such a degree of party fragmentation as Italy has since the

transformation of its party system in the crisis period between 1992 and 1994. Even in the bipolar system of the last fifteen years, personal, political, organisational and group rivalries between the coalitions' various fragments have frequently been more important than competition between the rival coalitions themselves, a state of affairs that has been symbolised by the coalitions' name changes. Thus, on the centre-left, the Ulivo became the Unione, while on the centre-right the Pole of Freedom and of Good Government (Polo della libertà e del buon governo) became the House of Freedoms (Casa delle libertà). In the period between 1996 and 2008, this fragmentation made governing the country an unusually difficult task. Can one thus argue that, with the parliamentary elections of 13-14 April 2008, Italy has made an irreversible step in the direction of a coherent competitive democracy?

In every democratic system there is a connection between the organisation of social interests, the functioning of the party system and the nature of the institutional rules. One might say that a model of democracy refers to the way in which this connection is given institutional form (Lijphart, 1999). Indeed, democratic countries have oscillated between two main models of democracy (Fabbrini, 2008a). The consensual model is characterised by the disaggregated representation of social interests, by multi-party systems and by the absence of alternation in government between alternative groupings (as is the case in Belgium). The competitive model, in contrast, is characterised by the aggregated representation of interests, by two-party or bipolar party systems and by the presumption of alternation in government between alternative line-ups (as is the case in the United Kingdom).¹ According to this typology, one might argue that the history of post-Second World War Italy can be divided into two distinct periods corresponding to two different modes of functioning of democracy. During the so-called First Republic between 1948 and 1993, Italy was a consensual democracy, whereas the system that emerged, in the so-called Second Republic, from the dramatic changes brought about by the end of the Cold War, has the features of a competitive democracy. However, although alternation (or competition) has replaced the logic of consensual democracy, the former nevertheless still appears feeble as it has not been supported by a reorganisation of the system of interest representation or any coherent institutional reform. Nor has it been supported by any change in the cultural paradigm utilised by political and social elites for interpreting the political world.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, I will place the analysis of the transformations in Italian democracy in the context of the two main existing models of democracy, i.e. the consensual and the competitive models. Second, I will highlight the changes that have taken place during the last half century – changes that have led Italy to abandon the consensual model – and I will identify the resistance that still obstructs

these changes. Finally, I will argue that Italian democracy is no longer consensual, even if it has not yet become a coherent competitive democracy.

The Two Italian Republics

Scholars and public opinion now conventionally distinguish between a First Republic during the period from 1948 to 1993 and a Second Republic after 1993 (Grilli di Cortona, 2007). The year 1993 is conventionally taken as a watershed because this was the year of the popular referendum that led to abolition of the emblematic proportional electoral system of the First Republic and its substitution by a quasi-majoritarian system,² which, starting in 1996, led to alternation in government between a centre-left and a centre-right coalition (Fabbrini, 2006). In its turn, the quasi-majoritarian electoral system of 1993 was replaced in 2005 by a proportional electoral system used for the parliamentary elections of 2006 and 2008.

During the First Republic, Italy was a member of the family of consensual democracies because it was characterised by ideological polarisation of a systemic nature between a communist bloc and an anti-communist bloc, at least until the 1980s. Such a division could not allow for alternation in government between alternative parties or party groupings. This ideological cleavage co-existed with religious, social and territorial divisions stretching back at least as far as the beginnings of the country's history as a unified state. It was believed by the main political elites that such a multiple system of cleavages could only be managed by means of a cautious and inclusive policy of mediation and compromise between the main political forces that had emerged from the Resistance, in particular Christian Democracy (Democrazia Cristiana, DC) and the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI). However, for international reasons related to the geo-political divide between the super-powers that defeated Nazism, it was impossible for the PCI to hold government positions. Accordingly, a policy of consociation was pursued in the legislature, which not accidentally has long been celebrated as the central institution of the system of government (Cotta, 1990). Consensual democracy allowed the country to consolidate its republican institutions, and thus enjoy a period of extraordinarily rapid social and economic development and growth. Italy (unlike Greece, for instance) not only escaped the tragedy of civil conflict in the immediate post-war period, but also managed progressively to modernise itself, becoming a fully industrialised country (Woolf, 2007).

