

Back to the Future. The New Re-alignment of the Italian Party System in Perspective

Ritorno al futuro. Il riallineamento del sistema partitico italiano in prospettiva

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Abstract

Italian party politics had been described for decades as immoderate and highly fractionalized. A great distance between the parties on the left-to-right dimension (polarization) and fractionalization are the two well-known syndromes of polarized multiparty politics, according to G. Sartori. This paper addresses the peculiarities of the Italian party system, inquiring into the contemporary changes of the patterns of party competition in Italy. It is argued that the Italian case has moved from polarized pluralism (1948-1992) to polarized bipolarism (1994-2012), with two major political coalitions alternating in power. Nonetheless, the progressive enfeeblement of the two competing coalitions, the emergence of new parties and the dismantlement of the majoritarian electoral laws favour the reestablishment of a multi-polar pattern of competition. The Italian party system now seems inexorably destined to go back to some form of multilateral distribution of parties with no clear ideological connotations.

La politica partitica italiana è stata descritta per decenni come immoderata e altamente frazionata. Elevata distanza tra i partiti lungo la dimensione da sinistra-destra (polarizzazione) e frammentazione sono le due ben note sindromi della politica polarizzata multipartitica, secondo G. Sartori. Questo articolo affronta le peculiarità del sistema partitico italiano, indagando sui cambiamenti contemporanei dei modelli di competizione partitica in Italia. Si argomenta che il caso italiano è passato dal pluralismo polarizzato (1948-1992) al bipolarismo polarizzato (1994-2012), quest'ultima fase caratterizzata da due grandi coalizioni politiche che si alternano al potere. Tuttavia, il progressivo indebolimento delle due coalizioni concorrenti, l'emergere di nuovi partiti e lo smantellamento della legge elettorale maggioritaria hanno favorito il ripristino di un modello multipolare di concorrenza. Il sistema partitico italiano sembra ora inesorabilmente destinato a tornare a una qualche forma di distribuzione multilaterale, senza chiare connotazioni ideologiche.

Keywords

Italian Party System, Polarized Pluralism, Bipolarized Pluralism

Sistema dei partiti italiano, pluralismo polarizzato, bipolarismo polarizzato

Introduction. Polarized Pluralism as a Pattern of Party Competition in «Difficult Democracies»

When Sartori (1976; 1982) intervened forty years ago in the – at that time - relatively new debate on parties and party systems, there was quite unanimous consent that the party systems could be arranged according to the number of parties competing, either two (two-party systems) or more than two (multi-party systems) (Duverger 1951; Downs 1957).

Sartori's criticisms of this mainstream interpretation were two. Firstly, the dichotomy between two-party systems and multi-party systems is objectionable because the latter class includes a wide range of cases, in which the number of parties (three-four, five-six, and more) affects the dynamics of the party competition itself. Secondly, Sartori argues that the more parties are aligned on the political space, the more ideologically distant they might prove to be and the more likely it is that the political space is *disjointed*. Democracy is «easy» when the competing parties are two or only few (three-four at the most) and the political space is continuous, lacking any ideological cleavage. On the other hand, democracy proves to be «difficult» in the opposite conditions, when the competing parties reach or even exceed the threshold of five-six, and the political space is disjointed because of some ideological cleavages (Sani and Sartori 1978; 1982). Finally, in these conditions it is likely that the competing parties are gathered in at least three (left, centre, right) «political families» with the left and right families being «anti-system» in their character and inclining toward the extreme ends of the space rather than converging toward its centre. In Sartori's words, if in the «easy» democracies the dominant drives of the party competition are *centripetal*, in the «difficult» democracies the dominant drives of the party competition are *centrifugal*.¹

This general framework had been fruitfully applied to the Italian case with most of the debate dealing with the degree of polarization of Italian party politics and its effects on the party system dynamics. Nonetheless, the recent changes in Italian politics have raised the question whether Sartori's framework could be still applied to the Italian new party system alignment. Observing the rallying of the Italian parties around two major and opposite poles or coalitions since the 1994 elections, one would be tempted to conclude that, despite the persistent fractionalization, the Italian party system had become bipolar. Italian democracy was losing its features of exceptionality, but it was still a question whether the two-party coalitions could have been described as 'homogeneous' (D'Alimonte and Bartolini 1997, 2002; Pasquino 2002).

¹ For a critical review of G. Sartori's seminal work (Sartori 1976), see Pasquino (2016).

The two dominant political coalitions during this long phase (1994-2008), the centre-left *Ulivo* and the centre-right *Casa delle Libertà*, very often disclosed their true nature of 'electoral cartels'. Disagreement and conflict over policies were still very high, as indirectly shown by the high instability of the three centre-left coalitions during 1996-2001, the fall of Berlusconi's 2nd government because of intra-coalition conflict (Spring 2005), and the recurrent conflicts into the later version of the centre-left coalition (*L'Unione*). The progressive electoral decline and the internal tensions in the two parties leading the centre-right coalition (*Forza Italia*, then *Popolo delle Libertà*) and the centre-left coalition (*Partito Democratico*) are clear indicators of the end of an historical season.

