

# ASTRID - RESOCONTI DI CONVEGNI

SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT LUISS "GUIDO CARLI"

## Governing Western Democracies

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Rome

**Resoconto a cura di Mario DI CIOMMO**

**Giovanni Orsina**, Deputy Director of LUISS School of Government, chaired the panel and introduced the debate: “the seminar aims to compare Italy with other countries, in order to better understand what happens in our peculiar country. [...] This seminar would like to propose a new approach. This debate would like to have a meaning for Italian debate, by taking into account Europe, since we are in a multilevel governance”.

Putting together Parliament (representation) and Government (decision) is one of the most relevant problems of political modernity. Italy did not solve this problem, while in other countries the problem has been (at least) faced. In Italy we have been speaking about constitutional reforms for years and years (a quarter of century), coming to nothing, notwithstanding long discussions. Proposing foreign models – “let’s do in the French way”, “let’s do in the German way”, etc. – represented a distorted way to present the issue to public opinion.

**Governing France: Still Semi-Presidential Government - Yves Mény** (European University Institute)

French system is not semipresidential but hyperpresidential. It is not a system to export: it cannot fit Italy at all. Italy is looking for stability and centrality while French system is excellent for transition to democracy, fitting well times of institutional crisis (it answered to 1939 crisis). Therefore, it is not adapted for a social crisis.

French system is characterized by ambiguity, that is a quality because it gives flexibility. Even cohabitations worked well in times of crisis. The system proved versatility and a fecund ambiguity. Another characteristic is the capacity to evolve and change: referendum, in this view, is dead (thanks also to the use Chirac made of it); there has been a continuous transformation of the constitutional court (*Conseil constitutionnel*); there have been many evolutions through practices and conventions.

Which is the “Fifth Republic” genetic code? First: the obsession for leadership, crucial as in USA (but with cultural differences). The reason why it fits well France is because of French constitutional monarchic history. As mayors, who are in France as monarchs (each mayor elects municipal council: they are his followers). Second: the obsession for efficiency and speed: the power of executive, pressing the Parliament, is irresistible. Third: the weakness of checks and balances: Italy has many, while France has not any. Unions are not consulted and they have no power to decide. Fourth: France is not centralised as it seems: local powers are quite strong. The State is a reference for every citizen: France is not addicted.

In conclusion, French system is not transferrable.

### **Governing Germany: Still Chancellorship? - Thomas Poguntke** (Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf)

Germany is characterised by the primacy of foreign policy, by parties’ control and electoral appeal. The party system is dominated by the decline of large parties, fragmentation and increasing volatility. Significant party changes are occurring: leaders are bypassing their parties, interacting directly with their electorate through media, membership referenda, plebiscitary assemblies (instead of decision-making assemblies). The Chancellor governed through party and the party through the Chancellor. In case of a weak Chancellor, the party governs. Who fills the void in these days? Public opinion’s expectations are for a strong executive leadership.

The resources of German Chancellor are:

1. Chancellor Office, that has substantial personnel resources, is the centre of government and is capable of monitoring what departments do;
2. executive bias due to the supranationalism and EU integration, that shifted the centre of gravity of governing towards the executive, with a policy formulation which is more and more controlled by the chief executive;
3. the practice of the German Chancellorship. If Merkel initially refused to provide strong leadership, later she had to decide a fairly substantial change in her approach to leadership, by adopting a conflictual style in symbolic policies as immigration and nuclear power. The paradox of German Chancellorship is made both of public opinion’s expectations of a strong leadership and resistance to the consensual structure of policy process procedures.
4. In this context parties and Parliament can only agree.

Presidential-style leadership is strongly expected by public opinion, but it could be very risky.

**Governing the United Kingdom: How the Premiership Works? - Paul Webb** (Sussex University)

The Prime Minister works in a majoritarian political system. The system is strong and cohesive and disciplines Parliament's support for the Government. This model had many changes in recent years. British Prime Minister is at the apex of a system of power but countervailing forces always existed: the tradition of the Cabinet Government and the tradition of Party Government (even Thatcher and Blair discovered it!). When the leader becomes not appealing for the electorate, the contrast with the Party becomes strong.

Cameron, today, looks like a "predominant" Prime Minister (PM). PM's institutional resources are: "royal prerogative" powers (formally delegated by the Crown, through which he leads Government's appointments, dismisses Ministers, etc.), capacity to run a Prime Minister department, ability to set the agenda via management of news, management of cabinet system. There is now a substantial institutional capacity in its two component offices (PM Office and Cabinet Office) and the potential for actors within them to exercise power has been enhanced. Other factors that shape PM's power are linked to his personal resources: personal reputation, skill and ability, association with actual or anticipated success, public popularity, high standing in party and government, parliamentary arithmetic.

