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*Prodi's Narrow Victory and Italian Politics: One Year On (Italian Politics Specialist Group)*

*Chair: prof. James L. Newell*

**The paradoxes of possible electoral reforms and the Italian party system: a trade-off between bipolarism and fragmentation?**

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**Abstract**

*The recent reform of the electoral system accentuated the most fundamental characteristic of the Italian party system, namely its 'fragmented bipolarism', a characteristic that emerged during the so-called 'transition' years. The paper analyses some crucial features of the present law and, in particular, the incentives by which further fragmentation has been favoured. The recent crisis of Prodi's Government shows how the Italian party and political systems are entering a new phase characterized by high turbulence, great uncertainty and deep instability. Recently, under the threat of another referendum on the electoral law, the issue of a possible electoral reform is coming back to occupy a central place on the Italian political agenda, and a complex political game is developing around it. The strategic prospects of various political actors are linked to the different characteristics that a possible reform could have. In particular, the project of a new 'Democratic Party', which would unify the main reformist forces of the centre-left, is also based upon the expectation that this new political force will reduce party-system fragmentation. However, this aim is unlikely to be achieved unless the emergence of the new party takes place alongside a more coherent reform of the electoral system. On the contrary, if the present electoral law remains unchanged, then the project of a new 'Democratic Party' is likely to run into considerable difficulties. The paper therefore analyses the possible interactions between the political actors' projects and the possible models of electoral reform, with emphasis upon the political actors' strategic adaptations and interactions. In short, a trade-off between bipolarism and fragmentation*

*seems to have emerged. The paper will conclude by considering the politics of electoral reform through an analysis of the reform proposals the various political actors have adopted and different scenarios that could occur.*

## **1. Premise**

Among established democracies that have changed their electoral rules in the nineties, New Zealand, Japan and, obviously Italy, are usually cited. But Italy, in this context, seems to be destined to assume a peculiar standing: among countries that changed electoral system in the nineties, it is the only one that, in 2005, has changed it again, and moreover, with a reform that even its authors consider to be a complete failure. Surely, all this means that the “transition” is certainly not finished, or, more simply, that the Italian political system continues to be unstable and weakly structured. Precisely this condition can explain, among other factors, the constant presence, within the Italian political scenario, of the electoral reform issue, and also the recurring relevance that electoral referendums have always assumed, since 1991. After this last reform, another referendum is now being promoted in order to repeal some aspects of the current law and prompt a new intervention by Parliament<sup>1</sup>. The Prodi Government, on the other hand, had committed itself to electoral reform, declaring that unlike the former government it wanted to proceed by seeking the largest possible consensus and then by searching for a political agreement with the centre-right opposition<sup>2</sup>. The crisis of 21 February allows us to predict that the electoral reform issue will become more and more central in Italian politics and, as in the past, it will be the field around which different views of the future political system will challenge one another.

In this paper, I would like to provide a map to disentangle the Italian political debate about the possible electoral reforms. I would like to do it, not by a mere description in the various positions, but by attempting to demonstrate, applied to the most recent developments of Italian politics, the fruitfulness of a theoretical approach usually defined as “institutionalist” and synthesized in the well-known statement: *rules matter*<sup>3</sup>. That is, the assumption according to which the institutional

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<sup>1</sup> Referendums concerning the electoral laws, in Italy, may only be partially abrogative: an electoral law, however, must always remain in force. The one currently being promoted is designed to abolish just some short passages of the present electoral law in such a way as to modify some mechanisms of it. The most important modification, if the referendum were approved, would concern the way in which the majority premium is assigned. This would accrue not to a coalition of lists, but to the one list that obtains the greatest number of votes.

<sup>2</sup> Prodi’s speech of 26 February, in which he asked the Senate for a new vote of confidence, indicated electoral reform as “an absolute priority”. Even President Napolitano, when sending the Government back to Parliament, stressed the urgency of a new electoral law, thus implicitly recognizing the enduring frailty of the present political equilibrium.

<sup>3</sup> “Rational-choice Institutionalism assumes that formal electoral rules have a substantial impact upon the strategic incentives facing politicians, parties and citizens, so that changing the formal rules has the capacity to alter political behaviour”. This theoretical approach proposes “to explore how formal electoral rules (the independent variable) shape the strategy of political actors (both parties and politicians, as the intervening variables) and how, in turn, the behaviours of political actors affects voting choices (the dependent variable)” [Norris, 2004: 6-7].

context and the rules of electoral competition tend to shape both the political actors' and voters' behaviours, and produce a framework of constraints and incentives, within which both make their choices, acting on the grounds of their own rationality, adapting themselves to the game rules and exploiting them for their own ends. I would also like to demonstrate how this theoretical approach, founded on the political actors' strategic coordination, on their adaptations to the rules in force, and on their expectations of those which are possible or predictable, is particularly suited to providing a good explanatory perspective on the present season of Italian politics.

In a weakly structured political system, like that of Italy today, expressed preferences about the possible adoption of any model of electoral reform, reflect (or better, *should* reflect) not only the short-term interests and calculations, but also the strategic prospects of each political actor, and his expectations concerning his own standing within the future political system. So, Italian politics today appears to be an exemplary case of a "political game", with a framework characterized by a strategic interdependence among a large number of actors, many variables and sub-variables and by a condition of high uncertainty and instability.

