Two steps forward and one step back: the majority principle in the Italian Parliament since 1994.

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ABSTRACT

Since the early nineties political actors, journalists and scholars are describing the evolution of the parliamentary arena to spot sings of adaptation to the majority logic that characterize the electoral arena. However, this process has been slow and discontinuous, because some of the consensual practices dominating the parliamentary arena have proved to be extremely resilient. The hung parliament resulting from the 2013 general election, with the emergence of the Five Stars Movement as a significant third electoral pole, has questioned the same applicability of the transition framework and terminology. This paper analyses the evolution of the main aspects of parliamentary politics in the last two decades, with special emphasis to the starting months of the XVII legislature. In particular fragmentation of the parliamentary arena and the character of the government formation process are analysed. Finally, this paper provides an assessment of the majority and consensual features of the Italian Parliament after two decades from the collapse of the post-war party system.

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the changes that have been affecting Italian parliamentary politics in the last two decades, or more precisely in the twenty years following Tangentopoli and the collapse of the old party system. Between the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties several social and political forces advocated the demise of the proportional electoral system, in the belief that several problems of the country depended on its consociative features. The events of the early nineties generated a rhetoric dominated by the idea that the country was experiencing a transition toward a fully-fledged majority democracy (M. Bull & Rhodes, 1997). In the following years the awareness that a fully fledged majority democracy has not yet materialized emerged, especially because all the attempts to change the Constitution to overcome its structurally consensual aspects failed (Fabbrini, 2000). The same applicability of the concept of "transition" to the Italian case has been subject to growing criticism (M. J. Bull & Rhodes, 2009; M. J. Bull, 2012; Newell, 2009) and also scholars who continued to use it now talk of "transition in stalemate" (Morlino, 2014)

However, three very important and related aspects actually changed the early nineties: the electoral system, the party system and the process of government formation. This paper addresses the last two aspects, assessing how they have evolved during the last two decades and arguing that the political turmoil triggered by the recent economic crisis has jeopardized the few steps forward in the direction of a majority democracy.

To encourage a comparative focus, the analytical framework through which these aspects are analyzed resembles the seminal study of Arendt Liphart (Lijphart, 2012). With reference to the variables used in Pattern of Democracy to distinguish between the consensus and the majority model I focus on two of them: the nature of the party system and the concentration of power in the executive. These variables pertain to the executive-party dimension, having to do with the diffusion of power among partisan veto-player within the parliament-government subsystem (Tsebelis 1995, in Lijphart 1999). Before proceeding to the empirical part I briefly summarize the nature of the executive-legislative relations during the consensual phase (1948-1993)1.

The executive-legislative subsystem during the consensual phase

Between 1948 and 1992 the Italian party system was formed by seven parties, which can be roughly ordered in the ideological spectrum from the left to the right: PCI (communists), PSI

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1 I deliberately refrain from using the labels "First Republic/Second Republic" because they originated from the same rhetoric that was based on biased expectations.
(socialists), PSDI (social democrats), PRI (republicans), DC (Christian-democrats), PLI (liberals), and MSI (neo-fascists). Oceans of ink have been used to describe and analyze the defining features of this system. The debate started around the turn of the seventies has been long and articulated (Di Palma, 1977; Farneti, 1973; Galli, 1967; Sani & Sartori, 1978). Beyond the differences among all these accounts, a mainstream interpretation emerged. With regard to the party-executive dimension, adopting the conceptual framework proposed by Lijphart (2012), the Italian democracy definitely fell in the consensual camp, though with some peculiarities. The main problems of the Italian party systems were its ideological polarization, its fragmentation and the lack of alternation. Polarization refers to the wide ideological spectrum in which parties are located, while fragmentation refers to the high number of political parties and also to the fractionalized nature of some of them (most notably DC and PSI). The polarization of the Italian party system was not symmetrical: the existence of a large communist party on the left was not paralleled by a comparable right pole. Rather, the right side of the ideological continuum was occupied by a relatively small post-fascist party. The dominant pole was a centrist one, dominated by the large Christian Democrats which attracted several small centrist parties. The dynamic of the system has remained rather stable for almost fifty years (Ieraci, 2014). Paradoxically the existence of a large anti-system party has had powerful stabilizing elements on the system: the DC always had a pivotal role in the formation of governments, because without it no coalition of the democratic forces was possible.

