



THE CARTELISATION OF THE ITALIAN PARTY SYSTEM:
ONE STEP FORWARD AND ONE STEP BACKWARD

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Occasional Papers
No. 17/2006

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI SIENA
DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE STORICHE, GIURIDICHE, POLITICHE E SOCIALI

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1. The Italian case and the cartel party model.

Studying the Italian case from the perspective of the cartel party model is for many reasons interesting. As we will see in more details we find at work in the Italian case significant elements that seem to confirm it, but also some elements that do not fit with the factors typically thought to be conducive to that model. We will briefly discuss them here, then we will explore in greater detail in the next sections of this chapter some of the classical indicators of the cartelisation of parties.

Even if Katz and Mair did not spell out in great details the causal mechanisms that should be behind this new process of change, the core of their argument is essentially based on a combination of challenges and opportunities that parties had increasingly to face in the last decades. On one side, parties which were based on the mass organised party model (and which to some extent had undergone the transformation into catch-all parties) were facing a decline in the resources extracted from their members (due to the reduced willingness of these to engage actively in party politics) and this at a time when the firmness of their electoral bases was not to be taken anymore for granted due to the unfreezing of cleavages. On the other side the increasing reciprocal acceptance of all parties and their transformation into governing parties could open the road to cartel-like agreements among all or most parties to share in the state resources. Vulnerability on the electoral and societal side and increased assurance on the state side were to create the favourable mixture capable of favouring the transformation suggested by the two authors.

To what extent these challenges and opportunities have existed in Italy? and have they produced the expected effects? We will try to answer the first question in this paragraph and the next in the following ones.

When analysing the Italian case over the past 25/30 years – the period which Katz and Mair consider (1995, 18) typical for the development of the cartel party – the first obvious thing that needs to be mentioned is that the party system underwent in the early 90s a major crisis and restructuring. This means, first of all, that we will have to consider two at least partially different phases (the one before the crisis and the one following it). There is also a broader meaning of this sequence of events: if a cartel of parties had developed during the first phase it was challenged and at least partially defeated by outsiders. The next question is if the process of cartelisation could be resumed after the crisis.

When examining the phase preceding the crisis an important peculiarity of the Italian political system needs to be mentioned: of the main parties only the Communist Party could be considered a full fledged case of mass organised party where the membership party and its organisation in the society provided the main resources for its political activity. The largest Italian party, the Christian Democracy, had attempted to develop a similar model in response to the challenge of the main opposition party, but a number of factors (the linkages with the organisation of the Church; the permanent governing position and the resources of patronage provided by this) had made the adoption of this model less crucial and consequently also less clear than in the case of the PCI. The Socialist party had also developed more along the lines of the DC than of the PCI (except obviously for the links with the Church). In these parties members were more a resource in intra-party battles than for inter-party competition. The characteristics of the main parties did not make them equally vulnerable to the same challenges. The weakening of the membership party and of its ability to mobilize voters could be a much more dangerous threat for the PCI (both because it had had a more important role and because of the party's opposition role). On the contrary the major challenge for DC and PSI was rather bound to come from the decline of resources available for the micro policies of *sotto-governo* (patronage), which was produced by the

growing budgetary constraints of the late 80s and early 90s (Cotta 1996; Verzichelli 1996), than from the loss of members or the decline of member activism. We can say however that all three largest parties were seriously affected in the 70s and 80s by the declining appeal for voters of some crucial elements of their ideological identity; this made them less sure of the support of voters which were becoming increasingly volatile.

The second point to be mentioned is that the Italian political system had been traditionally characterised by the exclusion from government of the largest party of the left (PCI), plus other minor extreme left groups and of the party of the extreme right (the neo-fascist MSI). This meant that a critical condition of the cartel party model – the potential access to government of all parties – was missing. This picture however should be corrected to take into account the fact that between the “governing parties” and the excluded parties significant patterns of cooperation had developed at the parliamentary level (Di Palma 1977). Particularly important had been the cooperation with the Communist party, which had produced its support for a significant part of the legislative initiatives of the government, for a consensual reform of the standing orders of the Chamber of Deputies of 1971 (which gave the opposition a much larger say in the parliamentary agenda) (Cotta 1991), for the 1975 reform of Public Television (which gave to the PCI representation in the governing board of RAI and de facto control of a news channel), and finally its negotiated parliamentary support for the Andreotti’s cabinets of 1976-79. If this first encounter with the government did not open for the PCI the main entrance door to the club of the governing parties (in fact after 1979 the PCI was no more involved in the parliamentary support of cabinets) the party acquired a special status among opposition parties. This typically entailed maintaining the presidency of the first chamber and continuing to play a significant role in the legislative process.

A third point to be mentioned concerns developments in the field of the mass media. The traditional monopoly of State Television (RAI), which as we have mentioned was amenable to cartel like distribution of resources, was challenged during this period by the new private Television (Mediaset). This was soon to be monopolised by one private entrepreneur, Berlusconi, and came to play a counterweight role vis-à-vis the cartelised RAI. The transformation of the television market has had some important consequences for parties. The appearance in the market of a commercial actor has rapidly changed the role of TV in political life: it is enough to mention here that it has increased the costs of television use for parties; it has meant also that while the RAI could fall under the control of the party cartel the new actor was less amenable to that. In fact Mediaset TVs developed a special relationship with only a part of the political spectrum (PSI and DC, with the exclusion of its left faction which had always cultivated a strong role in the RAI and was more oriented towards a consociational agreement with the PCI).