Nevertheless, consensual democracy has imposed a high price on the country. It has institutionalised a common sense impermeable to the ideas of competition and individual responsibility (Luiss 2008) and it has justified attitudes towards corruption unheard of in other advanced industrialised

countries (Della Porta and Mény, 1995). Economic development ended up undermining the socio-cultural foundations of the consensual model of democracy. After all, this model was not underpinned by ethnic, linguistic or religious differences (as in Belgium, in Austria for a long time, and in Israel), which are rather insensitive to cultural and economic changes, but by ideological divisions, which are in contrast rather responsive to such changes. Although the economic modernisation of Italy undermined the material bases of the consensual model, it was the changes in the international system that brought this process to its final conclusion (Fabbrini and Della Sala, 2004).

Still, decline of the old ideological conflict did not prevent it from being resurrected for reasons of electoral advantage even in the post-Cold War period. In contrast to what happened in other countries with a similar history of ideological division – like Spain, for example (Pérez-Díaz 1999), where the leaders of the main parties agreed to break with the past in order to concentrate on projects for the future – in Italy the past has never really been superseded. Rather, the cleavages of post-unification Italy (for example the divide between the North and the South of the country, or between church and state) have continued to be employed by the political leaders to fuel political conflict and to justify their social role. Once the fall of the Berlin Wall in November of 1989 and the demise of the Soviet Union in August of 1991 had undermined the international basis of the ideological polarisation, the most active sections of the citizenry were able, in the face of the legislative inactivity of the governing parties, to launch a series of referenda ushering in a period of reform of Italian democracy.

Political change through popular referenda has become a sort of established pattern in Italy (Barbera and Morrone, 2003). Indeed, it is worth recalling that, in 2008, the threat of a popular referendum drove the main political parties to overcome the logic of quarrelsome or negative coalitions, i.e. coalitions formed to oppose someone rather than to promote a coherent political programme.³ It was anticipation of the effects of the referendum which in 2008 set in motion, first on the centre-left and then on the centre-right, a dynamics of amalgamation around two new parties, the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) and the People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PdL). However, whereas the electoral reforms of 1991 and 1993 abandoned the consensual model of democracy (driven by a search for the alternation in government that has finally become a reality since 1996), the absence of a subsequent comprehensive institutional reform, in combination with a widespread corporatist style of interaction of the pressure groups representing socio-economic interests, has not yet allowed for the consolidation of a coherent model of competitive democracy.

Interests, Parties and Institutions in the First Republic

On the institutional level, First Republic Italy came to be structured around an electoral and party system operating according to a multi-polar logic, alongside a polycentric system of government and a centralised state system (Pasquino, 2002). From the beginning, the First Republic was a party-political democracy, if not a veritable 'partyocracy' (*partitocrazia*) as the parties were the sole actors both in the process of representation and in decision-making (Calise, 1994). This was possible because, in the absence of regular alternation in government between competing political forces, the massive presence of the state in the economy and society allowed the parties (especially those that were permanently in government such as the DC) to appropriate resources of extraordinary electoral and organisational significance (Salvati, 2000).

Thus, Italian democracy was *dominated* by the parties rather than *governed* by them, as the parties had transformed themselves into public oligopolistic associations able to exert influence over the economy and society of the country (and not just over its political structure) – or, in the case of the Communist opposition, over the regions and the municipalities they controlled, especially after public administration was finally decentralised through establishment of the regions in 1970. There was no single agency, service provider, or company controlled by a public authority that was not directed by individuals chosen because of their party affiliation rather than their competence. The culture of mediation and compromise helped to eliminate the idea of meritocracy from public discourse. This created cognitive patterns that still today inform the behaviour and the way of thinking of many members of the country's elites (Carboni, 2007).

Concerning the role of the parties in consensual Italy, their ability to mediate between the state and society must be taken into account (as well as their ability to mediate between Parliament and the Government) (Colarizi, 2007). The system of interest representation modelled itself on the party system. In fact, during the Cold War years, Italy witnessed the formation of a kind of ideologically based neo-pluralist regime of (social, economic and territorial) interests (Accornero, 2000; Salvati, 2003). Political elites had no experience of the type of interest representation that characterised the democracies of northern and central Europe. In those countries, representation was structured around a few, centralised, sector-based confederations, able to operate as peak organisations representing the shared interests of the various constituent functional organisations and thus to bargain directly with the state. This model, which has been termed neo-corporatist (Crouch and Streeck, 2006), made it possible to base socio-economic relations on considerations of national interest shared by both the representatives of the interest groups and by the political elite. Nor was

consensual Italy familiar with the pluralist interest organisation – based on a multitude of groups in permanent competition to influence the priorities of public policy-makers – that was characteristic of American democracy.

