

#### 4.3. Populism in Italy: Historical, Contemporary and Comparative Perspectives

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## Populism and the origins of the "Second Republic". A historical institutional perspective.

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### **Introduction: Historical Institutionalism and Italy's party systems**

Abertazzi and McDonnell (2008) recommended using a model rooted in the analysis of structure and agency to understand contemporary European populism. This paper considers one specific institutional context of Berlusconi's role in recasting Italian politics, and that is the party system. This is a structure, or institutional configuration, in which agency is, arguably, particularly evident, especially during so-called 'critical junctures' such as Italy's party system experienced in and after the early 1990s. Populism, or populisms (Tarchi, 2008) has/have thrived in this context. This prominence of structure and agency in party systems dovetails with recent developments in Historical Institutionalism (HI) which seek to develop a more actor- (and ideas) centred approach in order better to understand institutional evolution and change (Hay, 2006; Peters et al., 2005; Steinmo, 2008). The paper suggests using an HI frame to study party system development in Italy. Within that frame, it builds on recent studies of party system theory, notably by Peter Mair (1997, 2006) and Russell Dalton (2008), and points to the possible relevance of recent electoral manifesto study research (Budge and McDonnell, 2006) to their work and to further development of party system theory. It confirms the need to build on and go beyond Sartori's typology and ontology of party systems identified by Mair (2006) and Wolinetz (2006) and proposes a way of doing this by identifying multipolarity and the potential and/or actual existence of 'blocs'. On this basis it suggests that a 'predominant party system' has been created in Italy (a type which doesn't formally fit Sartori's ontology). Finally, it asks what the ideational dimension of the post-1993

party system has been, and suggests that the oppositions (sic) must prioritise office-seeking if they are to reassert the bipolar (or ‘two-bloc’) nature of the party system.

The paper is in three parts. The first, part has two sections. The first section outlines six commonplace observations that might be made regarding developments in the Italian party system from a historical institutionalist perspective. These observations are actually based on a dated version of HI, so whilst they provide a useful starting point, the second section outlines their limitations and the way in which HI has developed. Essentially, whilst HI used fundamentally to explain stasis and saw change in terms of rupture, it now seeks to explain incremental change, as well as ruptural change. This section also suggests that just as classic party system theory was a fore-runner of HI (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992: 2, 10, 11), so existing party system theory actually goes a long way to providing a dynamic model of stability (rather than stasis), of evolutionary change, and even provides some indication of how rupture can arise endogenously. This section further suggests that integral to this analysis an understanding of party systems emerges that avoids the stark and misleading, because over-reductionist, alternative of perceiving them as either ‘tripolar’ or ‘bipolar’.<sup>1</sup>

On the basis of the principles outlined in section one, section two outlines a dynamic and evolutionary perspective of party system stability in the First Republic. Section three considers the application of this perspective to the critical juncture existing in the party system since c. 1993.

#### *Developments in the Italian party system: a preliminary HI perspective*

1. The stability of the party system in the so-called First Republic can be considered a case of systemic, or *path-dependent equilibrium*.
2. As per ‘old’ HI theory, the disintegration of that party system in 1993-94 can be considered a case of ‘punctuated equilibrium’, that is of sudden, dramatic change (a model adopted from an unsophisticated understanding of evolutionary theory).
3. The ‘punctuated equilibrium’ model seems especially relevant to the Italian case since central to HI’s use of it was a reliance on exogenous factors to explain change, and two external factors have figured prominently in explanations of the Italian case: the

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<sup>1</sup> Although this idea is of very great significance in itself, for the centrality of government formation to party system structuration, supplementing it allows one to obtain a fuller picture of the dynamics of a party system and to develop an ontology with a theoretically consistent definition of a predominant system.

collapse of the USSR, the CPSU and the Soviet empire on one hand; and accelerating European integration on the other.

4. The period from c. 1993 has been a so-called '*critical juncture*'. For many, the critical juncture was substantially over by 2001 when a bipolar structure seemed to have been established. That may not be the case, however, and anyway the 2005 electoral reform and subsequent strategic developments seem to have broken a possibly nascent equilibrium. This may be a more precise view of the debate regarding whether Italy is in a 'transition' period or not, usually argued in terms of Lijphart's (consensual and majoritarian) models of democracy. For contrasting views: Fabbrini, 2009; Morlino, 2009.<sup>2</sup>
5. **Berlusconi** was, or has been, the key protagonist, or political entrepreneur of the critical juncture. By definition, however, in a system defined in terms of interaction between parts, he has not been the only political actor to have shaped developments, nor has he done so in a vacuum. Arguably, analysing Berlusconi's role in terms of the competitive, multi-actor construction of a new party system is a particularly relevant way of considering development in Italian politics this past 15 years. This means grappling with the issue of structure and agency as such.
6. Finally, the notion of 'punctuated equilibrium' implies *a new party system equilibrium* has been, or will be created. Is this the case? If not, is there a way of understanding the situation which evokes neither an entirely fluid 'multiparty arena', i.e. the transition is over, and the result is non-systemic fluidity; nor asserts prematurely that a new equilibrium has been established. In sum, can we get some further purchase on the notion of 'transition'?

