

**THE ITALIAN PARTIES AND THEIR PROGRAMMATIC PLATFORMS:
HOW ALTERNATIVE?**

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THE ITALIAN PARTIES AND THEIR PROGRAMMATIC PLATFORMS: HOW ALTERNATIVE?

Abstract

In the last decade, in spite of a large number of parties taking part in the elections, the Italian party system has shown an increasing simplification in the programmatic supply, with two large coalitions showing a process of convergence of their policy platforms. In this article, I will show that on the crucial themes characterising the confrontation between *neo-liberalism vs. regulated capitalism* the distance between the two coalitions has progressively reduced. The theory of the cartel party has predicted a convergence in the policy positions of parties. Thus, I will attempt to test the validity of this theory and of the announced consequences on the Italian case. For this purpose, a longitudinal analysis will be presented grounded on party manifestos for the period from 1994 to 2006.

Introduction

For more than a decade, from the fall of the old party system and the naissance of new parties in 1994 to recent times, the ideological positioning of the Italian parties has been a contentious matter. In particular, the creation of new parties with no clear ideological affiliation has created many uncertainties in the scholarly debate and in the general public as to the attribution of such parties to traditional party families. Additionally, the transformation of some old parties into new ones with fresh political views has also created uncertainty as to their break-up with their old and often radical views. At the same time, in the electoral campaigns, parties have been particularly tenacious in describing their adversaries as very distant from their own programmatic positions, to the point that

voting has often been presented to the electorate as a choice between radically different world views. As a consequence, the tones of the electoral campaign have often taken a rather dramatic feel, one that has eventually contributed to a large mobilization of the electorate.

This picture raises many questions, some related to the understanding of the new Italian party system, some others related to the broader debate on parties and party change. In particular, at first glance the Italian case does not seem to fit the normal functioning of bipolar party competition in plurality systems usually leading to convergence toward the centre in the attempt to intercept the median voter (Downs 1957). If this was proved true, it would show that Italy has not overcome its exceptionalism and still remains a case of polarised politics in spite of the change in the party system and in the electoral law occurred since the early nineties. But also, the Italian case would go very much against predictions of theorists of the cartel party who in fact have predicted the ideological convergence of parties in contemporary democracies toward the centre of the policy spectrum. In particular, in their seminal work Katz and Mair (1995) have devoted specific attention to the problem 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’ (1995: 22). Consequently, none of the major parties are ever definitely excluded from office, while the very difference between the parties in office and those out of office becomes increasingly blurred. The two authors also claim that the convergence of the programmatic platforms of parties has several implications. In particular, it is deemed to produce a weakening of the essential *linkage* between the citizens and the state that can be fully guaranteed only when voters choose between parties with clearly distinctive programmes, sanctioning with their vote their policy agenda and exerting a real popular control over policy. Ultimately, Katz and Mair argue that a cartel mode of politics will finally lead democracy to become ‘a means of achieving social stability rather than social change’ (1995: 22).

At first sight, if we consider the mutual recognition of wide programmatic distance voiced by the Italian parties during the electoral campaigns of the last thirteen years, the scenario announced in particular by theorists of the cartel party seems far from being in place. However, this statement has never been tested empirically. In this article I will therefore try to show the real distance between the programmatic platforms at the time of general elections. For this purpose, a longitudinal analysis will be presented focused on the patterns of party competition in the policy space. I will analyse five general elections including the last one of the First republic with a PR system in 1992, three elections with a mixed (PR-plurality) system from 1994 to 2001 and the last general election of 2006 characterised by a return to a PR system (with some majoritarian aspects). The time-span is long enough to allow a limited longitudinal analysis. In real fact, this limited period is disproportionately relevant due to the transformation occurred moving from the first to the second Republic, through the transitional period of the mid-nineties. In other words, this limited time-span is extremely relevant for the discontinuities it has generated. Additionally, in order to have more solid evidence of the discontinuities occurred moving from the first to the second Republic, I will also make reference to the general elections of the period 1946-1987. The analysis will be characterised by the attempt to answer the following questions. Is the Italian party system really as polarised as party leaders presented to voters? Do we find hints of greater polarisation over time? Does the cartel party theory find in Italy a deviant case, at least with reference to the dimension of the programmatic offer?