Despite this prevailing element of stability the coaltional formula, that is the number and identity of the minor parties entering coalition with the DC, changed several times. From 1948 to the beginning of the sixties the DC governed only with its small centrist allies, the two "lay" parties (Republicans and Liberals) and the Social Democrats. From the sixties onwards the medium sized Socialist Party abandoned the opposition and joined forces with the Christian Democrats entering the governing coalition. The constant growth of the Communist Party until 1976 and the slow erosion of the consensus for the Christian Democrats caused the progressive enlargement of the governing coalition. During the seventies, thanks to its increasing ideological moderation and to the difficulties caused by the threat of internal terrorism, the Communist Party was gradually included at the borders of the governing coalition: this phase was called "National Solidarity" to highlight the exceptional circumstances in which it emerged. In those years (1976-1979) the communists, which have had their best electoral results in 1976, were not allowed to enter the government with their ministers but for the first time gave an explicit parliamentary support to DC single party cabinets. The national solidarity governments, at least in the hopes of their promoters, should open the way to the possibility for the PCI to enter governments. However, this coalition cycle followed the fate of the previous ones: "from
great hopes (and promises) to disillusionment” (Verzichelli & Cotta, 2000, p. 449). The inability to solve neither the terrorist threat nor the economic crises, the emergence of growing disagreements about economic policies, the murder of the Christian Democratic leader Aldo Moro and the modest results of the Communist Party in the 1978 local elections marked the end of the coalition cycle. The failure of the National Solidarity coalitional phase and the continuing decline of the electoral strength of the Christian Democrats did not leave many choices. By the beginning of the eighties the only possible governing coalition included five parties (the so called pentapartito), each of which was necessary to grant the government a working majority. Among the traditional parties, only the Communists and the Neo-Fascist were excluded from the government. To further complicated things, it must be noted the DC was an extremely fractionalized party, in which factions covered a rather large ideological spectrum encompassing most of its allies. At that time, the Italian Political system was effectively described as a system of "bargained-pluralism" (Hine, 1993), where the power was dispersed among a large number of actors and institutional veto-players.

Like in others consensual democracies, in Italy the outcome of the government formation process was almost invariably a coalition. What was peculiar of the Italian case, however, was the programmatic vagueness of the negotiations among parties. While in prototypical consensual countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands governments were formed after painstaking effort to negotiate a detailed "coalition agreement" focused on the policies to be implemented, in Italy the main concern of parties was almost exclusively to maximize their portfolios (Cotta & Verzichelli, 2003). The absence of explicit coalition agreements allowed parties to enter a governing coalition without making concessions about policies, postponing the conflict to the future. This was perhaps a way to facilitate the emergence of coalitions composed by heterogeneous parties, but it obviously sacrificed the emergence of effective governments. The management of conflicts on policy issues was left to the ongoing negotiations among parliamentary groups and even among factions within parliamentary groups, with the result of multiplying the number of veto players (Vassallo, 2007). The need for permanent negotiations among them made the governments incapable of exercising a significant steering function and contributed to make the parliament the main political arena.

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2 Farneti (1983) points out that both the declining turnout and the recrudescence of red terrorism were in part consequences of the National Solidarity phase.

3 Technically the cabinets in power in from the 8th to the 11th legislature were almost all "oversized majority", because some of the smallest allied were not strictly necessary to have a thin numerical majority. However governing with a very strict margin has never been easy in the Italian Parliament.
When it comes to the interactions between parliament and government in the legislative arena, the Italian case until 1993 could be clearly placed on the consensual pole. With regard to parliamentary systems, Lijphart (2012) measures the degree of executive dominance over the legislative assembly using cabinet duration as an indicator. A cabinet staying in power for a long period is assumed to be dominant vis-à-vis the legislature, while a short-lived government is considered to be subordinated to the legislature. This view is widely accepted and average cabinet duration is considered a valid comparative measure of executive dominance, with the additional bonus of being easily computable for every democratic country with data that are publicly available. Between 1948 (from the adoption of the Republican Constitution) and 1993 Italy had 47 cabinets, with an average duration of 322 days, that is slightly less than one year. It is hardly possible to find a country which can contend this negative record. However, it has been noted that having short-lived cabinets did not prevent the consolidation of a highly stable "core" of ministerial personnel, creating a "stable instability" which was even more pronounced that the one experienced in the Fourth French Republic (Siegfried, 1956) for which the term was firstly adopted. To have a better grasp of the capacity of governments to lead the policy process it is useful to look at the character of the law-making process. From this perspective, according to a wide literature, the weakness of the executive in the consensual phase clearly emerges. According to the mainstream interpretation Italian governments were condemned to "survive without governing" (Di Palma, 1977) because governing parties did not feel legitimated to adopt important reforms against the will of the opposition, to avoid the breaking of the consensual pact on which the Italian Republic has been established. An alternative viewpoint suggests that the main reason for which governments were not able to change the status quo had more to do with the heterogeneity within the governing coalitions and the lack of alternation than on the necessity to involve the communist opposition (Vassallo, 1994; Zucchini, 2014). Anyway, it is a fact that parties adopted a strategy of marginal accommodations avoiding clear choices on the main policy issues and dedicating most legislation of the distribution of narrow social benefits (Cotta, 1996). The two interpretations can be seen as complementary, and perhaps their combination can explain the absence of policy change in several meso-level policies and the delay with which the government was given some agenda powers in the legislative arena. It is worth noting that until the end of the eighties the cabinet could not count on any mechanism to set the agenda of the parliament. Governmental bills had no priority over bills with parliamentary origin, and this made the Italian government extremely weak on a comparative basis (De Micheli & Verzichelli, 2004; Döring, 1995).