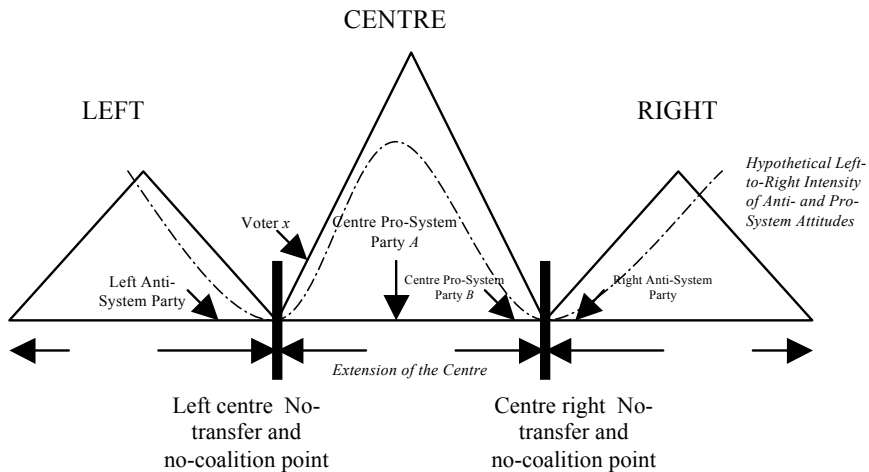
In the following section, the peculiarities and the development of the polarized pluralism pattern described forty years ago by Sartori (1976, 1982) will be addressed. The transition of the Italian party system towards some pattern of bipolarism at the turn of the XXI Century will be tackled in the second section. In the third section, the focus moves to the scenarios opened by the 2013 political elections, which could provide some insights about the possible evolution of the Italian party system. The progressive enfeeblement of the two competing coalitions, the emergence of new parties and the dismantlement of the majoritarian electoral laws favour the reestablishment of a multi-polar pattern of competition. Italy now seems inexorably destined to go back to some form of polarized pluralism but with no ideological connotations. Finally, in the fourth section, some post 2013 political scenarios are assumed and discussed.

From Polarized Pluralism to Polarized Bipolarism

Sartori described the political space in a multi-party polarized system as disjointed, therefore it would be cross-cut by at least two points of «no-transfer» and «no-coalition» lying somewhere towards the left and towards the right. These points divide the pro-system parties of the centre from the anti-system parties of both the left and the right. That means that on the political space there could be found one or more parties «perceived as being more or less 'alien' or more or less 'extraneous'» (Sartori 1976, 343). As a consequence, the voters identifying with the pro-system centre would not be prepared to transfer their votes to any of the alien parties lying on the left or on the right, regardless of their actual distance from these parties.

Fig. 1 introduces a spatial representation of a polarized party system. Adopting the assumption of the presence of two or more disjoints on the space, one should infer that voter x would never choose the left anti-system party and would vote always for the

Figure 1 – A Polarized Party System Model



centre pro-system party, notwithstanding the fact that the former is closer to him than the latter in terms of policy position.²

Similarly, the two «no-coalition points» exercise an effect on the behaviour of the parties. Therefore, we should expect that the centre pro-system Party B would never form a coalition with the right anti-system party and would rather opt for a coalition with the centre pro-system party A.³ If we took these assumptions seriously, the conclusion would be that any polarized party system should tend sooner or later to stabilize itself, because the disjointed space and the two points of no-transfer and of no-coalition would prevent any noticeable systemic dynamic. In other words, the three portions of the electorate would systematically vote for the parties belonging to the same segment of the political space as themselves. Even the coalition dynamics would be rather predictable, and one could expect that each party would choose only coalition partners belonging to the same ideological family as itself.

² Such behaviour would be a deviation from a basic standard assumption of any spatial model of voting based on the principle of proximity, according to which the voter chooses rationally the closer party in terms of policy or ideological distance. Things may be different in any model based on directionality (Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989). For an application of the two theoretical models, see Warwick (2004).

³ As in the case of the voter, see footnote 2 above, this would be another deviation from any standard spatial model, because even the parties are supposed to act rationally and to choose the closest possible coalition partner.

So it appears evident that Sartori's spatial analysis combines some standard assumptions with other inductive assumptions taken from the observation of the polarized models. Four standard assumptions still constitute the primary reference points of his argument and among these two of them relate to the parties:

1. The parties compete on a one-dimensional left-right space that qualifies their ideologies.
2. The parties are free to move on the space towards the left and the right as long as they do not meet another party on the continuum. They cannot cross over each other.