The Problem

This article has two main goals. On the one hand, to produce an empirically grounded description of the patterns of party contestation of the policy space in the period 1994-2006 and the discontinuities introduced in relation to the first Republic. In the literature, the absence of a systematic analysis of the programmatic offer of the Italian parties from 1994 to our days makes this descriptive part necessary. This descriptive part will also be followed by an attempt to test in the Italian case the

underlying argument of cartel party theorists, *the programmatic platforms of parties tend to converge over time toward the centre of the political spectrum.*

Given the peculiarity of the Italian party system - characterised by a high number of parties forming large coalitions in a largely bipolar system and allowing even small/radical parties to be represented in Parliament - it will be particularly interesting to see how parties compete from a programmatic point of view in this rather crowded electoral market. Furthermore, the creation of two alternative coalitions of parties since 1996 has produced for the first time a political scene where real alternation in government has been possible. The extreme fragmentation of the Italian party system – the strongest party has always been below 30% of the national vote – has made coalition-building very inclusive, usually encompassing a large number of parties ranging from the centre to the extremes of the political spectrum. The result of this is that from 1994 none of the parties represented in parliament has ever been bound to permanent exclusion from government. In fact, at various points in time each of them, even the extremes, have been in government. This should suggest that competition *within* the two main political areas – left and right – is mostly oriented toward convergence, as forming coalitions and a joint policy agenda have become common practice within each of these two areas. Therefore, the first problem I will address concerns the competition between mainstream and extreme parties within each of the two poles. At the same time, the tendency to develop a largely bipolar competition certainly has an impact on the patterns of competition between poles. This brings us to our second problem: does bipolarity create a pattern oriented toward convergence in a race to catch the vote of the median voter?

In order to link these speculations with the scholarly debate on the cartel party, I will test on the Italian case the three following expectations generated by cartel party theorists (Katz and Mair 1995):

1. The party positions in the policy space and their electoral platforms tend to converge.
2. From the ideological point of view 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 politics.

I will test such expectations in the Italian case and see how they fit the party system that has emerged in this country after the political turmoil of the early nineties.

The Italian case: coalition-building as means of cartelisation?

In this part of the analysis, I will make use of data drawn from the party manifestos issued for the general elections¹. In particular, the attention will focus on some specific dimensions of the party programmes that are extremely relevant for party competition. To be more specific, I will refer to the policy preferences on the two alternative models of socio-economic development that are often described through the labels of *neoliberalism* and *regulated capitalism*. In recent times, many analyses (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2004; Gabel and Hix 2004) have shown that in Europe the patterns of party competition are shaped predominantly around the confrontation between these two models. Hence, my attempt will be to build an index of the socio-economic preferences of parties as they are voiced in the electoral discourse through the party manifestos. The main interest will not be to describe the position of parties on the left-right scale (even if from this analysis some implications can be drawn also in this respect). Instead, following the theoretical problems that I have presented above, I am more interested in seeing to what extent parties distance themselves from each other, regardless of their positions in the left-right continuum. In the conclusion, I will introduce some reflections on the kind of scenario such patterns of party competition open for the possibility of re-introducing *centrism* in this country.

In my analysis, I will apply an index for the estimation of the policy preferences of parties about alternative options of socio-economic development. This index is built using six variables, each covering a broad policy issue. Every variable indicates the percentage (saliency) of quasi-sentences² dedicated to a particular policy issue as a share of the total number of quasi-sentences in the

manifesto. Hence, the higher the value, the more a party has emphasised a given policy issue in its discourse. The following are the policy issues presented in the index:

- Market regulation positive³;
- Social justice positive⁴;
- Welfare state expansion positive⁵;
- Welfare state limitation⁶;
- Labour groups positive⁷;
- Labour groups negative⁸.

I have subtracted the total share of quasi-sentences expressing a negative orientation toward measures for regulating capitalism and a social-market economy from the total share of quasi-sentences expressing positive orientations. The result is a measure where the more positive values reflect a preference for *regulated capitalism* while the more negative values express a preference for a *neoliberal platform*.

In Fig.1 we see a first representation of the policy preferences of the 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 in 2001 and 2006), two of the centre-left (PDS-DS and DC-PPI-Margherita) and two more peripheral parties (Rifondazione Comunista and Lega Nord)⁹. Where coalition manifestos (Olive Tree and House of Freedom in 2001-2006) are present, the relevant manifestos also represent other smaller parties.