*Limitations to the preceding portrait and developments in HI:*

1. HI has itself moved away from the 'punctuated equilibrium' model of change, recognising that it signalled the failure of HI itself to explain change since the motor

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<sup>2</sup> The validity of Lijphart's dichotomous model has elsewhere been rejected as methodologically and theoretically unsound (Pennings REFS).

of change was exogenous to the theoretical approach, as well as to the cases supposedly explained (Steinmo, 2008).

2. The new HI has developed tools for analysing incremental change within institutional configurations (Pierson, 2000; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Thelen, 1995) and also seeks, at least, to give a more prominent role to political conflict and human agency (Peters et al. 2005). Sartori's theorisation of the party system in the First Republic already suggests that it was stable, but not static; i.e. there was *dynamic* stability, and it focuses on the interplay of strategic actors (party elites) and voters even whilst emphasising structure as constraint rather than opportunity. Farneti's model, which accepted Sartori's analysis identifying a tripolar dynamic, also identified the co-presence of a subordinate dynamic – bipolarism. Recently, even Sartori has affirmed the fundamentally dualistic nature of electoral politics in the First Republic (Sartori, 2007). Farneti's analysis of the bipolar dynamic in effect links the two party systems across the early 1990s rupture. In any case, Farneti's model pointed to another mechanism of change in a structurally stable context, and it is one which contains both an evolutionary dimension and which outlines the basis for the possibility of change of a ruptural nature: from tripolarism to bipolarism.
3. The existence of an endogenous tendency to bipolarisation clearly does not mean that the 1990s rupture was endogenously caused. Nor that an endogenously induced rupture would have happened anyway.
4. The nature of the *new party system* must be explored. A new, stable equilibrium does not seem to have been established, yet nor is there complete fluidity. A dynamic model of party system interaction allows one to understand this in terms of the dominance of the bipolar dynamic, rooted in support for, and opposition to Berlusconi, yet the co-existence also of challenges to it. Two can be identified: neo-centrism, seeking to re-establish a tripolar structure, with its clear logic of positive returns if ever once asserted – this reverses Farneti's model: now the dominant dynamic is bipolar, then it was tripolar; now the subordinate dynamic is tripolar, then it was bipolar; the second challenge is *multipolarism*. It is, in fact, necessary to go beyond Sartori's (and thence Farneti's) ontology of 'poles' rooted as it is in a logic not only of government formation, but also of system-threatening ideological polarisation

which no longer pertains (Mair, 2006),<sup>3</sup> and thus beyond the either/or dichotomy of bipolarism or tripolarism.

5. Consideration of Italy's party systems also raises the issue of their ideational content. Consolidated systems tend to revolve around "a core opposition – that is, it is 'about' something" (Mair, 2006: 68). In the "Second Republic", this has tended to be Berlusconi himself. This is a weakness in the structural solidity of the system. Furthermore, it is compatible with two diverse structural outcomes: predominance and bipolarism.
6. Since 2008 the multipolar tendency has seemed to some to have led to what many have long feared: the establishment of a predominant party system. The category is problematic from a Sartorian perspective since, though used by him, it is extraneous to his model (Mair 2005). Nevertheless, it is not a category to forego. The problem lies in the ontology of Sartori's model, that is its rootedness in 'poles' rather than parties and coalitional blocs. Arguably, since the 2008 election Italy's party system comprises a right/centre-right *bloc* facing four strategically non-coordinated parties or, one might as well say, but the term is debatable: four 'poles'. In any case, parties which do *not* constitute an alternative 'bloc', an 'alternative government in waiting'. How long this will persist, one cannot say. Many believe a long period of predominance by the right is to be expected. Still, care is needed. It has been suggested that predominance and alternation are compatible in the contemporary context of weak partisan alignment. Few, however, would see the UK as a possible model for Italy in this instance (Mair, 2008) because whilst partisan loyalty is light, left-right identification seems strong in a system still substantially polarised (Curini and Iacus, 2008; Salvati, 2009). But who knows what the future may hold? Which rhetorical question leads to a final point.
7. Finally, from an HI perspective, one should keep an open mind about the outcomes of critical junctures. Arguably, the transition from the First to the Second Republic should, even from a party system perspective, have been (and be) regarded from a more 'open' perspective than that of the dominant (and reductionist) paradigm of a transition from tripolarism to bipolarism. This is not entirely to reject there being some validity in that view. Yet it is over-schematic. Farneti's work on the contested