In short, the organisation of socio-economic interests in Italy conformed neither to the top-down model of democracies such as Germany and Scandinavia, nor to the bottom-up model of democracies such as the American one. Instead, throughout the Cold War period, Italy had a system of interest representation that was fragmented along ideological lines instead of functional considerations; that depended on the political system for resources and legitimacy, and that in many cases overlapped with the public administration. Trade unions were divided along lines that had been inherited from the Cold War; interest groups were connected to parties or party factions and their leaders moved between public and private roles (Morlino, 1991). In a relatively immobile political context bereft of changes at the governmental level, representatives of the various interest groups – thanks too to networks of personal relations with the political parties and their leaders – became veritable oligarchies (Fabbrini, 1995). The major companies, banks and trade unions came to be organised around rather limited networks of individuals linked through kinship ties and their membership of boards of directors and trade unions.

That arrangement was entirely consistent with the oligarchical nature of the political parties, with the same individuals permanently holding positions of power due to the absence of competition as well as the ability to procure and distribute public resources with which to foster social consensus. This was an ability developed at the cost of a growing budget deficit. However, the ideological divide of the Cold War enabled the parties to keep the fragmentation of organised interests under control, regulating the behaviour and the political loyalties of their members and leaders. Paradoxically, the confrontation between communists and anti-communists enabled socio-economic fragmentation to be disciplined by tying the various special interests to the vision espoused by one or the other of the two fronts in the ideological war. As was argued at the time (Magatti, 1996), this gradually came to be an instrumental criterion as it lent an aura of legitimacy to what in reality was a veritable permeation of public institutions by private interests.

Thus, one can argue that, after the failed attempt of the then Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi to introduce a super-majoritarian electoral law at the beginning of the 1950s (Fabbrini, 2008b), Italian democracy progressively stabilised around an institutional system that discouraged competition between alternative options. The presence of a strong communist party, constitutionally legitimate but democratically unreliable, ended up promoting a governmental system structured around the main centrist (pivot) party, namely the DC, allied with neighbouring centrist parties (to its immediate right and left). The proportional nature of the

electoral system, the dispersal of power within the parliamentary system and the limited decision-making ability of the government, created the institutional conditions for a democracy operating according to a consensual logic (large coalition governments without alternation in power). Each government decision was the outcome of a prolonged process of mediation and negotiation between ministers, deputy ministers, parliamentary leaders, interest groups and institutional leaders (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007). Through their leaders and with the influence they derive from their organisational and electoral links with the various interest groups, the parties connected the many arenas of the system of government (structurally and functionally), imposing a political orientation on this network, in addition to furnishing the overall system with a substantial legitimacy.

The outcome was a democracy with limited decision-making ability because of the spread of veto powers and the obfuscation of responsibilities, although as a political regime it came to acquire stability. This has not prevented political leaders and interest groups, at specific historical moments, from being able to mobilise sometimes impressive resources to achieve important *policy* objectives, such as industrial development and the civic modernisation of the country.

Parties and Institutions in the Second Republic

This polycentric system of government dominated by political parties came under pressure between 1993 and 1996 (Cotta and Isernia, 1996). The period witnessed significant changes, which can be traced back to the pressures exerted by two environmental factors (Fabbrini, 2000). The first was the mobilisation of civil society – expressed by the referendum movements and the emergence of regional leagues which later merged to become the Lega Nord – and driven by widespread dissatisfaction with collusion between the political parties and organised interests. Such practices underpinned *partitocrazia* and were subsequently brought to light by the judicial inquiries known as ‘Bribe City’ (*Tangentopoli*). The second factor concerned the effects of European integration, or rather of its acceleration after the Treaty of Maastricht of 10-11 December 1991. The effects of both changes were strongly felt by the party system, leading to its crisis and subsequently to its transformation. After all, European integration made necessary the adoption of severe budget constraints on policy decisions, while *Tangentopoli* led to the dramatic fall from power of the traditional holders of government office. The disintegration (in terms of electoral support and legitimacy) of the post-war political parties between 1993 and 1996 led to the emergence of new parties, a process that was also driven by the pressure of a new quasi-majoritarian electoral law. The

bipolar system, which gradually stabilised, thus strengthened the decision-making capacities of governments, as the latter came to be expressions of electoral majorities, rather than parliamentary majorities formed after the elections through prolonged negotiations, as was the case in the First Republic.