The situation of the last decade of the so called “first republic” can be characterised rather clearly as one of increasing weakness of the parties in society (whatever their organisational model), of a partial convergence of parties in the institutions enabling significant examples of collusive behaviour, but also by a persisting asymmetry in the party system due to the lack of alternation in government and to the permanent governing position of a group of parties (this situation had some paradoxical effects with regards to the cartel party model: on one hand it put parties on a different position but at the same time suggested to compensate this peculiar setting with reciprocal “insurances”).

The crisis of the 90s, with the electoral defeat of DC of 1992, the growth of the Lega, the “mani pulite” episode and the referendum on the electoral system showed that the collusive agreements of the previous years could not produce a stable equilibrium nor an effective control by the governing parties of some important sections of the state apparatus or of civil society. The implosion of Christian Democracy meant the breakdown of the central hinge of the cartel of the previous years (if any could be said to exist) and a dramatic change of the actors on the political scene and of their roles. It could rightly be said that the crisis of the 90s was to an extent a rebellion against the political establishment and its defective ability to produce innovative policies directed at solving the problems of the country (Cotta 1996). In different

ways the new party of Northern Italy, the Lega Nord, with its populist attacks against “Rome” and the collusion among parties generating corruption, the referendum movement for the reform of the electoral system, with its plea for a more competitive electoral process, and the judicial prosecutors with their accusations against practices of illegal financing of the parties tacitly accepted by all main parties mounted a successful attack against the peculiar Italian way to the cartelisation of politics.

After 1994, if we limit our attention to parties, the political landscape shows a number of contradictory features that may be relevant for our analysis. On one side we have to signal the success of two new parties – the Lega, winning a significant part of the electorate in the northern regions of Italy, and Forza Italia, the party created *ex novo* by Berlusconi, which succeeds in becoming the strongest force of the centre-right. Albeit in different ways the two new parties do not fit well in the cartel party model. The Lega embodies in a perfect way (particularly in the beginning) the model of the outsider party challenging the cartel of old collusive parties. This is shown very well by its crude anti-party, anti-establishment language, by its deliberate effort to distance itself from the powers that be and to appear close to common people and by its reluctance to enter into any stable agreement with the other parties. In this perspective the party stresses the importance of the participation of the rank and file. As for Forza Italia it is a sheer novelty for Italian politics. It has completely abandoned the old paraphernalia of the mass party and is a totally leader-centred party. The leader controls to a predominant extent the main resources of the party: economic (thanks to his enormous personal wealth), symbolic (the image and popularity of Berlusconi overshadow completely at the mass level that of the party) and organisational (the lack of a well established party organisation enables the leader to play a dominant role in all major policy and recruitment decisions). Due to the role of Berlusconi the party is more dependent from private economy than from the state.

The next point to be mentioned concerns the structure of the party system and patterns of competition. From the old tri-polar model based on a centre coalition with left and right oppositions described by Sartori (1976) the party system has changed into a bipolar system with two alternating coalitions of centre-right and centre-left (Verzichelli & Cotta 2000). The competition has changed thus to a more adversarial mode, which has challenged if not totally erased some of the consociational aspects that existed in the old days. Also from this point of view the situation is less favourable to a cartel like development.

There is however another side of the picture which is more fitting with the requirements of Katz and Mair’s model. Contrary to the past, in the “second Republic” all the parties have progressively become accepted as governing parties. In particular this has meant that the two main parties which in the first Republic were excluded, the PCI and the MSI, or to be more precise their successors, DS and AN, have gained for the first time a full governing role. And even the more extreme Communist Refoundation has accomplished in 2006 this goal. As for the Lega, after the failed attempt to go alone at elections in 1996, it has accepted since 2001 to adapt to a more stable coalitional role within the centre-right. In spite of the rather confrontational language that characterises the Second Republic all parties now share a common perspective: they have all the ambition and the chance to gain a cabinet position. And even the parties that had adopted a more strongly anti-politics style and language have come to share advantages and responsibilities of the parties they had criticised.

It is time to summarise our discussion of the Italian political system and of its evolution. If the Italian party system has undoubtedly had to face some of the challenges that Katz and Mair consider conducive to the transformation of parties in the cartel direction, it must be added that important (albeit different) factors unfavourable to a full deployment of this trend have been at work during both periods. We have in particular stressed the persisting exclusion of some parties in the first period and the features of some important new parties plus the adversarial character of competition in

the second period. Yet, as we have seen, these negative conditions have been at least partially compensated by other favourable ones: in the first republic the need to establish a peaceful equilibrium between permanent governing parties and permanent opposition and the highly proportional institutional system have stimulated the search of common agreements; in the second republic the reciprocal acceptance of all parties has created a common ground and the acceleration of the decline of party organisations has made more urgent the need of new resources.

