ARTICLES

# The rhetoric of reform revealed (or: If you bite the ballot it may bite back)

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## Abstract

The article assesses the effects, direct and indirect, intended and unintended, of the 1993 national electoral reform and the results of the 1994 general elections in Italy. It shows that the new system is not an eccentric compromise, and that those who forecast either its unworkability or its evil consequences were mistaken. However, in evaluating the success of the reform with respect to the ambitions which were held for it, it concludes that the reform was a predictable failure. The article then explores the role played by the electoral reform in the unexpected electoral success of the Polo della Libertà, the emergence of Forza Italia, and the ability of Berlusconi to strike a compromise with two such different parties as La Lega and the AN.

## Keywords

Italy, politics, electoral systems, electoral reform.

*'Elettori! Elettrodi! Siamo qui per cominciare la nostra campagna elettorale. Il nostro partito si è sempre battuto per la donna, per l'omo, per la pianta, per il minerale. Noi vogliamo la crescita 'stantanea di tutta la gente. Siamo il partito del pinzimonio. Noi siamo per l'uninominale . . . Secca! All'inglese! Con lo scorporo maggioritario, a doppio turno, a turno unico! Senza ballottaggio. Col proporzionale! Col ripristino del proporzionale sul ballottaggio dello scorporo dell'uninominale! Col 25% alla camera e il 20 al Senato! Noi si vuole il quorum! Il quorum del referendum! L'una tantumme! Bisogna vedé cché dicano i Probiviri. Se i Probiviri dican di sì, sarò super partes all'exit poll . . .'*

*(from Roberto Benigni's TV show, August 1995)*

## 1 Introduction

Throughout the past few years, the UK – a nation whose political system has been regarded with admiration by many for over a century and where elections are conducted on the basis of the plurality system[1] in single-member constituencies – has heard voices raised with unprecedented vigour calling for a reform of the domestic electoral system towards some form of proportional

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representation (PR). Meanwhile, Italy, home to one of the purest PR systems ever established, experienced equally vigorous demands for this system to be replaced with one based on single-member constituencies, with elections conducted on the basis of either the plurality system or the double ballot.[2] Italians were generally ignorant of the debate taking place in the UK, while in the UK, only those who sought to defend the plurality system from reform invoked the Italian experience, as a means of demonstrating the faults of the PR system.

Electoral systems are powerfully inert, tending to change very seldom, for one very simple reason. Those who have the capacity to instigate reform, namely those in government, are those who are able to win under the prevailing electoral system, and so have no motive to change that system. Likewise, those who have the motive to seek a reform to the electoral system, namely those who have proved to be incapable of winning under the rules of the prevailing system, lack the political power necessary to force that change. Yet in Italy, the demand for electoral reform breached the boundaries of minority passions to become a live political issue, and the reform, or at least *a* reform, was introduced. The purpose of this article is to offer a review of some of the effects, foreseen and actual, expected and unexpected, of introducing the new Italian electoral system.

## 2 The uncertainties of electoral reform

Many criteria may be, and have been, employed to judge the relative merits of the various competing electoral systems: the fairness of the voting procedure, the transparency of the method by which votes are aggregated, and the tendency of the electoral system to deliver stable and effective governments. The point of such criteria is obviously to enable us to reach a determinate conclusion about which electoral system would be best. However, such determinate judgements can only be reached if we restrict our attention to one given criterion – say, the fair contribution of each person's vote to the outcome – and to one given national context – say, contemporary Italy, with its current social cleavages, distribution of party support, and demographic characteristics. Both restrictions must be in place if we are to hope realistically for a determinate conclusion. In the abstract, the idea that there is an optimal electoral system is nonsensical: there is no system which might maximally satisfy all the reasonable criteria of fairness and governability that may be applied to evaluate an electoral system; and there is no electoral system which can be relied upon to satisfy one given criterion to the same extent in all contexts. To state the matter crudely, a system might enhance fairness but at the cost of the stability and effectiveness of the resulting government; and while a system might provide stable government in one country, there is no guarantee that the same system would deliver equivalent results in another.

In order to have any chance of determining which system it would be best to adopt for a given country, one must first understand the shape of that country's political context, and also decide which of the potential values a system might deliver are to be privileged. It is, therefore, difficult to maintain in theory that any electoral system will *inevitably*, at all times and in all places, be inadequate. Writing shortly before the Italian general election of 1994 (*L'Unità*, 23 March 1994), Gianfranco Pasquino appears to deny this difficulty, asking rhetorically how anyone could deny that the Italian variant of PR was the worst of all possible electoral systems. But, without wishing to deny the severity of the problems of Italian politics in the postwar period, we are not convinced that the case for the inadequacy of the *electoral* system in place over this time can be regarded as quite so self-evident. In simple terms, the PR system previously employed in Italy tended strongly to promote the value of electoral fairness to the detriment of governmental efficiency. That is to say, elections in Italy tended to result in a parliament the composition of which was highly representative of the preferences expressed by the electorate, but tended also to result in weak and unstable governments. However, it is unreasonable to suggest that such a state of affairs is, in all places and at all times, undesirable; in other words, even if this were the inevitable result of this electoral system, it would still be an open question whether or not this system should be employed. Furthermore, even in order to establish the more cautious claim that this variant of PR was inadequate and undesirable for postwar Italy, Pasquino would need to prove that had there been a different electoral system over the same period, Italians would have reaped political and social benefits which were denied them under PR. Not only this, but he would need to be able to maintain that these benefits were denied to Italians as a *direct* result of the use of PR in deciding elections, and not as a result of some contingent factor. In fact, it is reasonable to suggest that had Italy employed a version of the plurality system throughout this time, the results would have included a Democrazia cristiana (DC) which was not merely dominant, but hegemonic; and if it is reasonable to expect that the power and influence of the DC would have been even more robust, monolithic and pervasive than in fact it was, it is likewise reasonable to suppose that a further result of the plurality system would have been significant social conflict and instability. If the Italian variant of PR is to be regarded as having been, or having become, inadequate, this view must constitute the conclusion to an argument; it cannot be presented as a self-evident truth.

