

Electoral Reforms 'Italian Style'

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The Italian pattern of government

After WW II Italy has gone through two different political regimes characterized by different electoral systems both at the national level and at the sub-national levels of government. The First Republic was based on proportional representation (PR) whereas during the Second Republic different types of mixed electoral systems have been used. Most of them based on the use of PR with a majority bonus (MBPR). The basic feature of this type of systems is the rule by which a party or a coalition of parties that gets a plurality of the votes will be guaranteed a majority of the seats regardless of the percentage of votes obtained.

With a few exceptions these systems are majority-assuring. They represent a component of a pattern of government which does not exist anywhere else. It is peculiarly 'Italian'. The other features of this pattern are the direct election of the head of the executive, i.e. mayors, provincial governors and regional governors, and the possibility for the legislative councils to call a no confidence vote on the head of the executive. If the motion is passed it carries with it the automatic dissolution of the councils and therefore early elections. *Simul stabant, simul cadent* is the formula used to describe this relationship. Within this model the electoral system is a key component because it guarantees that whoever is elected to govern cities, provinces or regions will have a majority of the seats in the council. It is the combination of direct election, assured majorities and the confidence vote that makes this model of government unique. It is neither parliamentary nor presidential. It is mixed, just like the electoral system.

The first step in the development of this pattern was the law n. 81, 1993 which changed the process of election of mayors and city councils for all municipalities with a population above 15.000 inhabitants as well as the election of presidents of provinces and members of provincial councils (Baldini 2004). Mayors and presidents are now chosen with a two ballot majority system. If no candidate gets a majority of the votes on the first ballot there is a run off between the two leading candidates. Seats in the council are

assigned by PR but the party lists connected to the winning major are guaranteed 60 % of the seats unless a party or coalition has received more than 50 % of the votes on the first ballot. This outcome is possible as voters have two separate votes that they use to choose a candidate for major and a party list and they may use these votes as they want with no obligation to vote for a major and a party belonging to the same camp. Sitting majors may be voted out by the council which will automatically bring about new elections.

The second step was the 'Tatarella law' from the name of its major sponsor. It was approved in 1995. It deals with the selection of regional governments. The basic features are the same we have seen for municipalities and provinces except for the fact that the system works with one ballot and not two. This means that any candidate for regional president can be elected with just a plurality of the votes. Regardless of the percentage of votes received his/her party or coalition is guaranteed a majority of the seats in the regional council. The simul...simul ... formula applies here, too. To be precise, when this system was approved, due to a Constitutional norm, it was not possible to introduce the direct election of the regional president. In 1999 a constitutional reform has opened up the way for the direct election which was first used in 2000.

Formally the 'Italian model of government' does not exist at the national level. Here the responsibility to select the president of the council of ministers (PM) falls on parliament and on the president of the republic. Yet, the majoritarian evolution of Italian politics during the Second Republic has substantially changed the process of government formation also at this level. It has strengthened the role of voters and elections and decreased that of parties and parliament. The key factor in this regard has been – until 2013- the decisiveness of elections. From 1994 to 2008 elections have produced a majority of seats for the winning coalition in both chambers, with the exception of the Senate in 1994 (Table 1). This has entailed that the leader of the winning coalition has become 'automatically' PM¹.

¹ With the 2013 elections things have changed drastically because of an electoral earthquake which will be discussed later. But even before this shock the onset of the Euro crisis in 2010 and its impact on Italy's financial stability had weakened the electoral pattern of government formation. The resignation of the Berlusconi cabinet in November 2011 was not followed by early elections. Under the guidance of the president of the republic a technocratic cabinet was installed with Mario Monti as PM.

Tab 1. The performance of the electoral systems of the Second Republic, % seats for the winning coalition, Chamber and Senate, 1994-2013

	Chamber		Senate	
	Winning coalition	% seats	Winning coalition	% seats
1994	CR	58,1	CR	49,6
1996	CL	51,3	CL	53,7
2001	CR	58,4	CR	55,9
2006	CL	55,2	CL	50,2
2008	CR	54,6	CR	55,2
2013	CL	54,8	CL	39,0

CR= center-right; CL= center-left. For the 2006 and 2008 elections the percentages are total votes and total seats, including the Valle d'Aosta region and the district for the Italian voters who reside abroad..

Such an outcome would not have been possible without two new electoral laws which were approved in 1993 and 2005. The electoral systems introduced with these laws are profoundly different but they have one very important feature in common. They both contain a strong incentive toward the formation of pre-electoral coalitions. The 1993 incentive was the single-member plurality district (SMD). The 2005 incentive is a majoritarian bonus similar to the one used in the electoral systems at the sub-national level. Both have changed the pattern of political competition and government formation by 'forcing' parties to make coalition agreements before the elections and not after, as it was the case during the First Republic.

The 1993 electoral reform: a mix of SMD and PR

On April 18 1993 Italian voters overwhelmingly approved a referendum that changed the electoral system used for the Senate since 1948. Given the fact that Italian referendums can only abrogate existing laws but cannot introduce new ones, the changes were 'sneaked in' by repealing existing norms of the Senate electoral law. The success of

this referendum was not driven by the intrinsic merit of the new proposal but by voters' dissatisfaction with the old political system and a desire for change.