The other two standard assumptions are related to the voters:

3. The distribution of preferences of the voters along the continuum is fixed.
4. The voter will choose the party closest to him on the left-right continuum, while he will remain indifferent between two parties equally distant from him (indifference condition of the choice).

However, in Sartori's model the one-dimensional space is not a simple left-right political continuum, but is rather an ideological space whose fundamental property is elasticity (the distance between the extremes can vary not only from case to case, but also in the course of time). The more distance there is between the first and the last party on the continuum (level of polarization of the party system), the more likely it is that some extreme or anti-system parties will establish themselves at the two opposite ends of the space. These parties will be perceived as alien to the system. The presence of some anti-system parties transforms the left-right continuum into a discontinuous or disjointed space. These features of any polarized political space justify two deviation from the standard assumptions 2 and 4 (see again Fig. 1):

- 2.1. In any ideologically polarized space, restrictions of the realignment of the parties along the continuum are set by the no-coalition points. These points separate the pro-system centre from the two extreme anti-system poles.
- 4.1. In any ideologically polarized space, restrictions of the rational behaviour of the voter are set by the points of non-transferability of the vote. These points imply that the voter will choose exclusively among parties lying on his own segment of the left-right continuum.

Assumptions 2.1 and 4.1, introduced to correct respectively the standard assumptions 2 and 4, have some stabilizing effects, which could be observed in the Italian case. In fact, strong and constant preferences of the voters throughout the continuum would

determine not only the stability and rigidity of the centre electoral strength, but also of the left and the right. If one unveils the logical implication of the polarized pluralism model, the necessary conclusion would be that it should exhibit a high degree of stability. The voters choose on ideological grounds (no-transferability of the vote) and the political parties are divided by insurmountable barriers (no-coalition points). The voters identified with the pro-system centre should not be willing to transfer their vote to the alien parties of the left or of the right, and similarly the voters identified with the antisystem parties of the left and of the right should not be willing to swing their votes. The three political poles should maintain their relative electoral strengths over the time with only minor fluctuations. In other words, because of the points of no transferability of the vote, in any polarized party system the inter-block volatility (Bartolini and Mair 1990) should be null or very limited. The same logic applies to the dynamics of the party coalitions, which are limited by the no-coalition points. Two adjacent parties on the left-right continuum would not join in coalition unless they belonged to the same political family (either pro-system, left anti-system or right anti-system).

This stabilizing effect on the party dynamics was in fact evident in the Italian case during the long phase 1948-1994. The Christian Democrat Party (DC) and its allies dominated the coalition game and Sartori's prediction of the «enfeeblement of the centre» was not fully confirmed. The DC did lose votes after 1948, but its electoral decline was balanced by the gradual co-optation in the coalition government of some quasi pro-system parties like the Socialists on the Left and the Liberals on the Right. The Centre was not enfeebled by the party system dynamic, but it rather included new parties in the coalition governments according to a process of «*extension of the centre*» (Ieraci 1999).

The strategy of the extension of the centre has proved to be successful for a long time, but it reveals some inconsistencies in the theory of polarized pluralism (Ieraci 1997, 61-63). Two main phases can be identified in such a strategy. There was, firstly, the formation of the centre-left coalition in the early 1960s, which integrated the Socialists (PSI) in the governments with the allocation to them of some relevant ministerial portfolios. This political coalition went through a crisis in the early 1970s but eventually was re-founded on new bases in the late 1970s as a «Five-party coalition» (*Pentapartito*). This phase lasted for a long time (1979-1994) and it featured the extension of the government coalition span towards the liberals (PLI) on the centre-right. The «Five-party coalition» (DC, PSI, PRI, PSDI, PLI) proved that the no-coalition points were far from being fixed and impermeable and they did not really constrain the dynamic of the Italian party system. The Italian parties, with the exclusion of the communists (PCI) on the extreme left and of the post-fascists (MSI) on the extreme

right, were all now cooperating at the governmental level. They revealed not to be so ideologically bound to their families, at least when government power and the ability to exert political influence were at stake.

This dynamic violates the assumption 2.1 (see above) of the model. It was nonetheless a sort of emergency exit for the Italian polarized pluralism, because the continuous electoral growth of the PCI (1948-1976) and the relatively constant fall of consent for the DC were clear signs of the alienation of the pro-system voters of the centre. This haemorrhage of votes from the centre to the extremes was balanced by the co-optation of some formerly semi-loyal parties (notably the PSI) into the government arena. Nonetheless, it was a clear indication that some non-negligible shares of the pro-system voters were available to change their orientations and even to vote for anti-system parties. Therefore assumption 4.1 of the model (the existence of points of non-transferability of the vote) seems equally questionable.

These inconsistencies may be reduced to a simple observation: either the two points of «no-transfer» and «no-coalition» are effective, and therefore any polarized pluralism would reach a status quo with no further possible «enfeeblement of the centre», or they are not. In which conditions do the two points of «no-transfer» and «no-coalition» become ineffective? The answer could be a two-fold one.