The party system: from moderate to extreme fragmentation and back again
The choice to focus on the electoral or parliamentary arena bears some important consequences for the analysis of the Italian party system, because since the 1994 elections (since the demise of the proportional system) parties had a strong incentive to form electoral alliances, under whose symbols candidates coming from different parties run together. Under both the mixed member electoral system adopted in 1993 and the proportional system with majority bonus adopted in 2005 parties should enter a coalition in order to be competitive in the electoral arena. This, as Bardi noted (2007), created a structural divergence between the electoral and the parliamentary party systems. From 1994 to 2013 the Italian party system obeyed to a double logic; in the electoral arena parties created two broad coalitions to maximise their possibility to beat the opponents. But in the parliamentary arena, when it came to form governments and pass legislation, parties divided again. Indeed, as far as the government formation process and the law making process are concerned, parties remained the dominant actors and for the purpose of this article it is more appropriate to focus on the party level. However the bipolar dynamic of the electoral arena had important effects for the formation of post-electoral governments, and will be analyzed when appropriate.

The format of the party system is one of the defining characteristics of the Lijphartian distinction between the consensus and the majority model because it contributes to the dynamic and outcome of the government formation process. Consensus democracies, with their attitude to pursue inclusive agreements, are especially fit to societies that are deeply divided, where decisions imposed by thin majorities can be too divisive threatening the cohesion of the country. The degree of political and social fragmentation in a country is usually related with the number of parties, but this relation is far from perfect. A thorough assessment of the party system would then require to study not only the number of parties but also the ideological space in which they are placed, both in terms of dimensions (the cleavages from which they originate) and the polarization of the system (the distance among them). In contrast with other consensual democracies like Belgium or the Netherlands, the main cleavages dividing Italian parties had not to do with cultural but with ideological conflicts. Morlino (2014) argues that, despite the decline of some old conflicts and the emergence of new ones, the number of cleavages on which Italian parties divide has remained similar. In the consensual phase the parties were divided on the left-right axis, the religious dimension, the value of democracy, and the international collocation of Italy. In the alternation phase the last two dimensions have faded, but parties still divided on the left-right and religious cleavages. In addition two new cleavages have replaced the old ones: the centre-

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4 Electoral rules created incentives to form very large alliances even at the price to build fragmented coalitions. The excessive fragmentation, especially in the center-left camp, gave birth to conflictual and short-lived governments (D’Alimonte & Chiaramonte, 2007; Zucchini, 2014).
periphery division which has always been at the core of the Northern League and the internal/external cleavage, now politicised by the Five Stars Movement with an Eurosceptic flavour. In his latest comparative analysis Lijphart only counts the number of parties, perhaps because a more in-depth analysis on 36 countries is prohibitive in terms of resources. However, the validity of a measure based only on a numerical criterion can be justified also on a theoretical base. The number of parties immediately indicates, albeit roughly, an important feature of the political system: the extent to which political power is fragmented or non-fragmented, dispersed or concentrated. Likewise, simply by knowing how many parties there are, we are alerted to the number of possible 'interaction streams' that are involved. As Gunnar Sjöblom (1968) points out, two parties allow for only one stream of interaction, four parties for six, five parties for ten, six parties for fifteen, and seven parties for twenty-one (Sartori, 2005, p. 105). These interactions can take place at different levels: within the electoral arena, in parliament, and in government. Each additional interaction adds complexity to the system. Then, the greater the number of parties the greater the possible interactions and the corresponding intricacy of the system.

There are different approaches to count the number of parties: the differences have to do with the arena we look at (electoral or parliamentary) and the indicator we select. For this reason the most appropriate measure of party system fragmentation is the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (EPP). To allow a comparison between the electoral and the parliamentary arena, in Figure 1 also the Effective Number of Electoral Parties (EEP) is reported.

The evolution of the EPP, measured with the Laakso and Taagepera index (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979), is plotted against time in Figure 1. Until 1987 the EPP constantly oscillated between 3 and 4, making Italy one of the countries with the most fragmented system. As a measure of comparison it is worth noting that analyzing the period 1945-2010 Lijphart found the following mean values: 2.16 for the United Kingdom, 2.66 for Spain, 3.09 for Germany and 3.26 for France.

The first turning point for the Italian Party system clearly coincides with the collapse of the so-called First Republic. The number of parties clearly grew in 1992, jumping to an astonishing 5.66 in the Chamber of Deputies, before the adoption of the new electoral system: the immediate reason for such an increase was electoral dealignment, caused by the crisis of the traditional parties and the emergence of new political actors. Looking backwards, it can be said that the signs of such outcome had started to

