

## **Alter or Anti? How the Media See the Opposition in Italy<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract: Expert surveys have recently acquired growing popularity as a method for detecting the policy preferences of political parties as well as for obtaining information about a range of other aspects of political systems. In this case, a survey was administered to Italian journalists, accredited by the Chamber of Deputies, through the use of Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI). Fifty-five journalists, representing thirty-seven different newspapers, radio and TV broadcasters and news agencies, were interviewed, between March and April 2011. They were asked to answer a series of questions regarding the role and functions of the opposition in the Italian Parliament, its relationship with the Government and the existence of a possible Berlusconi effect on its behaviour. This article reports in detail the results of this expert survey, in order to understand how the media consider the Italian parliamentary opposition and to shed new light on this fundamental political actor.*

*Keywords: Expert survey, Parliamentary opposition, Government, Berlusconi's effect*

Although in the weeks before its demise the government led by Silvio Berlusconi was facing an unprecedented loss of support, due to a combination of economic and political factors together with the scandals involving the Prime Minister himself, the Italian parliamentary opposition did not seem to be enjoying higher opinion-poll ratings. In 2011, in the local elections held in May and then in four referenda held about one month later, the centre-right coalition consisting of the People of Freedom (PdL) and its ally, the Northern League, suffered serious defeats: the first time this had happened since 2008. Despite the undoubtedly favourable outcome for the opposition parties, notably in the local elections, this was not perceived as an unambiguous victory for the centre-left coalition (Braghioli, 2011).

The result of the election was interpreted by many observers as an indication of the difficulties being faced by the centre-right government,

and as a triumph for high-profile candidates who had brought victory to the parties they supported, rather than a clear-cut success of the forces of the opposition. To this, we may add a factor that is peculiar to the Italian political system, one that probably influenced the behaviour of the opposition, both outside and inside Parliament, as well as the relationship between opposition and Government over the years. According to many analysts and members of Parliament on both sides the presence of Silvio Berlusconi, leader of the centre right, who in seventeen years led the country on three occasions – in 1994, from 2001 to 2006 and again from 2008 – had significantly shaped the choices and the behaviour of the opposition. Therefore, there seemed to exist a *Berlusconi effect* that shaped Italian politics and more specifically the type of competition that was created between the majority and the opposition, both in and out of Parliament.

The truth is that, for many reasons, the Italian opposition has always struggled to find its place within Parliament and therefore to distinguish its identity for the electorate. With the advent of the so-called Second Republic and the end of the exclusion of the anti-system parties from competition for the country's leadership, people began to think that the destiny of the opposition would change as well (Verzichelli and Cotta, 2000). This, then, is the question we explore in the present work: since the mid-1990s, has a new idea of the opposition – a singular, competitive and alternative parliamentary opposition – been constructed? What are the salient features of the image of the parliamentary opposition that is daily transmitted to the Italian public? To search for answers to these questions, we decided to turn to an actor that is quite relevant in this context, that is, the media: the mass media, in fact, each day, conveys an image of the opposition to the public and, as a consequence, creates opinions.

Expert surveys have recently gained increasing popularity as a method for detecting the policy preferences of political parties, but also for obtaining information about various other aspects of political systems. Therefore, an expert survey was conducted among the journalists (most of whom are accredited by the Chamber of Deputies) responsible for reporting on Parliament and its activities. They were given an electronic questionnaire that focused on several themes: the Italian opposition as a political entity; its behaviour and strategy; the relationship between majority and opposition and the possible changes that have taken place in the relationship since the mid-1990s; the existence or non-existence of a so-called Berlusconi effect on the behaviour of the opposition itself. The survey took place over about five weeks, beginning in mid-March 2011. The fifty-five journalists who participated in the survey were distributed rather uniformly among print media, television, radio, and news agencies, for a total of thirty-eight different news organisations of the mass media.

### **History of the parliamentary opposition in Italy**

The term 'parliamentary opposition' is, in common parlance, usually associated both with those parliamentary parties who are against the policies of the governing majority, and with the parties' activity of challenging the actions of the majority. Unlike the term 'minority' which connotes a purely quantitative aspect, the term 'opposition' also evokes a qualitative aspect, thus representing a precise function (De Vergottini, 1980).