Firstly, as shown in Fig. 1 by the dotted line, a hypothetical curve of the left-to-right intensity of the anti- and pro-system attitudes of the electorate could be traced. It is assumed that such intensity declines drastically the closer the voters are to any of the two points of «no-transfer». In other words, the closer the voters are to the points where the space is disjointed, the less relevant the pro- and anti-system cleavages are for them. These voters would not perceive the extreme parties of the left or of the right as potential challenges to the system and therefore they would be prone to vote for them. The growth over time of the PCI on the left signalled the fact that part of the originally pro-system electorate was discontented with the government's performance and disapproved of the strategy of «extension of the centre». Therefore, the identification of the voters with the parties lying in the same segment of the political continuum (anti-system left, pro-system centre, and anti-system right) was not so compelling. These voters did not perceive any risk in switching their votes towards the Communists, and this is what they did at least until the late 1970's.

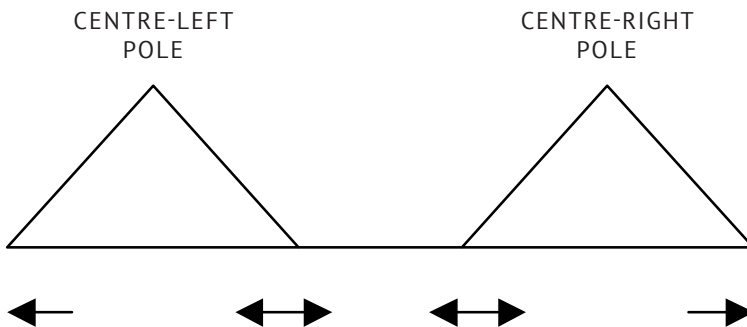
Secondly, the formation of the first centre-left coalition government in the early 1960's, with the allocation of some ministerial offices to the Socialist Party as well as to the Social Democratic Party, and later on the stabilization of the *Pentapartito* («Five-party coalition», 1979-1994), ranging from the Socialist Party to the Liberal Party, revealed that the two «no-coalition» points on the space could be pushed backward and forward. It could be said that, similar to the behaviour of the voters, even for the politi-

cians the pro- and anti-system cleavages, signalled by the «no-coalition» points, became more blurred as their position moved closer to them. The political leaders and their parties positioned around such cleavages (in Italy, the so-called *partiti laici minori*: PSI, PSDI, PRI and PLI) tended to collaborate with the DC when they had an opportunity and to withdraw this availability when necessary. The Italian parties did coalesce in an opportunistic way, openly interacting regardless of their own ideological family.

This dynamic proved that the model was right with regard to one crucial aspect. The political space was disjointed and some alien parties were placed on it (the Communists, PCI, on the left and the neo-fascists, MSI, on the right). The centre parties could dispose at their convenience of the points of «no-coalition» in order to counterbalance the loss of votes in favour of the alien parties. Extending the centre through bargaining over the coalition governments and the inclusion of new partners was a strategy for containing the growth of the PCI on the left and for limiting the systemic challenge of the neo-fascist movements on the right. But once those two useful embankments were removed by the unforeseeable accidents of history (the «End of Communism» and of the Cold War), the appeal of the centre parties evanesced and the picture changed drastically, as shown in Fig. 2.

Figure 2 simplifies a polarized bilateral distribution, that is the *Polarized Bipolarism* in Italy during 1994-2012 (Ieraci 2006; 2008a; 2008b). A polarized bipolar party system has no clear centripetal drives. The centre pole has dissolved into its components, because the bilateral pressures which kept it together are now weakening and eventually disappearing. The centre pole now breaks into two or more parts, with the more left-oriented of its components merging in a left-centre pole while the more right-oriented are moving towards the right. The system is still highly polarized and

Figure 2 – A Polarized Bipolar Party System Model



highly fragmented. The two newly born poles or coalitions find it hard to converge centripetally. They are indeed very heterogeneous in terms of membership, and the split parties included in the poles are capable of an effective conditioning action.

The Italian Polarized Bipolarism (1994-2012)

The Italian polarized bipolarism was dominated by two large coalitions or party poles (*Ulivo* and *Polo della Libertà*) which did not converge centripetally according to the Downsian model of competition. Persistent high fractionalization of the party system and endurance of the old structure of cleavages (i.e., Communism-Socialism, Tradition-Modernization, State-Periphery) might be some of the explaining factors of this dynamic (Ieraci 2008a; 2008b). Fractionalization and the resilience of the structure of the cleavages provided strong incentive to the small parties for exiting the two coalitions and blackmailing them. In turn, these tactics were encouraged by the particular 1993 reform of the Italian electoral system which combined proportional representation and plurality system (Bartolini and D'Alimonte 1995).