With the parliamentary elections of 1996, the Italian crisis came to a conclusion and gave way to a long transition towards a competitive democracy. In the meantime, new political actors emerged and, since then, a new bipolar logic has imposed itself on the party system. During the period of crisis (1993-1996), Italy had not yet adopted a competitive logic, because of the survival of centrist parities from the previous consensual period. However, starting with the elections of 1996, the electoral context became decidedly bipolar (D'Alimonte and Bartolini, 2002). For the first time in the history of the Italian republic, this context has allowed for alternation in government between a centre-left coalition (that won the elections of 1996 and 2006) and a centre-right coalition (that won those of 2001 and 2008). This bipolar structure of the party system was the outcome of a growing bipolar orientation of the electorate (Catellani and Corbetta, 2006). The bipolar logic of political competition has taken shape alongside a strengthening of the executive relative to Parliament, and of the head of government relative to the executive (Barbieri and Verzichelli, 2003). The *electoral* formation of the government has made it possible to overcome the practice of protracted *post-electoral* negotiations characteristic of the consensual period. In addition, the inevitable weakness of new parties has boosted the role of political leaders, highly personalising the electoral and political process.

However, notwithstanding the electoral reforms of 1993 and 2005 and changes to Parliament's standing orders and the organisation of the executive, the system of government has not been reformed or rationalised so as to give substance to these innovations. Although decision-making power has become less dispersed within the two chambers, the bicameral system has remained unchanged and, in combination with fragmentation of the parliamentary groups, has generated incentives to question the pre-eminence of the governmental arena. Even though governmental power is no longer spread horizontally within the executive, it is also true that the head of the government (bereft of any powers to discipline his own majority) has continuously faced the threat of being replaced by rivals within his coalition. This has been truer of the centre-left than the centre-right, where challenges have hitherto been kept in check by the formidable personal resources of Silvio Berlusconi (Ginsborg, 2005). Those personal resources have revealed themselves to be much more effective than the institutional ones employed by centre-left leaders such as Romano Prodi whose government from 2006 to 2008 consisted of no less than 103 members, counting the ministers, the deputy ministers and under-

secretaries, all included because of the need to appease the appetites of his coalition partners. In short, in the period from 1996 to 2008, the previous system of multiple vetoes was downsized, but not neutralised. Indeed, those vetoes were institutionalised within each coalition. The high degree of party fragmentation within the two coalitions (Table 1) made it hard for them to take decisions once they were in government.

Table 1: Indices of Fragmentation of the Party System (1948-2006)

	No. of groups (Chamber of Deputies) ¹	Effective no. of parties (Chamber of Deputies)	Rae's index of rationalisation (Chamber of Deputies)	% of votes of the two major parties in Chamber of Deputies
1948	8	2.9	0.66	69.5 (DC+ Popular Front)
1953	8 (7)	3.5	0.76	62.7 (DC+PCI)
1958	9 (8)	3.4	0.74	65.0 (DC+PCI)
1963	7 (10)	3.6	0.76	63.6 (DC+PCI)
1968	10 (9)	3.6	0.75	66.0 (DC+PCI)
1972	8	3.6	0.76	65.8 (DC+PCI)
1976	10 (11)	3.1	0.72	73.1 (DC+PCI)
1979	10	3.4	0.74	68.7 (DC+PCI)
1983	11	4.0	0.78	62.8 (DC+PCI)
1987	12	4.1	0.78	60.9 (DC+PCI)
1992	13 (14)	5.7	0.85	45.8 (DC+PDS)
1994	8 (10)	7.3	0.87	41.5 (FI+PDS)
1996	9	6.2	0.86	41.7(PDS+FI)
2001	8	5.2	0.84	46.1 (FI+DS)
2006	13 (14)	5.1	0.79	40.8 (FI+DS) (Senate)

Source: Cotta and Verzichelli (2008: 82)

¹ The number of groups at the end of the legislature is given in parentheses if it differs from the number of groups at the beginning.