There is, then, considerable (and justified) uncertainty surrounding the judgement as to which electoral system it is appropriate for any given country to adopt at any given time. An indirect sign of this uncertainty can be found in the range of systems employed by the various European nations in the course of the last elections to the European Parliament. Across the *twelve* member states, some *thirteen* different electoral systems were used, with the United Kingdom achieving the possibly unique distinction of having two systems operating within its borders for a single election.[3] If there genuinely were an optimal electoral system, this situation would be even more incongruous than it is. Furthermore, if such

an optimal system existed, the controversies surrounding the adoption and reform of a system, and the decision-making mechanisms which led to one system being selected, would be of greatly reduced interest. If an optimal system existed, the only issue of any interest would be the need to explain why a country did not employ that system. Such an explanation would be almost exhausted by pointing to the factors we mentioned above which lead to any given electoral system being powerfully inert.

In the absence of an optimum towards which to aim, however, the decision-making mechanisms which lead to the selection of one system over another become indeterminate, rich with potential hazards, varied and peculiar. The decision-making processes of electoral reform become of interest in themselves, independent of the particular outcomes they produce. An optimal electoral system might serve as a determinate focus for the debate and a shared goal for the protagonists, leaving undecided only the means of reaching that end, of overcoming the tendency to inertia inherent in an established, albeit suboptimal, system. Lacking such a shared goal, the ultimate decision to reform the electoral system lacks a single rationale. In this context, the mechanisms which guide the decisions fall, in practice, into four categories. One common factor is the *partial* rationality of one interest group or party, which hopes to gain some electoral advantage through a particular system, and is either sufficiently powerful or sufficiently persuasive to others to achieve the reform they seek. A second set of mechanisms in the selection of a reform consists of *pre*-rational motives, such as the adherence to a value such as fairness, which protagonists believe can be furthered by the reform they seek. A third category consists of *ir*rational motivations; one such motivation is derived from the belief that the political context of any given country can be reproduced simply by imitation of its electoral system. This motivation of *pseudo-imitation* was central to shaping the outcome of the Italian reform process. The final category covers 'oblique' motivations, that is motivations not directly connected with any interest in which system is selected. One such motivation might be the desire to avoid social unrest, where this is believed to be the likely result in the absence of a reform.

Generally speaking, when an electoral reform is successfully implemented, its generation can be traced to a conflation of all four of these types of motive. For this reason, it is extremely difficult to separate the arguments in favour of the reform into distinct motivations for rational analysis. Instead, electoral reforms tend to generate debates of heated controversy, and discussions often degenerate into competing rhetorical flourishes. The reform process in Italy has been a model example, as humorously illustrated by Roberto Benigni. The various parties interested in reform have deployed their rhetoric and obscured their underlying motives, and their competition has managed to produce a situation in which Italians have their votes counted by four different electoral systems, depending upon whether they are voting in European, municipal, regional or general elections. This state of affairs can only encourage attempts at further reform, ironically in the name of clarity.



## 3 The new Italian electoral system

In this article, we shall be concerned only with the effects of that electoral system selected for general elections, for determining the composition of the *Camera* and the *Senato* and the formation of the national government. We shall consider the other electoral reforms only to the extent that they have either affected, or been affected by, the reform of the national electoral system. This system combines two mechanisms to aggregate votes: the first is the plurality mechanism, which is exercised in single-member constituencies, and which allocates 75 per cent of the parliamentary seats; and the second is a proportional mechanism, which is applied to lists of candidates and is exercised in multi-member regional constituencies to allocate the remaining 25 per cent of seats.[4]

It is common to assume that this combination of two distinct mechanisms is an eccentric compromise which reflects the balance of advantage between two camps in the debate over electoral reform. On this view, the fact that 75 per cent of seats are allocated under the plurality system demonstrates the strength of those who favoured a pure plurality system relative to those who sought to retain PR. This view was, it seems, one held by many of those engaged in the reform process itself. That is to say, they seem to have been of the opinion that having 75 per cent of the seats allocated under the plurality system delivers the same results as the plurality system *per se*, but to an extent reduced by a quarter. To the extent that those involved understood their activity in these terms, with the electoral system which emerged being seen as a hybrid resulting from a process of bargaining, this view can play a key role in explaining why this system was selected. But this view is singularly unhelpful if our aim is to understand the nature of the new system. In fact, the new electoral system is not an Italian invention, at least not as regards its fundamental shape; it is not an eccentric compromise between two 'pure' types of system, but is rather an example of a specific type of system which may be seen as equally 'pure'. That is to say, this type of system does not tend to produce a combination of 'plurality-style' and 'PR-style' election results, but has general properties of its own which are distinct from those of either of its apparent constituent systems. The Italian reform selected is an Additional Member System (AMS), which is sometimes also known as the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system. As such, it is one example of a family of systems, other members of which can be found in Germany, New Zealand and Russia. Several east European countries – Albania, Armenia, Hungary, Lithuania – have, in the wake of the collapse of Communism, adopted similar mixed systems, but have opted for multiple-round mechanisms in their single-member constituencies.[5] Japan, where electoral reform had been on the agenda for some time, eventually followed Italy to become the newest member of the AMS club. Even among proponents of electoral reform in the UK, there are those who propound the virtues of the AMS.

The element common to all these systems is their use of some combination of the plurality/single-member and proportional/multi-member electoral

*Table 1* Members of the AMS club

| | *Plurality system seats (%)* | *PR seats (%)* | *Proportional correction* | *Preceding event* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Germany | 50 | 50 | strong | Second World War |
| Russia | 50 | 50 | weak | end of Communism |
| Italy | 75 | 25 | moderate | *Tangentopoli* and referendum |
| New Zealand | 50 | 50 | strong | the Maori factor |
| Japan | 60 | 40 | none | corruption |

mechanisms. The differences between the various examples of the AMS are, however, significant. They consist either in variations of the proportion of parliamentary seats allocated through each of these mechanisms, or in the method of 'proportional rebalancing', the manner in which the results of the plurality contests are accounted for in allocating seats at the proportional stage. These two variables are of sufficient importance that, in any given country at any given election, alterations to them could be expected to affect the outcome of that election.

The various countries which have adopted a form of AMS have designed their systems in considerably different ways, reflecting the flexibility the two major variables give to this form of system.