The popular pressure for reform, prompted the Italian Parliament elected in the 1992 general elections to pass a comprehensive electoral reform (Katz 2001). There was a substantial consensus on the objectives of the reform. These included the formation of more stable governments with a secure parliamentary majority, greater accountability of the political class to the voters, the representation of minority views. These were exactly the same goals that, just a few months before, had driven the approval of the new electoral systems at the municipal and provincial levels. But the new electoral system at the parliamentary level would be substantially different, in spite of the fact that the aims were the same.

The difference can be accounted for by two factors. The first is the Constitution. Without a constitutional change the direct election of the PM was impossible. At the time there was no consensus on changing the form of government abandoning a straightforward parliamentary system. The second is the constraint on legislators represented by the outcome of the referendum. This was such that, by striking words and paragraphs out of the old electoral law, the new electoral system for the Senate was based on single member districts and plurality rule. To be precise only 75 % of the senators would be elected in such a way whereas the other 25 % would be elected with PR. The new electoral law for the Chamber and the Senate approved in August 1993 is based precisely on these features². It is likely that if Parliament had been 'free' to choose it would have adopted a PR system with a bonus (MBPR), as it had done previously for municipalities and provinces. It did precisely this two years later for the regions. However, this option could not be pursued in 1993 because of the referendum. It would be pursued, as we shall see, in 2005.

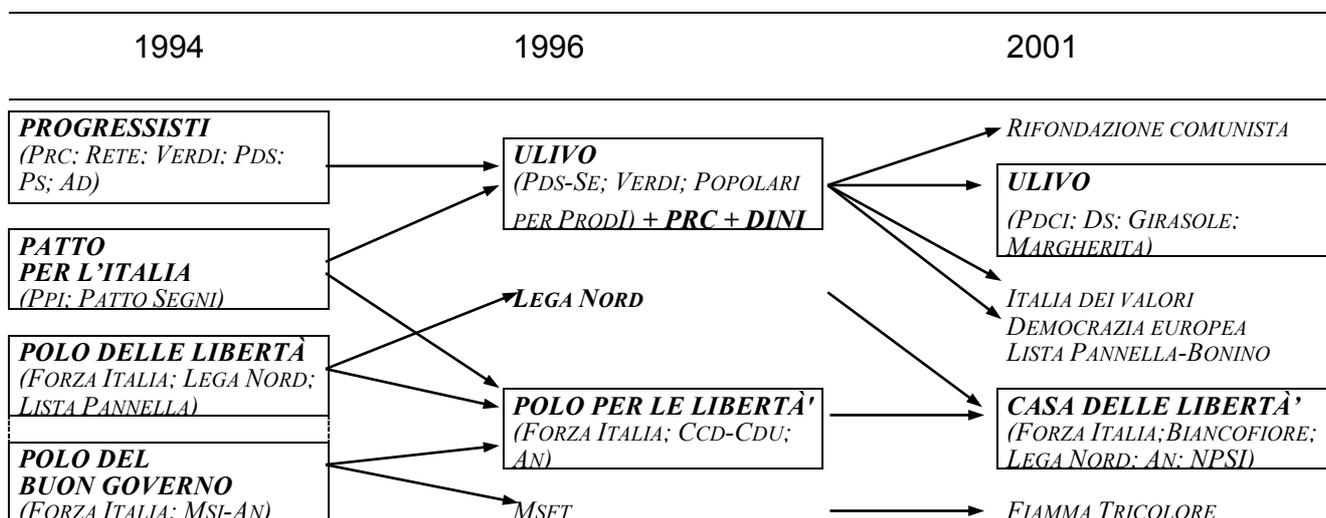
The 1993 electoral law is responsible for a striking development in Italian politics, i.e. the emergence and consolidation of a bipolar pattern of electoral competition based on two dominant, clearly identifiable, pre-electoral coalitions (D'Alimonte 2001). This pattern has coexisted, however, with a high level of party fragmentation. Italy has become a case of fragmented bipolarism. (D'Alimonte 2005). Coalitions did not replace parties but they were more important than parties for winning seats and executive power. Since the first elections in 1994 their composition, size and performance have been the most relevant variables for predicting electoral outcomes (D'Alimonte and Bartolini 1998; Bartolini and

² A detailed account of the reform is to be found in Katz 2001.

D'Alimonte 2002). The new electoral law passed in 2005 has changed the pattern of formation of these coalitions but it has not done away with them.

The pre-electoral coalitions of the first phase of the Second Republic (1994-2001) have changed over time (Figure 1), but they have always been based on the same type of electoral coordination taking the form of stand-down agreements. Most parties chose not to run SMD candidates autonomously but rather enter into coalition agreements based on the selection of common candidates that would run in the SMD with the symbol of the coalition. These cartel agreements were not easy to arrange. They required the development of a set of mutually agreed criteria to determine both the number and the 'quality' of the districts assigned to each coalition member. (Di Virgilio 2002, 2004).