As mentioned earlier, the Italian opposition has always struggled to find its place within Parliament and to distinguish its identity for the electorate. One of the peculiarities of the Italian political system from 1948 was the absence, for almost half a century, of alternating government (if one excludes the rotation of the minor parties which used to coalesce with the Christian Democrats (DC) from time to time). The anti-system nature of the main party of opposition, the Italian Communist Party, made it impossible for the latter to enter government and as a result, made impossible the alternation in office of two parties or pre-constituted coalitions of parties. It was therefore impossible for the main minority party realistically to present itself as a candidate able to substitute the majority in office. The impossibility of alternation in government thus limited the role of the opposition to one of checking the exercise of executive power – together with attempting to influence the majority's policies – without ever successfully representing a concrete alternative to the forces of government (Cazzola, 1974; Di Palma, 1977; Fabbrini, 1994; Pasquino, 1990; Sartori, 1966). If we think of the two principal functions carried out by the opposition in a system such as the British – one of scrutinising and challenging the actions of the executive, the other of providing an alternative to the government in power – then when examining the Italian case, we should speak of a 'semi-opposition': it acted as a check on the Government's exercise of power, but it could not realistically propose itself as a substitute for the Government. Until the beginning of the 1990s, the primary function of the opposition was not to represent an alternative government for the electorate but, together with criticising the activities of the executive, to influence the governing majority's policies.

With the advent of the Second Republic, and the structural changes that came with it – above all, the new electoral system and the party-system changes – one expected a concomitant transformation of the role, functions and public perceptions of the opposition: an opposition that could finally present itself as a potential substitute for the government of the day and one that would no longer be relegated to the functions of control and critic but could also aspire to the role of alternative government.

Despite the undeniable importance of the elections of 1994 and 1996,<sup>2</sup> the real watershed event for the evolution of the opposition's role in Italy

was in 2001 (Fabbrini and Gilbert, 2001; Pasquino, 2002): for the first time in the country's history, a reasonably cohesive and recognisable opposition, led by Silvio Berlusconi, presented itself as a substitute for the out-going government (one supported by a rather heterogeneous coalition of centre-left parties) and succeeded in winning office. With this, for the first time in Italy, there was a complete alternation of government. It seemed that a new political phase had begun for the opposition too. However, to make that decisive turn towards a full recognition of its own role within the system, there was still a need for rules and, more importantly, for political will. The creation of two opposing camps, that *de facto* excluded the participation of third forces from the contest for government, and the presence of genuinely bipolar competition were necessary but insufficient elements for successful evolution towards the so-called majoritarian model – which envisages a loyal, alternative and singular parliamentary opposition (Punnet, 1973). In the first place, in the Italian system, there lacked and there still lacks formal recognition of the roles and prerogatives of the parliamentary opposition: formal institutionalisation of this key political actor has still not occurred, even though there has been no lack of proposals and discussion of the topic over the years (Gianfrancesco and Lupo, 2009; Petrillo, 2009). Furthermore, there does not seem to be a real will on the part of the forces of the centre right or centre left, to build a political entity that is united and capable of representing, both inside and outside Parliament, a singular and clear alternative to the government of the day. An example is the decision of the Democratic Party (PD) and Italy of Values<sup>3</sup> (IdV) to create separate parliamentary groups even though they had presented themselves in the 2008 election as a single political entity.