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<sup>3</sup> Which is not to say there is/are no threat/s; rather, that they are not located simply at the 'extremes' of the party system.

nature of party system structure is useful here, as is the insight of historical institutionalists that actual outcomes, in terms of institutional configurations, are often unintended consequences of competitive interactions. And partly the result of systems of great complexity. Indeed, the party system is but a sub-system of the political system and arguably the nascent stabilisation on a new equilibrium was disrupted by electoral reform stemming from the governmental sub-system (Fusaro, 2009). In fact, the delimitation of party systems is a critical theoretical issue (Bardi and Mair, 2008).

I shall now outline how Sartori's and especially Farneti's analyses help to develop *dynamic* and *evolutionary* models of party system stability and change.

### **The First Republic: Dynamic and evolving stability**

Sartori's model was, fundamentally, a dynamic one: it theorised centrifugal and centripetal trends which came to be in balance: 'stabilised polarisation' (Sartori, 1982: 309). The model didn't merely describe, it explained the structural logics according to which human agents, both voters and party strategists, acted. Rather than rehearse the model, I want to point to two limitations.

First, the model's ontological focus on 'poles', rooted in government formation, tends to marginalise individual parties and competition between parties in the same pole. Of course Sartori's analysis doesn't ignore parties, but they are secondary. For example, one of the most remarkable dynamics, at the level of parties, is the near doubling, between 1948 and 1976 of the PCI vote from 18.9% to 34.4%. Of course, Sartori's model explains precisely why this is unimportant. The left *pole* took c. 40% of the vote in 1946 and 31% in 1948, so 35% in 1976, including the NSU-DP, shows the stability of the tripolar systemic structure. Quite so. However, the near doubling of the proportion of voters for the PCI over 30 years had consequences. The concentration of the vote within the left pole made it impossible for the DC to carry out a fourth 'oscillation' to the left, as understood by Farneti (below). Indeed, the third oscillation was different to those of its predecessors, and in some sense terminal.

Second, Sartori's genius lies primarily in his explaining the maintenance of the equilibrium of an established institutional configuration. Thus, the formation of the

centre-left (1960-63) and its consequences, primarily the maintenance of tripolarism, are explained brilliantly by Sartori's model. However, Sartori somewhat neglected the question of the system's origins.

Still, a counterfactual study of the establishment of the party system rooted in historical and constructivist or discursive institutionalism might nevertheless conclude that the tripolar party system constructed was a likely outcome, if not a necessary one. In fact, the period 1947-53 comprises the 'critical juncture' that established the tripolar party system which was the foundation of the First Republic. Fabbrini (2008) has recently analysed the 1948-53 period as a critical juncture in terms of the type of democracy established: consensual rather than majoritarian. My interpretation is somewhat different. According to it, the *elite centrism* of the CLN governments (1944-47) was challenged by electoral and other radical tendencies to bipolar confrontation. This juxtaposition was highly visible in the 1948 election and in the early 1950s the so-called 'Roman party' (Riccardi, 1983) sought, via Operation Sturzo to ally the DC with the MSI and Monarchists first in local elections, including those for Rome, then in the 1953 parliamentary election. In the event, the consolidation of the bipolar dynamic was very specifically *rejected* by the DC; and the 1953 election laid the basis of the tripolar party system which dominated Italian politics for the next 40 years.

The origins of the First Republic's party system matter also because they help identify the *ideational* dimension of the party system which is central to understanding its evolution in terms especially of the disjuncture that arose between voters and party strategists. The ideological dynamics of the First Republic were rooted in a mix of post-1945 Cold War logic, and post-1917 'European civil war' logic, in which democratic centrists fought extremists on left and right (Schlesinger, 1949). Somewhat anachronistically, but very successfully, the DC championed that ideological framework right into the 1980s by which time, however, the mobilisational power of both socialism (whether social democratic or communist) and Christian democracy was waning.