Table 2. Electoral coalitions and their dynamics, 1994-2001

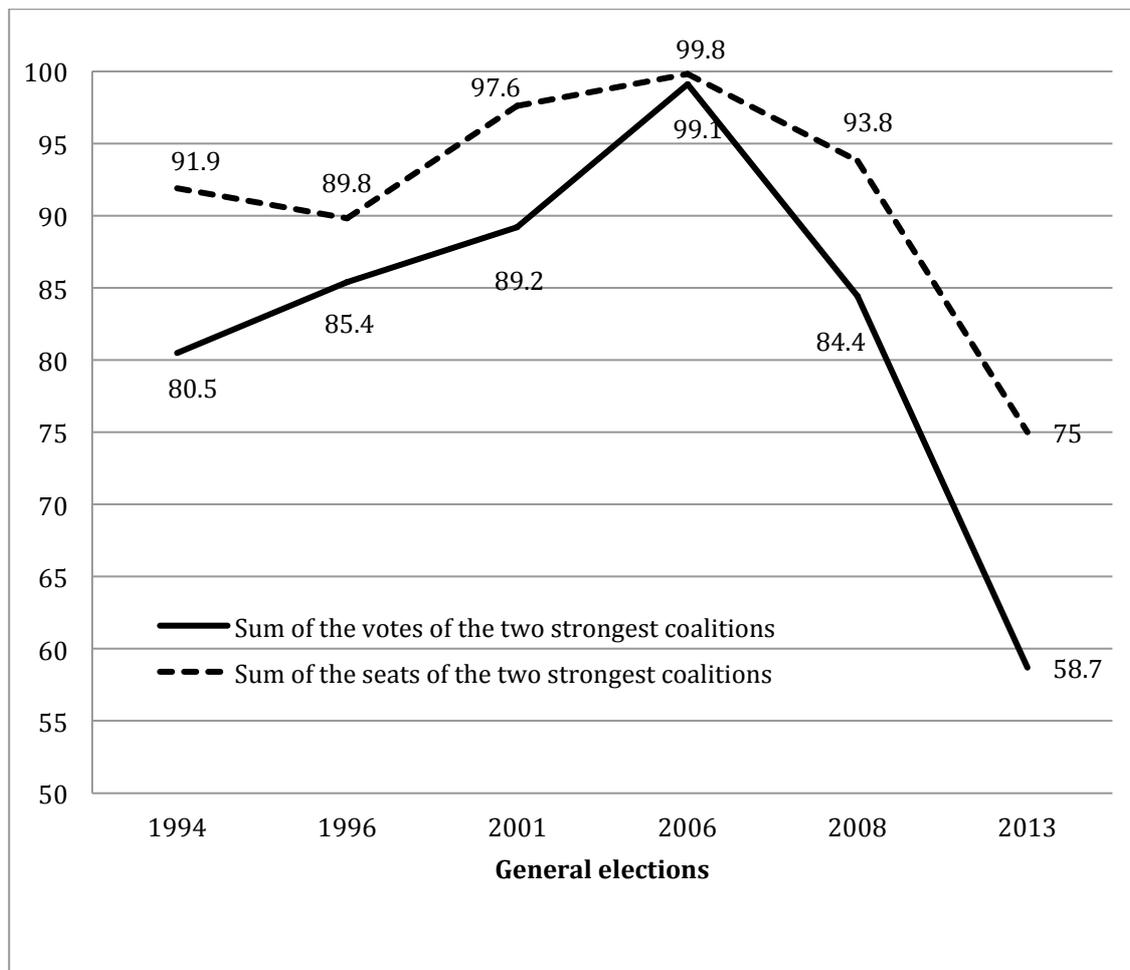


Legend. The rectangle defines the members of the alliance running in the SMDs. The parenthesis includes the PR lists that were members of the coalition.

The systemic consequence of this type of electoral coordination has been the survival of the small parties within a majoritarian environment which should have been very hostile to them. They exploited the unwillingness of the large parties to run alone and therefore they were successful in bargaining a share of safe SMD seats. The outcome of the process has been a sort of 'proportionalization' of the plurality component of the new electoral system. This is why the level of fragmentation of the party system has remained high, but its effect has been constrained within the framework of a bipolar pattern of competition with the two major coalitions gaining a very large share of the votes and the seats Figure 1. So, the system showed the bipolar mechanics of a two-party system and

the format of a multiparty one. This has been true until 2013. With these elections the bipolar pattern of the 1994-2008 period has been replaced by a tripolar set up because of the extraordinary success of a new actor, the Five Star Movement (M5s) founded by the comedian Beppe Grillo.

Fig. 1 Index of bipolarism in Italy (Chamber of Deputies, 1994–2013).



In 2005 the electoral law which had produced the systemic change towards bipolarism was replaced. The main reason for the reform was the poor performance of the center-right coalitions in the SMDs. This finding was possible thanks to the features of the electoral system for the Chamber of deputies. For choosing deputies voters had at their disposal two separate ballots, one for a candidate in their SMD and another one for a party list in the same district. This makes it possible to calculate the total number of votes received by all the coalition's candidates in the 475 SMDs and compare it to the PR votes received by all the party lists belonging to the coalition. The data are shown in Table 3. Both in 1996 and in 2001 the difference was negative for the center-right coalitions and

positive for the center-left. The 2001 data were particularly disturbing for Berlusconi, in spite of the fact that this phenomenon did not jeopardize his victory at that time.