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5 For the 1994, 1996 and 2001 elections the EEP is calculated on total votes obtained by coalitions and parties not included in coalitions (Bardi, 2007).
appear a couple of years before. From the end of the seventies onwards the electoral fortunes of traditional parties started to decline. If in 1976 the first three parties (DC, PCI, PSI) received almost 83% of the popular vote, this percentage gradually declined to 75% in 1987 and to about 59% in 1992. Along with the decline of the old parties some new actors, representing emerging conflicts, were appearing on the political stage. The Northern League, representing the discontent of the rich and modern North against the ineffectiveness of the central state and the high fiscal pressure, elected its first deputy in 1987 and reached the astonishing 19% in the 1990 regional elections in Lombardy. In 1992 general election it won the 8,7% of the votes, becoming a significant party also at the national level. In the 1990 regional elections La Rete, an anti-Mafia political movement, obtained 7% of the votes in Sicily. The collapse of the Soviet Union, marking the end of the communist threat, freed millions of votes that were given to the Christian Democrats exclusively for its anti-communist role. In the same years, along with the emergence of these new parties, a vigorous referendum movement led by Mariotto Segni, a Christian democrat backbencher, started to contest the proportional system in the attempt to transform Italy in a majority democracy based on alternation in government. The referendum movement was inspired by (and gave voice to) those dissatisfied with the consensual nature of the Italian political system, which was sees as the main reason for its chronic inefficacy. All these new players, openly contesting political corruption, the partisan occupation of the state and the incapacity of the government to solve the country huge economic problems, signalled that the decline of the traditional parties was irreversible.

The adoption of the 1993 electoral system failed to reverse this trend, and in the all the three elections contested with it (1994, 1996, 2001) the EPP in the Chamber of Deputies oscillated between 5 and 6. The tendency towards a bipolar competition is clearly observed by looking at the number of electoral parties (EEP), but the effects of the electoral law were easily neutralized by parties. In fact, small parties could negotiate their precious support in favor of larger parties engaging in pure electoral coalitions without merging, because the Rules of Procedures of the Chambers did not prevent them to establish their own independent party group. The Duverger Law according to which a plurality system leads to a two-party system did not apply to the parliamentary arena. The electoral system introduced in 2005, with its the majority bonus given at national level (for the Chamber of Deputies), is believed to have increased further the bargaining power of small parties. The winning center-left coalition, the Union, consisted of as many as 15 parties, many of which very small: according to the criterion proposed by Sartori the total number of relevant parties reached the astonishing peak of 25 (Bardi, 2007). The EPP declined slightly if compared to the 2001 elections because the two major parties of the
center-left (the Left Democrats and the Daisy) constituted unitary groups both in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate as the starting point toward their merger.

The second turning point for the Italian Party System happened between the beginning of the short lived 15th and the beginning of the 16th legislature, that is between 2007 and 2008. In 2006 the two main parties of the left coalition, the Left Democrats and the Daisy, presented a single electoral list in the Chamber of Deputies, announcing their intention to merge. In 2007 they actually constituted the Democratic Party, leaving to their sympathizers and supporters the responsibility to choose the leader of the party. Since its constitution the Democratic Party made clear that its secretary was the natural candidate for the office of Prime Minister (Pasquino, 2009). The election of Walter Veltroni contributed to exacerbate the already existing tensions within the centre-left coalition that was already plagued by a pathological level of conflict due to the high number of parties comprising it and the very thin majority it could command in the Senate. These factors caused the demise of Prodi’s government and the anticipated end of the legislature. Going against the incentives to form large electoral alliances, Veltroni decided to make a coalition only with the centrist Italy of Values, discarding the plethora of small leftist allies that he blamed for the failure of the previous governing experience (Newell, 2009). This choice induced the two main parties of the center-right (Go Italy and National Alliance) to run together under the new symbol of the People of Freedom (PDL), and the usual leadership of Silvio Berlusconi. The PDL allied with the Northern League and absorbed some minor parties but could not conclude an agreement with the Union of Christian and Center Democrats (UDC) led by Pierferdinando Casini. The UDC run alone. It must be remembered that the electoral law adopted in 2005 introduced some thresholds to encourage small parties to enter coalitions. In the 2008 elections only the two main coalitions and the UDC overcame the threshold and obtained parliamentary representation. The sudden and impressive decrease in the EPP, which seemed to mark the beginning of a crucial legislature (Russo & Verzichelli, 2009), must be credited to the joint effect of party strategies, triggered by the creation of the Democratic Party and its decision to ally only with another party, and the thresholds.

The 2013 elections represented the third turning point, demonstrating that the almost bipartisan result of the previous general election was not the outcome of a deterministic trend. The fall of the Berlusconi government in 2011 under the pressure of the economic crisis and the establishment of a

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6 Analysing the reasons leading Veltroni to go against the incentives of the electoral rule is beyond the scope of this article. However, the interested reader will find useful to look at some recent works assessing the relation between incentives given by electoral rules and party strategies, with reference to the Italian case (Scheiner & Tronconi, 2011; Scheiner, 2008).
technocratic government led by Mario Monti symbolically represented the failure of the parties which dominated the alternation phase. There are several striking similarities between the collapse of the post-war party system in the early nineties and the political phase which began in 2011. The last technocratic government to take power before the Monti cabinet had been the Dini in 1995, after the collapse of the Berlusconi I cabinet. However, the Monti experience, with the implementation of severe austerity measures that were implemented to avoid the financial default, resembled more the government led by Amato and Ciampi during the collapse of the First Republic.⁷ The Monti government, just like those mentioned above, took power in a period of acute crises to which existing parties were not able to respond. Beyond the crises of the existing parties and their marginalization form the executive level, in both phases the emergence of successful challengers anticipates electoral dealignment and the growth of the EPP.