[Fig. 1 about here]

To start with, it is important to note that the parties show a number of distinctive positions until 1996, while from 2001 the picture looks much more simple with only two/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, from 2001 the programmatic offer looks much simplified, as each of the two coalitions produced a unitary

manifesto, and in 2001 only Rifondazione Comunista participated to the ballot as a challenger party with an alternative platform. This has evident implications for my analysis. It shows that using this methodology it is possible to have more precise estimates of the positions of the individual parties only until 1996. Otherwise, from 2001 onwards we can only refer to the alliance compromise represented by the joint manifesto of each of the two poles. However, this change in the object is also part of the variation that I intend to describe. I assume that the positions of the individual parties vary from the point of compromise marked by the joint manifesto of each alliance and also that this is something that the present study cannot assess with accuracy. At the same time, for the problems raised in this article, it is probably more relevant to note that the extensive commitment of the parties to joint manifestos represents an unprecedented convergence within the two poles. Hence it is evidence of a path toward programmatic convergence within the overcrowded Italian party system. I will now analyse whether this also results in convergence between the two poles.

We see that overall 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, indeed it seems that no other party in Italy has promoted a clear neo-liberal agenda, while pledges in favour of social protection and market regulation have been more recurrent. Overall, the Italian party system seems to express predominantly a preference for a “social market economy”, with the only partial exception of its largest party, Forza Italia. This shows that in this country even the discourse of a large part of the centre-right keeps an important social component, while at the same time it stays cautious on strong statements in favour of the free market. In particular, in the Second Republic the Italian right has not evolved very much into neo-liberal ideological positions and proposes instead various measures of social market policy and resistance toward the free market. This makes a large difference with the neo-liberal orientation of the centre-right in other European countries, of which at some points the political discourse of Forza Italia could be considered the only vague approximation. But hints of neo-liberalism in Forza Italia

never really evolve into a mature neo-liberal platform, while over the years we find instead the signs of a change of direction.

Certainly, 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. 1 clearly shows. In particular, if we consider the point in time where a greater differentiation in the positions is visible (1996), we see that the parties occupy a large range of positions and, in particular the distance between the two major parties (DS and Forza Italia, whose positions are at the two extremes, without considering the even more distant Rifondazione comunista) is as large as 21 points. Until now, the picture does not show strong evidence in favour of programmatic convergence. At best, it seems plausible to argue that in Italy the neo-liberal orientation is clearly undermined by a diffuse preference for a social market economy and even by some protectionist options¹⁰. This phenomenon reveals an interesting continuity with the trend shown for the period until the 1980s where competition over economic issues has been remarkably on the left of the policy spectrum (fig. 2)¹¹. It seems clear that the DC and the PCI, the two main actors of the Italian party system, have been in strong competition over socio-economic policies and we see that at some points their distance in this dimension of the programmatic supply equals zero. Hence, in spite of their different ideological background, at some points there has been much less ideological polarisation between these two parties than some would expect. However, starting from the 1990s the picture seems more diverse with mainstream parties producing larger variation in their socio-economic preferences, even if overall the social element is still present in their political discourse.

[Fig. 2 about here]

It would now be interesting to move our attention to 2001. As already mentioned above, this year marks a simplification in the programmatic supply under the form of three alternative platforms: the two of the competing coalitions - House of freedom and Olive tree - and the one of Rifondazione comunista, the only challenger party of some relevance among those refusing to take

part in a large coalition. For our interest, the most important implication of this event lies in the fact that the diversity in the positions previously shown is now much undermined. We will see that this phenomenon will mark the beginning of a path toward converging programmatic platforms. Indeed, if we exclude the only challenger party (RC) whose position seems to diverge from the mainstream party ones to an even greater extent than before, the distance in the positions between the two coalitions is 11 points, which is much less than five years before. Furthermore, 2001 seems to definitely water down the only programmatic platform showing some hints of neo-liberalism, the one of Forza Italia.

In 2006 we find this tendency reinforced. As a consequence of a re-alignment – precedent even to the new electoral law that creates strong incentives for parties to take part in large coalitions – a relevant party still contesting alone the 2001 elections, RC, also participates in the centre-left coalition led by Prodi. This further reduces the scope of variation in the programmatic supply, as only two alliance agendas are now available for the voters. At the same time, the tendency to reduce the mutual distance between such programmatic platforms is also confirmed as the distance is now exactly 9 points.

In 2006 there is a general shift in favour of the regulated capitalism option, we could also argue this represents a shift toward the left of the policy spectrum. It is interesting to note that the House of freedom shows the same tendency and has a similar shift as the *Unione*. Hence, we could argue that a shift of one coalition results in a similar shift of the other coalition. One possible explanation of this could be that the *Unione* has been influenced by the accession of RC to the centre-left coalition. But also the Italian economic crisis of the time (characterised by economic stagnation, declining international competitiveness and deteriorating purchasing power of the households) could explain a growing demand of social protection from the electorate to which parties try to respond. Either way, it is interesting to see that the shift is common to both coalitions and that as a result of this the distance between coalitions does not increase and remains in fact smaller, as it has been ever since 1994.