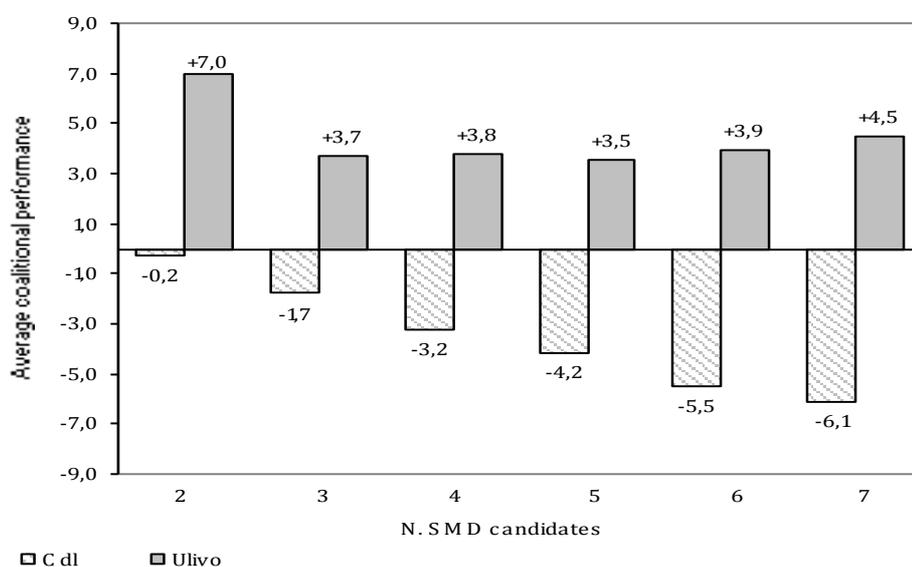
Tab. 3 . SMD and PR votes, center-right e center-left, Chamber 96, 01

1996	Ulivo+Prc			Polo		
	SMD votes	PR votes	Difference, SMD-PR	SMD votes	PR votes	Difference, SMD-PR
Italy	16.744.708	16.270.935	+473.773	15.027.275	16.481.785	-1.454.510
2001	Ulivo (+Prc)			Casa delle libertà		
	SMD votes	PR votes	Difference, SMD-PR	SMD votes	PR votes	Difference, SMD-PR
Italy	16.315.355	14.827.087	+1.488.268	16.918.020	18.390.893	-1.472.873

The district by district analysis of the performance of the center-right candidates in the SMD (Casa delle libertà) shows a linear correlation between their poor performance and the total number of candidates running in the district (Figure 2). The higher the number of candidates the higher the loss of SMD votes compared to PR votes. On average in the 2001 elections the center-right candidates lost 3.6 percentage points compared to the vote percentage received by the party lists supporting them. The opposite occurred with the center-left candidates (Ulivo), though in this case no linear correlation existed. In the 1996 elections the same phenomenon had occurred. Its systematic nature suggests that the problem was not the quality of the candidates themselves but the quality of the coalition and the nature of the center-right electorate.(D'alimonte and Bartolini 2002).

This is the background to the 2005 decision by the Berlusconi government to change the electoral system. The aims were to do away with the SMD without doing away with the pre-electoral coalitions and the bipolar pattern of competition. The solution found was the adoption at the national level of an electoral system similar to the one used for municipalities, provinces and regions, i.e MBPR. The bonus replaced the single member district as the major incentive for keeping parties together within a pre-electoral coalitional framework.

Fig. 2. Coalitional performance, Chamber 2001



The 2005 electoral reform: PR with a bonus

The new electoral system was approved by parliament in December 2005, a few months before the next general elections to be held in the Spring of 2006. Berlusconi wanted to improve his chance to be re-elected against unfavorable odds or at least to limit the success of the center-left coalition. He convinced easily the other parties of his coalition. The opposition did mount a campaign against the reform but it was neither very credible nor effective. In reality many members of the opposition welcomed privately the abolition of SMDs and the return to a PR formula, though with a majority bonus.

As in the case of the 1993 reform the new law introduced two different systems for the Chamber and the Senate. The system for the Chamber is relatively simple. All the seats are assigned by PR but the party or the coalition with a plurality of the votes at the national level is given 54 % of the seats regardless of its vote percentage. The difference between this percentage and the percentage of seats actually given is the bonus. So, the bonus is variable, it has no ceiling and could be equal to zero if a party or a coalition wins 54 % of the seats on its own. The remaining seats are divided proportionally among the losers who pass the thresholds. There is only one ballot, unlike the municipalities and provinces where there are two. Voters have only one vote that they use to choose a party. If the party they pick is a member of a coalition, their vote goes automatically to the coalition. The list of candidates were closed and very long. Figure 3 shows how the ballot

paper looked like in one of the districts in the 2006 elections. Basically, it is a majority-assuring electoral system. It always produces a winner with an absolute majority of the seats. This is not true for the Senate.

Fig. 3. Example of the ballot paper for the 2006 elections



The electoral system for the Senate is also based on MBPR but the bonus is not assigned in one national district, but region by region. The formula is fundamentally the same. The party or coalition winning a plurality of the votes will get 55 % of the seats allocated to each region. So, instead of one bonus there are 17. This implies that the system is not majority-assuring. The fact that different parties/coalitions are likely to win in different regions makes a decisive outcome highly unlikely. In a sense it works like the US presidential electoral college. In order to win an absolute majority of the seats a party or a coalition has to pick up the bonus region by region. Different regions have different weights in terms of seats, depending on population. Like in the US, some regions are strongholds of the center-left, others are strongholds of the center-right. The final outcome hinges on the 'battleground regions'. Unlike the US, the system is not winner-takes-all, as the bonus is equal to about 55 % of the seats in each region.