The 2013 general election were contested by several coalitions; the center-left coalition (PD, SEL and other minor parties) led by Pierluigi Bersani, the center right coalition (PDL, LN and other minor parties), the Five Star Movement led by Beppe Grillo and the With Monti for Italy coalition (centrist parties). The Five Star Movement obtained 25.5% of the popular vote, only slightly less that the center-left (29,5%) and the center right (29,1%) coalitions, taking 109 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 54 seats in the Senate. Also the coalition led by the incumbent Prime Minister Mario Monti managed to overcome the threshold (10,5%). Parties of the two main coalitions immediately formed separate groups in Parliament. As it is argued in the following paragraph, the hung Senate, where no coalition could command a majority, exacerbated the distance between the electoral and the parliamentary arena and led to the immediate dissolution of both coalitions. The success of the anti-establishment Five Stars Movement (M5S) in the 2013 elections was surprising and not anticipated by scholars and pundits. However, the fortunes of the movement led by former comedian Beppe Grillo had been growing for some time and could be interpreted as the protest against the inadequacy of the existing parties. An analysis of the path followed by the Five Stars Movement is beyond the scope of this article (Corbetta & Gualmini, 2013). However, I briefly recall some events that constituted the first signs of its success. In 2007 Grillo organized an happening named V-Day in more than 200 cities (the V, as the New York Times reported "stands for a very rude Italian expletive")⁸ to protest against the

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⁷ While it is undeniable that those cabinet were not fully technical, because partisan ministers had either a preeminent (Amato) or a rather important role (Ciampi), in both cases parties as organizations should accept to relax their control on the executive (Cotta & Verzichelli, 2003). Ciampi himself was not attached to a political party.

political class and gather popular support for the petition "Clean Up Parliament". Such petition proposed to the parliament to consider a popular legislative initiative\(^9\) that would ban candidates convicted of crimes from seeking public office, limit politicians to two terms and introduce the direct election of legislators. The V-Day was a resounding success, and more than 330,000 signatures were gathered. After its formal constitution in 2009, in 2010 the M5S run for the regional elections in 5 out of 13 regions, obtaining some good results and electing its first representatives in the Regional Councils of Piedmont and Emilia-Romagna. In 2011 it obtained good results in several municipalities, especially in the Northern regions. In 2012 the M5S win the local election in Parma, electing its first Mayor of an important city. At that time Opinion Polls started to reveal the impetuous growth of its successes. As it happened in 1992 the party system started to change reacting to electoral dealignment.

*Figure 1. Effective number of electoral parliamentary parties after elections in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate (1979-2013)*

After this excursus a cautionary note should be made. The rather fragmented picture coming from the analysis of the EPP after elections is even too optimistic, because of the criteria followed in the computation of these data. Firstly, the mixed group, which is usually composed of several political

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\(^9\) According to article 70 of the Italian Constitution “The people may initiate legislation by proposing a bill drawn up in sections and signed by at least fifty-thousand voters”. This procedure, commonly known as “popular legislative initiative”, has been frequently used by Italian citizens despite the strict numerical requirements. The petition organized by Beppe Grillo did not follow the strict rules to certify the signatures of the voters, having only a symbolic value.
components, has been considered as a separate political group. Secondly, and most importantly, in the so called Second Republic party splits and individual party switching have been quite common, inflating the EPP between elections. By calculating the EPP right after elections I somehow underestimated it, because in that moment the bipolar dynamic of the electoral system still exerts its influence. The organizational weakness of political parties and very favourable rules of procedures made rather appealing for ambitious politicians to change groups (Heller & Mershon, 2008). For instance, in the first months of the 17th legislature two significant splits (the division of the PdL between Nuovo Centro Destra and Forza Italia and the collapse of the Monti’s centrist electoral cartel) definitely increased the fragmentation of the parliamentary arena (Russo, Tronconi, & Verzichelli, 2014).

The flight to Westminster has been delayed: parties in the government formation system

The type of cabinet can be regarded as the most important feature of the polar model developed by Lijphart. Single majority party cabinets are typical of majority democracy, because concentrate power within the hands of a single player. On the contrary, broad multiparty governments occupy the opposite position being the typical outcome in consensus democracy, where power is shared among many actors. As it is evident, Lijphart does not consider only the number of parties but gives also importance to their parliamentary base of the cabinet. Different cabinets can be ordered starting from the most to the least majoritarian: Single party majority, Minimal winning coalitions, Single party minority, Minority coalitions, Oversized coalitions. Grand coalitions, defined as coalitions made by the two largest parties of the country, must be treated as oversized coalitions even if they are minimal winning in technical sense. To find a comparative measure Lijphart considers the amount of time in which Single party (majority and minority) and Minimal winning (among which he includes also Single party majority) cabinets have been in power, and take the average of those values. Not surprisingly, there is a very strong correlation between the Effective number of parliamentary parties and type of cabinets (-0.85, significant at the 1% level). Even less surprisingly, Italy scores among the most consensual countries.