It may be worth noting briefly that in each country, electoral reform has been preceded by dramatic events of seismic political significance, a fact which can only serve to underline the inertia of established electoral systems. In Italy, for example, it is important to appreciate the scale of *Tangentopoli*. This is no mere scandal; the implications of the revelations of various forms of corruption stretch throughout all the major institutions, and to most of the major personalities of postwar Italy. Indeed, many commentators believed the new electoral system to be the herald of the emergence of a Second Republic. The one exception to this rule is provided by New Zealand, where the German variant of the AMS was recently adopted to replace the Westminster-style plurality system. The incentive in this case seems to have been the perceived need to conduct elections according to rules which favoured, to some extent, the Maori minority. In this case, electoral reform has been entered into in lively anticipation of a potential crisis.

As far as its general form is concerned, then, the new Italian electoral system is not uncommon. The AMS has also proved itself to be viable in practice. The claims made before the 1994 election, to the effect that the new system was composed of rules of byzantine complexity, can now be seen as exaggerated, born of a failure to appreciate that similar systems had been employed without difficulty elsewhere. The election delivered its outcome with reasonable clarity and without controversy. (The 1996 elections, which were held in April, confirm this conclusion.)

Giovanni Sartori, in many articles published in *Il Corriere della Sera*,[6] lashed out at the new electoral system, 'lo sciagurato meccanismo elettorale'. Without making clear exactly why he felt so strongly against the new system, he predicted that it would bring about an even more fragmented and unruly parliament; in fact, 'impotence'. This stance is somewhat puzzling. Elsewhere in his articles, where he compares the new Italian system with others, Sartori has no objection to the German electoral system. So, in order to maintain his criticism of the Italian version of AMS, he must be able to show that at least some of the main problems of post-reform Italian politics are caused by the differences between the German and Italian versions of the AMS. We believe it would be excessive to blame the electoral system for so much. (This is not, of course, to say either that any form of AMS is necessarily the best electoral system for Italy, or that the particular AMS selected is beyond reproach.)

## 4 The ambitions for the new electoral system

For the participants in the reform process, the move to a new electoral system was motivated by a series of substantive political ends. In fact, the introduction of the AMS was overloaded with objectives. However, a significant proportion of these aims and ambitions are not by nature attainable through electoral reform, for a variety of reasons. For some of the stated aims of reform, such as the desire to see alternation between parties in government, the electoral system is not the key mechanism in determining the realization of the goal.[7] Other aims, such as the desire for a bipolar party system, are not realizable in the current Italian context, and could only occur given a prior shift in social cleavages, ideological loyalty and party support. Yet further aims, such as the more limited desire to see the party system simplified, are not immediately realizable, and it is disingenuous to believe that a single election conducted under a new system could produce this effect. One way to judge the success of the Italian reform is to evaluate it with respect to the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of these aims, and this is what we shall proceed to do.

### Ambition 1: the 'personal vote'

One declared objective of the reform was to achieve a situation in which the electorate is encouraged to vote more with reference to the qualities of the individual candidate than to the party to which he or she belongs. We maintain that in fact this ambition could not be realized in *any* electoral system which involves elections in single-member constituencies. Under any such system, whether based on the plurality system, an AMS or the double ballot, the parties attain a significance which they may be unable to reach under a PR system. When elections occur in single-member constituencies, the parties have considerable leverage over their candidates which derives from the discretion they have in selecting which *one* of their members is to contest the seat. The clearest guide to a candidate's political profile is thus clearly the party label or banner under which he or she appears on the ballot paper. Following this general reasoning, one might expect that an election conducted under the AMS would not display

a significant personal vote. The 1994 contest confirmed this expectation. Throughout the nation, the electorate cast their votes far more on the basis of party labels, alliance banners and their opinions of the parties' national leaders than on the basis of any appreciation of the local candidates themselves. The candidates belonging to the Partito socialista italiano (PSI), for example, fared badly in the PR stage of the contest, in which they fought *as* members of the PSI; but other PSI candidates, contesting the plurality stage of the election, did so under the banner of the Progressisti alliance, and were elected. It seems clear that the key to this apparent discrepancy in the fortunes of Socialist candidates was that PSI was a vote-losing label, while Progressisti was a vote-attracting banner. An analogous example can be found in the fact that both the Lega Nord and Forza Italia selected candidates from the widely despised 'old regime'; despite the animosity felt towards those regarded as complicit in the corrupt politics of the previous fifty years, many of these figures achieved success in their constituencies, a result which can plausibly be accounted for by presuming that, for their electors, their current party labels counted for more than did their personal past and character.

These impressions are reinforced by the results of a Censis poll conducted shortly after the election: according to the responses, some 40 per cent of the electorate claimed to have either no knowledge, or at best only a vague impression, of the individual candidates to whom they gave their vote. A further 42 per cent maintained that they had a 'fairly precise' awareness of their preferred candidate (it is difficult to evaluate what degree of precision is involved in respondents' understanding of the term 'fairly precise' because in all likelihood different respondents will have understood this term differently). In fact, only 19 per cent of those surveyed felt confident that they had a 'very precise' knowledge of their preferred candidate. In itself, this poll contradicts any suggestion of a significant personal vote holding sway in 1994; in addition, having a 'very precise' knowledge of one's *preferred* candidate says nothing about one's level of awareness of that candidate's opponents. Even for those individuals with this high degree of awareness about their preferred candidate, their preference may not be inspired by that awareness. The party labels and banners may, for such interested individuals, have caused them to collect information in a very selective manner. That is to say, their preference may have been formed for the Progressisti candidate, in whom they become interested and about whom they then collect information. Despite their investment in becoming aware of the qualities of the particular candidate towards whom they are attracted, then, the choices of such individuals would have been motivated by the party labels. It is, of course, difficult to say how widely applicable this portrait might be, but the plausibility of this scenario suggests that the appearance of even a 19 per cent personal vote may be exaggerated.