My hypothesis is that, around the issue of a new possible electoral reform, a decisive game is now under way and that its outcomes could perhaps mark a milestone in the infinite history of the Italian "transition". What is now emerging with great clarity is a trade-off between bipolarism and fragmentation, that is, a possible alternative that the political actors could be forced to face, between the defence of bipolarism, but at the cost of an enduring and unceasing fragmentation of the party system, and the choice to drastically reduce this pathological state of fragmentation, but at the risk of leaving behind a bipolar framework of the political system, or at least placing it in jeopardy.

## ***2. Some Effects of the Recent Electoral Reform***

The 2005 reform marked a rupture in the recent history of the Italian electoral reforms, because it was the first time (excepting 1923 and 1953) that a new electoral law was approved by a governmental majority alone, against the will of opposition. This was a serious breach, motivated by barefaced partisan concerns and aimed at avoiding the centre-left's expected victory or, at least, to attenuate it, by sweeping away the plurality single-member districts, *i.e.* the format of electoral competition that has proved itself favourable in the past to the centre-left<sup>4</sup>. It could be tempting to

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<sup>4</sup> Following the analysis of Katz [2005:64], we may classify this reform among those having as their objective "damage control". Katz inquires into "the reasons why parties might change, or allow to be changed, the rules of a game they are winning", and he finds that such situations are not very frequent. The recent Italian electoral reform must then be placed in a completely different category, because it may be interpreted as a change in the rules of game having as its objective the attenuation of a predictable defeat, *i.e.*, as someone suggested, a strategy of "poisoning the wells" or "blowing the bridges", as happens during the retreat of a beaten army. D'Alimonte [2005: 273-274] had correctly predicted what the possible options and preferences of the centre-right coalition were, but he could not take into account the lack of

say that, as in other similar cases, a partisan electoral reform turned against its authors, since the Berlusconi coalition lost the elections anyway. Yet, *this is not so*. The first months of the Prodi government, and then the 2007 February crisis, showed how the main effects the authors expected from this law have actually been obtained. The government worked with difficulty and precariously. Surely, this is because it made some mistakes (particularly in the political handling of the budget bill), it had a slim Senate majority and its coalition was very large and heterogeneous, but also, and perhaps more tellingly, in virtue of some political consequences of the new electoral law. This has introduced new and strong incentives to further party system fragmentation and these incentives have been daily operating to shape and motivate the behaviours of the political actors. Indeed, it is now dominating what, in the Italian political language, is the well known “game of visibility”, or the “need for distinctiveness”. That is, the necessity, for each actor, to mark his own identity, to adopt *bonding strategies*<sup>5</sup> and cultivate his own consensus niches, so distinguishing himself even from his own coalition allies (and especially those nearest, along the right-left continuum).

Certainly, even the previous electoral system had a PR component, and also formerly, as we know, a “fragmented bipolarism” prevailed<sup>6</sup>. But the fact itself that three quarters of the MPs and all the senators were elected by plurality single-member districts, under common labels of the coalitions, was producing (in part by a learning effect after three elections) some major cohesion mechanisms and was beginning to create (especially among centre-left voters) a prevailing coalitional identity, compared with one’s party. Today, on the contrary, because of the new system, this process, though it was slow and closely fought, has been abruptly interrupted.

The new electoral system, really, is not an absolute novelty. It belongs to the same family of those electoral systems that were introduced first in 1993 for municipal and provincial, and then in 1995, for regional elections. That is, it is an electoral system with competition on a proportional basis and the assignment of a majority premium to the winning coalition. But this last variant, also in this same family, represents, so to speak, the “unworthy brother”!

The *rationale* of the current electoral law (but also, it should be stressed, of the systems in force for local and regional elections) is the search for the largest possible aggregation of lists inside the two major coalitions. This happens because every vote, even those cast for lists that remain under the provided formal thresholds, is considered fully useful and contribute to the total coalition votes. So,

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political scruples by which a majority expecting to lose has “upset the game table” and imposed an electoral reform with openly partisan purposes.

<sup>5</sup> About the distinction between *bonding* and *bridging* strategies, see Norris (2004: 8-11).

<sup>6</sup> There is by now abundant literature regarding the 1993 reform. To quote only two, Katz (2001) deals with the political process and legislative debate leading to the law’s approval, while D’Alimonte’s analysis (2005) may be considered the latest analysis of the 1993 Italian electoral law and its workings and effects, before it was changed, between September and December 2005.

predictably, in the pre-electoral coalition building, we were witness to an extreme proliferation of lists and micro-lists, and each of these negotiated its support for one of the two coalitions. So, we ended up counting thirteen centre-right and twelve centre-left lists<sup>7</sup>. Of course, it was quite clear that either not all of these lists would be able to get above the threshold of 2%, or they could exploit another odd novelty the law introduced, the so-called “best loser safety clause” (that is, the admission to the national seats allocation even for those two lists, one for each coalition, which came nearest the threshold, without getting over it)<sup>8</sup>. But, their contribution to the total coalition vote, could be, and actually was, decisive. In many cases, moreover, in exchange for this support, the effective leaders (in fact, the owners of a brand) of these minor lists asked, and obtained, a sure place inside the closed list of the major parties. So, we have experienced in Italy, with the recent elections, a new type of candidate: the “parasite candidate”, nested inside the list of another major party, to guarantee them a comfortable election.