After 1994, the Italian party system seemed to have moved from polarized pluralism to a new model, which could be labelled *polarized bipolarism* and in which:

- 1) Two opposite coalitions or parties compete for government, but they lack ideological and policy coherence, something which in turn increases the government instability.
- 2) The two opposite coalitions or parties are quite far apart from each other and the measure of systemic polarization is high.
- 3) There are no clearly identifiable centre parties, which permanently occupy the centre of the political continuum. The metrical centre of the continuum is a sort of no-man's land towards which the parties may converge in their tactical moves.
- 4) There are no systemic constraints on the political continuum which may restrict the party movements, similar to the discontinuities registered over thirty years ago by Sartori, which separated the anti-system parties from the pro-system parties. As a consequence, the distribution of the parties on the political continuum is less stable and depends on the bargain over the government policies.
- 5) The intra-coalition stability is jeopardized by the swing of the minor parties, either towards the centre or towards the extremes of the political continuum. These movements are designed to condition the government policy and the alignment of the competing coalitions.

Back to the Future? The Italian Party System after the 2013 Elections

According to Downs (1957, 120), in «a bimodal distribution of voters with modes near each extreme», such as was the case of the Italian polarized bipolarism, it is likely that the winning party «will attempt to implement policy radically opposed to the other party's ideology». The parties do not converge towards the centre, «the government policy will be very unstable», «democracy is likely to produce chaos», and finally «the growth of balancing centre parties is unlikely». Unfortunately, these predictions can be applied with some approximation to the Italian case of the present time, and the Italian democracy after the February 2013 elections and the Referendum on the Constitutional reform in December 2016 seems on the verge of degenerating into chaos. As a last stroke, the Italian Constitutional Court in January 2017 declared as unconstitutional Renzi's electoral reform named *Italicum*, which would award a majority bonus of 340 parliamentary seats (54%) to the party which wins at least 40% of the votes in a second round. In February 2017 Renzi resigned as leader of the PD, and its left wing split. It could be appropriate, therefore, to reflect on the scenarios that the Italian politics might disclose in the near future and on the opportunities now opened up to the new political actors. Are there any reasons to believe that, although extremely conflicting, inconsistent and inefficient, the Italian democracy will survive, in spite of the persistent polarization and the almost complete disintegration of the party systems?

SCENARIO 1: *About the fate of the Five Star Movement (M5S)*

The political elections held in February 2013 were certainly won by M5S, which grew from nothing to 25% of the votes. At its present state of evolution, the M5S looks like a hybrid between the movement and the party (Ieraci and Toffoletto, 2017 forthcoming; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013). Of the former, it exhibits the typical dearth of a defined organizational structure. To some extent, the Meetups platform and the blogs are useful instruments to coordinate the actions and to influence the attitudes of the participants in the movement (Ieraci and Toffoletto 2018, forthcoming). Moreover, the web provides to the base of the movement an illusionary channel of direct control over the actions of the leaders of the M5S, forcing them to visibility and openness.

From this point of view, the M5S as a political organization presents itself as a headless and horizontal structure, with a maximum degree of opportunities for participation and exercise of influence offered to its members. Nonetheless, this political organization is clearly subjected to the control of the founder Beppe Grillo and to his immense influence over the participants. The presence of such a charismatic leadership has bred conflicts within the M5S and among the elected political personnel

(parliamentarians and local administrators), who are struggling to assert their political role. We are thus witnessing an organizational tension between the virtual party, which manifests itself on the web, and the institutional party with its MPs and local administrators. The M5S has become, despite the proclamations of Beppe Grillo, a party with a branched nationwide organization and representatives established in the local councils and, above all, in Parliament and in the national Senate. The parliamentary groups are gradually institutionalizing and becoming relatively independent from the virtual party which acts via the web. If the web is a transparent and functional tool for monitoring and coordinating a movement, it loses its capacity in the institutionalized arenas (such as the legislature) where rules, roles and expectations related to these rules and roles become dominant. The institutionalized parliamentary groups, in other words, become autonomous from the movement. Their effectiveness demands a leadership in the parliamentary arena, and a very close co-ordination of the actions of the deputies.

This scenario unveils two sources of tensions. Firstly, as implied above, it is easy to predict frictions between the institutionalized party (that is the representatives of the M5S in the legislature and in other institutional bodies) and the external tutors of the movement (Grillo and Casaleggio) who might bring into play the participants in the web whenever it suits them to constrain the institutionalized party. The latter will not be easily allowed to achieve autonomy. Secondly, once inside the institutions, the representatives of the M5S will no longer be capable of resorting exclusively to protesting about and desecrating power, but they will have to make proposals and thus policies, to take responsibility and take action consistently. In other words, the M5S will become accountable for its choices and it will pay the consequences in case they prove unsatisfactory, or even wrong for the public opinion and the voters. The conversion of the M5S into a party, whatever form it may assume, even if difficult to imagine now, would open a further series of questions. An increasing degree of partyness of the M5S will trigger the struggle for organizational power and would definitely mark the split with the movement of its origin. The M5S as party could be targeted with the same criticisms and delegitimizing messages which had been directed to the parties of the old establishment. Would the M5S-party bear its own anti-party rhetoric? In addition, once it became a party, the M5S would be dragged into the deadly Italian coalition politics, and this in turn could bring about deep internal conflicts over the tactics to be followed and over the selection of eligible allies.