### Ambition 2: governmental stability

To pursue governmental stability through a reform of the electoral system is to betray a misunderstanding of the source of such stability. The stability of governments, in common with the alternation of parties in government, cannot be a direct result of the electoral system. Those who propounded the ambition of stability tended to connect it intimately with the ambition for an end to coalition governments. However, these two ambitions deserve to be kept distinct, and we can treat stability as an aim in itself. If we assume, unrealistically, a thoroughgoing party unity (or inter-party unity, in the case of a coalition government), then the stability of a government in a parliamentary system is a direct function of its having a majority in the national assembly. As such, if the party or parties of government are in the majority in the *Camera* but not in the *Senato*, that government will experience difficulties of efficiency and stability regardless of whether the composition of those bodies was decided under the rules of the AMS, the plurality system or PR. If we drop the assumption of thoroughgoing unity, a government may experience such problems even if it possesses a majority in both houses. The achievement of such aims as stability and alternation are functions of electoral preferences, and while in any given context a certain set of electoral rules might make a stable outcome more likely than another set of rules, this is a highly contingent and changeable situation, not least because the electorate may react to a change of rules with strategic behaviour. The only way in which one could approach a guarantee of stability through the electoral system would be to incorporate into it some form of anti-democratic 'top-up' rules, to allocate a disproportionate number of seats to the party with the largest share of the vote. It is hardly surprising, then, that a dramatic enhancement of governmental stability was not forthcoming following the 1994 election.

### Ambition 3: an end to coalition governments

Similar reasoning leads one to conclude that an end to coalition government could not reasonably be expected as a result of the Italian reform. Whether a single party has the capacity to enter government alone is a function of the expressed preferences of the electorate, and while it is again true that in a given context a change of rules may make this more likely, no guarantee can be achieved. Given the distribution of party support in Italy as it was in 1994 and remains now, it would be unrealistic to expect a single-party government under *any* electoral system. A single-party Italian government could only be expected to take office under one of two scenarios. In the first, a dramatic shift of the electorate's preferences and values might deliver a sufficient level of support to a single party; in the second, a prior (and equally dramatic) simplification of the party system might force the electorate into a stark choice, at the limit between a single party of the Left and an equivalent party of the Right, with a majority being achieved by one or other side. Neither of these preconditions for the delivery of a majority to a single party had, or indeed has, been met. Although some may have been disappointed when Berlusconi formed a government composed of four parties – the Alleanza nazionale (AN), the Lega Nord, Forza Italia and the Centro cristiano democratico (CCD) – they should not have been surprised.

Italian government coalitions have generally been compacts based on perceptions of mutual advantage rather than ideological marriages, and that formed in the wake of the 1994 election was no exception. Coalitions founded on bargains of this sort are prone to collapse, as each participant seeks to exploit any shifts of public opinion to enhance its relative advantage in terms of ministerial appointments and the priority given to its favoured legislative ambitions. The continuation of coalition government thus enhanced the elusiveness of governmental stability.

### Ambition 4: bipolarism

The fourth ambition for the electoral reform, underwriting to some extent the hope for stability and an end to coalitions, was for the new system to participate in creating this stark choice, in simplifying the party system without the need to await an unreliable change in the electorate's values and preferences which might never arrive. This was one of the most widely held and thoroughly discussed objectives of the reform; the parties hoped, through reforming the electoral system, to deliver a simplification to the electorate, rather than having to wait for the electorate to generate greater simplicity through changes in the pattern of their votes.

The most coveted hope was that the electoral reform would create a bipolar party system, that it would take the simplification of the party system to the limit permitted by democracy. Now, it is certainly true that different electoral rules make it more or less possible for small minority parties to survive. It is, furthermore, true that the systems most hospitable to the survival of such parties are those that most closely approach pure PR. So, in successfully moving the Italian system further away from PR, it would seem logical to suppose that the reformers were exercising some power over the future shape of the party system. However, it is vital to bear in mind that PR can only *facilitate* the survival of minority parties, and that, likewise, the plurality system can only *facilitate* their demise. Under PR, the minority parties must still be able to justify their existence to the electorate, they must still speak to a constituency which finds itself badly served by their opponents. The plurality system cannot guarantee a bipolar party system; if a society contains more than one powerful and motivating cleavage, the electorate's quest for adequate representation of their preferences will ensure that there will be a demand for more than two parties, and if the opposing camps formed by these various cleavages are sufficiently numerous, this demand can be expected to be met with a willing supply. In other words, a reform of the electoral system can indeed hinder the survival of small parties, but it cannot guarantee their demise. Once again, almost everything hinges on the contingent factors of context, the distribution of party support throughout the constituencies and the number, nature, severity and significance of social cleavages.

Recognizing the tendency of the Italian AMS to reproduce the pressures on small parties presented by the plurality system, one might expect that, *over the course of several elections*, some simplification of the party system would occur. Certain minority parties, often formed as splinters from larger parties, cannot be regarded as serving a sufficiently distinctive constituency to be able to survive, except in those cases in which they attract highly concentrated localized support. For example, the Sudtiroler Volkspartei (SVP) can be expected not only to survive, but to maintain its traditional level of parliamentary presence. In other cases, the supporters of one small party could relatively easily find a comfortable home in a larger party. However, the extent of this sort of voter mobility is limited by the significance of a variety of cross-cutting social cleavages which, in the manner described above, guarantee a demand for a range of different parties (the question of supply to meet this demand is, of course, less problematic for Italy than in a country such as the UK for the simple reason that the parties already exist, their origins facilitated by the PR system, and so the only question concerns their continued existence). While the electorate can be expected gradually to cooperate in the simplification of the party system, abandoning redundant minority parties, they cannot be expected to deliver the coveted bipolarism.

These are expectations for the medium to long term; this simplification could not (and did not) occur immediately. Indeed, the immediate result of the electoral reform was to encourage further fragmentation of the party system. Giacomo Sani has noted that, whereas it was once routine for the support given to the two biggest parties, the DC and the Partito comunista italiano (PCI), to account for two-thirds or more of the total votes cast, this near duopoly had been in decline for some time; and in 1994, the two largest parties, Forza Italia and the Partito democratico della sinistra (PDS), managed between them to gather barely 40 per cent of the total votes cast.[8] Of course, the decline and apparent collapse of an electoral duopoly is not alone sufficient to establish that further fragmentation followed the reform. In fact, in 1994, three parties collapsed entirely: the Partito socialista democratico italiano (PSDI), the Partito liberale italiano (PLI) and the Partito repubblicano italiano (PRI), and one disappeared into a larger entity, namely the Movimento sociale italiano (MSI), and was later disbanded. However, at the time of the election, six parties emerged to make their début, namely Alleanza democratica (AD), Forza Italia, the AN, the Patto per l'Italia, the Cristiano sociali, and finally the CCD.