To complicate matters, both electoral systems include a complex mix of thresholds for getting seats. In the Chamber parties running alone must obtain at least 4 % of the vote at the national level. If they choose to run as a member of a pre-electoral coalition they need to get just 2 % , provided their coalition as a whole obtains at least 10 %. In the

Senate the same mechanism exists but the thresholds are higher and they are applied at the regional level. Specifically, for single parties the threshold is 8 %. This drops to 3 % if a party is a member of a coalition that gets at least 20 %. In fact if there are third actors capable of overcoming the thresholds for getting seats it is possible that no coalition will get a majority . Actually it is possible that the outcome of the elections could be a 'divided Parliament' with one coalition winning in the Chamber and a different coalition or no coalition winning in the Senate. This is precisely what happened in 2013, as we shall see later.

From the point of view Berlusconi and his allies the 2005 electoral reform was a step in the direction of creating a form of government similar to that existing in the other arenas. It was the ideal mix of majoritarian and proportional components. Thanks to the majority bonus voters can still choose a coalition and decide who will govern the country, but at the same time they vote for the party they prefer whether is a member of a coalition or not, unless they want to cast a strategic vote. Without the SMDs of the previous system the problem of the poor performance of the center-right coalition candidates disappeared and with it the electoral defections from the PR arena to the plurality one . For the center-right the system seemed the best of all worlds. For Berlusconi it presented the further advantage that with closed lists he could choose candidates and basically decide who would be elected.

Berlusconi's preference was to introduce also the direct election of the PM but that required a constitutional change that lacked the necessary support. But the reform did introduce a norm according to which each party or coalition is obliged to designate a candidate-prime minister and a common program. This feature of the reform was highly controversial and for some it was even unconstitutional as it interferes with the prerogatives of Parliament and the president of the republic in the nomination of the PM. There is no question that it has introduced an element of tension between the form of government and voters' expectations.

The new system has been used three times with substantially different results. In 2006 all the parties of the center-left joined in a coalition called l'Unione (The Union) and chose Romano Prodi as their candidate for the premiership. Berlusconi was the leader of the center-right coalition , called Casa delle Libertà (House of Freedoms). The Union won in the Chamber by a margin of 24.000 votes, but thanks to the majority bonus gained 348 seats (out of 630). It won also in the Senate but the final count here was 158 seats

(out of 315). A majority of one. This very small margin made life very difficult for Prodi who after two years was voted out of office.

In the 2008 elections the results were quite different. The same electoral system yielded a completely different outcome due to the different strategies followed by the two major parties of the center-left and of the center-right, respectively the Democratic Party (PD) and the Freedoms People (PDL). They both decided to abandon the strategy of putting together 'catch-all coalitions' and chose to ally themselves with few allies. There were a number of third actors competing but this did not prevent the Berlusconi coalition to win both in the Chamber and in the House with large margins. The two electoral systems performed as majority-assuring. Actually, our measure of bipolarism - the concentration of votes and seats on the two major coalitions- dropped significantly as it can be seen in Figure 1. The level of fragmentation also dropped (Figure 4)..

For a short while it appeared as if the perverse relationship between a high level of bipolarism and a high level of fragmentation had been broken.(Chiaramonte 200) The Pd and the Pdl gained together more than 60 % of the votes and seats. However, following the 2008 election both parties have lost support as seen in the 2009 European elections and in the 2010 regional elections. With that the party system returned to the more traditional format of a fragmented bipolarism . But the real surprise has come with the 2013 elections.

The 2013 electoral earthquake

On 21 December 2012 Mario Monti, the technocratic prime minister appointed on 16 November 2011 resigned. Elections were set for the first time since 1948 in a winter month, February 24 and 25. They yielded an unexpected outcome which threw Italy in a difficult and uncertain political situation as no clear winner emerged.

Four main groups competed in this election. The expected winner was the left coalition formed by the Democratic party (Pd) and Left, Ecology and Freedom (Sel). Its leader was Pierluigi Bersani, the Pd secretary. Most polls consistently showed that it had a significant lead over its competitors though the margin had been narrowing in the last weeks of the campaign. When votes were counted the center-left won in the Chamber only by 0,4 percentage points. And with that it got a total of 345 seats. But it was not able to win in the Senate.

Bersani's main competitor was supposed to be Silvio Berlusconi and his right-wing coalition made up by his party, People of Freedom (Pdl), the Northern League (Ln) and a host of other small groups. Yet the final result was affected by the astonishing success of the Five Star Movement (M5s), whose leader, the comedian Beppe Grillo, did not even run as a candidate. The party never competed in a national election before, but it was not a complete novelty³. The M5s has been defined as 'a strange animal... in the zoo of Italian politics' (Corbetta and Gualmini 2013, p. 197). According to Corbetta (ibidem) it shows most of the traits of populist parties but its use of the web puts it in a different category. It is certainly not a single issue party like the Greens. Its program is a mix of proposals that cuts across the political spectrum.