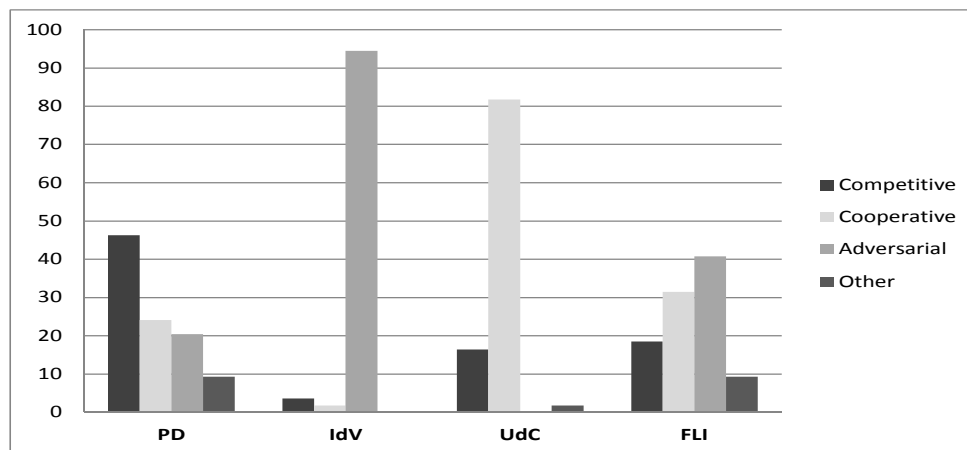
### **Attitude and activity of the opposition in Parliament**

We began our investigation by focusing on the opposition as a political entity. We asked respondents, whether, when thinking about the opposition, they thought of it as an entity composed of a number of actors that nevertheless behaved as a single actor. The response was unequivocal: all of the journalists who responded to our survey thought that the opposition could not be considered as a single entity. Responding to the second question, 85.5 percent said that, when they spoke of the opposition, they had in mind all of the parties not belonging to the majority, but did not consider them as a single actor. It is evident that, from the perspective of organisation and internal cohesion, the Italian parliamentary opposition does not seem to embody that majoritarian model which, for obvious strategic reasons, prevails at elections.

We then moved on to explore how the behaviour of each of the opposition parties in Parliament is evaluated. We asked respondents to indicate if in the assembly each party assumes an attitude that is

competitive – with the aim of demonstrating to the electorate that it is capable of proposing a concrete alternative to the government of the day – or an attitude that is cooperative – with the aim of searching for and obtaining compromise, in an attempt to influence government policies – or an adversarial attitude – with the aim of challenging the actions of the Government. The results reveal rather heterogeneous opinions in relation to the PD and the Future and Freedom party (FLI),<sup>4</sup> while we obtain a rather clear picture with regard to IdV and the Christian Democratic Union of the Centre (UdC).<sup>5</sup> Entering into the details of the responses (Figure 1), the attitude of the PD towards the Government was considered competitive by 45.5 percent while 23.6 percent found it to be cooperative and 20 percent adversarial. It is also worth noting that 9.1 percent did not choose any of our proposed definitions and described the behaviour of the PD as ‘alternately adversarial and competitive’, and in some cases, even ‘ambiguous’ and ‘confused’. The same could not be said of the other two parties, IdV and the UdC, which were part of the parliamentary opposition from 2008. In both cases, the image that emerges from the responses to our survey is rather clear-cut: 94.5 percent of those interviewed believed that IdV usually adopted an adversarial attitude towards the Government; while 81.1 percent felt that the UdC assumed a cooperative stance, thus one more based on the search for compromise than on challenging the Government.

*Figure 1: Opposition parties’ behaviour in Parliament*

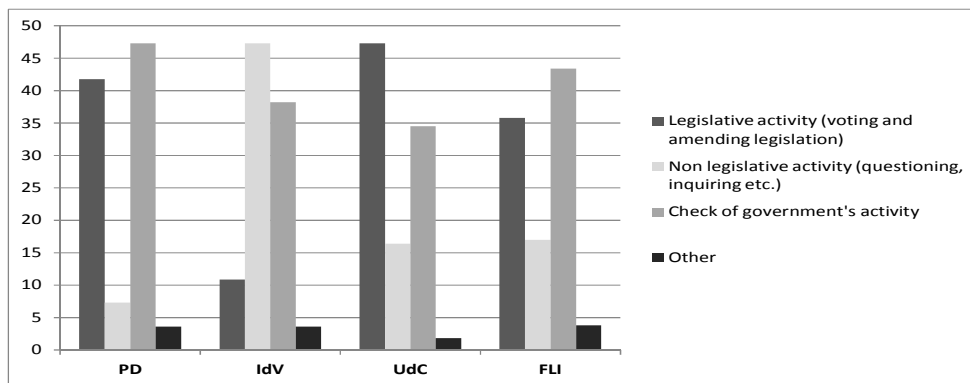


These data effectively correspond to the voting behaviour of these three forces with regard to the executive’s initiatives in the first two years of the centre-right government. The index of opposition,<sup>6</sup> calculated in relation to the final vote on the laws approved in the Chamber of Deputies, shows a

substantial difference among the three principal minority parties. In May 2010, Antonio Di Pietro's IdV was clearly the most adversarial of the three, with an index score equal to 0.7, while the PD had a score of 0.6. The UdC, with a score of 0.54, was considered by interviewees to be the most cooperative of the opposition parties.