The maximum enlargement of coalitions has exact consequences also on the voters’ behaviour, because such a broadening of the electoral offer induces, generally, a scattering effect in the distribution of votes and encourages voters to reward, to a certain degree, all, or almost all, the competing lists. This happens precisely because these scattered votes are perceived anyway as *useful*<sup>9</sup>. With electoral systems working thus, and with this logic of competition, the major parties, especially, are more “vulnerable” and tend to encounter grave difficulties in aggregating and maintaining their own electoral consensus level. Indeed, the larger and more structured parties, precisely because they are more “responsible” and their platforms are broader and more inclusive, are the most susceptible to pay an electoral price. And this may happen in reaction even to a few of their marginal issue-positions, which voters may more easily punish, given this model of competition. On the contrary, the minor political forces are structurally advantaged in so far as they may deliberately choose to turn to an electoral market niche and they may be rewarded exactly because those “scattered” votes are not at all “wasted”. This happens in so far as the choice to vote for the minor lists does not bring high *political costs*, for a voter who primarily, however, identifies himself with a coalition and does not want to run any risk of favouring the adversaries. The rationality of voter behaviour, in this framework, can be interpreted according to the well-known

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<sup>7</sup> In the Senate, in all Italian regions, there were 17 centre-left and 15 centre-right lists.

<sup>8</sup> The lists which took advantage of this clause are the centre-right list “Nuova Dc-Nuovo Psi” (0.7%), obtaining four MPs, and the centre-left list “Udeur”, the party of the Minister of Justice, Mastella (1.4%), obtaining ten MPs. The eight under-threshold centre-right lists received *circa* eight hundred thousand votes (totalling 2.3%), while the seven under-threshold centre-left lists received *circa* one million one hundred thousand votes (totalling 2.9%)

<sup>9</sup> During the electoral campaign, in many public meetings devoted to the illustrations of the new electoral rules, a very frequent question put by many voters concerned just this “usefulness” of their votes: “*Are the votes obtained by under-threshold lists wasted or, on the contrary, do they count all the same?*” Obviously, the answer could be nothing but reassuring, and this often implied an incentive to a more and more varied distribution of the votes, in the context of an electoral supply that offered solutions “for any taste whatsoever”.

Hirshman categories: *loyalty, exit, and voice*. The smaller the political cost of the “voice”, the greater the inclination to seize the electoral occasions to send “messages”.

Such an electoral system, certainly, renders the electoral competition highly *contestable* and *decidable*, producing an extreme polarization of the electoral race and strongly divisive issue campaigning, but at the same time it facilitates, without any limits, the entry of any small force into the electoral arena while offering them great opportunities to build and reinforce comfortable and advantageous niches. The “political market” seems to be very “open”, but in effect it is highly influenced by many, small political *rentiers*, tending to occupy all its possible interstices. And we certainly cannot say that the result is positive for the quality of Italian democracy<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, we can conclude that the present Italian electoral system entails *strong and structural incentives* to fragmentation, both in strategic coordination of political actors and in the voters’ choices. For the former, fragmenting and splitting *pay*; for the latter, scattering their votes among the “minor” lists has no real political costs. Usually, a “strategic” vote is defined as one that a voter gives to a candidate or a list that is not the first preferred, but has a greater likelihood to win; here, on the contrary, the “tactical” motivations of voters may bring them to vote for those lists that will obtain even very few, but potentially decisive votes<sup>11</sup>.

### **3. Electoral Laws and Italian Party System: from a “Fragmented” to an “Atomised” Bipolarism.**

It’s clear that fragmentation characterizing the Italian party system, as we have known it since 1993, is now going through its “highest stage”, with the political season opened by the 2006 elections and the new electoral law. We are passing from a “*fragmented*” to an “*atomised*” bipolarism. Yet, we seem to be drawing nearer a breaking-point. It can easily be supposed that the present extreme deconstruction of the Italian political system, cannot go on any longer. Something will have to happen.

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<sup>10</sup> For the definition of the conditions of electoral competition (contestability, availability, decidability and vulnerability), see Bartolini (2002). In our case, the electoral rules and the consequent offer format influence voters’ availability (that is, their propensity to voting switches), but they do it in a partial or “limited” way: as even the electoral results showed, there are many incentives to high *infra-coalitional* mobility, whereas *inter-coalitional* mobility remains less frequent and more difficult.

<sup>11</sup> As Cox (1997: 109) notes, in a LRPR (largest-remainders proportional system), one of the kind of strategic voting is that in “which voters abandon hopeless or submarginal lists (those that are expected neither to win a quota seat nor to be competitive for the last-allocated remainder seat)”. So, we may well say, comparatively, that, in a peculiar mixed-system, as in the current Italian one, there is *no incentive* to “strategic voting” (in usual terms), and therefore no incentive to minimize vote scattering, because even the “submarginal” lists’ votes *are anything but wasted*. The difference, obviously, consists in providing a majority seat premium for the winning coalition and, above all, the way it is assigned. But there is another feature to stress: Cox notes as another kind of strategic voting, in an LRPR system, is that in which voters may desert those lists that are “too strong” (p.120). From this point of view, the present Italian law favours, in effect, a similar reasoning: voters may have a lot of incentives to choose minor lists, insofar as they may “help” them (especially those, as Cox says, that are “on the edge between winning and losing the last-allocated seat”), but – and this is decisive in our case – with no fear whatsoever of wasting their votes and no weakening of that which remains, in all cases, their own coalition. About strategic voting in the “mixed” electoral systems, see Chiamonte (2005, pp. 147-205).