The other new entry in these elections was Mario Monti. After agonizing quite a bit over the decision whether or not to run, he made up his mind at the end of December 2012. He did not create his own party but accepted leading an alliance of centrist groups which included the Centrist Democratic Union (Udc) , Future, Liberty, Italy (Fli) and a new movement called Future Italy. In the Chamber these groups ran as a coalition of three different lists, each with its own name, symbol and slate of candidates. These were Udc, Fli and 'Civic choice with Monti for Italy'. In the Senate, due to a higher threshold for getting seats, they decided to run as one list called 'With Monti for Italy'.

Tab. 4 The results of the 2013 elections by coalitions/lists, Chamber and Senate, % votes and seats

Coalitions/Lists	Chamber		Senate	
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats
Center-Left	29,5	54,8	31,9	39,0
Center-Right	28,7	19,8	30,0	37,1
M5S	25,1	17,3	23,3	17,1
Monti	10,8	7,5	9,3	6,0
Others	5,9	0,6	5,5	0,8
Total	100	100	100	100

³ The logo 'Friends of Beppe Grillo' had already been used in some local elections in 2008.. It competed in the 2010 regional elections with some success. But the real take-off occurred with the local elections of 2012. One of its candidate became mayor of Parma defeating the candidate of the left coalition in a run-off election. But even more significant was the fact that in the regional elections held in Sicily at the same time the M5s turned out to be the largest party in the island, though it was not able to win the governorship.

The results of the election are synthesized in Tables 4 . The left coalition won an absolute majority of the seats in the Chamber but not in the Senate. It actually received a higher percentage of votes in the Senate but, because of the electoral system, this was not enough for it to gain an absolute majority. The real winner of these elections is the M5s. It got 25,6 % in the Chamber making it the largest party in the country. In the Senate its vote was 23,6 %. For a new party competing for the first time in a national election it was quite a performance. Not even Berlusconi in 1994 with its Forza Italia achieved such a success.

In spite of the success of the M5s the outcome of the elections would have been much less destabilizing if the Senate had been elected with the same electoral system used in the lower chamber. In such a case the Pd-Sel coalition would have gained an absolute majority of the seats also in this branch of Parliament and Bersani would have been able to form a government.

Italy is a perfect bicameral system. Both branches of Parliament have exactly the same powers. Specifically, governments, once they are formed, have to pass a vote of confidence in both houses. Likewise, if either branch approves a motion of no confidence they have to resign. Yet, the Chamber and the Senate are elected by different electoral bodies and with different electoral systems. Only voters aged 25 and above can vote in the Senate. In these elections this accounted for a difference of almost 3 million votes. As to the electoral system we have seen that the one for the Chamber is majority-assuring whereas for the Senate is not. Under these circumstances it is possible that elections may yield different outcomes and this is precisely what happened.

The 'chaotic' nature of the Senate electoral system depends from various factors. The most important is the allocation of the majority bonus at the regional level. This feature makes it difficult for a party or coalition to win a substantial majority of the seats unless it wins in almost all of the 17 regions where the bonus is awarded. The other critical factor is the format of the party system. In order to win a substantial majority for a party/coalition it is not only necessary to win the bonus in many regions but it is also crucial to win many seats in those regions where the bonus goes to a competitor. This in turn depends on the number of parties/coalitions that can gain seats by obtaining more than 8 % of the vote. Therefore, the pattern of competition is an important variable. Regardless of the vote percentage of the leading party/coalition, its success may depend on whether competition is bipolar or not. If there are more than two parties above the 8 % threshold the difference between winning and losing the bonus becomes greater than in a bipolar situation

because losing means splitting with others the 45 % of the seats available to the losers (Table 5) . As a result it becomes more difficult to get an overall majority.

Tab. 5 The weight of the majority bonus in the 2013 elections and in a perfectly bipolar scenario

Regions	Number of seats	Bonus weight in a bipolar scenario	Bonus weight in the 2013 scenario
Piemonte	22	4	9
Liguria	8	2	4
Lombardia	49	5	16
Veneto	24	4	10
Friuli V.G.	7	1	3
Emilia R.	22	4	9
Toscana	18	2	6
Umbria	7	1	3
Marche	8	2	4
Lazio	28	4	10
Abruzzo	7	1	3
Campania	29	3	10
Basilicata	20	1	3
Puglia	7	2	7
Calabria	10	2	4
Sicilia	25	3	8
Sardegna	8	2	4

In the 2013 elections the pattern of competition was not bipolar. The parties/coalitions that won Senate seats were four, not two (Table 8). True, the Pd and the Pdl coalitions split all the 17 regions. Neither the M5s nor the Monti list won any bonus, but they won a number of seats as they were able to pass the 8 % threshold. As a result no one got an absolute majority of the seats. The Pd coalition won in 10 regions and got 112 seats. The Pdl won in 7 regions and got 115 seats. The final outcome was basically proportional.

After the earthquake: the Constitutional Court and the Renzi factor

The electoral system used since 2006 does not exist anymore. Last December the Italian Constitutional Court struck down a number of its provisions. The most important are the majority bonus and the closed lists. With reference to the bonus the Court did not rule out the constitutionality of any bonus but it chastised a type of bonus that is potentially unlimited and that it can be assigned regardless of the votes received by the party or coalition with a plurality. This decision has two major consequences. The first is that, by abolishing the bonus and leaving intact the other rules for the distribution of seats, it has introduced *de facto* a proportional system. The second is that the voting system for the Chamber and the Senate are now more similar than they were before, given the fact that the 'lottery' of the 17 regional bonuses has been cancelled.