Farneti's model was also a dynamic one. It was, perhaps, more historically-minded, less abstractly structuralist, than Sartori's. Farneti emphasised the asymmetry of Italy's party system and saw a historical tendency for the DC to reach out for allies on the left, rather than the right, identifying three successive oscillations in that direction: the first in the late

1940s, embracing the PSDI; the second in the early 1960s, embracing the PSI, and the third in the late 1970s, embracing the PCI – though not completely. The PCI did not enter government. Still, the dynamic is fundamentally similar. The implication is that by the late 1970s the logics inspiring the dynamics of the party system hitherto had reached an end point. At the time there was quite a wide expectation that the PCI would enter government and even that this might lead to alternation, as had happened in Germany with the SPD. But the DC was not the CDU, nor the PCI the SPD. Still, the politics of the 1980s were less about ideology, more about the desire for effective government and, also, spiralling competition within government for spoils. And new ideologies were born, too: the Greens and the leagues.

The dynamism of Farneti's model, then, has an evolutionary, not merely a dynamically stable sense, and this is rooted in the elites' *denial* of the also-existing *bipolar* dynamic. That is, dynamism comes from two sources: first, the tripolar dynamic, as per Sartori, with some party strategists seeking, successfully, to maintain government-building at/around the centre; but also, secondly, dynamism comes from the interaction between this centrist dynamic and a bipolar one, with some party elites seeking to encourage electoral trends which would create a situation in which coalitions could be built on either a left, or a right bloc basis. This bipolar tendency was particularly evident in the elections of 1948 and 1976. Put another way, Farneti's work accepted the logic of Sartori's model, but said that the tripolar logic was not the entire and sole logic operating. In historical institutionalist terms, Farneti accepted that a logic of increasing returns operated to maintain coalition-making at the centre of the party system, but he identified that an alternative logic existed which also had powerful incentives and, were it not to result in systemic crisis, could have created a system of alternation with its own incentives and increasing returns for the new protagonists – which was precisely the PSI's concern in the 1980s. That alternative logic would have marginalised it to the advantage of the DC and PCI.

Farneti's work was also significant in identifying the ambiguous nature of the DC: simultaneously the core of the centrist coalitions, but also the core of the anti-socialist centre-right. To a considerable extent, the widespread expectation that the left would come to power in 1994 was rooted in a sense of the naturalness of left-right dualism which had always existed, yet had been subordinated to the dominant logic of centrism.

The growing use of referendums in the 1970-80s probably also reinforced the cultural acceptance of a “winners-and-losers” political culture of alternation.

Finally, since Farneti emphasised the centripetal dynamic, or depolarisation, from 1964, there is arguably less of a focus on poles in his work, more of an emphasis on parties, on their evolution, not least of the PCI. If one shifts ones focus to parties, then competition between parties, even within the same pole, becomes more analytically prominent. ‘Intra-pole’ conflict may matter more than Sartori’s model suggests, especially in non-polarised systems. But even in the polarised “First Republic” significant conflict can be seen. For example, the DC was an ally of the PSI and also a rival. And the same was true of the PLI. The attempt by the PSI and PLI to weaken the DC by championing divorce in 1969-70 really has no place in Sartori’s model. And it is true that the challenge was weak, undermined as it was by the three parties’ fundamental proximity in systemic terms. So weak, in fact, that the competitive logic was taken over – hijacked – by a non-parliamentary party – the Radicals. And it is further true that the 1976 election saw the DC and PCI dominate, not competition within the centre pole, although the DC gained voters from its centre pole allies. Thus, although the Radicals gained entry to parliament in 1976, their attack on the DC did not immediately undermine it. In the longer run , however, the victory of liberal values signalled by the 1974 divorce referendum – and even more the abortion referendum in 1983 – was a victory for the Radicals; an ideational one. In fact, the Radicals’ several mobilisations of the 1970s challenged the dominant ‘cold civil war’ framing of public perceptions of the nature of politics. This is to extrapolate well beyond anything that Farneti hypothesised. Still, the theoretical point is two-fold. First, that intra-pole competition can matter even in a polarised party system, whereas it is extraneous to the ontology of Sartori’s model. Second, that it can matter in complex ways perhaps some of which are best understood from a constructivist institutionalist perspective (which some regard as a development of historical institutionalism – Hay, 2006).

In sum, reviewing the theorisation of the dynamics of the First Republic party system, we find competing dynamic logics, bipolar and tripolar, rooted in party strategists’ behaviours as they follow alternative logics of government formation, and the associated incentives of constructing and maintaining government at, or better, around the centre; or on a basis of alternation, and the behaviour of voters. We also find intra-pole competition,

though this was marginal compared to competition between poles. And we find the centrality of the ideational framing of the nature of politics, as well as challenges to that framing. That is, challenges to the holistic logic of the party system, a battle about the battles, or the nature of the principal cleavage and the very ‘language of politics’ (Mair, 1997: 13). Such conflict, of necessity, will be either marginalised or transformative.