An aside should be made about FLI, the new formation led by the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Gianfranco Fini and comprised of former members of the PdL. The relative novelty of this political force and the time it spent as part of the governing majority made more difficult the formulation of a judgment about its behaviour in and outside the assembly. In fact, opinions on the attitudes of FLI were rather varied: 40 percent of the journalists interviewed thought that Fini's party tended to assume an adversarial attitude towards the Government, while 30.9 percent considered the party's attitude to be prevalently cooperative and 18.2 percent, competitive. It is already apparent from these initial results that the opposition parties were perceived not only as distinct political figures, but as the carriers of quite diverging attitudes towards the Government.

*Figure 2: Opposition parties' activity*



However, we expect the parliamentary opposition not only to respond to the Government's initiatives, but also to bring forward alternative proposals, thanks to the instruments available in Parliament. Therefore, we asked respondents to indicate what, in their opinion, was the main activity of each opposition party, that is, through which activity these parties had the greatest opportunity to obtain advantageous political results.

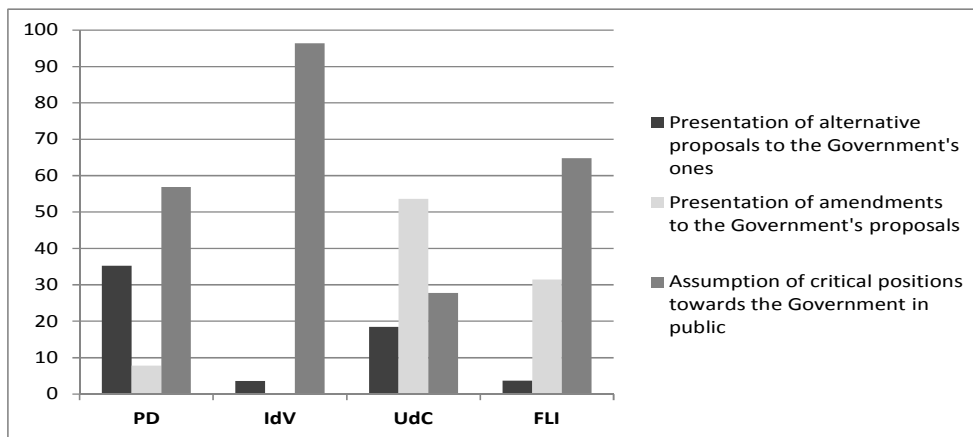
In this case too, as we can observe in Figure 2, the idea that respondents had about the activities of the parliamentary opposition varied markedly from one party to the next. The main activities of the PD, according to the journalists surveyed, were fundamentally providing a check on the activities of the Government (47.3) and engaging in legislative

activity (41.8), understood both as presenting legislative proposals and as the activity of amending proposals. For the majority of respondents, IdV, the UdC and FLI instead focussed on three different activities, namely, non-legislative activity – understood as asking questions, conducting inquiries and other activities – legislative activity, and acting as a check on the Government’s actions. In the case of these three parties too, however, the activities are not exclusive: as we can see from Figure 2, a good number of those interviewed mentioned a second and rather significant activity for each party – more specifically, acting as a check on the Government’s actions, in the case of IdV and the UdC, and legislative activity in the case of FLI.

### Strategies and relationships with the government

We then asked about the main strategy utilised by each opposition party to present itself to the electorate as a concrete alternative to the Government, and offered three different response categories: presentation of proposals offering an alternative to the initiatives of the Government; presentation of amendments to government proposals; the assumption, in a public forum, of critical positions regarding the Government.