Now, from a theoretical perspective, an interesting question is this: is such fragmentation the product of a given institutional framework or, more simply, does it reflect a condition of Italian society and political culture? Does it express effective social and cultural cleavages or is it only a specific effect that institutional rules induce?<sup>12</sup>

Here we find the terms of a classic debate that has long engaged political scientists and that had its first expression around interpretations of “Duverger’s Laws”. “The controversy over whether electoral systems cause party system or vice versa”, to quote Cox, is a controversy between a “sociological” and an “institutionalist” perspective. Today, as Cox stressed, “the prospects for a limited reconciliation” between the two approaches, “are reasonably good”<sup>13</sup>. Naturally, this necessitates escaping from “opposite determinisms” and building specific analyses which are able, from time to time, to understand those mechanisms that shape a given causal relationship among electoral laws, party system and social cleavages.

Therefore, to come back to the Italian case and to the question raised above, it would be much too easy to answer “*both*”. It is at least necessary to try to define a more precise causal chain, recognizing the various stages through which the different factors specifically have been operating. Here, obviously, we can only touch on a possible answer, also because we stand before a great interpretative issue that involves the whole of Italian history of the last twenty years.

Without doubt, at the outset, there was a deep historical rupture, marking a new epoch, namely the events of 1989, and at national level, in the same years, the crisis of a whole economic and social development model, partly due to new European (especially, monetary) constraints. The crisis and transformation of the PCI and the success of the Northern League (the expression of an emerging territorial and social cleavage) were the first stages of a change in the party system that, like the collapse of a house of cards, weakened and then rapidly swept away all the old parties. After, and only after, the “clean hands” inquiries arose, to give the *coup de grace*.

Thus, in this context, the only factors acting for a new, though partial, restructuring and rebuilding of a party system, were precisely the new electoral rules, approved between 1993 and 1995, under the pressure of referendums<sup>14</sup>. The new rules might have been approved because of the existence of a vacuum, but they, in turn, became the main factors shaping a new party system. As we know, the

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<sup>12</sup> Not only the electoral rules, but also those for public financing of parties and regulations (very permissive) concerning the settlement of parliamentary groups represent a further strong incentive to fragmentation in Italy today. On the occasion of recent government crisis, the President of Republic has been obliged to consult *twenty-three* parliamentary groups, some of which are constituted by one or two MPs!

<sup>13</sup> Cox, 1997, pp. 17-19. The pages that Cox devotes to “the endogeneity of electoral structures” and the relationship between the “social cleavages and the party system” (14-27), offer many theoretical and methodological suggestions, also in order to face the issues we are dealing with here.

<sup>14</sup> The importance of the electoral systems introduced for municipal and regional elections should not be underestimated. Indeed, there is a strong inter-dependence between local and national tiers. If even local electoral systems foster a state of fragmentation, as has been happening in Italy, this certainly contributes to shape the format of national competition

electoral reforms were possible *only* by *embedding* the state of fragmentation caused by the explosion of the old party system into the new rules, but *since then*, this condition has become a *constraint* and the new electoral and institutional rules have, in turn, “locked” other possible developments. Potential new paths lead to dead ends. *Since then*, the electoral rules have decisively influenced the structure of party system. The new rules have created the basis for bipolar competition and opened the political space for Berlusconi’s intervention, which reorganizes the right side of the political chessboard. But, *since then*, fragmentation has weighed as a sword of Damocles upon the future of Italian politics. *Since then*, fragmentation has been self-reproducing, has entered a vicious circle, until even the last, feeble factor of cohesion, the plurality single-member constituencies, were removed, so producing the effects described above.

Today in Italy, two different approaches confront one another, both in the scientific debate and in current political discourses, about fragmentation and its possible remedies. Both re-echo precisely the classic terms of the discussion quoted above. There is, on the one hand, the “sociological”, or “historical-cultural” approach, on the other, the “institutionalist”. In particular, when many people speak about the electoral system, some attitudes appear very widespread, i.e. the claim of a “Primacy of Politics” and seeing the supposed theoreticians of “electoral engineering” with bored indifference and sceptical irony. In short, the accusation is that you “engineers” deceive you yourselves that it is possible to “*mettere le brache al mondo*” (or, “pin down a cloud”), because the parties are deep-rooted entities, with their own social and historical *raisons d’être*, and therefore electoral rules cannot modify this fact. As a corollary they often add that the party system is as fragmented as the society, and then you cannot conceive of changing this fact only by a “forcing” of the rules, by a top-down elimination of an irrepressible social and cultural pluralism. Therefore, they seem to assume, once again, that fragmentation of the political system is the result of an unavoidable historical heritage and a kind of *constraint* imposed by all of Italian history, and above all by the culture of its political classes, on any reform process today whatsoever.

On the contrary, the “institutionalist” replies that, of course, the fragmentation of the present party system is an historical heritage, but it is not an inevitable destiny. It is also (and today, *above all*) *the product* of a given set of electoral and institutional rules, by which it is fostered and exacerbated, as the effects of the present electoral law clearly show. The extreme degree of fragmentation of our “political market” is hardly understandable and justifiable by appealing only to the noble rationale of a social and cultural pluralism deeply characterizing Italian society. Such pluralism is, in fact, indubitable, but it can in no way explain the proliferation of parties and lists<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Cox (1997: 16): “a given set of social cleavages does not imply a unique set of politically activated cleavages, and hence does not imply a unique party system”. Moreover, not all the “*politically activated*” become “*particized*” cleavages. (p.26).



This has as its own root cause a more prosaic reality: the institutional incentives that make multiplying the electoral offer wholly “rational”. Hence, given certain conditions, it is only through a break in the continuity of electoral and institutional rules that a new phase of Italian politics will be able to start.