### **Party System Dynamics in the ‘Second Republic’**

A standard interpretation of political development in Italy since the early 1990s crisis sees the First Republic as built upon a tripolar party system whilst the Second Republic has seen a shift towards a Republic built on a bipolar party system.<sup>4</sup> By 2001, there was fairly wide agreement that the party system was fundamentally bipolar (Bartolini et al. 2002, Pasquino, 2002):

- the League was re-allied with Berlusconi
- the neo-centrist challenge of the UDR had failed to re-aggregate a Catholic centre party which, potentially, would have provided a basis for a return to government formation at the centre
- The left was disunited, but the incentives for it to unify were strong: to defeat Berlusconi; and to gain office – and the precedent of 1996 was there.

In fact, some aggregation of the centre-left took place with the consolidation of the Margherita, and in 2006, the left did win the election. Despite this confirmation of bipolar alternation, however, fragmentation remained the second defining feature of the party system and subsequent developments led to the 2008 election being fought on a multipolar basis (Di Virgilio, 2008: 633). The structure of the party system is now less clear (Corbetta, 2009).

Before exploring this further, in terms of a dynamic and contested process of structuration taking place, a preliminary point to identify is that the party system has become more complex. Thus, as per Bardi and Mair’s (2008) specification of what constitutes a party system, the parliamentary and electoral systems are now routinely identified as distinct in their own right; territorial differentiation, which was always marked, has changed qualitatively in that the Northern League is a major national-regional party in a way that

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<sup>4</sup> The extent to which the party sub-system influences other sub-systems, notably the assembly-government sub-system is debated. Various mixes of change and continuity have been identified (from a HI perspective) in different parts of the political system (Bull and Rhodes, 2007).

no party was in the First Republic; thirdly, the multi-level nature of party competition has become pronounced (Conti et al. 2009).

The distinction between the electoral and parliamentary party systems is particularly important to this paper since its focus is on horizontal processes between party strategists and does not consider in any depth the vertical interaction and mutual learning processes between the two systems. Whilst a full study of party system development would need to include analysis of the system's micro-foundations, the bulk of the literature on electoral behaviour emphasises stability, especially within left and right, although this is not uncontested (Pappalardo, 2002) and, above all, the primacy of party/alliance "supply" over electoral "demand". Thus, an emphasis on the centrality of horizontal processes is not entirely vulnerable to the charge of being ungrounded. It is also the case that recent comparative research suggests that significant disjuncture between the parliamentary and electoral levels of polarisation, or distribution of voters and parties, is possible and even 'normal' (Dalton, 2008). Whilst party elites clearly make decisions in the light of their understandings of electoral structuration there must, then, be a degree of latitude in how they manage their relationship with it.

The argument of this paper is that the structure of the party system since the early 1990s be understood in terms of competing dynamics rooted in rival, and to some extent differently based, party strategies and/or perceptions of winning strategies. Indeed, as Bardi and Mair (2008) also point out, not all parties are of the same type, which also provides a challenge for analysing party systems in terms of the interactions between parties. Thus, not all are primarily office-seeking. For example, whilst the centre-right parties have been fundamentally office-seeking, the UDC in 2008 adopted a primarily vote-seeking strategy. Whilst undoubtedly it would have been willing to enter government had it emerged in a strong bargaining position, a primarily office-seeking strategy would have led it to fuse with the PDL. On the left, the more radical parties made great strides towards becoming office-seeking parties as was implicit in the formation of the Union, but this tendency was set back considerably by the PD's reversal of the pan-left alliance strategy pursued by Romano Prodi and the strength of extra-parliamentary mobilisations. In these terms, what is clear is that the main opposition parties are not unified by a collective, office-seeking goal. They are not a single 'pole'. Vote-seeking issues of identity and policy issues divide them. They may become such a 'pole', but that is a

contingent outcome. Given which, the party system is not truly “bipolar”. Rather, the current situation seems to be one of multipolarity, perhaps even of a predominant party system, in which one relatively unified block of parties faces ‘the rest’ (Newell, 2009). This is somewhat similar to the situation of the SAP in Sweden for many years, until 1974, or Fianna Fail in Ireland before 1989. To understand how this came about it helps to have a richer understanding of the Italian party system before 2008 than one that identifies the only alternatives as bipolarism or tripolarism – which are the alternatives to be derived from Sartori and Farneti.