There was, then, a net increase in the number of active parties following the electoral reform. However, this does not necessarily demonstrate that the reform acted contrary to the desire for a simplification of the party system. Despite any increase in the number of actual *parties*, the election was, of course, contested by *alliances*. This alliance making, motivated by individual parties' perceptions of their chances in contesting the first AMS election alone, simplified the 'party system' with which the electorate was confronted. Of course, the bald fact of this alliance-based simplification is true, and it is, furthermore, true that 85 per cent of the single-member constituencies effectively became two-horse races between the two major alliances, the Polo della Libertà which consisted of the

Lega, Forza Italia and the AN, and the Progressisti, which consisted of the PDS, the PSI, Rifondazione comunista and assorted other parties of the Left.

But in granting this fact, we must insist on the following qualifications. First, both of these alliances existed only to field candidates in the single-member constituencies of the plurality-system stage of the AMS. In the PR stage of the election, organized in the multi-member regional constituencies, the individual parties to these alliances each put forward their own, separate list of candidates, a practice they repeated in the last European elections. The alliances were not, then, universally present in the election. Second, both alliances, which might be better seen as electoral cartels, were quite clearly *not* parties. Not only were they periodically convulsed from within during the election by disagreements of both policy and personality, but one, the Progressisti, dissolved into its constituent parts almost immediately upon defeat, and the other found, in the powerful attraction of the opportunity to govern, a rather precarious cement to maintain a form of cohesion. Of course, this cement did not prove to have lasting adhesive qualities, as the Polo ruptured at the instigation of the disaffected Lega. This suggests that any claim that the alliance making constituted a simplification of the party system is at best overstated. These alliances were based on a compact for mutual advantage, and were as unstable as this might suggest. No lasting simplification was provided by these alliances. The third, and final, qualification we would wish to make is that even if we were justified to regard Polo and Progressisti as parties, this move would lead to there having been effectively not two parties, but three: the Polo della Libertà should be understood not as one alliance, but as two distinct alliances.

## A brief digression

This last claim is in need of justification, and the purpose of this digression is to provide an argument for it. If we look at the deployment of candidates throughout the single-member constituencies of Italy in the 1994 election, we find the following pattern. In the northern constituencies, candidates were fielded in the name of an alliance between the Lega Nord and Forza Italia under the label of the Polo della Libertà; there is no sense that these candidates might be associated with the ex-Fascists of the Alleanza nazionale. Conversely, in the southern constituencies, candidates were fielded in the name of Forza Italia and the Alleanza nazionale, here under the label of the Polo del buon Governo, again with no indication that these candidates might have anything to do with the northern secessionists of the Lega, who would deny the south its extensive economic assistance. With an almost comic sense of balance, neither alliance attempted to field candidates in some of the central regions, with the three parties competing with each other as well as with the Progressisti. Of course, this was the case for the PR stage of the election in every region, but only in the centre does this hold true for the plurality stage. The upshot is that there is a clear geographical separation of these two alliances; one for the north, one for the south, neither for the centre. The considerable contribution made by Berlusconi and the Forza Italia he formed was to act as a bridge between two incompatible partners. Able to form an alliance with both the Lega and the AN, Berlusconi constituted the link between two distinct bipartite alliances. He provided a common element and a common name to act as an umbrella for these two compacts. The presence of Forza Italia wholly transformed the fortunes of the parties in the Polo; drawing the two alliances together enabled them to achieve what neither could have managed alone. The crucial point, then, is not only that the Polo alliance was in fact an alliance of alliances, which presented two distinct and geographically separated faces to the electorate, but also that had this not been the case, had the Polo been constituted as a genuine tripartite alliance, it is unlikely that it would have achieved the success it did in fact attain. It is plausible to argue that the electorate in the south would not have been so willing to vote for an alliance which included the Lega, and it is equally plausible that many Lega supporters would not have supported an explicit alliance with the AN, whatever claims its members made of having left Fascism behind. A single, tripartite alliance would have alienated many of those voters whose support gave the members of the 'alliance of alliances' their chance to govern.

Contesting the election as two distinct alliances was, then, a stroke of strategic brilliance. Of course, the three parties involved were nominally united under the same banner, which raises the question of how they managed successfully to convey the desired impression of being two bipartite alliances. Clearly, each member of the Polo had an incentive to stress its relative independence from its erstwhile partners, or at least to stress only its alliance with the more acceptable of those partners. Facilitating this end, the Lega and the AN quarrelled continuously, and indeed Umberto Bossi directed as much venom against Gianfranco Fini and his party as against the various members of the Progressisti. In its quest to demonstrate its relative independence, the Lega even went so far as to attack Berlusconi on more than one occasion. This presentational tactic acted to reinforce the geographical separation of the two alliances, and thus enabled the Polo effectively to respond to the differentiated beliefs and values which motivated northern and southern Italians to support (some of) the members of the Polo.

These parties of the Right worked diligently to undermine any impression of their being united in a tripartite alliance, justifiably preferring to present themselves to their various electorates as either independent of one another or as allied effectively to only one partner. Now, we would not claim that the arguments played out between the members of the Polo were wholly theatrical or contrived, engaged in for no reason other than their strategic effect. There are genuine differences of policy and principle between the parties. But the strategic value of placing considerable emphasis upon these differences may be the single most important factor in explaining why these arguments were conducted in public rather than behind closed doors. Furthermore, these differences were not, in the end, considered to be so intractable as to prevent the formation of a government by a coalition of all three parties (although they do appear to have

been the cause of sufficient strain to undermine that same government after a brief period). We cannot but admire the sheer ability of the Polo campaign. However, the manner in which that campaign succeeded also inspires another emotion, very different from admiration, which is enhanced by the fact that this 'alliance of alliances' came to form a government. It is this second response that leads us out of this digression and back to the central issues of this article.