#### ***4. The Building of the New Democratic Party: Like Gulliver and the Lilliputians?***

These contrasting approaches set the stage also for what appears today to be one of the key developments in the Italian political system, namely the project to found the Democratic Party by unifying the two main centre-left parties (DS and “Margherita”).

Here we can discuss neither the basic purposes of such a project, nor the many difficulties that it is running into. Still, one argument among those asserted by supporters of this project concerns our theme more directly. Italy, it holds, -faces a great number of historical challenges, within the scenario characterized by the new forms of globalisation. There is the risk of a decline and increasing “marginality” of the country. A “big” new party, it is added, is necessary as a strategic answer to meet the needs of a whole new phase of national history. Such an objective, it is usually added, could not even be conceived, if a new political party, adequate to these historic tasks, were not built. This new party is also necessary as mainstay of a new political system and a new institutional order, capable of bearing the ambitions that a country like Italy should have.

In order for all this to happen, and this is the following step of the argument, it is usually added, or implied, that one of the more important pre-conditions is, exactly, a *drastic reduction of fragmentation*, that represents both cause and effect of a structural weakness in politics and institutions and their feeble capacity to govern and transform Italian society, as much as necessary today.

The scheme is therefore quite clear: to build a new party, unifying the fundamental centre-left forces, with the objective to create an actor with the (political, organizational and electoral) “critical mass” to be able to break the vicious circle of fragmentation and impotence of politics. In addition, building such a big party cannot but produce a chain of systemic effects, compelling the other sides of the party system to start similar processes of aggregation and simplification.

This outline has its own inner coherence, but it takes for granted a no less important detail. It is founded, ultimately, on a theoretical premise which it would be right to explain and discuss. That is, party system fragmentation seems to be assumed, once again, as a *datum*, as the result of an

historical heritage, and overcoming it is essentially considered possible only through the potency of politics and the strength of a political project. The assumption is that building this new unitary political entity is the main instrument which can attain the breaking-point of the vicious circle of fragmentation.

Yet, in the debate about this political project, the relevance of a congruent institutional strategy has only partially been taken into account. A suitable “politics of electoral systems”, which is able to create some essential pre-conditions for the same success of such a challenging project, has often failed. Is it possible to give it a real strength, if the institutional framework and electoral rules that are coherent with it are not clearly crafted, and if, at the same time, those rules that risk making this project totally fruitless, are not modified?

One point, indeed, appears clear: the *persistence* of electoral systems, as for the one present (founded upon proportional competition and then providing a majority premium to the winning coalition, thus accepting and fostering the current dominant logic of “fragmented”, or at worst “atomised” bipolarism), risks totally cancelling the aggregating and “centripetal” effects that the future party intends to trigger. Moreover, we can say that the destiny of this project seems strongly linked to the change or maintenance of the current electoral system. If the present law, substantially, remains unchanged, it is easy to imagine that the new party would risk ending up itself constantly “beleaguered” by various players and any number of single issues. We could say, with a literary image, that it could find itself like a Gulliver immobilized and “pinned” on the ground by thousands of strings and bonds, surrounded by a multitude of small, aggressive Lilliputians.....

Obviously, it is possible to argue (and supporters hope) that this project has enough political momentum to be able to “survive” any adverse environmental (institutional) circumstances. But this, to tell the truth, does not seem very probable. This political energy will not be sufficient, if the competitive framework does not change. Moreover, if the electoral system does not change, instead of a reassembling, a further breaking up process could be encouraged. The (*wholly rational*) temptation of further splits will become irresistible. Those inner components of the two parties that today oppose this project, would be encouraged to embark on an adventure to make some new *dwarf-party*, insofar as even the micro-forces have all their own reasons for existence and none of them could ever be accused of “betraying” their allies.

In sum, the vicissitudes of the new Democratic Party and their outcomes will be evaluated in the near future as an interesting field experiment. Is an “endogenous” reform of a party system possible? Will the building of this new party influence, by a shock wave, the whole political system, as predicted? And will it be possible to produce these systemic innovations without a preliminary,

or at least congruent reform of the institutional and electoral framework within which such a new political actor will find itself?

### ***5. The Electoral Reform: the Political Actors and their Preferences.***

It appears therefore quite clear that the Italian party and political systems are entering a phase characterized by high turbulence, great uncertainty and deep instability. It would not be right to claim that the future of the Italian political system is today only linked to a possible electoral reform. But it is indubitable that Italian politics today is at a crossroads and the electoral rules and their possible reforms are the key to this passage. And also there is no doubt about another fact: a reform that, *at last*, gives Italy a serious and coherent electoral system is the necessary, though not sufficient, condition to close the “never ending transition” (or better, at this point, after eighteen years from 1989 and fourteen from the first electoral reform, to declare a new phase of Italian political history open).

As we said above, today we find ourselves at the centre of a very complicated strategic situation. This is a real political game in which many actors participate, within which many moves and counter-moves interweave and, it is true to add, not always the “leading parts” show they have a clear view about their own future and that of Italian politics. Many people express a short-term rationality and, so to speak, live “from hand to mouth”.