In the next pages we will explore with the help of empirical data to what extent some of the crucial features of the cartel party model can be found to apply to the Italian case. For this purpose we will analyse the organisational strength of parties, the development of public financing of political life, some features of parliamentary recruitment and finally their ideological and programmatic distinctiveness.

2. Organisational strength of parties and public financing of politics

One of the defining characteristics of cartel parties is their capacity to extract resources from the state. State subventions have been constantly growing in the last three decades in all European countries, and this “represent[s] one of the most significant changes to the environment within which parties act” (Katz and Mair 1995, 15). On the other hand, decreasing levels of citizens’ involvement in party politics have reduced the amount of resources parties can extract from civil society, and particularly from party members. The two processes are clearly linked: the first one can be seen as a consequence of the second (parties turn to the state because they are no more able to cover their costs with members’ volunteer activity and financial support), but the causal link can also be reversed (parties are less demanding to their members because they have easier access to state resources). Whatever the relation between the two processes, the (changing) origin of party resources is unquestionably crucial in understanding how parties evolve, and to what extent they come close to the model of the cartel party. In the following pages this aspect is analysed taking into account the two processes we have just discussed: membership on one side, and state resources on the other. The second one may in turn be divided into state funding and access to the media. The expectation is, if we assume that cartel party is the winning model, that membership is declining and state funding and privileged access to the media are increasing their relevance for all mainstream parties. This would be a clear confirmation of the fact that linkages between parties and civil society have been getting weaker, while the ones between parties and the state are now the most relevant. To this we will add also some data on parliamentary recruitment which are relevant for evaluating the position of the parties between civil society and the state.

Data about party membership leave little room for doubt. Overall, party members have declined from more than four millions in 1980 to less than two millions in 1998. This is even more significant if we consider that in the same period the electorate has grown from about 42 millions to about 49 millions. In 1980 we had slightly less than 10 party members for each 100 potential voters, at the end of the 1990s the same ratio has declined to 4 (Mair and Van Biezen 2001, Appendix). To be sure, this trend is not a unique feature of Italy. Party members are declining in all western countries. But also from a comparative perspective, Italy emerges as a country where party membership has declined in a particularly sharp way. Only in France the decline has been stronger in the same period. This is due to the fact that up to the 1980s Italian parties had a particularly strong hold on society: in absolute terms, four millions of members is by far the highest figure of Europe; in percentage of the electorate, Italy is just behind Austria, Finland, Norway and Switzerland. Starting from this situation, and considering the negative effect of the *tangentopoli* scandals on the legitimacy of Italian parties, it is clear why the generalized crisis of the 1990s has had an outstandingly severe impact on Italy.

In table 1 we move our focus from the general picture to single parties. The first and second column show the long lasting crisis of the PCI¹, the (apparently) healthy condition of the DC and PSI, and a substantial stability of the MSI. The next column clearly reveals the earthquake of the party system at the beginning of the 1990s. The PCI/PDS loses about half of its members (only a small quota of which joins the new-born Rifondazione Comunista), while the DC and the PSI almost disappear, if compared to the previous period. Only the MSI/AN is able to increase its members, as an effect of its legitimization and its capacity to attract part of the former Christian Democratic supporters. The last column shows the recent situation. The two parties that may count on old organizational roots (DS plus RC on one side and AN on the other) are the strongest ones in terms of membership, even though the difference is sharp between the post-fascist, almost trebling the number of members, and the post-communist, losing more than one million members in the same period. What remains of the DC and PSI is not even comparable to the same parties in their heydays. The new parties, Lega Nord and Forza Italia, are “light” parties. The second one, in particular, explicitly refuses the traditional form of party organization and has a weak territorial structure, to the extent that it is sometimes labelled as a “virtual” party (Poli 2001).

Table 1 *Membership of the main Italian parties*

	1980	1990	1994	1998
PCI/PDS	1.751.323	1.264.790	698.287	621.670
RC			113.495	127.446*
DC/PPI	1.395.584	2.109.670	233.377	130.877*
PSI	514.918	660.195	43.052	35.000
MSI/AN	165.810	142.344	324.344	485.657
Lega				160.000
FI				140.000

*1997

Source: della Porta 2001, 64-66

The first regulation of public funding to parties dates back to the mid-seventies. According to law n. 195/1974, parties were funded through two distinct channels: the first one was a reimbursement for electoral campaign expenses (due to parties contesting elections in at least two thirds of constituencies and getting at least 2% of the votes nationwide or a full electoral quota), the second one a “contribution to party activities” of parliamentary groups. A first attack to this public funding scheme came in 1978. The Partito Radicale, as part of its historical battle against *partitocrazia*, called for a referendum in order to abolish the law. The referendum eventually failed, but 43.6% of voters (some 13 millions of people), expressed themselves against the law. The real troubles began anyway in the 1990s. A new referendum was called, one out of eight dealing with a wide range of topics, from the electoral system to the use of drugs. This time abolishment of public funding to parties was supported by 90% of the voters. This overwhelming majority was the result of long lasting and increasing anti-party sentiments present in Italian society, but also of the contingent situation. The corruption scandals, which had emerged one year before, reached their highest point in 1993, hundreds of party politicians were under judicial investigation for the systematic practice of illegal financing: the old political system was facing an unprecedented collapse. In this climate, citizens felt that referenda could be a concrete

¹ The Communist Party had its peak in membership size in the 1950s (with more than two millions of members). Membership declined and then rose again in the 1970s. From 1976 (1.814.262) it steadily declined up to 1989 (1.421.230), to fall dramatically at the beginning of the 1990s (690.414 in 1993).

opportunity to reform the political system, and to do that *against* the actors – all of them – who had ruled it for fifty years.