Lijphart classify as oversized any coalition cabinet based on more than 80% of the seats in the legislature (Lijphart, 2012, p. 95). The Letta cabinet was supported by about 71% of the legislature but it is classified as oversized because its parliamentary base included uncessary parties.
Table 1. Proportion of time during which different kinds of cabinets were in power before and after 1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of cabinet</th>
<th>1948-1993</th>
<th>1994-2013</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimal Winning Coalition</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Party Minority Government</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi Party Minority Government</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surplus Coalition</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical/Non partisan government</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caretaker Government</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average time Minimum Winning + Single party</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average cabinet duration (days)</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>564</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Woldendorp, Keman, & Budge, 2011), updated and modified by Luca Verzichelli and Federico Russo.

A comparison between the proportion of time during which different kinds of cabinets were in power before and after the beginning of the alternation phase demonstrates that in this respect Italy has clearly become more majoritarian. In the whole republican period there has never been a single party majority cabinet, the quintessential expression of power concentration. However, after 1994 Italy discovered Minimal winning coalitions, which were virtually unknown until then. At the same time, minority governments became much less common. According to the data gathered by Woldendorp and colleagues, during the consensual phase Italy had 18 minority governments. Actually, only 13 survived the investiture vote while 5 did not manage to win the first confidence vote after being sworn in by the President of the Republic and remained in office with limited powers. The Italian

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11 The difference is statistically significant with p<0.05.

12 We considered the Ciampi cabinet as Technical and the Prodi cabinet as Minority Coalition. Both cabinets are classified by Woldendorp and colleagues as Surplus Coalitions.

13 The formal investiture procedure established by the Constitutional Assembly states that “The President of the Republic appoints the President of the Council of Ministers and, on his/her proposal, the Ministers” (art. 92); after being sworn in by the President of the Republic (art. 93), the Government has ten days to obtain the confidence of both Houses (art. 94). Bergman (Bergman, 1993) distinguishes between countries in which the government is supposed to enjoy the confidence of the parliament unless a majority votes a no-confidence motion, and countries in which governments must win an investiture vote to take power. The firsts are said to have negative parliamentarism while the second are said to have positive parliamentarism. Positive parliamentarism is usually believed to make life harder for minority governments (Bergman, 1993; Strøm, 1990). The Italian Constitution unambiguously prescribes a
Constitution requires governments to win a formal confidence vote within ten days from their formation. In theory this represents a rather high obstacle to overcome for minority governments, which have only two strategies to survive: counting on the external support or negotiating the friendly abstention of other parties. According to Strom (1990) governments relying on external support are "majority government in disguise" while only those having to negotiate legislative support from issue to issue are actual minority cabinets. Conversely, Lijphart (2012) argues that for theoretical and practical reasons it makes sense to treat all of them as oversized majority, especially because the commitment of support parties is never as solid as if it were member of the cabinet. Following this line of reasoning I consider the Prodi cabinet, which stayed in government for almost 900 days between 1996 and 1998, as a multi party minority because it rested on the external support of the Communist Refoundation Party. Another important feature of the alternation phase is the high relevance of purely technical/non partisan governments, namely the Dini and the Monti cabinets. Both of them were appointed between elections, after the early failure of a center-right post-electoral government and in a condition of financial instability (especially in the case of 2011). Both of them were supported in parliament by a broad legislative coalition, a fact that would suggest to consider them rather consensual. To find a synthetic measure of the overall degree of majoritarianism in the formation of cabinets Lijphart calculate the percentage of time in which minimal winning and one party cabinets were in power and take the average of the two indicators. The higher the indicator the more majoritarian is the country. From this comparison it appears that power is somehow more concentrated in the post 1994 period (19,5%) than before (11,0%). However, the value remains at the bottom end of the comparative scale, being higher of the values reached by Switzerland (4%), Finland (10,0%), Israel (14,0%) and Mauritius (15,3%) but lower of all the rest (the mean and median of this indicator for the 36 countries studied by Lijphart are 60,3% and 55%).

positive formation rule, but the lack of viable alternatives sometimes forced the President of the Republic to appoint cabinets without a solid majority.

14 Woldendorp and colleagues (Woldendorp, Keman, & Budge, 2011) treat it as a surplus coalition.

15 It is worth noting that before elections the Olive Tree Coalition and Communist Refoundation Party (PRC) had reached an agreement according to which the center-left coalition refrained from presenting its candidates in several "safe" single member districts to ensure the election of PRC candidates. This agreement however did not imply the participation of the PRC to a center-left government.