### Ambition 5: transparency

The final ambition held for the new electoral system was the hope that an election conducted under the new rules would be one characterized by transparency. Elections, it was hoped, would be transparent in these related senses: that the connection between the casting of votes and the formation of a government would be clear and obvious, and that the electorate would, when casting their votes, be able to select the manifesto to which they felt most attracted and thus know which goods they were 'buying' with their votes if their preferred party was successful. This transparency was absent from Italian politics under the old electoral system, not as a direct result of that system *per se*, but as a result of the fact that the electorate continually denied any party the opportunity to govern alone. The need for coalitions in itself would not necessarily impede transparency, but when combined with PR, an electoral system which encourages each party to contest elections independently, such an impediment is constructed. In other words, under PR there is no incentive to form electoral pacts or alliances prior to the election. The formation of Italian coalition governments was a process carried out behind closed doors, once election results were known, and their precise shapes were functions of the relative bargaining strengths of the parties, which themselves depended primarily upon their relative performances at the ballot. The Italian coalitions were, of course, remarkably stable in the sense that it was predictable which parties would be included in them, but the nature of the process of their formation meant that their legislative programmes were fluid compromises between the participants' manifestos, their priorities shifting as the balance of power within the coalitions shifted. Even though the electorate knew what partnerships their preferred party was likely to form, they could not predict the influence which their party and its manifesto would have within the coalition. They could not, then, effectively vote for either a specific government or a specific legislative programme.

With the introduction of the AMS, the incentive to make alliances prior to the election was increased; it might seem, then, that the electoral reform has genuinely made a contribution to this ambition of achieving transparency. However, if we look at the Progressisti, we find that its component parties often clashed in terms of their legislative programmes, with Rifondazione comunista at one point publishing a proposed economic policy which was at odds with that of the PDS. Both left- and right-wing alliances were characterized by disputes over priorities and policies. Furthermore, they both existed only for the purpose of contesting the single-member constituencies. As such, whichever alliance proved successful, we could have expected the legislative programme of the ensuing government to be the result of a bargain worked out between its member parties once the balance of power between them was determined by the election results. In other words, as before, the electorate could predict who the members of a government would be if their preferred party was successful, but could not predict what their legislative programme would be. On the Right, the differentiation of the Polo into two distinct alliances further undermined any transparency. This tactical device greatly diminished the clarity of the link between supporting a (member party of a) given alliance and the formation of a government and a legislative programme. According to our hypothesis, the electorate should be understood not as having voted for the Polo as such; instead, they were voting *either* for the alliance between the Lega and Forza Italia, or for the alliance between Forza Italia and the AN. If this is right, can any of the votes given to the Polo genuinely be regarded as votes for the tripartite coalition government which emerged? It would seem that the legitimacy of the Berlusconi government was not as secure as the sheer fact of the election result appeared to suggest.

## 5 The electoral reform evaluated

The ambitions for the reform, governmental stability, alternation, an end to coalition government, bipolarism, the encouragement of a personal vote, and even transparency, are best understood as proposed solutions to perceived *political* problems. The capacity of an electoral system to deliver these aims is strongly limited, and to resort to an electoral or constitutional reform in order to address these problems is a misguided strategy. In an earlier work, we tried to account for the employment of this misguided strategy, explaining why the limitations of such a reform were either played down or failed to be recognized.[9] But the fact that electoral reform cannot provide all that was hoped of it might make the strategy of employing such a reform not only misguided, but dangerous. Besides the creation of expectations which remain unfulfilled, and the disenchantment this is likely to create, there is a further danger. The political problems identified by the reformers were not the result of the PR system; they were the result of contingent features of the Italian context. Of course, although not a source of the problems as such, the electoral system helps shape the nature of the problems created by the context, because it determines the means by which that context is translated into a government and legislature. The upshot of this is not that changing the electoral system has no effect, but rather that it tends to have unexpected consequences, at least in so far as the particular ambitions held for the Italian reform are concerned. If, under PR, the social context translates into problems of stability, transparency and so on, then the effect of putting a different mechanism in place to provide a different translation of that context is unpredictable. As a solution to political problems, then, electoral reform is not only inefficient, it is also risky.

## 6 Unintended consequences of the electoral reform

It is worthwhile beginning our assessment of the unintended consequences of current electoral reform with a historical grand example. The establishment of Fascism as a governing philosophy in Italy was preceded by a different electoral reform. In the year between 1918 and 1919, PR was introduced as a replacement for the plurality system. In this instance, the reform was motivated in part by the after-effects of war, and by the effects of the recent introduction of universal male suffrage. However, the most important source of motivation for reform was the shared concern of all parties in the country at the time that they would suffer at the polls in the next election held under majoritarian rules. Every party had reason to doubt its own chances of electoral survival – a tense and unusual situation in which the major causes of the inertia of electoral systems have disappeared. The first elections under the PR system were conducted shortly after the reform, in 1919 and again in 1921. Then as now, the Italian electorate was too divided to deliver a majority to any party, but unfortunately, the parties were also deeply divided (and there was no stable set of coalition partners to mirror that present in the years following the Second World War). The formation of governments in this context was difficult, and the resultant pacts highly unstable. This state of affairs resulted in the effective collapse of the party system, ironically at the hands of those who sought to save their parties through electoral reform, clearly an unintended consequence of *that* reform process.

The collapse of that party system provided the opportunity for Mussolini to begin his rise to power. Having achieved some influence within the situation created in the aftermath of the shift to PR, by 1923 the Fascists were ready to consolidate their own position. Once again they engaged in an electoral reform in an attempt to meet their ends, abolishing PR and introducing a new system. However, unlike the two electoral reforms of 1918 and 1993, the Fascist reform was able to meet these ends directly, for the simple reason that they designed an anti-democratic electoral system. The rules of that system included the so-called *legge Acerbo*, according to which the party with the largest share of the popular vote, regardless of the size of that vote provided it was at least 25 per cent of the total, would be allocated a substantial majority of the seats in parliament. This extraordinary piece of legislation was passed not least due to the abstention of the Partito popolare, the forerunner of the DC (not, of course, to be confused with the Partito popolare which is the successor of the DC).[10]

This episode is instructive in the context of the more recent reform in the sense that it serves to draw our attention to the convulsions and turmoil which may occur *following* an electoral reform. If such reform is generally preceded by some form of crisis or political and social drama, an electoral reform is not a means of returning immediately to a more peaceful, less dramatic environment. Furthermore, the turmoil created by a reform of the electoral system is largely of an unintended and unexpected, and often unpredictable, nature.