It is interesting to note that especially in large coalitions, these electoral manifestos usually tend to play the role of a prospective governmental programme. They show the compromise/lowest common denominator agreement over policies of the coalition parties. In other words, it is a sort of agreement among partners on the policy agenda of the future government in case of electoral victory. It should both be politically binding and a guarantee for each of them that the government activity should not deviate too much from this agreement. Ultimately, this means that for the first time since the naissance of the new Italian party system, the whole political spectrum has converged to two electoral/governmental programmes whose mutual distance under the socio-economic sphere is sensitively lower than in the past.

We have seen that since 2001 most actors of the Italian party system have structured their socio-economic policy platforms around the pattern opposing left vs. right, while the internal competition has been greater within the left where RC has marked its distance from the centre-left until 2001. We should also note that the ideological distance between the two coalitions remains remarkable. The difference between the centre-left and the centre-right coalition in the socio-economic index shows that there are still options for the voters to choose between alternative policy programmes. At the same time this difference is not that extreme. Contrary to the rhetoric of political leaders and to the dramatisation of the tones in the electoral campaign, if we only consider the programmatic supply, politics in Italy seems in actual fact increasingly more about who is better in doing things than about radically different political projects. The ideological polarisation seems in fact to be reduced over time and the mutual distance does not actually allow talking about real polarisation. We should also note that the two extremes of the political spectrum (RC and LN) having respectively converged into more moderate programmatic platforms, in 2006 the total variation between left and right turns to be smaller than ever. Variation is also surprisingly small when we think that this reflects the policy commitments of more than twelve parties. Finally, this evidence shows a tendency to establish a bipolar system of centripetal competition even in presence

of a large number of parties as it happens in other European countries such as Belgium and Finland (Pappalardo 2002).

In the end, it seems that the massive proliferation of parties is quite disproportionate compared to the relatively small variation in the programmatic supply. Even if we consider the coalition manifestos as the lowest common denominator agreements among coalition partners - a point of compromise among coalition partners whose original preferences vary from this point of compromise - there is reason to believe that the scope of total variation would not justify alone the existence of over twelve relevant parties¹². If, as we have seen, the ideological distance cannot play as a credible justification for the number of parties, we should then search the explanation of this phenomenon elsewhere. For instance, in the institutional structures (electoral law, public financing), or in the behaviour of the political elites not very inclined to party merging. The mixed (PR-plurality) electoral system in place in the period 1994-2001 and the new PR system introduced in 2006 have certainly not contributed to reduce the number of parties although they have forced them to build alliances. While a generous system of public financing (Pacini 2002) has created incentives even for the smaller parties to keep their distinctiveness and take part in the elections without considering merging with other parties. But also the collusive attitudes of the larger parties should be mentioned, as they have preferred not to isolate potential small partners to induce their disappearance from the electoral market, while they have made all kinds of efforts to include them in the electoral alliances. These problems would take us far from the focus of this analysis and therefore they will not be explored. However, this article can contribute to show that the number of parties in the Italian system is unrelated to the ideological/programmatic divisions in the party system and should therefore be explained in another way.

The elections of 2006

The particular case of the 2006 elections is relevant for our analysis under different points of view. On the one hand, we have seen that since 1994 the mutual distance in the socio-economic

aspirations of the Italian parties has never been so small as in 2006. On the other hand, the electoral campaign has been extremely contentious and the reciprocal accusations of extremism between the leaders of the two poles have been recurrent. In the end, the two competing coalitions have been particularly successful in presenting the ballot as a choice between two opposite world views, almost a way of no return for the country. Considering the large mobilisation of the electorate, well represented by the increased turnout in 2006 (83.6% excluding the constituencies abroad) compared to 2001 (81.5%), it seems that the dramatisation of the political climate during the electoral campaign has been convincing in the view of the public¹³. However, in the light of what we have seen above, we should argue that in Italy parties seem to present the electoral contest in being more polarised than it is in actual fact. I will try to give further evidence about this apparent contradiction.