As to the closed lists the Court claimed that they were unconstitutional as they deprived voters of the chance to express their voice in the selection of candidates. But, also in this case, the judges did not go as far as to affirm that any closed list violated constitutional norms. They limited their ruling to those lists that have too many candidates. Therefore shorter lists could still be used. But what is a short list? No criteria are given. The same indeterminacy applies to the size of the bonus. How large can a bonus be in order to be constitutional?

With its ruling the Court has established a new *status quo*, which is appreciated by some parties and strongly criticized by others. The voting system that is now in place is clearly a departure from all the systems which have been used during the Second Republic. Matteo Renzi, Italy's new prime minister, is strongly against it. Under his leadership a new electoral reform is making its way in Parliament. It has been approved in the lower house earlier this week and will have to be passed in the Senate. It is very similar to the previous MBPR system used until 2013. The main differences are in the size of the bonus, the way it is awarded and the length of the party lists.

The new system will apply only to the Chamber. This is the result of a political compromise. In order to avoid giving the new PM a voting system ready to use his adversaries have demanded that the reform of the electoral rules be connected to that of the Senate. This branch should be profoundly transformed. But this is a constitutional reform which will take a while to get through parliament. In the meantime the new voting rules will be adopted for the Chamber, whereas for the Senate the old rules will still be

effective. It is a messy compromise which has created an awkward situation. In the case of early elections the two branches of parliament will be chosen with radically different voting systems.

The new system in the making is also a MBPR. A maximum bonus of 15 % will be given to any party or coalition which gets at least 37 % of the votes. If no one reaches this threshold the two competitors with most votes will go to a run off. The winner will get 52 % of the seats. This is the most important feature of the system. The Constitutional Court should be satisfied. There are a limit to the bonus, a threshold for getting it and a second round. As to party lists they are still closed but they are short with a number of candidates ranging from 3 to 6. They should meet the Court's standards.

At this stage it is too early to say whether the reform will be definitely approved. The fact that it is supported both by the Pd and by Berlusconi's new-old party, Forza Italia, gives it a better than an even chance.

The performance of MBPR: a mixed record

After the 2005 reform, and until the ruling of the Constitutional Court , all the electoral systems used in Italy were based on the combination of PR and a majority bonus. The only exception was the system used for European elections. The major remaining difference between the national and sub-national levels of government was the direct election of the head of the executive which was introduced for municipalities, provinces and regions but not for the national government. However even at this level, the parliamentary form of government, though it did not change formally, in practice from 1994 to 2013 it developed in the same direction. The recent ruling of the Constitutional Court has replaced the 2005 MBPR with a straightforward PR system but, as we mentioned , the plan of the present government is to re-install a MBPR. If successful this attempt will bring once again the electoral system at the national level in line with those existing at the sub-national levels. What is the record of this type of systems ?

Let's start with party fragmentation . We lack systematic data for municipalities but we have them for the regions and parliament. Table 6 shows the number of party lists competing and those who got seats in the 15 'ordinary' regions from the first election with the new rules to the last in 2010. The national average of lists with seats is 8,9. There is some variation between the three different areas of the country but less than one could have expected.. Even in the North, which historically has been ,along with the Center, the

least fragmented part of the country the level of is high. The picture is basically the same using other measures of fragmentation.

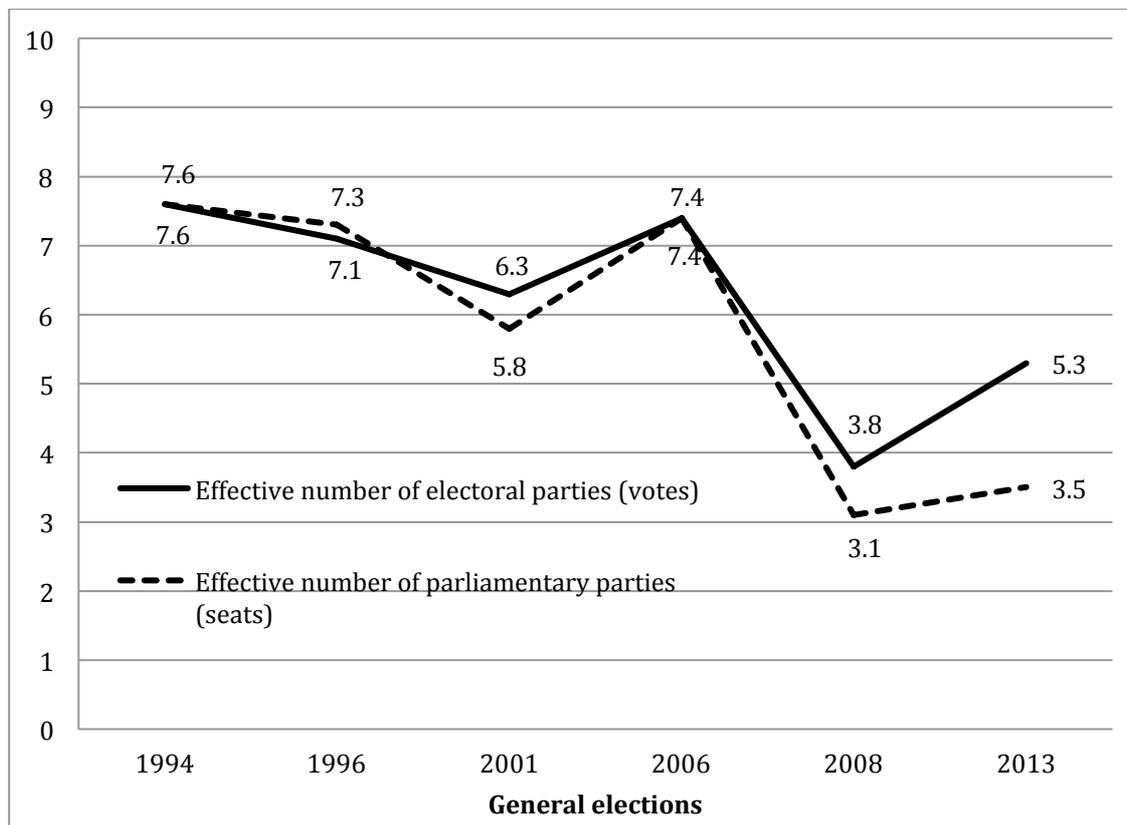
Tab. 6 Fragmentation in the regions, number of lists and number of lists with seats, 1995-2010