Perhaps the most extraordinary of the unintended consequences of the 1993 electoral reform to have made itself apparent thus far has been the emergence of Forza Italia as a new political force. It is important to remember that Berlusconi did not form his party until early 1994, and that the members of Forza Italia were not participants in the creation of the new electoral system. That a group of non-participants should reap the greatest initial benefit from the period of reform was clearly not the intention of the reformers.[11]

Before the 1993 election, commentators, ourselves included, expected the result to be a victory for the Left. The reasoning behind this was plausible: the parties of the Left were ahead in all opinion polls, they were relatively untouched by the corruption investigations whereas the parties in government were facing an endless barrage of accusations and scandal, and they had proved extremely successful in the municipal elections of March 1994. How, then, did Berlusconi come to be able to counteract the evident support that existed for the Left? In fact, there is a theoretical ground for expecting a new party such as Forza Italia to emerge in the aftermath of an electoral reform, and had this theory been applied to the Italian context in 1993, we could have further deduced that the new party would belong to the Right wing of the political spectrum.

This theoretical tool originates with Anthony Downs, who argued that the very social and political turbulence which constitutes the precondition for a successful reform is also likely to create, at the same time, the conditions for a popular demand for new political parties. In Italy, this demand was motivated primarily by popular disgust with the revelations about the extent of the corruption of the political system, a motivation which would have made the Polo an attractive proposition, whatever their specific policies, because its three members were either wholly new – Forza Italia – or a recent development from previous political forces – the Alleanza nazionale – or a relatively new and certainly novel party – the Lega Nord. The key common element among these parties, besides their being on the Right wing of the political spectrum, was the fact that none of them had ever participated in government. Of course, a theoretical explanation for the emergence of a *demand* for a new party is not sufficient to explain the *supply*, the actual emergence of a new party. The further key condition that must be satisfied if a new party is to emerge to capitalize upon the evident demand is that there be some politically ambitious individual who has a significant degree of public recognition, sufficient personal funds and a willingness to take risks. Only if such a political entrepreneur exists can the demand for a new party be met with its supply. Of course, Berlusconi is just such an individual, and one with the crucial further qualification of having been regarded, at the time of the election, as uninvolved in the deep corruption revealed by *Tangentopoli*. Although it seems increasingly clear that he and his businesses were far more active in participating in corrupt deals than was perceived, the crucial issue is one of perception rather than fact. Now, it is not possible to predict the likelihood of this supply side of the political market. While the Left's municipal victories were clearly central in motivating his decision to create Forza Italia, had Berlusconi been a little more risk-averse, or less confident in the results of the opinion polls, or gone

bankrupt under the weight of Fininvest's huge debt, he might well have decided or been forced not to run for office. In consequence, it was not possible for any observer to predict the emergence of Forza Italia as such, to predict that a party led by Berlusconi would constitute the new political force.

However, had we appreciated the theoretical likelihood that a demand for a new party would have existed in the immediate aftermath of the electoral reform, we could reasonably have expected that, subject to the uncertainty of supply, any party which emerged to meet this demand would be a party of the Centre Right rather than the Left. It is a neat paradox of the reform process that the Left, having been in a position of moral superiority as a result of being largely insulated from the *Tangentopoli* revelations, has in the end been damaged more than the Right, and as a direct result of its relatively 'clean hands'. The parties of the Left did not face the wholesale collapse of their vote which threatened their right-wing opponents, and while some of the smallest parties could look forward only to a more or less protracted demise, their votes would naturally be swallowed up by the remaining survivors. The PDS continued in its self-reinvention, becoming increasingly social-democratic in its policies, and persuasively disowning its Communist past. On the Right, by contrast, the established parties faced an electoral rout of unprecedented proportions. The DC, the Right's centre of gravity, sought to reinvent itself as the Partito popolare, and in doing so succeeded in splitting the party, but failed in its aim of ending the public's association of the party with the worst excesses of corruption.

This widespread collapse on the Right, graphically illustrated by the Left's victories in key municipal elections, created the political space necessary for a new party to have a realistic possibility of succeeding where its established brethren could not hope to. There were parties of the Right not undermined by the corruption scandals, such as the Lega and the MSI, but these parties were too specific, both ideologically and geographically, to offer a source of salvation for the Right. These parties could not expand to fill the space left by the collapse of the mainstream Right, whether independently or together, in the highly unlikely event that they could have formed an alliance without some additional partner to act as a lubricant. There were thus clear grounds for expecting any new party to belong to the Right, and once we add to this general picture the presence of Berlusconi as a political entrepreneur of the right sort, we can begin to understand how Forza Italia emerged.[12]

In the account so far, the reform of the national electoral system itself has not played a direct role. The events that created the demand for that reform were the same that created the demand for a new party, and it is thus perfectly cogent to suggest that the second demand would have been satisfied even had the first been left unanswered. Of course, it is equally possible that the satisfaction of the demand for reform was a precondition of the emergence of Forza Italia, perhaps because Berlusconi's evaluation of his chances of success would have differed sufficiently for him to judge it unwise to enter the fray. If these two competing claims are fairly evenly balanced in terms of their plausibility, it is more difficult



to imagine equivalently balanced hypotheses regarding the creation of the Polo. It is highly unlikely that the Polo, that victorious alliance of alliances, could have existed had the electoral reform not taken place. The disincentives to such alliances under the rules of PR are considerable, and the fact that the Polo did not contest the PR stage of the AMS election clearly demonstrates that Berlusconi, Bossi and Fini were as sensitive as any to these disincentives. Furthermore, even if we make the implausible assumption that the Polo would have been formed had PR remained, it is unlikely that the alliance would have proved to be quite so successful; its overall victory was due in some considerable part to the fact that the plurality stage of the AMS election acted to allocate seats disproportionately to the advantage of the Polo.[13] Had this plurality stage not existed, or had it accounted for a smaller proportion of the total seats in parliament, or had the system been designed with a stronger proportional correction inherent in the PR stage, Berlusconi would most likely have lacked the overall majority in the *Camera* that he did in fact receive.