In Fig. 3 I show the total number of quasi-sentences in the Manifestos of the centre-left (Unione) and the centre-right (House of freedom) coalitions. The first information we can draw is that in 2006 the manifesto of the Unione is ten times bigger than the one of the House of freedom. We should not simply attribute such a difference to a distinct communication style of the two coalitions, thinking, for example, that one may give more emphasis to this means of electoral communication. In the past, the manifesto of the coalition led by Berlusconi has in fact been rather large and articulated. We should also add that in the past it was above all Berlusconi's initiative that gave unprecedented visibility to this instrument of communication with the electorate. The electoral campaign of 2001, for instance, has been characterised by the presentation of excerpts of the manifesto of the House of freedom in the media, culminating in a well-known media event where in a TV show Berlusconi signed a symbolic contract with the Italians containing some of the most salient measures presented in the manifesto of his coalition.

[Fig. 3]

Therefore, the problem here would not seem to be linked to the importance attached by the two coalitions to manifestos as means of communication with the electorate. The problem would

rather seem to be linked to the context where parties develop their electoral campaign. In this respect, I argue that two possible explanations might reveal the reasons for the different format of the two manifestos in 2006. On the one hand, failure to comply with all the ambitious programmatic statements of 2001 has made the centre-right more reticent this time and in particular more reluctant to commit to so many specific policy proposals. On the other hand, for the Unione there is a clear interest to have a sort of contract among the 9 party partners of the centre-left coalition. This number of coalition partners is double compared to the centre-right. Therefore, this contract should play a double function: to be binding for the government agenda in case of victory and, at the same time, to play as a guarantee for each coalition partner that the eventual centre-left government should not deviate too much from what has been agreed in the manifesto. Ultimately, the Unione could be more sensitive about these problems than the centre-right considering the large number of parties it includes. Additionally, the centre-right has already been in government for five years under the same Prime minister and this past experience offers more guarantees about the ability of the centre-right coalition to create a relatively stable government agenda.

Considering the nature of the problems that I have raised in this article it would now seem fundamental to see how the content of the manifestos of 2006 is distributed among policy domains. In this respect, looking at Fig. 3 we see that both for the Unione and the House of Freedom the three domains that are more salient concern the economy, the welfare state/environment, the political system (73.6% of total content for the Unione, 75% for the House of Freedom). Most references to the political system (20.4% of the total manifesto content for the Unione, 26.8% for the House of Freedom) concern problems of governmental and administrative efficiency and also the manifesto coalition's competence in governing and the accusations to the adversaries of lacking such competence. I have already explored the preferences in the domains of the economy, the welfare state and the social groups. Thus, considering the salience that the economy (28.8% of the total manifesto content for the Unione, 37.3% for the House of Freedom) and the welfare state (24.3% for the Unione, 10.8% for the House of Freedom) have within the two manifestos, we might

conclude that most of the programmatic agenda of the two coalitions could well be represented by Fig. 1. As we have seen, the socio-economic preferences of the two coalitions are different but not so dramatically, and certainly not as much as political leaders tend to present to the public. If polarisation really is present, this should actually be searched in other domains such as the foreign policy (External Relations) (see on this Conti 2005), immigration and multiculturalism (Fabric of society), domains where polarisation seems more present even if they are much less salient in the two manifestos. In the end, the analysis on the elections of 2006 seems to confirm that the explanation for the bitterness of the political climate in Italy should not be searched in the policy preferences of the parties but elsewhere. There is reason to believe that in actual fact deep divisions in Italian politics are due above all to the personalisation of politics, and in particular to the lack of mutual recognition between the two coalitions and between their party leaders.