Can Cameron be a predominant PM? He is a modern "presidential" media figure; he had a personalised campaign strategy; he has no significant intra-party opposition yet; he is working as a strong manager of Cabinet and party; practices of "sofa government" are quite widespread. However, first, Cameron must manage a coalition and not just a party (hence the institutionalisation of this aspect through the Coalition Committee), second, he has to face the Lib-Dem presence in all departments and all cabinet committees. Hence, two question-marks: will this lead to the return of a Cabinet Government? Will the backbenchers remain loyal? There are areas of political conflict (EU, social policy, electoral reform) and thwarted ambitions can breed resentment. Moreover, this is already a record-breaking Parliament for backbench rebellion against the Government.

To conclude, Cameron has many of the attributes to be a predominant PM as Blair. The austerity context and the need to manage a coalition could undermine his public popularity and authority within party and coalition.

**Governing the US: Still Presidential Government? - Bruce E. Cain** (University of California, Berkeley)

Even if Obama did many things, Americans are not satisfied by him.

President's domestic constitutional powers are based more on practices and style than on constitutional guarantees. So, the answer to the question is "yes, but very constrained". His constitutional domestic powers are always relatively weak. Bush and Cheney tried to change things and acquired more powers vis-à-vis the Congress: they tried to arrive to a "muscular cowboy Presidency".

The power of Presidency depends on what you want to make of it. In recent years most Presidents did not control executive and legislative branches, with Congress as a check to Presidency's powers. This seems to be the new normality. In Senate, filibustery is used very constantly. Another constrain is represented by media: they are not controllable and many of them can be hostile. A third factor is polarisation. Congressional leaders' role is becoming less internal and more external as legislative leaders. They can count votes and can be very important to get votes. Obama today has to face the Republican Congress and filibustery in the Senate.

The President is not so powerful also because he has no control on economics: who decides today is Bernanke. But he was elected by Bush! These are relevant constraints. Maybe Obama overestimated the support he had from elections, and its meanings: it was a protest vote. As soon as he started to take decisions, many got angry.

Today we still have in the USA a Presidentialism, but a constrained one, in particular in domestic matters.

### **Governing the EU: Which Role for National Governments? - Amie Kreppel (University of Florida)**

Member States' participation in EU governance has a bifurcated structure: a "Janus face".

The core political structure of the EU is characterised by a separatism of system of powers and a mitigated federalism (EU is a truly federal system). This structure is very dissimilar from national States' models. Today Council of Minister has the legislative power, while the European Council has the executive. This distinction is now very clear thanks to the Lisbon treaty, that gives, in the long run, the opportunity to make more and more clear the differences between these two branches. Relationships between Member States' governments and the EU can be classified as intergovernmentalism, supranationalism or hybrid (transnational or mitigated federalism).

The intergovernmentalist interpretation is based on the following elements: the rule of unanimity for Foreign and Security Policy, treaty revisions and core political areas. The supranational one on: the large number of policy areas under the primary or partial jurisdiction of the EU; a widespread use of qualified majority voting and a concomitant loss of national sovereignty; direct rights for citizens. The system of governance is based on the separation of powers and the federal nature of

the system. Federal, even if there are aspects that are not conformed to “standard” structural/institutional models.

**Debate introduction - Giuliano Amato** (President Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana)

It is necessary to be careful in comparing systems of government and even more in transposing them. It’s very easy to make simplifications. Every institutional system is the output of a peculiar history and culture. And the performance of every system depends on the context. Within limits you might transfer some ingredients but the result depends on the context. You may adapt them in specific points.

What is very interesting is trying to understand why our systems have to face similar difficulties. Something has changed the context where our systems work:

1. first, the overall system has become more and more complex because of the interconnections among States, between EU and other players (G 20 etc.);
2. Second, taking decisions is more and more tough, both for domestic reasons and for fragmentation of societies (due to the lack of common views and values). “E pluribus unum” has become more and more far from reach.

Great changes occurred in our history. Before our democratic contemporary regimes, our societies were based on very strict social ties (family) and political life on national states and political parties, that represented and filtered different interests in conflict with each other. Now there is an increasing interaction between institutions and institutional leaders because you reach your electors through media with a direct personal exchange. This kind of dialogue - based on a direct relationship between the leader and electors – is not rational at all. In media you have to be rapid, emotional, clear cut. And decisions are taken on an emotional basis! There is no more discussion on reasons and items in order to explain in a clear and rational way (think on Swiss campaign against minarets or US one against Obama’s health reform: both irrational and based on lies). Therefore leaders are scared!

This is happening in our countries in different ways and with different results. What we need now is to build bridges for these cleavages, restoring what some scholars called “deliberative democracy”. Democracy is not voting, but discussing and finding answers to make decisions. With citizens, and not fans opposing one against each other.

The issue is: democracy is still the best solution we invented. But as it is now it simply does not work.

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Useful links

- [School of Government Luiss “Guido Carli”](#)
- School of Government Luiss “Guido Carli” – [“Governing democracies”](#)