The 2005 electoral reform was fundamental in creating an institutional basis upon which a fragmented system can continue to exist, even if one now bordering on only moderate, rather than extreme pluralism. Equally important was the shift in party strategies initiated by Veltroni. But fundamental too was the complex array of pre-existing parties with their competing identities. For all that it makes profoundly good sense to see a bipolar dynamic as having become dominant, it also makes sense to apply Farneti’s concept of competing logics being at work. We can see something like a reversal of Farneti’s perspective. That is, we can see the period from 1994-2006 as one in which the bipolar dynamic came to dominate but, in a first approximation, a tripolar one was also present. This may have been central at least to perceptions of what Cossiga’s political project aimed at in 1998, and more certainly to Prodi’s construction of the Democrats in order to oppose such a development. The neo-centrist ideas expressed more recently in 2003-05 (and again in September 2009) also sought to re-establish a dominant centre ‘pole’ on a semi-permanent basis, though they came to nothing. In practice, indeed, neo-centrist gambits since 1998, including the centrism of the UDC today, have not been about forming a dominant, centre governing ‘pole’ as per Sartori.

In fact, we need to part company with a view of a centre ‘pole’ as being one that dominates government semi-permanently. In that model, the law of ‘increasing returns’ fundamental to historical institutionalism’s notion of path dependency is present, rooted in incentives to maintain the governing coalitional *bloc*, or at least government around the centre, preventing alternation, since this permits:

- a) access to public resources whilst
- b) the maintenance of party identities in terms of insiders (governmental parties) and outsiders (principled and permanent opposition parties) and

c) the maintenance of the dominant coalitions within parties that opted for this strategy.

Crucially, in a non-polarised system, the logic of insiders and outsiders no longer applies. All or nearly all parties are “coalitionable”. And a centre identity is compatible with alternation. Identity may be more important than access to public resources, though there is likely to be a degree of tension about the merits of an alliance strategy that results in remaining in the opposition. In this depolarised system, the path-dependent logic that can ‘lock in’ a tripolar structure lacks fundamental its prerequisites.

In non-polarised party systems, competition for government may result in parties forming opposing blocs rooted in a logic of alternation in government and a mutual interest in maintaining the existing system. There may be strong path dependency here. The British/UK case is the best known, though it is also recognised that the nature of the electoral system is fundamental to this path dependence. Nevertheless, a more general tendency to bipolarisation in contemporary multiparty systems has been identified (Mair, 2006). Still, in a fragmented party system, both office and policy incentives might lead one or more parties to seek advantage (in one or both regards) by changing their alliance partners. The feasibility of this is likely to rise in a system which is ‘depolarised’ in Sartori’s sense, that is lacking system-challenging ideological extremes. Thus, party systems may be fundamentally *multipolar without (ideological) polarisation*. Indeed, they are likely to be. So we ought to lose the notion that there can be only two poles, or three. One or the other. In a relatively depolarised, fragmented party system, we might see several poles, i.e. parties or clusters of parties. Such multipolarity has in fact been identified as an enduring feature of party systems in the Manifesto project research into party placement (Budge and McDonald, 2006): see Table 1.

**Table 1. Multipolarity in terms of number of distinctive policy alternatives**

Number of cases	Number of distinct policy alternatives (DPAs)
7	2
8	3
2	4
2	5
Total = 19	

*Source:* Budge and McDonald (2006). Italy as identified as having two DPAs

Similarly, Dalton's (2008) study of polarisation in terms of voter self-placement and voter placement of parties indicate clearly that spatial distances between parties vary significantly between party systems, and that the extent of polarisation within systems varies greatly (Table 2). Dalton also establishes that levels of polarisation vary independently of the level of fragmentation so that party number is not a reliable indicator of party system characteristics. And whilst Dalton does not consider the number of 'poles' or clusters within systems, the examples he provides suggest his findings are similar to those of Budge and McDonald.

**Table 2: Polarisation index**

Level of polarisation	Number of cases
<2	9
>2 <3	31
>3 <4	13
>4 <5	4
	Total: 57

*Source:* Dalton, 2008

*Notes:* Voter self-placements & party placement

Level of polarisation: 0 = all parties in same position; 10 = all parties at the two extremes. Curini & Iacus (2008) place Italy more or less in the >4>5 category, 1983-2008 in both the electoral and the parliamentary party systems, excepting the latter drops to barely enter the >3>4 category in 2008; whilst in 2006 both are marginally greater than 5.

How does this relate to the 'transition' to the Second republic and more specifically the structure of the party system? Let us first consider the dynamics present and the adequacy of viewing them as simply about a process of bipolarisation, even whilst accepting that this dynamic was to prove dominant.