After the 1993 referendum, Italian parties had to face what was without any doubt the worst financial crisis of their history. The direct effects of the referendum (i.e. the end of public funding) have in fact to be added to the downfall of membership, that we have previously seen, and to the end of the system of illegal financing, brought about by judicial investigations². It is not surprising then to discover that in 1992-1994 all the traditional parties – or at least the surviving ones – were becoming bankrupt (see Rhodes 1997, tab. 2) and were forced to sell part of their real estate and intellectual properties (newspapers and magazines) to survive. The crisis of the party system was also the crisis of the cartel parties, meaning the model of party organization that had emerged in Italy like elsewhere since the 1970s. Not surprisingly the attack was coming from actors excluded from the cartel or actors that based their action precisely on populist protest (Tarchi 2003) against mainstream parties: the Partito Radicale, proposing the referendum, and the Lega Nord above all.

If 1993 is the year of the breakdown of the cartel, the following years can be labelled as its resurrection, at least assuming public funding as an indicator of cartel strength. Law n. 515/1993, passed just a few months after the referendum was held, was a first response³. Being impossible to reintroduce an “ordinary” public funding scheme after such a clear defeat, the lawmakers just reinforced electoral campaign reimbursements, no more linked to real campaign expenses, but to the number of inhabitants of each electoral constituency. The result was, in any case, a net increase of the amount of funding. Moreover, being this amount unconnected to actual campaign expenses, it made it possible for parties to get additional resources beyond what they really spent for campaigning.

All the following modifications to legislation on this field share the common characteristics of increasing public funding to parties and extending the subjects entitled to it (Pacini 2002). Law n. 2/1997 added to reimbursements a system of voluntary contributions to parties. At the moment of income tax payments, citizens could decide to allot part of their taxes to financing political parties and movements. The failure of this system was clear since the first year of implementation, as only some 12% of the Italians agreed to the voluntary financing. It was not difficult to foresee such a failure, given the generalized distrust in parties (especially when party funding is at stake). Surely it did not help the fact that in the same year parties assigned themselves some 50 millions euros as an advance of voluntary contributions, about two times the amount citizens actually allocated them.

The failure of voluntary contribution led two years later to its abolishment and the introduction of a new law (n. 157/1999), increasing again the amount of funding, and spreading it throughout the legislature: 40% the first year and 15% for each of the following four⁴. The last step (law 156/2002) shows a substantial continuity with the past, again increasing funding and extending the number of entitled subjects (tab. 2).

² Martin Rhodes (1997, 71), while warning about the difficulties of such calculations, estimates the total amount of illegal income of Italian parties to have reached 3,400 billion lire (about 1,700 million euros) per annum. This amount represents more than ten times the total official income (280 billion lire in 1989) of Italian parties.

³ Party financing is only one of the subjects regulated by law 515/1993, which includes many other aspects related to electoral campaigns. See on this Fusaro (1994).

⁴ Also law 157/1999 was exposed to a referendum in 2000, but this time the necessary quorum (50% plus one) was not reached. 32.2% of the people turned out; 71.1% out of them voted for the abolishment of the law.

Table 2 *Total amount of reimbursement per legislature, according to changing legislation, and threshold of admission (only Parliamentary elections, in millions euros)*

Law	Chamber of deputies	Senate	Threshold
195/1974	15.5		2% of votes nationwide <i>or</i> one full electoral quota
515/1993	23	23	4% of votes nationwide <i>or</i> 3% and one elected in one constituency
157/1999	102	102	4% of votes nationwide <i>or</i> 1% and one elected in one constituency
156/2002	247	247	1% of votes nationwide

Sources: Ballini 2002; Pacini 2002.

Notes: the amount for law 195/1974 is referred to last revaluation. Voluntary contributions set by law 2/1997 were in addition to campaign reimbursement.

The threshold for access to public funding is an issue rarely raised by the media, normally more interested in the amount of money parties assign to themselves, but it is nonetheless relevant to our discussion. In 1974 the legislation on reimbursement reflected the proportional logic of the electoral system: the requisites for getting funds were more or less those for entering the parliament. In 1993 the logic was adapted to the new (predominantly) plurality system. But the following modifications (1999 and 2002) reflected and enhanced the well known mechanisms of *fractionalization and proportionalization of the plurality system* (Bartolini e D'Alimonte 1995) by which in spite of Duverger's laws small parties are crucial to coalitional policy, and exercise a blackmail power disproportionate to their electoral size. It is also interesting to note that the 2002 act has a retrospective effect, assigning funds for year 2001 (based on the electoral results of that year) with the new criteria. This is an explicit way to avoid that someone, once the results are known, could remain out of the game⁵.