Within the centre-left coalition, and in the Government’s action, the recent events show how many actors have been particularly inclined to an Italian version of the well-known “chicken game”. The narrow electoral victory, in a common prediction, ought to favour a greater cohesion of the coalition, though it was broad and variegated. But precisely *this is not occurring*, as the facts show. Surely, nobody wanted to make the Government fall, but everybody, and above all the smallest parties, tended “to tug at the rope”, seeking to compel the other to “give up” an instant before the clash is irreparable. Everybody gave reassurances about their intention not to really break the rope, but naturally, by dint of tugging, the rope was fraying more and more, and at last, as we have seen, it even broke. A parliamentary accident, especially at Senate, was every day round the corner and indeed it happened.

This condition of permanent bargaining is certainly an effect of the competitive logic induced by the new electoral system, but it is also, in large measure, the consequence of a reasonable expectation. Those who act in such a way believe, evidently, that the next elections will take place with the same rules, and that no substantial reform of the present law appears possible. And therefore, what prevails is strictly a *bonding strategy*, the search for an intensive competitiveness, especially among the closest parties in the political space. In particular, this has been happening

daily among the three parties of the extreme left (Refoundation, Italian Communists and Greens), which are grappling with a difficult coexistence between a “governmental” and a “grass roots” politics. But this logic prevails in the behaviours of all “marginal” forces, even the centrist and moderate ones.

The political crisis which occurred on 21 February seems to have been overcome, but the issue of electoral reform will certainly occupy an increasingly prominent place on the political agenda. Even the centre-right, though it may now have the upper hand in case of new elections, cannot but consider the fact that to use the present electoral system again could very probably create an analogous situation, especially in the Senate, with reversed roles, and reproduce a condition of governmental paralysis.

But, at this point, what are the different strategies challenging one another today in the field of a possible, and now even more necessary reform?

Prior to the crisis, the “Olive tree” parties declared as their first preference a “return” to a majoritarian system (and specially to a two-round French model), but they have not really pushed this proposal with much conviction and have not expressed, at least not yet, the intention to impose it as the one of the whole coalition. The “veto players”, so to speak, at once “jumped up”, as soon as such a model was proposed, even with a certain shyness. For the minor parties of the centre-left coalition, the present electoral law, or similar models, in fact, are working very well; at best they might allow some slight tinkering only to avoid the referendum (chiefly feared by them).

The position of Communist Refoundation party, a medium-size party by Italian standards, is different. Faithful to its traditionally proportionalistic political culture, this party has always declared its preference for the German system, but really it considers the present model acceptable.

In the centre-right the situation is equally complicated, but some actors seem to have a greater clarity about the connection between the possible models of an electoral reform and the future pattern of the Italian party system.

The UDC (Union of Christian Democrats) has declared the House of Freedoms experience to be “closed” and is now managing an autonomous opposition to the centre-left Government and demarcating its difference from the former allies. The openly declared objective of this centrist party is the overcoming of Italian bipolarism: this experience is judged by this time fully unsuccessful and “unsustainable” for Italian society. The project, consequently, is to build a neo-centrist perspective. The requirement, or better the hope, is that Berlusconi will sooner or later give up his leadership role. Without Berlusconi’s unifying glue, decisive masses of moderate voters could “come free” and potentially be attracted to this new centre. Wholly coherently and

“rationally”, and this should be stressed, the UDC declares its preference for the German electoral model, respecting integrally the threshold of 5%, without any sweetening, so to say, “*all’italiana*”. On the contrary, the right-wing AN (National Alliance) position is totally opposite and symmetrical. Fini’s party too is waiting for Berlusconi “to leave the stage” at last, but its project is completely different, focussed as it is on a desire to unify AN and Forza Italia, creating a new large centre-right party, whose natural candidate for the leadership would be Fini himself. In this case too, preferences about the electoral system are entirely coherent and rational. The AN wants, above all, to save a bipolar competitive pattern, because any PR system, without any majority bonus able to “tighten” the two coalitions, could isolate the party on the right-side of the Italian political spectrum. The AN could even accept a return to a majoritarian system, but considers in any case the maintenance of an electoral system like the current one congruent with its strategy. There is great uncertainty in Forza Italia, since its prospects are linked to the future of Berlusconi’s leadership. Nevertheless, in matters of electoral reform, one preference clearly prevails: strong opposition to any return to a majoritarian system. Forza Italia is firmly convinced (and the evidence, in effect, does not belie it) that its voters have a real idiosyncrasy in regard to any model that implies plurality single-member districts and a two-round system. And therefore, waiting for the “post-berlusconian” era to begin, an electoral system like the present one (deliberately wanted by this party) corresponds perfectly to the tactical needs of this political phase, *i.e.* the weakening and fall of the Prodi Government. Finally, to complete the picture, let us consider the Northern League: as it is rational to expect, for a party characterized by a high territorial concentration of its voters, the League is today above all worried about avoiding the next electoral referendum, with a rather indifferent attitude towards the possible models of an electoral reform, *as long as* they save, of course, its levels of representation.

#### ***6. The Government Crisis of February 2006 and the Possible Strategic Scenarios.***

Given this outline, the chances that a large bipartisan majority will approve a new electoral law are *quite small*. Above all, it seems quite unlikely that a coherent and organic reform, able to introduce some serious incentives to a possible stabilization and reinforcement of a new political system, will pass. On the contrary, the above described picture of the parties’ preferences portrays a typical situation in which many actors can exert an effective blackmail power against any reform proposal they believe may cause them any damage.