Figure 3: Opposition parties’ strategy



In this case too, the opposition parties prove to be rather distinct from one another in respondents’ perceptions (Figure 3): 52.7 percent held that the PD sought to present itself as an alternative mainly by assuming a publicly critical position towards the Government, while 32.7 percent thought that it preferred to propose initiatives providing an alternative to those of the Government. Only 7.3 percent believed that the PD’s principal approach

was to try to influence government policies through the presentation of amendments to the executive's proposals. Conversely, in the case of IdV, the response of those interviewed is unequivocal: the party led by Antonio Di Pietro preferred publicly to assume positions challenging the actions of the Government - a response that fits perfectly with the journalists' perceptions of the party's attitude as clearly adversarial. Based on these responses, IdV undoubtedly appeared to be the most hostile towards the Government in comparison to the other forces of opposition. At the same time, it is the party that proves to be the most identifiable as the carrier of a clear position and a defined strategy.

The UdC places itself, in this sense, at the extreme opposite pole to the IdV, both in terms of its attitude and in terms of the strategy it adopts: according to 52.7 percent of those interviewed, the party led by Pier Ferdinando Casini preferred the approach of presenting proposals for amendments, demonstrating therefore its capacity to influence the content of government policies. Meanwhile, 27.3 maintained that the UdC's main approach was to assume publicly critical positions regarding the Government's actions, only 18.2 percent that its main approach was to present proposals which were an alternative to those of the executive. Finally, with regard to the new formation led by Gianfranco Fini, 63.6 percent maintained that the strategy most often utilised by the FLI to make itself identifiable in the eyes of the electorate was the assumption of positions critical of the governing majority, of which Fini himself was a part until the end of 2010: probably the most effective tool, for the time being, for a new party like Future and Freedom.

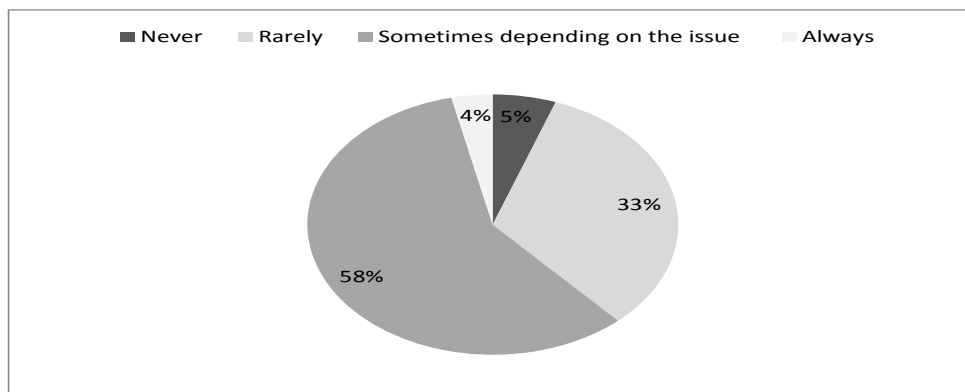
How, according to respondents, are the strategies adopted by the opposition parties related to the actual voting behaviour of the opposition in Parliament? As we saw above, these parties differ in their voting behaviour with regard to government legislative initiatives. We will now see how often, according to the journalists who cover parliamentary news and therefore witness the daily workings of the assembly, majority and opposition attempt to find agreement in the context of legislative activity. As we can see in Figure 4, 58 percent of those interviewed believed that the majority and opposition tried to find agreement on the topic under discussion depending on the issue. By contrast, for 33 percent of those interviewed, majority and opposition rarely attempted to agree upon the legislation to approve. Finally, at two extremes, we find that 4 and 5 percent respectively thought that in Parliament one always found or one never found agreement among the forces on the field.

Having looked at the frequency with which attempts were made to reach agreement in the context of legislative activity, to conclude the section dedicated to the opposition's attitudes towards the executive, we asked whether the relationship between the majority and the opposition could be defined as one of: total opposition, substantial opposition,



substantial cooperation or constant cooperation. As shown in Figure 5, a significant majority (74.5 percent) defined the relationship between majority and minority to be one of substantial opposition while as much as 21.8 percent considered the relationship to be one of total opposition. Only 4 percent defined the relationship between majority and opposition as one of substantial cooperation, while none of those surveyed defined them as being of constant cooperation.