Abbreviations: DC – Christian Democrats (Democrazia Cristiana); DS – Left Democrats (Democratici di Sinistra); FI – Forza Italia; PCI – Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano); PDS – Democratic Party of the Left (Partito Democratico della Sinistra).

Thus, in that period, the strengthening of the executive did not prevent the leaders of the parties and the parliamentary groups from making their voices heard in the executive. The appeal to the electoral legitimacy of the government, in order to fend off attempts from the parties to gain more influence over it, enabled prime ministers to reduce the pressures of the

latter. Yet, this worked as long as it was necessary to confront emergencies – such as reduction of the public deficit in order to be able to introduce the Euro, and involvement in the war in the Balkans and in Iraq. But as soon as these emergencies receded, internal tensions within the two coalitions re-emerged. Again, this was particularly the case during the centre-left's period in office: indeed, there were no less than three prime ministers heading four different governments between 1996 and 2001 (Romano Prodi, Massimo D'Alema I and II, Giuliano Amato). During the subsequent period from 2001 to 2006, there were two centre-right governments each headed by Berlusconi, both of which were accompanied by cyclical conflicts between their various components (these conflicts leading to the replacement of important ministers, such as those for foreign affairs, the interior and the treasury). Of course, divisions also occur within the executive in stable competitive democracies such as the United Kingdom or France. However, because the executive in these countries is formed by one or two parties, conflicts never assume the characteristics of a permanent guerrilla war between the parties of the majority, as has been the case in Italy (especially during the centre-left governments). In fact, the Prodi government, which emerged from the elections of 2006, managed to survive this guerrilla warfare only for two years.

In short, the party system during the period from 1996 to 2008 was marked by fragmented bipolarism. This reflected the party divisions that developed within the two coalitions (especially the centre-left). It was due to the 'proportionalisation' of the quasi-majoritarian electoral system approved in 1993,⁴ and subsequently to the party dominance of the proportional electoral system with a majority bonus approved in 2005. It should be pointed out that the latter is a 'closed-list' system, the composition of lists and the order of candidates being decided by the national party leaders, without voters being able to express preferences for any of the candidates on their chosen lists. Moreover, the party leaders may head the lists in several constituencies, enabling them to choose which constituency to sit for after they have been elected. The outcome (for the period from 1996 to 2008) was that electoral bipolarism was accompanied by multi-party arrangements within each coalition – so much so that the index of fragmentation of the party system rose significantly with respect to the First Republic. Likewise, the number of parliamentary groups grew, the effective number of parties doubled and, above all, the aggregate electoral weight of the two main parties was almost cut in half as compared with the aggregate weight of the two main parties in the First Republic. Whereas in 1976 the DC and the PCI together polled 73.1 per cent of the vote, in 2006 the two main parties – Forza Italia and the Left Democrats (Democratici di Sinistra, DS) – together polled 40.8 per cent (Table 1).

Interests and Parties: The Difficult Road of the Second Republic

It is certainly plausible to argue that the party fragmentation of the period from 1996 to 2008 represented the mirror image of an equally pronounced fragmentation of the systems of socio-economic interest representation. Probably as a result of post-industrial transformations and the declining hold of ideologies, the last 15 years have witnessed the veritable balkanisation of interest representation accompanied by a radical corporatisation of the behaviour of those groups (Carrieri, 2009). No longer held in check by the ideological divisions of the Cold War, balkanisation and corporatisation have resulted in the emergence of a multitude of micro-organisations exclusively concerned with promoting their particular interests. Thus, a peculiar divide has appeared within Italian society: in their capacities as voters, citizens have continued to support the structuring of the political system around two large party groupings; as members of professional groups, citizens have instead continued to support the corporatisation of interest representation. After all, the latter has deep roots that are not easily eradicable. Faced with a party system in transformation, and thus uncertain about the relative power of its actors, these micro-organisations have mobilised in order to influence specific policy decisions, regardless of the coalition in power. Such corporatisation, in its turn, has helped to exacerbate the party fragmentation of the two coalitions. No other party system of the main western democracies has recorded a level of party fragmentation comparable to Italy in the period from 1996 to 2008 (Chiaromonte, 2007). Under the umbrella of the coalitions, 'personal' parties, composed of no more than a few deputies or senators, have entered Parliament. They have been accompanied by 'functional' parties representing specific lobbies, micro-associations or territorial clienteles. Italy has become the laboratory for building both macro and micro personal parties (Calise, 2000).