Conclusion

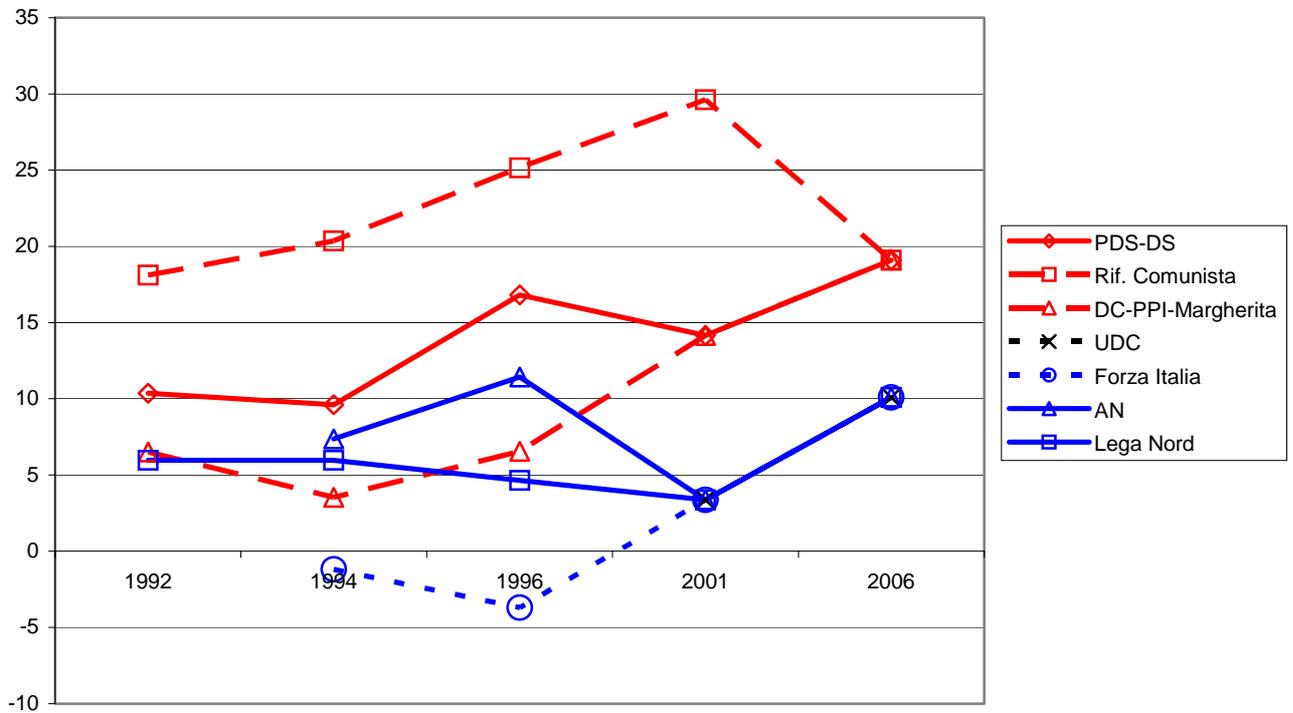
After more than a decade of existence, the Italian party system shows evidence of some interesting trends. On the one hand, there is a clear tendency toward the cartelisation of the programmatic supply. We have seen that the positions of parties in the policy space tend indeed to converge, in particular on the socio-economic issues. There is still some clear distinctiveness that definitely makes the two coalitions alternative to each other. At the same time the large distance of the early 1990s has been dramatically reduced. It is also true that from an ideological point of view the parties following this trend are all legitimised to govern, even those with a past experience of radicalism and fringe politics. In the Italian case, this trend is so overwhelming that the convergence *within* and *between* coalitions has in the end opened a space at the extremes of the policy space. After the shift of Lega Nord and Rifondazione comunista into more govern-oriented positions and after their actual participation in government, it seems there are no anti-system parties of any relevance that occupy the extremes. This is quite the opposite to what cartel theorists have predicted, in particular that extreme parties would keep their programmatic distinctiveness to

represent the only alternative to cartel party politics. Consequently, this seems an interesting deviation of the Italian case from the predictions of the cartel model, one that could probably be explained by the very nature of the Italian party system and of the electoral institutions. On the one hand, the party system is so fragmented and so focused on bipolarity that no majority is possible without the support of many parties, including some extreme parties that are consequently allowed to share power and resources. They in turn move into less radical stances to become acceptable for a government coalition. The electoral laws adopted since 1994 have also favoured such fragmentation of the party system. We should also note that the shift toward more moderate stances concerns first of all the party in office, the face that is more inclined to a collusive behaviour. The party in the ground might be instead dissatisfied with this strategy and withdraw support from extreme parties after they shift toward more moderate stances. If we look at the electoral performance of the Northern League (10% in 1996 not taking part in any coalition, 3.9% in 2001 and 4.4% in 2006 taking part in the House of Freedom), this seems to be very much the case. It will be interesting to see how the vote for Rifondazione Comunista will change after its first experience in government in 2006-2007. In the end, it seems that the situation could be fluid and more radical parties could emerge occupying the extremes of the political spectrum if they are left vacant.