*Figure 4: How often do majority and opposition agree on legislation?*



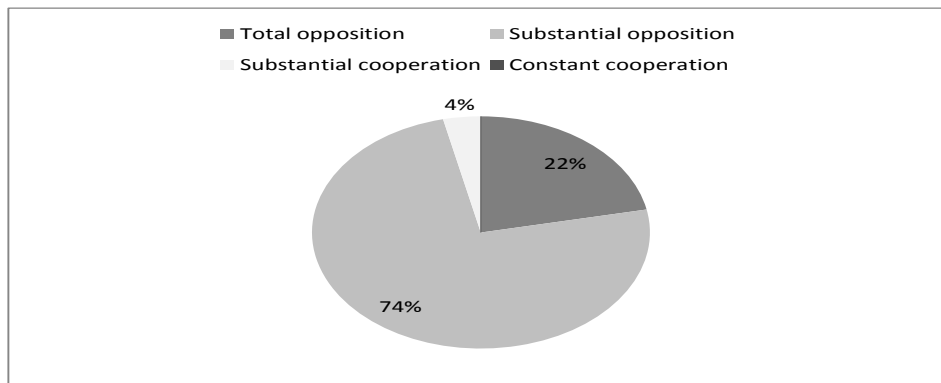
### **The opposition and the Berlusconi effect**

When asked if they had perceived any changes in these relationships since the beginning of the 1990s, 81.8 percent of those interviewed responded affirmatively, explaining this response in a rather interesting way. In fact, we asked them to indicate the year or event, which they believed to be the turning point in the relationship between the majority and opposition. As scholars of the Italian political system, we would have expected a response more or less influenced by the structural changes that occurred in Italy at the beginning of the 1990s. Instead, 48 percent attributed the change that has occurred in the relationship between majority and opposition in recent years to Silvio Berlusconi's entry into politics. In this way, they anticipated one of the most crucial questions we wanted to put to them in follow-up: that of the so-called Berlusconi effect. Only 26.8 percent thought that the changes in the relationship between government and opposition could be attributed to the advent of bipolarity in party competition, while 12.2 percent made reference to a much more recent event: the new electoral law approved in 2005.

We then asked about the effects of the changes. For 71.1 percent, the changes have brought about a significant increase in the level of competition between majority and opposition, a response foreseen in our questionnaire. But much more interesting is what was said by the 24.4

percent who preferred to give an individual response: according to many of these journalists, recent years had led to 'growing conflict', a 'paralysing contrast', a 'polarisation' that impedes exchange and communication. The terms most recurrent were paralysis of debate, of discussion, of political dialectics; permanent conflict, and tones of exasperation.

**Figure 5: Relationship between majority and opposition in the legislative process**



To conclude, we come to the issue we raised at the beginning of this article and which was partially anticipated by these last responses: we asked those surveyed if, in their judgment, the work of the opposition had been influenced by a Berlusconi effect and, if so, what they believed the main consequence of Berlusconi's presence for the performance of the opposition to be. 98.2 percent maintained that the presence of Berlusconi as the leader of the Government had indeed had consequences for the work of the opposition.

But what, in substance, are the effects of this presence? The responses to this question are certainly very interesting because, though it was posed as an open question, three fundamental ideas emerged concerning the impact of Berlusconi on the conduct of the opposition. Above all, Silvio Berlusconi's presence as leader of the Government had led to a hardening of the adversarial function of the opposition. As revealed in the responses to the earlier questions, according to those interviewed, the parliamentary opposition - and certainly some parties more than others - tended to give more importance to the function of criticising as opposed to that of providing an alternative, both in and out Parliament. Furthermore, respondents indicated that the presence of Silvio Berlusconi as the country's leader had brought the minority forces together, precisely in the name of *anti-Berlusconism*. This, however, represents an intrinsic weakness: the possible exit of the leader of the centre right from the political

competition may cause disunity and division among centre-left forces over issues that do not currently figure in political debate, precisely because it is too concentrated on the figure of Berlusconi. Finally, another effect of the entrepreneur's presence was the degeneration of policy debate, but also degradation of the proposals offered by the opposition itself.