In 1994, the PPI/Segni Pact rejected the bipolar dynamic. One should not exaggerate this, since the PPI believed it had formed an alliance with the League only weeks before the election. And the DC's centrism had always been of the centre-right, as Farneti's insistence on the asymmetry of the tripolar system in the First Republic makes clear. To some extent the PPI's centrism was forced upon it, not merely autonomously chosen. Nevertheless, this was a case of a "subordinate dynamic" existing, to use Farneti's terms. Of course, its failure was complete. But it existed. And yet it is not necessary to see that centrism in terms of tripolarism as per Sartori, that is of the creation of a semi-permanent, 'exclusionary' bloc of government parties. Had it been more successful, it might, with

varying degrees of improbability, have led to either the formation of a centripetal, centre-right party in a system with near total turnover, or to the formation of a pivotal party, with substantial alternation between larger parties on its left and right.

The 1996 election was arguably ‘bipolar’ in the sense that competition on a left-right basis for government predominated, and the left won. But looked at more closely, the victor formed a minority government and the opposition was divided. This was more akin to the ‘bipolar quadrille’ identified in France in an earlier period. Indeed, one might characterise it as a quadripolar system, with two nascent or potential blocs. In 1998, with a minority centre-left government in power and a context of multipolarity, or division within left and right, former President of the Republic Cossiga launched a challenge to the process of bipolarisation, creating the UDR and gaining entry to government. This threatened to leave Communist Refoundation as an excluded pole, perhaps with the League as another. This would not have precluded eventual government alternation. Nevertheless, Prodi used the perceived challenge to bipolarisation to create a new party, the Democrats, expressly championing bipolarism. The success of the Democrats in the 1999 EP election helped convince the PPI not to reunify with the CDU, most of which now backed Cossiga, a development which would have reversed the traumatic 1995 split in Christian Democracy. The attempt, if it was such, to build a centre pole, or bloc, of parties failed. Possibly it was the last significant attempt to create a centre pole in Sartori’s terms. One can dismiss this failure as inevitable, and as the result of elite ‘learning failures’ vis-à-vis the new incentive structure. But that is to write history from the perspective of the winners. It tends to be over-deterministic and to be unable to explain set-backs in the process of bipolarisation. As Thelen (1999) has argued, in politics, losers often survive – and make come-backs.

If we look at the LN, then it is a case where competition within a ‘pole’, or better, bloc, has mattered: in 1994, it formed its alliance with Forza Italia largely in order to avoid a self-destructive electoral competition against that party. After some months co-existence, the alliance, a nascent bloc, broke down, leading to the League’s running independently in 1996. Thus, in 1996 the League constituted a pole of attraction in its own right, and rather an effective one, electorally, although this success unravelled in 1998-99. By 2001, of course, the League was reintegrated within the Right and a co-constituent of the Right’s transforming identity. Yet the League retained its independence and in 2007-08 rejected

fusion in the PDL. Now part of a fairly stable right-wing bloc of parties, it nevertheless remains a pole of attraction in its own right.

The CCD detached itself from Forza Italia immediately after the 1994 election but thereafter remained loyal to Berlusconi until 2008 (by which time it had merged into the UDC). Its loyalty, however, was always rooted in the hope that once Berlusconi was gone, the Christian Democrats would restructure the right to their advantage. The UDC, or the UDC, White Rose etc., is also a 'pole' of attraction. Whether it can maintain its autonomy is uncertain. The National Alliance, of course, which also hoped to dominate the centre-right in the post-Berlusconi scenario, did not. Finally, the less than full summability of the right's voters also suggests that what we might see as multipolarity existed at the electoral level, as well as the elite and parliamentary one, so that the bloc has been more of an elite structure than an electoral one, notwithstanding the weakness of cross-bloc electoral volatility.

On the left, the formation of the Olive Tree in 1995 not only left the centre unoccupied by any significant party. It also encouraged the development of a split between the centre-left and the radical left: the Olive Tree and Communist Refoundation. The Left/pan-left, then, was also multipolar, though one might regard it too as tending towards becoming a unified bloc after the calamity of the 1998 government crisis, given the extent to which, during the Prodi II government (2006-08), the 'left-left' provided rather loyal support. There were two or three individual exceptions who were of some significance – but these were rebels within their own parties, significant only because of the extremely slim majority in the Senate.