In principle the convergence of the policy platforms that we have observed could facilitate an alliance at the centre, particularly of those parties whose individual party preferences lie in between the two points of compromise represented by the two coalition platforms in fig. 1. At the same time, this should not be considered the only possible option. In fact, a bipolar confrontation is also typically about programmatic convergence in the race to capture the vote of the median voter of which I have shown some clear signs in this article. In the end, if from the ideological point of view there seems to be reason to believe that a coalition of centre parties would be possible, other factors might in real factor interfere. In particular, a political culture based on alternation that has now been rooted for over a decade. The lack of recognition between coalitions and between their leaders also makes communication between actual adversaries more difficult. The creation of a new

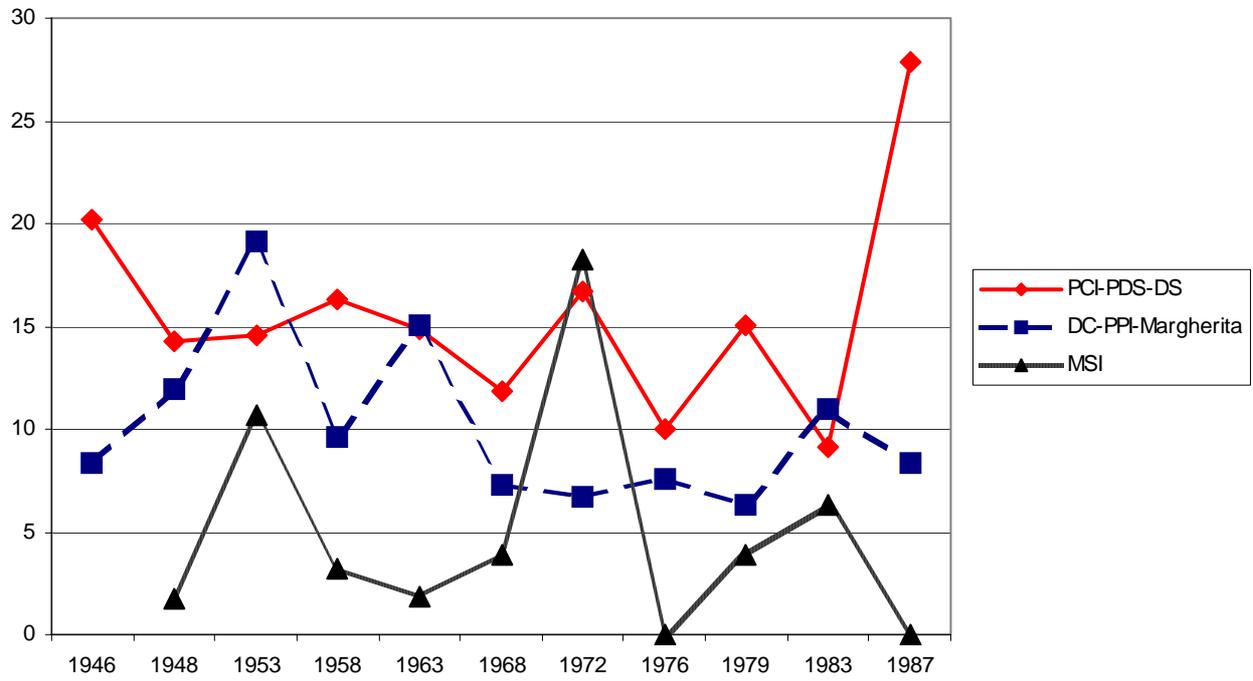
party – Partito Democratico – resulting from the merge of leftists and centrists has reduced the possibilities for centrists to unite at the centre of the political spectrum under one *pivot* party. Finally, the shift of the extremes into less radical positions makes the system less polarised, so less inclined to centrism. In fact, centrism as it has been in place in Italy at the time of the First Republic is a way to avoid access to power of anti-system parties. It creates a blocked system with a dominant centrist party where alternation in government is made virtually impossible. In spite of the crisis of the Prodi government in early 2008 that has created a climate of deep antagonism between mainstream and radical parties, a blocked system of government seems to go both against the political culture established in the last fifteen years and the mechanics of a party system whose distance between radical and mainstream parties has been progressively reduced.

Fig. 1 – A socio-economic index of the positions of the Italian parties (1992-2006)