This shattered party system and the interconnection between party actors and the multitude of interest groups has sustained a veritable 'politics industry.' Politics has transformed itself into an activity aimed at the training of a social group specialised in selectively producing and distributing particularistic goods. This group is a veritable 'caste' (Rizzo and Stella, 2007), installed in the multitude of public positions where relevant collective decisions are taken, funded by public expenditure, and financing very generously its own activities. Looking at countries with a population size similar to Italy's, the hypertrophic dimensions of this 'Italian politics industry' become clear immediately. For example, reimbursements to the parties for electoral expenditures in Italy (€200 million, for a population of 60 million) are almost twice as high as those the parties receive in Germany (€133 million, for a population of 82 million), almost three times as high as the contributions to parties in France (€73.4

million, for a population of 64 million), more than three times higher than the amount Spanish parties receive (€60.7 million, for a population of 45 million), and incomparably higher than the sum parties receive in United Kingdom (€9.3 million, for a population of 60 million). In the United States with its 302 million inhabitants, parties receive much less (the equivalent of €149.6 million) than the Italian parties do. Moreover, still comparing countries with population sizes comparable to that of Italy, the gross monthly allowances of members of the Italian parliament, are much higher than those available to their counterparts elsewhere in Europe: €15,700 (in Italy), €7,600-10,000 (in the United Kingdom), €7,000 (in Germany), €6,900 (in France) and €3,750-4,650 (in Spain).

If one examines the funds allocated for the operation of Parliament's internal institutions, the Italian figures are again very much higher than those allocated in the other European countries: Italy spends €1,465 million per year, whereas France spends €845 million, Germany €644 million, the United Kingdom €411 million and Spain €150 million. It is no surprise, therefore, that the bipolar logic at the electoral level has hitherto largely been reduced at the parliamentary level. Parliament has continued to be organised around two main coalitions but, by means of the creation within each of them of a host of parliamentary groups seeking to control important public resources, the cohesion and coherence of the two coalitions have been regularly called into question. One should also note that the number of members of the national Parliament in Italy, in relation to its population, is the highest in Europe. As Rizzo and Stella (2007: 13) recently calculated, 'in Italy there is a member of Parliament for every 60,371 inhabitants as compared to 66,554 in France, 91,824 in United Kingdom, and 112,502 in Germany, not to mention the United States with one member of the House of Representatives for every 560,747 inhabitants'. Furthermore, if one compares the gross allowance of the Italian members of the European Parliament to those of members from other countries one sees that the Italians receive substantially more than members from any of the other countries of the European Union. An Italian MEP receives a gross annual allowance of €149,215, a German MEP €84,108, a British MEP €82,380, a French MEP €63,093, while a Spanish MEP receives just €39,463. To this gross allowance many additional items need to be added, from travel reimbursement, expenses for hiring staff, to a subsistence allowance for attendance. Adding everything up, a recent study by two ex-members of the Italian Parliament (Salvi and Villone, 2005: 33) arrives at the conclusion that Italian MEPs receive in the range of €30,000 to €35,000 per month, this probably being a very conservative estimate.

This tendency to transform politics into a business activity is widespread not only at the national level, but at the local and regional levels as well. Local and regional parties have increasingly become organisations of the elected rather than the electors. The reform of Section

V of the Italian constitution (which allowed the regions to write their statutes themselves and thus themselves to establish the composition of their councils), has led to a significant increase both in the number of councilors and in their salaries. In Lazio, for example, the number of regional councilors has jumped from 60 to 70, in Piedmont from 60 to 83, in Puglia from 60 to 70, in Tuscany from 50 to 65, and in Calabria from 40 to 50. Almost all the other regions have committed themselves to increasing the number of councilors as well. In almost all regional councils, some groups have only one councilor, and these groups obviously receive their share of public funding. In view of this, it would seem plausible to assume that, unless subjected to precise criteria, the law on fiscal federalism (approved by the Italian Parliament between January 22 and March 24 2009) could lead to an additional increase in the number of regional representatives and their allowances.