Regions	Number of lists				Number of lists with seats			
	1995	2000	2005	2010	1995	2000	2005	2010
Piemonte	15	19	20	31	10	13	14	12
Lombardia	15	14	16	13	9	10	10	7
Veneto	12	17	16	15	9	11	11	7
Liguria	15	18	20	15	9	11	11	9
North	14,3	17,0	18,0	18,5	9,3	11,3	11,5	8,7
Emilia-Rom	11	18	13	10	9	10	9	8
Toscana	11	17	11	9	8	11	7	6
Umbria	11	13	10	8	6	9	7	6
Marche	13	16	15	12	9	11	8	10
Center	11,5	16,0	12,3	9,7	8,0	10,3	7,8	7,5
Lazio	14	20	23	18	7	12	11	12
Abruzzo	10	18	17	-	8	12	12	-
Molise	9	17	-	-	8	11	-	-
Campania	15	20	21	17	10	15	13	12
Puglia	14	20	20	15	9	13	15	8
Basilicata	12	17	14	17	10	12	9	11
Calabria	13	21	17	16	8	14	10	8
South	12,4	19,0	18,7	16,6	8,6	12,7	11,7	10,2
Italy	12,7	17,7	16,6	15,1	8,6	11,7	10,5	8,9

Figure 4 shows the trend of party fragmentation at the parliamentary level from 1994 to 2013 using the Laakso-Tagepeera index. Here the picture is different. Up to the 2006 general elections the effective number of parties remained high by international standards. It had started to move down during but with the 2005 electoral reform it shot up again due to the formation of two 'catch-all coalitions' in the 2006 elections. In 2008 it

declined drastically, only to rise again with the last elections but without reaching previous levels. It is a mixed record which shows how volatile the electoral picture still is. The future trend will depend on many factors, including the new electoral system being discussed in Parliament today.

Fig. 4 Party system fragmentation in Italy (Chamber of Deputies, 1994–2013).



The other side of the story about the performance of MBPR regards executive stability. This is the dimension where the Italian pattern of government has shown its effectiveness. This is particularly true at the municipal and regional level. Though no systematic data are available on the tenure of majors the existing evidence shows clearly that it has been very rare since 1993 to see city majors forced out of office by a council vote. As to regional governments suffice it to say that since the 2000 election no president of an ordinary region has had to step down because of a vote of no confidence. Both for municipalities and regions this picture is dramatically different from that seen during the First Republic.

As to the national government the picture is mixed. Since the 1994 elections Italy has had 12 cabinets. Their average duration has been 20 months. No cabinet lasted an entire legislature. There have been two cases of early elections, in 1996 and 2008.

However, if we compare this evidence with that of the First Republic the difference is significant. From 1948 to 1994 the average duration of cabinet was less than a year. However, we cannot neglect the outcome of the last elections. Due to the faulty electoral system of the Senate, government formation has been subject again to the wheeling and dealing of parliamentary politics. The benefit of disproportionality and electoral decisiveness has been lost.

It is not difficult to explain the difference in term of stability between the national government on the one end and the sub-national governments on the other. MBPR alone did not perform equally well given the fragmentation of the party system. It is the combination of MBPR, direct election and the *simul...simul* ... clause that help create stable governments.

The institutional setting makes a major difference. The Italian case provides further evidence that electoral rules and form of government are interdependent. MBPR is an interesting electoral system because it helps reach different objectives. It allows the representation of small parties and at the same time it let voters choose the government because it is a majority assuring electoral system and as such it provides a powerful incentive for electoral coordination taking the form of pre-electoral coalitions. So, it seems to combine the virtues of the SMD and those of PR. Yet, the many parties that find their way into parliament, thanks to electoral coordination, can still be a source of instability if there are not other institutional arrangements that limit their room of maneuver. This is what the Italian experience shows. In this respect Italy is not alone. France is another interesting case. It is quite likely that the two ballot majority system for legislative elections would work quite differently without the direct election of the president of the republic.

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