The last relevant point about public funding legislation is that, coherently with the cartel party theory, it rarely produces clear partisan divisions. The rule is that this legislation is passed by majorities close to unanimity, no matter who is governing and who is in the opposition, the Partito Radicale being the only permanent opponent to whatever form of public party financing. An exception was law 157/1999, but it is one of those exceptions that confirms the general rule. Forza Italia and AN voted against the law, but the first one declared it would not refuse the money once the law was passed, while AN, having initially affirmed it would devolve in charity the whole amount, finally kept it to the party (Pujas 2000, 156).

While public funding to parties, and the related controversies, are common to many European countries (Fusaro 2004), the history of relations between media and politics in Italy is to a great extent a peculiar one, given the fact that the owner of the biggest private television network is also the leader of one of the two political coalitions and the current Prime Minister. In this case too, anyway, the beginning of the 1990s represented a watershed. During the so called "first Republic" the currently used word to designate the relations between television and politics was *lottizzazione*. It meant that each political actor was entitled to a parcel of public television (and more generally to a parcel of public resources) corresponding to its political power. Saying 'political actor' – instead of political party – is a way to underscore that also factions within parties (particularly within the Christian Democracy) must be considered in the partition. As far as public television (the RAI network) is concerned, the partition followed iron rules: "the first

⁵ And in fact the law admitted to public funding those parties - Lista Di Pietro, CCD-CDU, Democrazia Europea, Lista Pannella-Bonino - that had been excluded by the legislation in force (law 157/1999).

channel, always having the greatest share of audience, the most powerful broadcasting plants and the best technical and professional resources, was reserved to the Christian Democracy. The second channel and its news, with a worse reception and less audience, was under Socialist jurisdiction. Finally, the foundation of a third channel set up the opportunity to a subordinate consociation with the Communist opposition, giving them an access to the RAI apparatus, even though as a minor partner [...]. Minor parties have various positions here and there, for instance as directors of radio news” (Marletti 1987, 185).

Two elements contributed to change this landscape at the beginning of the 1990s. The first one was the consolidation of Berlusconi’s position as a monopolist in the market of private television. Berlusconi’s network had emerged in the mid 1980s in a substantial lack of regulation (Marletti 1987, 186-190). The Mammi law (n. 223/1990) was a snapshot of the existing situation, more than an attempt to reform it, and ratified the *duopolio*: two networks (the public one – RAI – and the private one – Berlusconi’s Mediaset) sharing 90% of audience and resources. The second element is obviously the collapse of the old party system and the direct involvement in politics of Berlusconi himself. In the “second republic” the *lottizzazione* still exists, but its rules have changed following the majoritarian logic. The executive board is now under the strict control of governing parties, while the opposition is only entitled to a minority of seats and the control of one of the three channels. More important, the executive board, the key officers, the editorial staff are usually replaced after each change of governing majority.

In the last decade the crucial problem in media-politics relations in Italy has been the conflict of interests of Berlusconi, a real obsession – though a justified one – for centre-left parties. Neither centre-left governments nor centre-right ones have been able (or willing) to solve the problem. The recent law on telecommunications (the Gasparri law, n. 112/2004), like the Mammi law 13 years before, is much more a picture of the existing situation than a effort to solve problems, leaving the *duopolio* substantially untouched, and delaying a real opening of the market to a full implementation of the digital broadcasting system⁶. Much of the recent legislation on this subject revolves around the concern of guaranteeing equal access to television to all relevant political actors, as a way of limiting Berlusconi’s dominance in this field. The *par condicio*, as it is normally labelled in Italian political debate, consists in an extremely detailed regulation of political communication during electoral campaigns; not only forbidding political advertisement on TV, but also defining meticulously who can participate to which TV programs, forcing directors and talk-show anchormen to a “correct and impartial behaviour”, forbidding political surveys in the last two weeks before elections. Such a strict regulation (and limitation) of political communication has often raised criticisms of observers and politicians – it is, after all, a limitation in the fundamental right of expressing one’s thought – but seems unavoidable until a real solution to the conflict of interests is found⁷.