SCENARIO 2: *About the fate of the Democratic Party (PD)*

The outcome of the elections of February 2013, the inability to give birth to a sustainable government in the aftermath, the events that led to the re-election of G. Napolitano

as President of the Republic on April 20, 2013, all this results from the management of P. Bersani as leader of the Democratic party. Matteo Renzi rose to the leadership of the PD, and after the brief interregnum of E. Letta (April 2013-February 2014) he led the government until his resignation (December 2016) as a consequence of the defeat in the referendum over the Constitutional reform. The political debate inside the PD became very harsh, Renzi resigned from the post of party political secretary and the left wing of the PD was ready to leave and give birth to another party or group named *Democratici e Progressiti* (D&P, Democrats and Progressive). Before speculating on the fate of the PD, let us reflect briefly on its genesis and its historical role.

After the electoral victories of the two centre-left coalitions *Ulivo* and *Union* led by R. Prodi, the latter promoted the idea of founding a party that embodied the spirit of that political experience. The new party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) would encompass the wide political spectrum ranging from the post-Communist Left to the Catholic centre and the inclusion with an ancillary role of the so-called «laical minor parties» (Social Democrats, Republicans and Socialists). It could be said that the PD gives partyness to the «historic compromise» between Communists and Catholics,⁴ which had been sought for such a long time after the end of the Centre-Left coalition governments in the early 1970s and the tumultuous years of dispute and conflict which followed (Ieraci 2013). Since its origins, the internal life of the PD has been characterized by a not easy cohabitation between the post-communist and the catholic souls.

The 2017 internal split of the PD suggests the possibility of a new realignment of the Italian party system. On the centre-left of the spectrum there could be the D&P and the PD. While the former may collect the protest vote and benefit of the dissent produced by the policies of Renzi's government, the latter inevitably would appeal to the moderate electors. In this way, the PD would enter in competition with the reborn *Forza Italia* and with other parties of the centre-right. Similarly, the D&P could benefit from the organizational weakness of the M5S and the ambiguities of some of its policies. The D&P might provide at the same time a new point of reference and new opportunities of inclusion in the political struggle to the electorate and the forces of the extreme left, which the polarized bipolarism of the Italian politics (1994-2012) had confined to a marginal position.

SCENARIO 3: *The end of the «Berlusconism»*

The fate of the centre-right is no less foggy than that of the centre-left. S. Berlusconi has reached the twilight years of his political life. His electoral victories (1994, 2001, 2008) were followed by great debacles (1996, 2006 and 2013), and among the major

⁴ For a theoretically oriented reconstruction of the «historic compromise», see D'Alimonte (1999).

European democracies he represents the fairly unique case of a government leader who has never been able to obtain a reconfirmation in power. This is a clear sign of the detachment between the expectations created and the goals achieved by his governments. The centre-right collapse at the 2013 elections, certainly connected to the rise of the M5S, was of an amplitude never recorded before: the centre-right coalition declined from 46.8% of the vote obtained in 2008 to 29.2% (-17.6%). Secondly, Berlusconi's political legacy is even more controversial. It should be remembered that in 1994, at his debut, S. Berlusconi outlined a project of great scope and ambition, creating a *rassemblement* of the centre-right. Pivoting on *Forza Italia*, he managed to build a large coalition with two joints. *Il polo del Buon Governo* was the alliance of *Forza Italia* with the right-wing party *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) in the Centre-South electoral constituencies, while *La casa delle Libertà* was the analogous alliance of *Forza Italia* with the Northern League in the Northern electoral constituencies. This political vision reached its complete fulfillment when in 2008 *Forza Italia* and AN merged in a new conservative party labelled *Popolo delle Libertà* (People of Freedom, PDL).