To conclude, the forces of opposition were believed to be too concentrated on the *anti* instead of on the *alter*. In this particular moment, then, according to many of the journalists interviewed, the presence of Berlusconi caused the opposition to concentrate on the man instead of on a genuine political alternative to the centre right. This could create a serious problem for centre-left parties at the first election in which Silvio Berlusconi is not the prime-ministerial candidate and leader of an adversarial coalition: a moment which, after all, could arrive soon.

### Conclusions

As we said at the beginning of this article, until the local elections and referenda held in May and June 2011, the Italian parliamentary opposition did not receive a high level of public support. And even after the aforementioned consultations, where we witnessed the victory of the opposition parties in the majority of the cities and provinces involved in the local elections, the outcome was not read as a clear victory of the centre-left coalition, but rather as the result of a combination of many other factors, such as the governing parties' loss of support or the exceptional strength of individual candidates.

We wondered why this was so, even before the 2011 election, and we started investigating the image that the opposition daily presents to the electorate and the country - an image that is usually transmitted by the media. To do this we directly provided them, the media, with an expert survey. Fifty-five journalists, representing thirty-seven different newspapers, radio and TV broadcasters and news agencies, were interviewed, in early 2011. They were asked to answer a series of questions regarding the role and functions of the opposition in the Italian parliament, its relationship with the government and the possibility that a Berlusconi effect might influence its behaviour.

The most noteworthy findings from this survey were two. First, the opposition was not seen as a political subject as such. To use the exact words of the questionnaire, for the majority of respondents, the opposition was more the sum of the parties not part of the governing majority, than it was a political actor consisting of many component actors but behaving as a single entity. Therefore, despite the profound transformations that have occurred in the Italian political system since the beginning of the 1990s, what emerges from our study is an opposition that does not yet strictly match the essential features of the Westminster model, that is, to be

parliamentary, loyal, alternative and unique. And this seems to be due not only to the absence of precise parliamentary rules, but most of all to a lack of political will on the part of the opposition actors themselves, who behave in an absolutely autonomous way and never try to adopt a common strategy, in order to challenge the Government in a cohesive and unitary manner.

Second, respondents felt that the state of the Italian parliamentary opposition was also due to the presence of the Prime Minister himself, Silvio Berlusconi. The opposition parties seemed so focused on *anti-Berlusconiism* that they neglected to do what an organised opposition, in a bipolar system such as the Italian, should do: that is, to create an *alter*, based on concrete proposals and contents, rather than an *anti* that is an end in itself.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article follows a first explorative analysis of data already published in the journal *Il Mulino* 4/2011. The author thanks Francesco Olmastroni for his help in the data collection phase, which took place at the Laboratory of Political and Social Analysis in the University of Siena ([www.laps.unisi.it](http://www.laps.unisi.it)).

<sup>2</sup> The elections of 1994 marked a sea-change in Italian politics. A new electoral system combined with party-system changes meant that new forces presented themselves to the electorate in new ways. The 1996 elections resulted in a centre-left victory that was the result of an intelligent weaving of alliances which began to demonstrate an intrinsic fragility that ultimately proved fatal for the government that took office.

<sup>3</sup> IdV was initially a movement and then a party led by former magistrate Antonio Di Pietro.

<sup>4</sup> FLI is a new centre-right party founded by the current President of the Chamber of Deputies, Gianfranco Fini, and his supporters, after their expulsion from the PdL, in 2010.

<sup>5</sup> The UdC is one of the Christian Democrat parties that resulted from the break-up of the former DC in the early 1990s and was part of the centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi until 2008.

<sup>6</sup> For each law originating with the Government, the index is equal to the number of votes against cast by the members of each of the three main opposition groups as a percentage of the total number of members of the group. Abstentions are regarded as 'votes in favour' because in the Chamber of Deputies, in contrast to the Senate, they are excluded from the count of valid votes, thus bringing about an automatic reduction in the numbers that can contribute to the 'quorum' that has to be achieved in order for proposals to be passed.

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