As such, then, the emergence of Forza Italia can be traced to a combination of a theoretically predictable demand, the collapse of the mainstream Right, and the contingent factor of Berlusconi's personality. The formation of the Polo can be traced to a combination of the incentives provided by the new electoral system and the ability of Berlusconi to act as the necessary lubricant between the Lega and the Alleanza nazionale. The victory of the Polo can be traced at least in part to a combination of the disproportionate allocation of seats in the plurality stage of the AMS, the strategic brilliance of presenting a tripartite alliance as two bipartite alliances, the appeal of novel parties in the context of that election, and the fact that right-wing supporters were presented with a comfortable solution to the dilemma of their disgust with the mainstream established Right.[14]

## Notes

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1 The plurality system is often referred to as 'first past the post', but we have avoided this common description for the simple reason that it is misleading. In the plurality system, there is no 'post' to be passed, no minimum level of electoral support to be attained in order to achieve victory. The winner of the election is simply that candidate with the largest number of votes; the proportion of total votes cast that this winning number represents is irrelevant to the result.

2 The double ballot is the system employed for national elections in France. The precise rules differ between the legislative and presidential elections, but the basic format is this. A first round of voting takes place. If the candidate with the largest number of votes also has over 50 per cent of the total votes cast, he or she is declared elected and the competition ceases. If no candidate has passed this threshold, a second round of voting is held. In the presidential election, this second round is contested by the two highest-placed candidates from the first round. In the legislative election, any candidate who gained at least 12.5 per cent of the total votes cast in the first round is entitled

to contest the second. In both cases, the second round itself is conducted as an election under the plurality system, with the candidate who receives the largest number of votes being declared the victor.

3 Voters in Northern Ireland elected their MEPs via a variant of PR, while the electorate in Great Britain expressed their preferences through the plurality system employed for general elections.

4 We shall forgo detailed discussion of the technicalities which connect these two stages of the system, precisely how the results of the plurality contest are to some extent taken into account in deciding the outcome of the proportional stage of the election; and we shall likewise pass over the fact that there are slight differences in the way in which the system is employed for the *Camera* and for the *Senato*.

5 An extremely useful summary of electoral reforms in east European countries can be found in Christian Lucky, 'Table of twelve electoral laws', *East European Constitutional Review* 3(2) (1994): 65–77.

6 These are now collected in a little volume, *Come sbagliare le riforme* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995).

7 This is not to say that in a given context, with a given distribution of party support, at a given time, the change of electoral system could not predictably lead to a change in the party composition of the government. However, in the medium and long term, it is that context, and that distribution of support, which do the work in producing alternation rather than the electoral system itself.

8 Giacomo Sani, 'Dai voti ai seggi', in I. Diamanti and R. Mannheimer, *Milano a Roma* (Rome: Donzelli, 1994). For the precise results of the Italian general elections between 1948 and 1992, see David Hine, *Governing Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 71–6.

9 Steven Warner and Diego Gambetta, *La retorica della riforma: fine del sistema proporzionale in Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994).

10 For a more detailed analysis of the emergence of the Fascist state from the collapse of its predecessor, see Ernesto Ragionieri, 'La storia politica e sociale', in *Storia d'Italia* vol. 4, III (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), especially p. 2135.

11 It would be interesting to know when, and how, the idea for the formation of Forza Italia developed. We have since seen ample evidence that Berlusconi places considerable faith in the findings of his opinion polls, and this suggests that one factor influencing the formation of Forza Italia might well have been the fact that the press reported that some 20 per cent of the population felt themselves likely to vote for Berlusconi and his party before he had declared his willingness to run, let alone to do so at the head of a new organization rather than as a member of one of the established parties of the mainstream Right.

12 A very interesting analysis of the electorate that voted Forza Italia is Luca Ricolfi, 'Il voto proporzionale: il nuovo spazio politico italiano', *Rivista di Scienza Politica* XXIV(3) (1994): 587–629.

13 Cf. Sani, 'Dai voti ai seggi'.

14 This is not to say that the parties of the Left were the passive victims of forces beyond their control. The Progressisti alliance, for example, was badly constructed in that it sought to encompass too many diverse minor parties, and more importantly in that the PDS failed to impose its authority on the alliance, allowing too much independence to its partners, a mistake which led, among other things, to the publication by Rifondazione comunista of an economic manifesto almost comically designed to frighten the middle classes which the PDS was seeking to attract.



# Science, gender and moral ascendancy in liberal Italy

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## Abstract

Following Italian unification 'progressive' physicians, jurists, and criminal sociologists, who constituted a sizeable if particular school of anticlericalism, adopted organic explanations separating responsible from pathological citizens. Positivist criminology enabled the conflation of sexual with political turbulence, of women with peasants and workers, of feminine deficiencies with Mezzogiorno underdevelopment. A secular, literate minority succeeded in resurrecting hierarchies grounded in gender, class and regional differences, and it did so without invoking the moral authority of the Catholic Church.

## Keywords

Gender, identity, the body, hermaphroditism, medicine, positivism.

After Unification, Italy's professional elite attempted to erect a liberal order on the terrain of the Vatican. Papal intransigence put Catholic officialdom and the secular state immediately at odds. The Holy See's opposition to the Risorgimento compromised the legitimacy of the constitutional monarchy, so the fight for political ascendancy inescapably involved a struggle for moral guardianship in the new nation. An ethos of social decorum developed in competition with apostolic axioms, and it breached boundaries of class and region in much the same way as Catholicism did. But the obvious and tangible reigned supreme in anti-clerical scientific circles over and against the force of the spiritual and metaphysical.

The emphasis on external traits helped to fuel the craze for biological determinism in scholarly communities on the peninsula as the cult of appearances prompted a scientific effort to define the soul through the body. The stress in criminal procedure on material evidence and organic pathology, the importance placed on the physical measurement of body parts in the medical academies, and the easy pre-eminence of positivism in clinical as well as court psychiatry for decades pointed to the centrality of appearance in the anti-clerical avant-garde's efforts to create a lay morality in a profoundly Catholic society.

Catholics and liberals alike saw the conjugal unit as the foundation of civic life, and each tried to exclude the other as guardians of the moral order. The new

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