16 However, it is difficult to classify technical cabinets on a consensual-majority scale, because their most salient feature is the limited policy delegation. According to Verzichelli and Cotta (2012) in this sense technical governments resemble "a sort of care-taker governments, although with some relevant missions".
This finding is consistent with two commonly used indicators of cabinet dominance over the parliament (which is a distinct but related variable of the Lijphartian classification): average cabinet duration and government capacity to get its bills passed in parliament. Before 1994 the average duration of a cabinet was less than 11 months (322 days) while between 1994 and 2013 the life expectancy of cabinets increased to almost 19 months (564 days). The direction of change is indisputably toward the majority pole, but Westminster is still out of sight: on a comparative basis even in the alternation phase Italian cabinets are patently short-lived. The analysis of the steering capacity of governments is beyond the scope of this work, and I cannot but refer to the copious literature on the subject. Here I just pick some of its main findings that corroborate this impression of limited movement toward a more majoritarian system. Firstly, it must be noted that from the strengthening of government in relation to parliament in the legislative arena began between the eighties and the early nineties (De Micheli & Verzichelli, 2004), under the pressure to meet the requirements of the European Monetary Union and under an increasingly worrying situation of the public finances. The Rules of Procedure of both houses were amended in this direction and winning coalitions started to nominate the Speakers among their representatives to guarantee that governments’ bills could have some priority (Vassallo, 2007). At the same time, to overcome a still problematic legislative procedure, governments tried to force the hand of parliament by adopting decree laws for their most important programmatic bills, well beyond the urgency matters for which the Constitution reserved this tool. According to Marangoni (Marangoni, 2013a, 2013b) all governments of the alternation phase were condemned to use emergency decrees, often associated with recourse to votes of confidence, if they wanted to ensure parliamentary approval of their initiatives. When it comes to ordinary legislation the fragmentation of the legislative majorities (especially, but not only, of the center-left) and the related presence of many veto players prevented government to pursue its priorities.

Highlighting the somehow limited size of this change must not distract us from a theoretically interesting point. After 1994 power was more concentrated despite the remarkable growth of the number of Effective Number of Parliamentary parties. While formal mechanisms of government formation has remained constant in the whole republican period, in the early nineties the change in the party system and in the success of the bipolar competition caused a sharp change in the investiture practice of post electoral governments. As noted by several scholars (Cotta & Verzichelli, 2003; Vassallo, 2007) between 1948 and 1992 the formation of the governing coalition always took place after the electoral moment and followed some simple rules:

1. No party would ally with wither the MSI or the PCI
2. the DC always had a pivotal role

15
3. The additional partners of the governing coalition, the identity of the Prime Minister and portfolio allocations were often decided after elections.

By contrast, since 1994 well-defined coalitions are formed before elections, and their leaders are presented to the electorate as prospective Prime Ministers. As a consequence, at least when the winning coalition has a clear majority both in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate, only portfolio allocation remains to be settled after election. Between 1994 and 2008 after each election the leader of the winning coalition was appointed Prime Minister and received the confidence of both Houses. In other words, elections had become decisive, giving to the voters a straightforward way to choose among alternatives. However, as it evident from the analysis of the party system, two very different logics applied in the electoral and in the parliamentary arena. As a consequence, a very different logic applied also to the government formation process before and after elections. When a post-electoral government terminated (and it happened in all the legislatures, with the partial exception of the 16th) the government formation process entailed complex negotiations resembling very much the logic of the consensual phase. The identity of the Prime Minister, portfolio allocations, the program and to some extent also the borders of the coalition were all objects of negotiation. It is true that from 1996 to 2011 the governing coalitions changed only marginally between elections. Nevertheless, with the notable exception of the 14th legislation, the Prime Minister emerged from elections never managed to stay in office for the whole legislature.

The first striking departure from the majority logic in government formation happened in 2011. After losing part of its parliamentary base due to a split of its own party and exhausted after a long series of personal and political scandals, Berlusconi was forced to resign in November. At that time Italy was under an extreme pressure coming from financial markets. In such instance, parties did not agree on what to do next: some of them argued in favour of forming a national emergency government while others were internally divided and perhaps tented to ask the President of the Republic to call a new general election. The President of the Republic, the then 85 years old Giorgio Napolitano, took the lead: he nominated former governor of the Bank of Italy Mario Monti for the office of life-time senator signalling to all parties the intention to give him the mandate to form a government. This happened before the resignation of the Berlusconi IV cabinet. Shortly after receiving his resignation letter initiated a very brief round of consultation and appointed the new cabinet, which received as many as 556 votes in the Chamber of Deputies and 281 in the Senate. The striking reduction in political fragmentation

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17 As summarized elsewhere, "The PdI suffered a major split with the foundation of Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia, reducing the parliamentary majority supporting the new Berlusconi government to a slim advantage which could not cope with the increasing challenges caused by the global crisis" (Russo, Tronconi, & Verzichelli, 2014, p. 93).
that took place in the 2008 election was not sufficient to consolidate a majoritarian logic. The fragility of the newly formed PdL and the decline of Silvio Berlusconi, together with the most severe economic crises of the last decades, swept away the illusion of a consolidate majority democracy.