So, it is very difficult to imagine the future developments. Nevertheless, if we reassemble the many pieces of this puzzle again, the possible alternatives emerge with sufficient clarity. A central feature seems to characterize this picture: a trade-off between bipolarism and fragmentation is distinctly evident. Namely, on the one hand, to save bipolarism, it could be necessary to accept a more and

more pathological condition of fragmentation; or, on the other hand, to overcome such an unsustainable condition, the only way that could be followed is a complete “return” to a *true* (non-mixed) proportional system, by one of its possible variants, able to reduce fragmentation in virtue of a set of legal and/or implicit high non-evadable thresholds, and/or a reduction of the magnitude of districts and other “technical” arrangements moving in this direction. But, in this latter case, the bipolar pattern of the political system could be seriously threatened or swept away altogether.

The Prodi Government has overcome a dangerous crisis and is resuming its tiring journey. It is very difficult to predict the course of the events, but we may try to suppose two different strategic situations. In this framework, the decisive variable is the Prodi Government’s capacity to survive.

The first scenario assumes a Prodi Government crisis (this time, *definitive*). In this case, since the possibility of a “large coalition” or a new government supported by a different majority is negligible, the only solution would be setting up a “technical government” promoting an electoral reform and dealing with early elections. Yes, but *which* reform? Within this crisis scenario, we will be able to measure the political forces’ capacity to break out of a short-term rationality and look at the future of the Italian political system with a broader and more conscious view. In particular, the future Democratic Party (which, at that point, should already exist), *could* and *should* show its own farsightedness and capacity to risk, with regards to the dramatic choice between the two terms of the above-described trade-off: to save bipolarism, but accepting, once again, the persistence of an unrestrainable fragmentation and the confirmation of an alliance with the same irresponsible “dwarf –parties”; or, on the contrary, to assume that a drastic reduction of fragmentation represents at last an absolute priority for Italian democracy (and also for its own future, as a party)?

On the other hand, if this scenario is realized, surely the greater responsibility should be attributed to fragmentation itself and to minor coalition partners’ behaviours. So, would be it reasonable, for the future Democratic Party, once again, to “reward” such unreliable allies and “bind itself hand and foot” accepting their blackmail powers? At that moment, the possibility of an agreement between the major parties of the two coalitions *against* the minor, by the approval of an electoral reform which assumes as its primary objective radically cutting down fragmentation, could be seriously taken into account. The Spanish model, in this eventuality, could appear as the best solution<sup>16</sup>, since the German model could easily be “detoured” and reproduce once again high fragmentation levels. Moreover, whereas adoption of the German model would mean the likely end of the Italian bipolar experience, delivering a new pivotal role to the neo-centrist forces, the Spanish one could induce a

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<sup>16</sup> The Spanish model is beginning to enter the Italian political and scientific debate fully and arouse much interest, as a possible solution to the tangled knots of electoral reform. Indeed, the well-known characteristics of this system (low average district magnitude, adoption of the formula D’Hondt, formal threshold at 3% in each district and, above all, the absence of any nationwide upper tier, without any majority bonus) could well adapt to the needs of a renewed political system.

strong reduction of fragmentation, allow a good representation of those political forces with a territorially concentrated electorate and, at the same time, produce strong incentives to a bipolarisation of competition, favouring the two greater parties. In a possible future scenario, within which there are, on the left of the party system, the new Democratic Party and, on the right, the new united Freedoms Party, this electoral model could make for good stabilization effects. But, certainly, we would go back to building *post*-electoral coalitions and then bipolarism would be put at risk, at least in its forms known so far, as a bipolarism “built” and “armoured” by the constraints of the majority premium.

In sum, this crisis scenario would end up proving right all those (for instance, many people in the economic establishment) who, already today, declare the “unsustainability” of *this* bipolarism, since it delivers a decisive conditioning power to the “extreme” forces of the political alignment (but truly, today, the blackmail power is delivered to all “marginal” forces, even the “centrist” ones). In addition, if this first scenario, which was dangerously near once already, were realized, it could offer some analogies with the 1992-1993 crisis. Once again, an incisive electoral reform, able to restructure the party system in a meaningful way, could result only from a “catastrophic” break up of the political equilibrium.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to consider the scenario just described as a mere prediction of future events. Pointing out a possible course of events is already in itself a political action and produces political consequences. And we know how, in political actors’ strategic behaviours, a prominent role is also played by *expectations*, *expected effects* of one choice or another, and also *threats* which actors may make towards others. So, it is possible (and in effect, this is already happening) to suppose that the “Olive tree” forces, faced with the wearing down of the Government’s action and confronted with the veto powers which coalition partners tend to exert with a more and more scot-free conduct, may show the above described scenario itself to be nothing more than a *threat*. Hence this may already be producing a *deterrent effect*, which could persuade the minor parties to pursue a wiser conduct. The next referendum itself may play, in this phase, an important role, as “a loaded gun”, pointed both at Parliament, to press it for the approval of a reform, as well as at the minor parties, so strongly worried about its possible effects, as to induce them to see reason. In recent months, the main forces of the centre-left coalition have often endured the partners’ veto powers, and have entrusted to Prodi the patient work of mediation (with feeble results, as we have seen). But, perhaps, some more firm reaction is emerging and the February crisis itself may be interpreted as a turning point. In particular, faced with the increasing divisions and tensions inside the majority about as crucial a policy arena as the international role of Italy, the main coalition reformist forces first fired a warning shot to the allies, trying to stop the war of

attrition and then sought a parliamentary “showdown”<sup>17</sup>. But the “chicken game” was still going on (or better, not all the single MPs of the extreme left had understood in time what the right moment to stop themselves was). So, the clash was unavoidable. The sudden crisis of the Government has created bewilderment, and also a real fear, precisely in those political sectors that had played with fire more. Here we meet again the strategic role of threats in the interactions of political actors. Somewhat paradoxically, only the *fear* of a catastrophic scenario could at last bring them to a greater cohesion, or at least to a lower-intensity infra-coalitional conflict. And it is perfectly clear that the “fear” is not only to hand Italy to Berlusconi on a platter, but also to consider the consequences of a possible electoral reform. The claim that often recurs is, precisely, “we can’t go on like this...”, and the question implied, once again, is this: is it still right or possible to save bipolarism? And how? Or, at this point, is “cutting” fragmentation the real priority?