Considering the various levels of representation (from the European level to the co-called Mountain Communities) (Salvi and Villone, 2005: 53-4), the number of people who in Italy receive an income for their political activities amounts to roughly 150,000. If one also takes into account the various assignments and consulting activities that depend on political decisions, the total number of persons that work in areas connected to politics comes to about 278,296. Thus, again according to conservative estimates, in Italy roughly 427,889 persons derive their sustenance from politics, in the sense that politics provides their main source of income or a substantial addition to their income. This is the country's largest industry, costing citizens between €2 and €4 billion, figures that do not include the operating costs of the executive and representative institutions at national and local levels or the costs of people working for political parties. By means of their hold over positions in public institutions, the leaders of parties large and small manage to procure the resources they need to consolidate their own power. In exchange, their followers are allowed to enrich themselves in a way they would not have been able to do outside of politics. The result is a hypertrophic political system that costs a lot and decides very little. In short, the Italian experience seems to confirm the argument advanced by Katz and Mair (2002) that the weaker the parties become in electoral terms, the more entrenched they become in institutional terms. It is not surprising that the result has been a pronounced lack of confidence of Italians in the Government, in Parliament and in the parties (See Table 2).

The most relevant institutional implication of the politics of 'bipolarism plus fragmentation' has been the high degree of conflict within the executive, even though between 1996 and 2008 conflicts did not reach the levels marked during the First Republic whose governments lasted 11.3 months on average. Yet governing coalitions have been subjected to

permanent internal conflicts that make it difficult to set public-policy objectives and to determine means and time-fames for their achievement. Fragmentation implies the politics of vetoes (i.e. constant blackmail as the accepted basis for 'political dialogue' between coalition partners). Indeed, during the periods of centre-left incumbency, it has sometimes happened that parties have sought to mobilise public opinion against their own government. The result has been a politics of introversion. Parliamentary and governmental debate has been driven by concerns that reflect more the short-term electoral benefits of one or the other segment of the coalition than the necessity to deal effectively with domestic and international challenges. As a result, parliamentary crises, votes of no-confidence, shifts in alliances, and the formation of new parliamentary groups have become regular features. The crisis of the Prodi government in 2008 was the epitome of this type of politics, not only because it took place for reasons that had little or nothing to do with decisions taken by the Government, but also because it was provoked by the choice of a personal party (the UDEUR led by Clemente Mastella) representing a territorial micro-interest in a southern region.

Table 2: Levels of trust of Italians in their Institutions (2008)

Institutions	Percentage of respondents expressing trust
Charitable associations	71.6
President of the Republic	58.5
<i>Carabinieri</i> (National police force)	57.4
Police	50.7
Church	49.7
Judiciary	42.5
Schools	33.0
Government	25.1
Parliament	19.4
Parties	14.1

Source: Eurispes 2008

Thus, in the period from 1996 to 2008, the Government and opposition were composed of coalitions fragmented on the organisational level and spurious on the programmatic level. Notwithstanding the bipolar logic in the electoral arena, internally the components of the two coalitions employed a proportional logic (with the corresponding recourse to veto powers) to accommodate various micro-interests, which in many cases reflected political elites' needs to keep their jobs or interest-group leaders' needs to retain their influence. This is why, although the electoral system has allowed the electorate to discipline parties *during elections*, the parties

have not been prevented from ignoring the electorate's predispositions *after elections*.

Conclusion

Fragmentation was drastically reduced by the parliamentary elections of 2008, when the two main parties of the centre-left and the centre-right decided to run on their own and no longer in alliance with minor parties. One might add that, in the case of the PD its leader (Walter Veltroni) had no alternative in view of the spectacular failure of the centre-left *Unione* coalition that imploded after less than two years in office. At the same time, the choice of Silvio Berlusconi (leader of *Forza Italia*) and Gianfranco Fini (leader of the *National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN)* to move in the direction of a single party of the centre-right (the *PdL*) was largely approved by their electors, with the success of the centre-right in the 2008 elections. As a result, the number of parties constituting the Government declined from 8-10 (during the Prodi cabinet of 2006 to 2008) to 2 (in the current Berlusconi cabinet). Due to the high threshold established by the new electoral system introduced in 2005 (4 per cent for the Chamber of Deputies and 8 per cent for the Senate, but lower in the case parties running as parts of coalitions), many small parties unable to run in tandem with larger parties or groups were excluded from parliamentary representation.