The tendency to division within the left, and the potential danger it represented, was clear in the period preceding the 2004 European election when competing strategies aimed to construct both the more moderate *Uniti nell'Ulivo/Federazione* and the pan-left *Grande alleanza democratica*. Whilst the latter, renamed the Union, was initially successful in that it won the 2006 election, the 2005 electoral reform exacerbated conflict within the left, as it was intended to do, and the pan-left strategy was abandoned by Walter Veltroni in the run-up to the 2008 election. The bipolarity of the socialist/ex-socialist left, then, has many origins: the desire of moderates to build a 'people's party' able to dominate coalition building and provide stable government (as per Smith, 1990); continuing

radicalism on the left, especially outside of parliament; the memory of the 1998 government defeat; the 2005 electoral reform and, not least, Veltroni's decision in January 2008. To this fundamental bipolarity of the left must now be added the success of the IDV, which has no links with the historical roots of the DS or radical left, and the new location of the UDC. So, whilst Berlusconi was the key architect of the 2005 electoral reform, the multipolar fragmentation of the opposition has surely been a success beyond his wildest dream. Given this disunity, it seems perverse to describe the array of opposition parties as a 'pole' or by any other term (e.g. bloc) implying unity. There is no clear 'alternative government in waiting'.

A final word should be said about the ideational dimension of the party system that replaced the 'cold European civil war' party system of the 1940s-80s. Arguably this has rotated fundamentally about support for and opposition to Berlusconi and his politics. This underpinned the consolidation of the bipolar, or nascent two-bloc structure in the period 1999-2006. However, when an ideational system dominated by support for, or opposition to Berlusconi is also compatible with a predominant party system: Berlusconi et al., versus "the rest", such as has arguably been constructed in the period 2007-09. In that sense, the "critical juncture" that opened in c.1993 may have moved towards closure in 2001, without being consolidated by constitutional reform and/or the autonomous consolidation of two alternative, dominant parties. Thus, a nascent, two-bloc equilibrium which, however, remained multipolar, was open to disruption. The 2005 electoral reform and strategic developments in 2007-08 may have opened a new critical juncture. This may be a contribution to formulating a more precise way of discussing Italy's "transition".

## **Conclusions**

Silvio Berlusconi has been central to the transformation of Italian politics over the past 16 years. From a party system perspective, his role has been fundamental in the unification of the right on an office-seeking basis, and in the construction of a new party system. Indeed, the argument here has been that he has perhaps been instrumental in two different party systems having been created in succession. In either case, the creation of a centre-right bloc is a hugely significant achievement. And yet the cohesiveness of the right remains uncertain given, not least, the prominent north-south tensions within it, especially as these have now taken on explicit party form: the LN and the MPA. This paper has thus

argued that the right is a *multipolar bloc* of parties. Its bloc nature is rooted in its collective, office-seeking identity. Yet that unity may be contingent since it has also been argued that the structure of the party system has been and remains contested. A potential new equilibrium, bipolarism, may have been wrecked by the 2005 electoral reform and subsequent strategic developments. In any case, there has been, and there remains, a deep-seated, albeit 'losing', opposition to the development of a bipolar format, favouring the restoration of government formation around the centre, and multipolar challenges to stabilisation.

Given the contested and dynamic nature of the party system's construction/development it has been that to envisage the outcome of party system as necessarily being either bipolar or tripolar is over-deterministic. Arguably, a predominant party system rooted in multipolarism has replaced the bipolar one as the contingent outcome of multiple actor interactions. In this sense, the approach to analysing political development in terms of the party system structure that has been highly prominent in the past 15-16 years has perhaps been too rooted in a physics-based scientism. An approach rooted in biological science is perhaps more appropriate, as some contemporary HI-ists are suggesting (Lewis & Steinmo, 2008; Ma 2007). There has been a substantial degree of stability, but stability is not stasis; there is evolution and the possibility of rupture. It remains to be seen to what extent the developments of 2005-09 constitute a fundamental rupture and how long it will take, assuming it does happen, for a two-bloc, or bipolar format to be reasserted.

Finally, I have said very little about Berlusconi's populism as such, and a lot about its structural context. I will conclude with a few words on this. If, as Mair suggests, party systems have a principal cleavage which tends to 'organise out' others, and this is to be understood primarily in party terms, without reducing those parties to the cleavages and interests that underlie them, then the party system of the First Republic was, in ideational terms, built upon the centrality and centrist identity of the DC and the bloc of parties supporting it, conceived of as 'democratic' ('bourgeois democratic') and facing challenges from the Communist and Neo-Fascist extremes. In other words, the principal cleavage in the First Republic was actually a dual cleavage, left and right of the dominant centre. I describe this as the "European, cold civil war" party system. The question remains unanswered as to what constitutes the principal cleavage in the Second Republic, in these ideational terms? Here there has been no more than the common suggestion that

perhaps the major component of it is the ‘permanent referendum’ on Silvio Berlusconi which is compatible both with a two-bloc alternating and a predominant party system. In the latter case in particular, the cultural issues raised by Berlusconi’s behaviour and reactions to it have been and remain fundamental to the dynamics that help constitute the party system.

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