*The second scenario* instead predicts that the Prodi Government, after the danger passed, will be able to go on with its program, despite many difficulties. So in this situation, since many political actors agree it is opportune to avoid the referendum and to improve, as much as possible, the present electoral law, we may suppose there will be a patient search for compromise, seeking the necessary consensus or, at least, the non belligerence of *all* the political actors. Yes, but once again, *which* electoral reform will it be possible to approve in such circumstances?

The Prodi Government, in recent months, had tried to go down this narrow and insidious road, entrusting to the Minister of Institutional Reforms the task of verifying the existence of a “lowest common denominator” among the various political forces, in order to eliminate at least the worst facets of the present law. But the outcome of this search anticipates a further dilemma: either a quite unsatisfactory solution (by marginal touches, which perhaps would not be sufficient to avoid the referendum) or, if the changes were even a little more incisive upon the *status quo*, once again the various veto powers would come into play<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> See, for an instance, an interview of the Foreign Minister D’Alema, given twenty days before the crisis exploded, after an earlier parliamentary incident: “I ask the allies for cohesion and sharing. *I ask them to lower the flags of distinctiveness*”. And later: “the ancient evil of our country derives from a difficult coexistence between the majority system logic and a widespread culture of proportionality...I am convinced that, for all of us, the first democratic duty is to defend the government, to work for its endurance and to increase its force. *Otherwise, the danger is to wipe out bipolarism...If the Prodi Government topples, the whole bipolar pattern of the country could be carried off...* We must take up the political system reforms again...the main objective is to create mechanisms that allow for the making of stronger and more homogeneous government majorities. I am still convinced that the best solution would be a majority two-round system...The present law has transformed the majoritarian system into a lottery. *We can’t go on like this...*”. (“*Basta liti, o il governo cadrà*”, *La Repubblica*, 30 January 2006). [*my Italics*]

<sup>18</sup> This would probably be the case if some proposals elaborated by R. D’Alimonte (2006) were brought to the negotiation table. As the author wrote, “today, this is the menu of possible electoral reforms, *given the existing political conditions*” (in 2006 autumn), not those reforms that would be necessary. But equally, they are proposals that cannot be evaluated as “minimal” and would probably be opposed by many actors. In particular, one reaction could be expected against the proposal to consider no longer valid, for the national total sum of a coalition, those votes cast for the under 2% threshold lists, and to abolish the “best losers safety clause”. An adequate discussion of these proposals, and the



So, if the method remains the search for a general agreement, what will actually be possible to obtain is not some effective *reduction* of the fragmentation, but only *a brake* on its further development. In sum, if all the actors must have a say in the matter, we might have a situation in which only the access to some new players is barred, with all the present players being able quietly to continue their game. But today, will this be enough to save the Italian political system, or Italian democracy itself, from the significant dangers to which it is exposed?

So, we are coming back to the starting point and it is difficult to imagine a way out. Nevertheless, the nearly disastrous crisis in February has perhaps rendered the political forces, at least the more responsible ones, more conscious of how unsustainable the situation is. The real possibility that, at any moment, a crisis scenario could turn up, ensures that electoral reform remains at the top of the Italian political agenda. Faced with the risk of a substantial and dangerous paralysis, will the major parties have the courage to abandon the search for an impossible unanimity? Will they be able to “break” with a part, at least, of their current allies, to impose a new electoral law that may be, at last, serious, coherent and organic? And will it ever be possible to make a “knight move”, so politically creative as to unblock this stalemate?

## **6. Conclusions**

In this paper I have tried to offer an interpretation of the present phase of Italian politics, from the perspective of the debate about electoral reform, in the light of the very bad results that the present electoral law have produced. We have also seen how, around this issue, the different strategies of the various political actors are interweaving, but we have also seen how such strategies are strongly influenced by the possibility itself that a reform may materialize and which model of reform may eventually be designed. We have then seen how entangled the strategic scenarios are and how rather they describes a typical field around which it is possible to measure and verify the different theoretical approaches to the classical questions of the relationship between electoral rules and party systems: the role of electoral rules as systems of incentives and constraints on political behaviours; the link between electoral rules and voters’ and political actors’ strategic adaptation, coordination and learning mechanisms; the logic of coalition and the role of veto players, and so on.

In Italy electoral engineering, today if ever, is certainly not an academic exercise (and actually, in this period, almost all Italian political scientists, and especially the experts of electoral systems, are working intensively, by writing in the newspapers, discussing in public debates and/or participating in various think-tanks). I would like to conclude with some advice, particularly addressed to non

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ways through which they could change the current pattern of the competition, as we described above, would require far more space than is possible here.

Italian scholars: it could be well worth paying attention to Italian politics in the coming months and following its developments beyond the usual commonplaces. Scholars could find an excellent case-study here and test some of the assumptions on which political science's theories have for long been based.

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