This has created the conditions for more stable government, although it did raise protests concerning the poor representativeness of Parliament. However, since the elections of 2008, Italy has enjoyed an unusually high level of governmental stability, even in the conditions of the worst economic crisis for decades. Also, because of the lack of vociferous divisions within the Berlusconi cabinet, the popularity of government and prime minister has continued to be high after 2008 (according to polls regularly published by the main newspapers, such as *Corriere della Sera* and *la Repubblica*). With the formal constitution of the centre-right *PdL* at the end of March 2009, the Italian political system has taken a very important step forward in the direction of competitive democracy, because among other things the centre-right's choice might induce the centre-left to take an equivalent step in the direction of a more institutionalised PD. Yet, the development of a competitive model of democracy might be constrained by various factors. The *PdL* still has the features of a party created by its charismatic leader, leaving uncertain the political implications of the institutionalisation of Berlusconi's charisma. The beneficiaries of the 'politics industry' have no interest in supporting a simplification of party representation, just as the fragmented system of interest representation draws no benefit from a simplification of competition between two main

parties. Territorial parties (as the Lega Nord) or single-issue parties, such as Italy of Values (Italia dei Valori, IdV), which risk being marginalised by strict two-party competition, will blackmail their allies (the PdL in the first case and the PD in the second) by threatening to withhold their parliamentary support from them when in government. Moreover, no reform at the governmental level has yet been introduced to consolidate the two-party logic apparent at the electoral level. Parliament continues to be structured around a symmetrical bicameralism potentially open to different majorities and the Prime Minister is still *primus inter pares*, unless he can deploy the formidable personal resources of an actor such as Silvio Berlusconi. While the latter remains the unquestioned leader of centre-right, nevertheless, the attempt to strengthen the cabinet, along the lines of other competitive democracies, will meet inevitable resistance. However, with the institutionalisation of the two largest parties, it is plausible to assume that the reform of Italian democracy will return to the centre of public debate, notwithstanding the unsatisfactory experience of recent years (Lanzalaco, 2005). Italy has changed significantly in the last two decades. It is reasonable to expect that, in the search for accepted institutional arrangements, its transformation will continue in the near future.

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¹ In my typology, the basic distinction between democratic models concerns their operational logic. Competitive democracies function through alternation in government of different political options, whereas consensual democracies function through aggregation in government of different political options. Alternation in government does not necessarily require the existence of majoritarian electoral rules, as is shown by the experience of countries such as Spain or Greece which have proportional representation (PR) systems. It is the combination of a highly constrained PR electoral system and the bipolar mechanics of the party system which generate alternation in government. This is why I prefer to talk of competitive rather than majoritarian (or Westminster) democracies, as Lijphart (1999) does.

² The 1993 law is generally defined as quasi-majoritarian because it combined a predominantly majoritarian electoral logic with a logic of proportionality. In fact, 75 percent of the seats were allocated on the basis of first-past-the-post, the remaining 25 percent on the basis of PR. Moreover, distribution of the latter took place according to highly complex criteria. The law was thus replaced, in December 2005 through the unilateral action of the then centre-right majority, by the current electoral law, which combines proportional representation with a majority bonus.

³ The new electoral referendum was promoted by Antonio Segni and Giovanni Guzzetta with aim, among other things, of abolishing the following features of the 2005 electoral law: (a) the provision allowing for allocation of the majority bonus to the most popular coalition – with the result that the bonus would instead go to the most-voted *party*; (b) the provision allowing party leaders to head party lists in more than one electoral district. In sum, the referendum aimed to create conditions that it was hoped would encourage the emergence of a two-party system (Barbera and Guzzetta, 2007). Because of the early demise of the legislature in 2008, the referendum was postponed until June 2009, when it failed for the lack of a quorum.

⁴ The expression ‘proportionalisation’ of the majoritarian electoral system (used by Sartori in 1998) implied that, in order to get the support of even the smallest party, each coalition was obliged to field, in the single-member districts, candidates drawn from all of the parties belonging to the coalition, regardless of their support in the specific districts concerned. In sum, a sort of PR logic governed the selection of candidates.