The second step backward happened in 2013. While both in 2006, albeit with a very narrow margin, and in 2008 the leaders of the winning coalition controlled a majority in both houses and could be appointed prime ministers, this did not happen the third time in which the 2005 electoral system was applied. This election produced a hung parliament where no pre-electoral coalition could count on a majority in both chambers. In fact the center-left coalition, headed by the Democratic Party, won a comfortable majority in the Chamber of Deputies but not in the Senate. In that chamber the centre-left needed the support of either the People's Party for Freedom (PdL) led by Silvio Berlusconi or the newly formed Five Stars Movements led by former comedian Beppe Grillo. The centrist party led by former Prime Minister Mario Monti (Civic Choice) had only a few seats in the Senate. The Democratic Party occupied a pivotal role because no coalition excluding it could enjoy a majority in both chambers. Table 2 shows the distributions of seats in the Senate, along with the coalitions predicted by several theories.

Table 2. Distribution of seats in Senate at the beginning of the 17th legislature and cabinet coalitions predicted by several theories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parties</th>
<th>Left</th>
<th>Monti</th>
<th>PdL</th>
<th>LN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M5S-PD</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD-PDL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theories</th>
<th>Left</th>
<th>Right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimum winning coalition</td>
<td>M5S-PD</td>
<td>PD-PDL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal size</td>
<td>M5S-PD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal connected winning</td>
<td>M5S-PD</td>
<td>PD-Monti-PdL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Estimation of the Left-Right positions are based on the analysis of Electoral Manifestos (Volkens, Lehmann, Merz, Regel, & Werner, 2013)

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18 Other two parliamentary groups were formed: the mixed group with 20 senators (including SEL, the small electoral ally of the Democratic Party that elected 7 senators) and the group of the autonomist parties with 10 senators. They were excluded from the analysis because they can hardly be considered unitary actors.
According to the majoritarian logic of the electoral competition, the Democratic Party firstly excluded to form an alliance with the center-right coalition and proposed a deal to the Five Stars Movement. After lengthy and unsuccessful negotiations, and despite no majority coalition seemed viable, the President of the Republic refused to appoint Mr. Bersani pointing out that the investiture procedure set out in Constitution indicates that no government could be appointed without the existence of a clear parliamentary majority. It is interesting to note that even after the refusal of the Five Stars Movement to support a center-left government several senior members of the Democratic Party asked the President of the Republic to appoint Pierluigi Bersani, hoping to convince the Five Star Movement to give an external support in the Senate. However, the interpretation of the Constitution given by the President of the Republic ruled out this option. A mandate to form a new government was then given to Enrico Letta (deputy leader of the Democratic Party), who eventually managed to form a grand coalition (oversized) including the People's Party for Freedom (PdL) and Monti's electoral cartel. After four days from receiving the mandate, Letta and his cabinet were sworn in and in the following days they survived comfortably the investiture vote in both chambers. Even this cabinet was short lived. As it happened in 2007, a fragmented government led by a leftist prime minister met its fate thanks to the "primary elections" to select the leader of the Democratic Party. In February 2014, under the new leadership of Matteo Renzi, the PD withdrew its confidence to the government and Letta could not do anything but resign. After a few days the Renzi cabinet was formed with the same parliamentary base.

Conclusions

Looking at the Italian case though the lens of a comparative framework is a useful exercise to contextualize the magnitude of the change experience by the Italian Political System in the alternation phase. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that from 1994 onwards the steps toward a majoritarian model have been only hesitant. Moreover, even looking only at the executive-party dimension of the Lijphartian model, those steps are not irreversible. The number of parties in parliament had started to grow in 1992 for the dissatisfaction of citizens toward an underperforming model, and the mixed majority system introduced in 1993 did not have the desired effect to encourage a simplification. Better, the simplification only happened in the electoral arena with the appearance of coalitions, but the effects of the bipolar competition vanished in the parliamentary arena. The combined effect of an electoral system giving incentives to form heterogeneous coalitions and parliamentary rules that do not discourage party switching and party splitting has contributed to this state of affair. The Effective Number of Parties in parliament declined after the adoption of the 2005
electoral system, but we must remember that correlation does not always imply causation: the successive party splits affecting the main party of the centre-right coalition between 2011 and 2013 and the emergence of a significant third force in the electoral arena demonstrated that the current institutions are fully compatible with the growth of fragmentation. The most relevant step toward a majority model regarded the process of government formation, which has been usually guided by the electoral results. However, also the consolidation of this step has been questioned by the formation of an emergency technical cabinet in 2011 and by the hung parliament emerged from the 2013 general election.

As the famous saying goes, it is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future. Much depends on the choices that will be made on the new electoral system, whose adoption is necessary after the Constitutional Court declared the 2005 electoral system unconstitutional in several of its parts. Much depends also on the success of the current government to achieve the institutional reforms, especially the abolition of the confidence relation between the Senate and the Cabinet, that have proved to be a mission impossible for more than 20 years. However, the adoption of rules discouraging party splits and party switching is almost as important (Verzichelli, 2000), and could be implemented by adopting stricter rule to discourage the emergence of new parliamentary party groups during the legislature. In the attempt to build a competitive model of democracy, a goal that is shared by the vast majority of political parties, the only provisional success has been the establishment of a bipolar competition in the electoral arena which has translated its effects on the government formation process. Consolidating this dynamic without encouraging party fragmentation seems the only way for achieving more stable results.
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