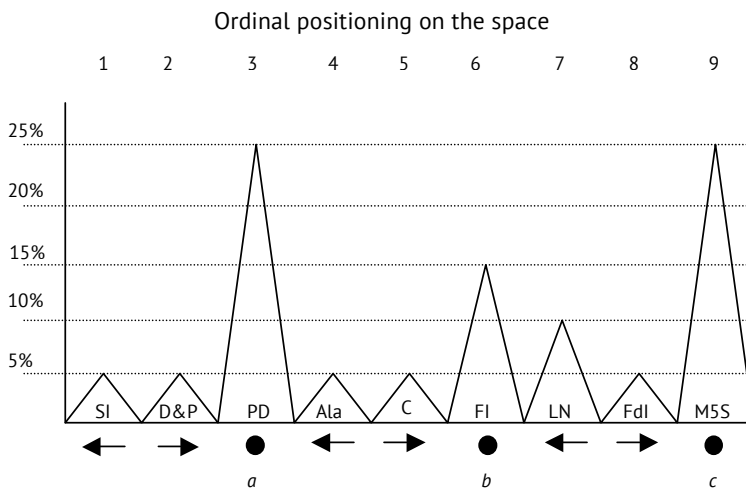
However, the project to establish a national conservative party with a majority vocation eventually failed. The national right, that is the political heirs of the MSI, partly dispersed or became marginalized in the political game, and the leader of the Italian right G. Fini withdrew from political life after having being expelled from the PDL. The Northern League also folded up and went back to its origins of regional party, abandoning the ambition to deal with the issue of federalism at the national level. The «northern question» did not become a «national» issue.

The decline of the PDL and its dissolution in October 2013 might leave more room for smaller parties in the centre-right spectrum of the political space. The poor 2013 electoral result of the re-founded *Forza Italia* justifies some speculation on the fate of the centre-right. There is, firstly, the problem of the succession of S. Berlusconi to the leadership of the centre-right. Secondly, the political *rassemblement* created 20 years ago by Berlusconi is very unlikely to be revived. Already during the experience of the Renzi government, some fractions of *Forza Italia* offered collaboration to the centre-left and they seem prone to exploit further opportunities in the future. Finally, the Northern League and other smaller groups of Berlusconi's old alliance remain isolated and are very much tempted to embrace the neo-populist vogue.

Which type of party system will emerge from these scenarios? A multilateral distribution of parties with no dominant party or pole (Ieraci 2012, 543) could be the outcome of the last twenty years of realignments on the Italian political space. This party system would resemble the fragmented or atomized party system described by Sartori (1976). It would feature a relatively high degree of polarization, i.e. high po-

litical distance between the extremes, and by the number of relevant parties reaching and maybe going beyond the threshold of seven. Compared to the polarized pluralism system typical of the Italian post WWII political history, the new multilateral distribution would lack any dominant party occupying the metrical centre of the alignment, as was the case of the DC in the past. The centre pole of the new Italian party system would instead be fragmented and would exhibit no common strategy or coherence. Moreover, there would be no clear disjuncting points on the political space, such as the «points of no transferability of the vote» and the «points of no coalition» of the polarized pluralism. In other words, it could be hypothesized that the new Italian party system would be polarized but would have no ideological characterization and cleavages. The «blackmailing potential» of the extreme parties and above all of the M5S, although not ideologically grounded, would act as a strong conditioning factor over Italian politics. Fig. 3 offers a synthesis of the hypothesized new realignment, with a speculative percentage distribution of the votes for the Italian parties after the 2018 political elections.

Figure 3 – The Future Italian Polarized Party System with a Multilateral distribution and no Dominant party



Key: *a, b, c* = Subsystems anchor points

SI = Sinistra Italiana; D&P = Democratici e Progressisti; PD = Partito Democratico; Ala = Alleanza liberal-popolare per le Autonomie; C = Centristi; FI = Forza Italia; LN = Northern League; FdI = Fratelli d'Italia Alleanza Nazionale; M5S = Movimento 5 Stelle

The political continuum traced in Fig. 3 should not be strictly conceived in terms of a left-to-right political space for two reasons. Firstly, as above argued the new Italian party system has lost any clear ideological connotation. Secondly, there are at least two relevant parties which certainly cannot be labelled either as leftist or rightist parties (Northern League and M5S). The nine parties aligned on the continuum of Fig. 3 all appear to be politically relevant, according to Sartori's conceptualization, because they can either enter into government coalitions (i.e., they have some coalition potential) or because they are capable of conditioning the government action (i.e., blackmailing potential) (Sartori 1976). In this scenario, it is argued that the PD will decline as a consequence of its internal crisis and of the presence of two challenges on its left, those launched by *Sinistra Italiana* (SI, a party which gathers post-communists, ecologists and representatives of the Civic Lists) and by the newly born group D&P. It is hard to believe that the PD could gain over 30% of the votes in the next scheduled elections (March 4, 2018), particularly once the crumbling of M. Renzi's leadership is taken into account.

Similarly, roughly the same percentage of votes gained in 2013 (15%) will probably be attributed to *Forza Italia*. This speculation is grounded on consideration of the high fragmentation of the large centre-right *rassemblement* created over twenty years ago by S. Berlusconi and of the incentives which the present electoral law would offer to any party wishing to run alone. The centre-right pole is at the moment divided into five components: The Liberal-popular Alliance (Ala), the *Centristi* (C), *Forza Italia* itself, The Northern League (LN) and the rightist *Fratelli d'Italia* (Fdi). Finally, the 5SM is a case on its own and it cannot be easily arranged on a hypothetical continuum. As long as the M5S refuses to deal with any of the parties of the former establishment, it is hard to anticipate its tactics and positioning on the political space.