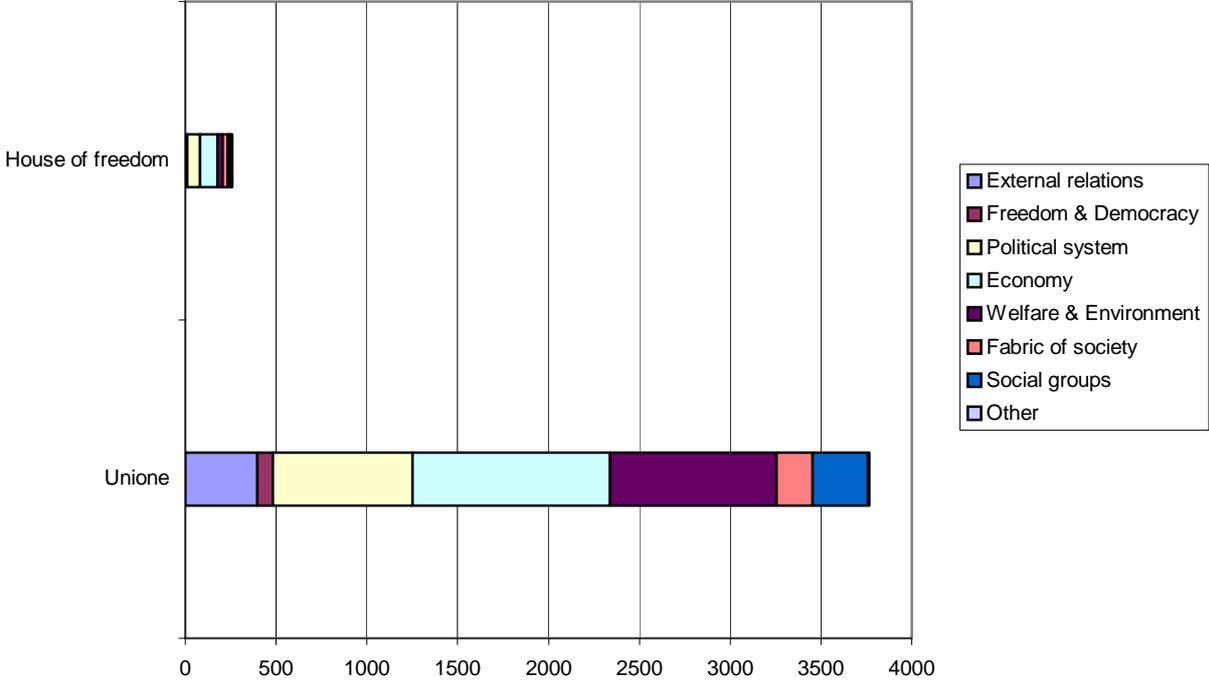
Source: Conti, Cotta and Tronconi (forthcoming)

Fig. 2 – A socio-economic index of the positions of the Italian parties (1946-1987)



Source: Conti, Cotta and Tronconi (forthcoming)

Fig. 3 – Policy domains in the coalition manifestos of 2006



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¹ I would like to thank the Manifesto Research Group of the ECPR and in particular Andrea Volkens for the data.

² The quasi-sentence is the coding unit and it refers to an argument. A sentence can contain one or more arguments, hence one or more quasi-sentences.

³ The quasi-sentences related to this policy issue make reference to the need for regulations designed to make private enterprises work better; actions against monopolies and trusts, and in defence of consumer and small business; encouraging economic competition; social market economy.

⁴ Concept of equality; need for fair treatment of all people; special protection for underprivileged; need for fair distribution of resources; removal of class barriers; end of discrimination such as racial or sexual discrimination, etc.

⁵ Favourable mentions of need to introduce, maintain or expand any social service or social security scheme; support for social services such as health service or social housing. This category excludes education.

⁶ Limiting expenditure on social services or social security; otherwise as Welfare State expansion, but negative.

⁷ Favourable references to labour groups, working class, unemployed; support for trade unions; good treatment of manual and other employees.

⁸ Abuse of power of trade unions; otherwise as Labour group positive, but negative.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ In particular, AN and the Lega Nord propose different solutions for the protection of the European market from third countries, but also for the defence of the domestic market from the EU competitors.

¹¹ As in fig. 1, the data shown in fig. 2 are by the ECPR Manifesto Research Group. It is important to note that, even if with less popular visibility than in the last decade, party electoral manifestos have been published in Italy since the 1940s. They are relevant documents as they express under the form of programmatic platforms the ideological positions of parties as they have been agreed in their recurrent party congresses. Additionally, in Italy electoral manifestos have always been published by party press and widely circulated via the party newspapers. As in this article I am not investigating how effective these documents are in shaping voters' views, but only the party official positions, I consider manifesto data appropriate for describing such positions even where they have not been given large public attention. To have an example of a longitudinal analysis based on the Italian party manifestos see Conti and Verzichelli (2005).

¹² They are relevant at least in terms of coalition and blackmail potential.

¹³ Turnout was 87.2% in 1992, 85.9% in 1994 and 82.9% in 1996 (data from the Ministry of Interior). The evident growth of abstentionism in the period 1992-2001 seems to stop in 2006 where we find signs of a reversed tendency. However, it has been claimed by other studies (Itanes 2006) that the data from the Ministry of Interior for 2006 do not consider a different calculation of the voters who are resident abroad and this has artificially increased the turnout as compared to 2001.

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