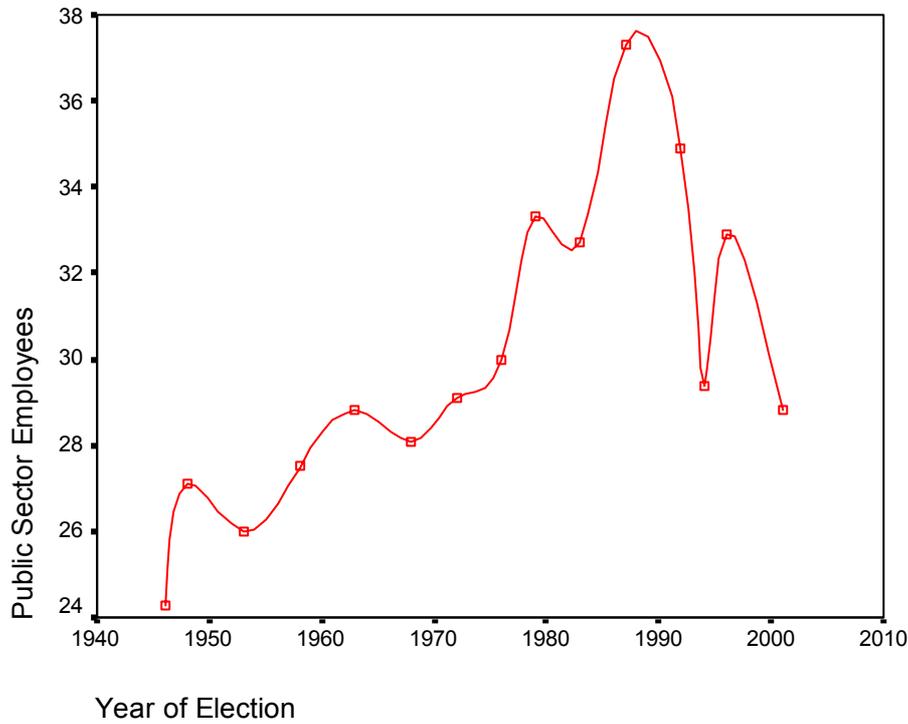
The growing dependence of the party from the state and its increasing distance from civil society postulated by Katz and Mair should appear also from an analysis of the personnel recruited by parties to the representative institutions. Our data for parliamentary recruitment show in fact some interesting results. Using the percentage of members of the first chamber (but adding the Senate would not change much) with a civil service background before their first election to parliament as an indicator of party interpenetration with the state we find a significantly growing trend from the restoration of democracy in 1946 onwards (Fig. 1). Confirming the cartel party hypothesis the trend shows a significant acceleration during the 70s and 80s: by that time the percentage of parliamentarian having worked in the state rather than in other positions in civil society had reached a level of more than 35%. The subsequent data

⁶ See Hibberd (2004, 197-202) for a more detailed description and an evaluation of the law.

⁷ Quoting the words of one of the most careful observers of legislation about politics and the media “[...] Italian legislation pays, with excessive quantities of forced *internal pluralism*, the basic incapacity of the system to seriously guarantee *external pluralism*, by way of adequate antitrust policies” (Fusaro 2004, 43, emphasis in the original).

show however very clearly the effects of the crisis of the 90s: the level of public sector employees in parliament drops very significantly in the following elections and goes back to the percentages of the 60s. It appears that parties have felt the need to turn (at least partially) back to civil society in order to counter the growing discontent in public opinion about their distance from “real people”.

Figure 1 *Members of parliament with a state background (%)*



Source: DATACUBE archive (CIRCaP – University of Siena)

3. Programmatic offer and patterns of party competition

In the seminal work of Katz and Mair a specific attention is devoted to the aspect of the programmatic offer. Quoting the two authors “as party programmes become more similar, and as campaigns are in any case oriented more towards agreed goals rather than contentious means, there is a shrinkage in the degree to which electoral outcomes can determine government actions“ (Katz and Mair 1995, p. 22). In fact, in the cartel model, none of the major parties is ever definitely ‘out’ of office, while the very difference between the parties in office and those out of office becomes increasingly blurred. This is also reflected in the convergence of the programmatic platforms of the parties that, according to the two authors, marks the weakening of the essential linkage between the citizens and the state (Lawson 1988) fully guaranteed only when voters choose between parties with clearly distinctive programmes and when they can exert a real popular control over policy. In the view of Katz and Mair the ideological distance between the parties, as it is reflected in their programmatic offer, is a crucial aspect for the analysis of the cartel model and of its impact on democracy. In the same article (1995) the two scholars even claim that where there is programmatic convergence, democracy becomes a means of achieving social stability rather than social change (ibidem, 22).

For these reasons, the analysis of the programmatic supply of the parties seems crucial. In particular, it will allow us to see if the following effects introduced by the cartel model are in fact truly in place:

1. The party positions in the policy space and their electoral platforms tend to converge.
2. From an ideological point of view the parties following this trend are all legitimised to govern.
3. Such convergence opens a space at the extremes of the policy space that more radical parties can occupy. Extreme parties therefore maintain their programmatic distinctiveness and they represent the only alternative to cartel party politics.

This section will be devoted to an attempt to test in the Italian case the validity of the hypothesis of ideological/programmatic convergence of the parties. More specifically, we are interested to see if the political discourse of the parties, as reflected in their programmatic platforms, follows a path toward convergence. Given the peculiarity of the Italian system, we are also interested to see if the building of large coalitions competing in a largely bipolar system is characterised by a process of programmatic convergence. In fact, the creation of two alternative coalitions of parties since 1994 has produced for the first time in Italy a political scene where real alternation in government is possible. In addition to that, the extreme fragmentation of the Italian party system where the strongest party is always below 30% of the votes, makes coalition-building very inclusive, usually encompassing a large number of actors ranging from the centre to the extremes of the political spectrum. The result is that in the last ten years none of the parties represented in parliament has ever been bound to permanent exclusion from government - and in fact at various points each of them has been in government (or has given an external support). In the end, with some exceptions that we will see in greater detail below, the cartel model seems to be a widespread practice both in terms of electoral competition and of access to government.