We are left with two analytical queries. Firstly, what could the dynamic of this confused game be? In other words, what is the mechanic of a party system with multilateral distribution and no dominant party or pole? Secondly, what could the sustainable coalitions in this game be?

Sartori (1976) does not offer an insight on the working of fragmented or atomized party systems. We can attempt to summarize the properties of the working mechanic of this system relying on current observations drawn from the Italian case.

1. The polarization of the political space (overall distance measured from the first to the last aligned party) is relatively high as a consequence of the crowding of parties on it. This effect corresponds to what Sartori pointed out forty years ago as the property of the elasticity of the space of competition, the more parties are aligned on a continuum the higher is the overall distance measured between the two ends.

2. Notwithstanding the fact that the political space is polarized, it is hard to identify any clear ideological cleavages on it. As shown by some space analyses of Italian patterns of competition in the 1990's and in the following decade, the left-to-right ideological traditional connotation of the political space has completely vanished. Both free market and democracy are fully accepted by the main Italian party fractions, with minor differences being now confined to issues such as the degree of liberalization of the market (which opposes a «solidarity» attitude to a free «competition» attitude) and the pattern of democracy («consensual» versus «majoritarian» democracy) (Ieraci 2008a, 37; 2009). Position issues are now predominant over valence issues (Stokes 1963).

3. Although crossing over positions among parties is strictly forbidden by any spatial modelling of party competition, this does not seem to be necessarily the case in systems with multilateral distribution and no dominant party. This does not refer to crossing the floor by MPs, a practice historically widespread among the Italian political class, but to the opportunity for the parties to cross over each other and to establish coalitional links with parties that are not adjacent to them. This would be another deviation of the traditional spatial analysis, which allows only «ideological connected coalitions» (Axelrod 1970). If there are no ideological cleavages and disjoints on the space, why should the parties not coalesce freely? The standard assumption that parties could not cross each other depended on the preliminary adoption of a unidimensional space of competition. Nonetheless, if the parties are not bound any more to the XIX century ideological continuum left-to-right and the space of competition becomes multidimensional, based on a plurality of position issues rather than on a single valence issue, there is no reason why it should not be possible for the parties to move freely on the space and to link with each other in terms of shared visions and perspectives over issues.

4. Finally, in any multilateral distribution with no dominant party or pole the drives of the competition are similarly multidirectional (shown by the pointed arrows in Fig. 3). This depends on the previously discussed properties (multidimensionality and absence of constraint to the movements of the parties), that is the propensity of the parties to find shortcuts through the space and to link with each other with regard to sets of issues. At the same time, although no party dominate the game, the relative weight of some of them (like the PD, *Forza Italia* and the M5S in Fig. 3) might exercise attraction drives in the coalitional game over the smaller parties. The system would work as a set of subsystems (*a*, *b* and *c* in Fig. 3) where some small parties are orbiting round larger ones, functioning as sort of *anchor points* of the system. Therefore, the overall picture would show a complex interplay of centripetal and centrifugal drives.

Conclusion

The analysis of the development of the Italian party system in the last 70 years has disclosed three distinguishable phases. From the early years of the Republican history of Italy, up until 1992, it was the era of *polarized pluralism* characterized by a multilateral left-centre-right distribution with a dominant party or centre pole. The party system was highly polarized and fractionalized but it was stable because of the rigidity of the voters' preferences and of the party cleavages on the political space. The Italian party system was frozen along the ideological cleavages of the Cold War era, and when that ended the subsequent electoral reforms (in 1993 and in 2005) did not manage to reduce the fragmentation of the Italian party system. The following post-ideological phase (1994-2013) was still featured by polarization. This was the short era of the *polarized bipolarism* towards which Italy moved after the 1994 elections and as a consequence of the subsequent party system realignment. During this phase, Italian party competition tended to be immoderate and the government turnover was very high because of the general instability and polarization of the distribution of the parties on two opposite poles that lacked coherence. Finally, after the crisis of the centre-left and centre-right rallies and the decline of their two leading parties (the PD for the centre-left and PDL for the centre-right), the era of multilateral distribution with no dominant party or pole (fragmented or atomized party system) commenced after 2013. A party system with multilateral distribution and no dominant party is highly fragmented, it exceeds the threshold of six relevant parties. In the Italian case, nine relevant parties can be identified in the political space, which shows no clear ideological structuring cleavages and consequently is multidimensional in its nature. The fragmentation of the Italian party system and the fluidity of the party dynamic in a multilateral distribution widen the range of sustainable coalitions in a potential increase of government instability.

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