In order to analyse how this reflects in the programmatic offer, we will make use of data drawn from the party manifestos issued for the general elections⁸. Our attention will focus on some specific dimensions of the party programmes particularly sensitive for party competition. More specifically, we will refer to the policy preferences that can be related to the two alternative models of socio-economic development often described through the labels of *neo-liberalism* and *regulated capitalism*. In recent times, many analyses (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2004; Gabel and Hix

⁸ We would like to thank the Manifesto Research Group of the ECPR and in particular Andrea Volkens to let us use the data.

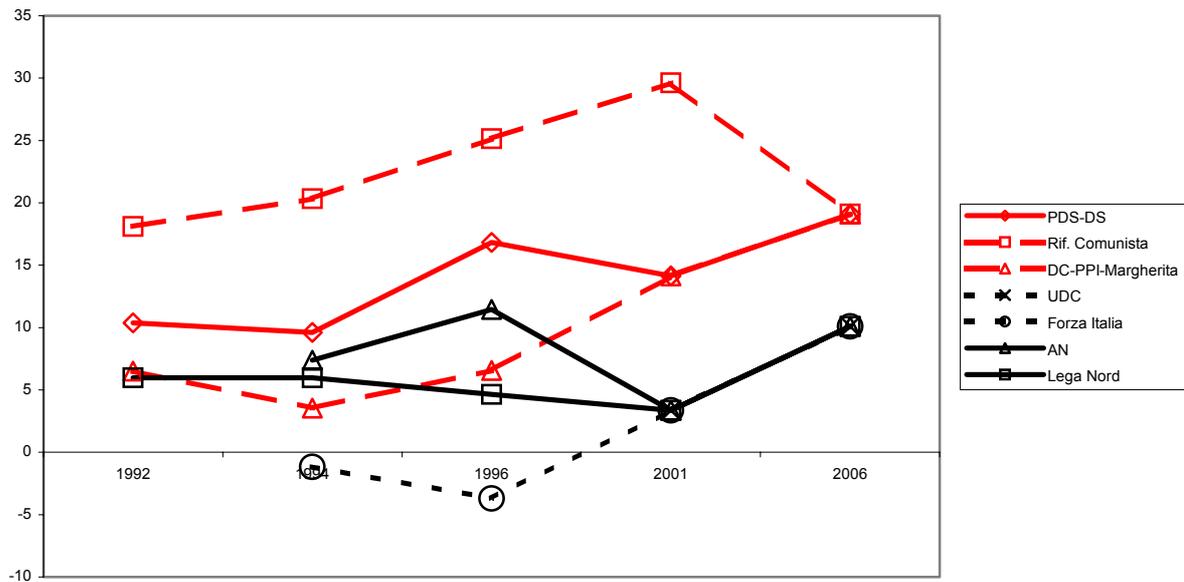
2004) have shown that in Europe the patterns of party competition are shaped predominantly around the confrontation between these two models. Hence, we built an index that shows what kind of socio-economic model parties promote through their manifestos in the electoral discourse⁹. What we are interested to see are not so much the positions of parties on the left-right dimension (even if from our analysis some implications can be drawn also in this respect). Instead, we want to know how distant parties are from each other, regardless of their positions in the left-right continuum. Finally, the aim will be to produce a measure of the respective distance of the socio-economic discourse of the Italian parties.

Fig. 2 shows a representation of the policy preferences of parties on issues of social economy and regulated capitalism. The parties analysed in this table are the largest ones of the Italian party system: three mainstream parties of the centre-right (Forza Italia, AN and UDC, this last only for 2001 and 2006), two of the centre-left (PDS-DS and DC-PPI-Margherita) and two more peripheral parties (Rifondazione Comunista and Lega Nord)¹⁰. We can see that in the period of time examined, the parties show a number of distinctive positions until 1996, while from 2001 the picture looks much more simple with only three points represented in the diagram. The reason is that before 2001 the parties kept their individual manifestos distinct, even when they built an electoral alliance. On the contrary, in 2001 the programmatic offer is more simplified, as each of the two coalitions produced a unitary manifesto and only Rifondazione Comunista participated to the ballot as a challenger party with an alternative platform. Respectively, of the analysed parties, DS and Margherita are the main parties of the centre-left coalition, while Forza Italia, UDC, AN and Lega Nord built the centre-right coalition. We see that in Italy the political competition on the socio-economic themes shows a tendency in favour of various degrees of social protection and market regulation. If we exclude the case of Forza Italia, it seems that no other party in Italy promotes a clear neo-liberal agenda, while pledges in favour of social protection and market regulation are more recurrent. Overall, the Italian party system seems to express predominantly a preference for a “social market economy”, with Forza Italia being the only exception to that. This shows that even the discourse of a large part of the centre-right in this country keeps an important social component while it remains at the same time cautious about the free market. This makes a large difference when compared to the neo-liberal orientation of the centre-right in other European countries, of which at some points the political discourse of Forza Italia can be vaguely considered an example. Of course, this does not mean that in Italy the socio-economic issues are ones of consensus. On the contrary, each party supports different degrees of social protection, a different political role for the labour groups, and various degrees of market regulation, as Fig. 2 clearly shows. In particular, if we consider the point in time where a greater differentiation of the positions is visible (1996), we see that the parties occupy a rather large range of positions and, in particular that the distance between the two major parties (DS and Forza Italia, whose positions are at the two extremes, if we do not consider the radical Rifondazione Comunista) is as large as twenty-one points.

Figure 2 *The programmatic supply of the Italian parties: social economy and regulated capitalism*

⁹ The index is built on the scores of the individual parties on six variables, each representing a policy issue. Every variable among the following ones has been coded in the data set as percentage of dedicated quasi-sentences out of the total number of quasi-sentences in the manifesto: Market regulation positive; Social justice positive; Welfare state expansion positive; Welfare state expansion negative; Labour groups positive; Labour groups negative. We have added the percentages of the variables expressing a positive orientation and subtracted the percentages expressing a negative orientation. The result is a measure where the more positive values reflect a preference for regulated capitalism and the more negative values for a neo-liberal socio-economic platform.

¹⁰ In our days, another party should be added to this list, UDC, a Christian democrat party of the centre-right coalition that has gained greater electoral strength since 2001.



Source: ECPR Manifesto Research Group, Party Manifestos Dataset

Until now, the picture does not show a particularly strong evidence in favour of the argument of programmatic convergence, at best it seems plausible to argue that in Italy the neo-liberal orientation is clearly undermined by the social market economy and even by the protectionist options¹¹. But it is interesting to move now our attention to 2001. As already noted above, this year marks a simplification of the programmatic supply under the form of three alternative platforms: the one of the House of freedom, the one of the Olive tree, and the one of Rifondazione Comunista. From our perspective, the most relevant implication of this lies in the fact that the diversity in the positions previously shown is significantly reduced and we can even see the beginning of a path toward convergence. If we still exclude the challenger party (RC) whose position diverges from the ones of mainstream parties even to a greater extent than before, the distance between the two coalitions is now of eleven points, much less than five years before. Also, the programmatic offer of 2001 seems to water down the only platform showing in the past some hints of neo-liberalism, the one of Forza Italia.

In 2006 we find these trends even strengthened. Before the new electoral law was in place creating strong incentives for parties to take part in large coalitions, a relevant party still contesting alone the 2001 elections, RC, decides to participate in the centre-left. This further reduces the scope for variation in the programmatic supply, as only two alternative policy agendas are now available for the choice of voters. At the same time, the tendency to reduce the mutual distance between such programmatic platforms is also confirmed as this distance is now exactly of 9 points.

The conclusion we can trace from this part of the analysis is that in the Italian party system, in spite of the large number of parties taking part to the elections, there is an increasing simplification in the programmatic supply, with two large coalitions of parties starting a process of convergence of their policy platforms. In the end, on the crucial themes characterising the confrontation between neo-liberalism and regulated capitalism, we found that the distance between the two coalitions has been progressively reduced, while only until 2001 Rifondazione Comunista has been the party clearly oriented to mark the distance from mainstream politics. Challenger parties seem to have disappeared in 2006.

¹¹ In particular, AN and the Lega Nord propose different solutions for the protection of the European market from third countries and of the domestic market from the competition of other EU countries.

In the end, if the convergence that we have seen will be further strengthened in the future, the electoral competition in Italy could be more and more characterised by a confrontation about who is better in doing things than about radically different political projects.

4. Conclusion

Our analysis of the Italian case has shown a mixed picture with regards to the main elements of the cartel party syndrome described by Katz and Mair. We have explored the causal factors that supposedly should determine this transformation of parties and found that while some of them fit rather well with the cartel party model others do not. The increasing separation between parties and civil society has undoubtedly affected Italian politics and has thus created a basic favourable ground for cartel like developments. Patterns of political competition have however only partially been favourable to a full scale cartelisation of parties. During the first Republic the asymmetrical position of governing and opposition parties produced significant forms of collusive behaviour, but at the same time did not enable a full public acknowledgement of them (and probably this is one of the reasons why side by side with limited public financing of political life diffuse practices of covered and illegal financing were accepted by all parties). In the second Republic the asymmetry among parties has been overcome and mutual recognition has become the norm, yet at the same time we must register both the appearance of new parties that do not correspond to the cartel party type and the increased competitiveness of political life. Parallel to this mixed pattern of causal factors we have mixed results on the dependent variables. On one side we have seen a large agreement on public financing and its expansion and a growing dependence of parties from state resources. On the other side we must underline the lack of consensus on the control of public television and a decline in the weight of a public sector background among parliamentarians. Finally, for what concerns the programmatic supply of the parties, the trend points first to an increased distance on the socio-economic dimension but then to a reduction of it. This is firstly due to the need of each coalition to find a common ground for its unified manifesto. But it seems increasingly due also to the need to find a common ground for competition between coalitions.

Our research confirms thus the multifaceted character of the cartel party model and the need to explore in a more analytic way the different components and also to understand better the causal linkages between explanatory factors and effects. It has shown also that a disruption of the party system, as the one experienced by the Italian political system during the 1990s, can on the short term interfere significantly with certain aspects of the process of cartelisation but is probably less able on the longer term to stop them.

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