Beyond the Leader?
Party Organization and Change of Leadership in the Italian Personalistic Parties

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Panel
‘The Italian Political System in the Last Twenty Years: Change, Adaptation or Unfinished Transition?’
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1. Perspectives on the Last Twenty Years: Why Party Leadership?

Which factors account for different outcomes in the processes of party institutionalization? Anyone who wants to answer to this question will find a rich research soil in the context of the Italian political system.

Italian politics is currently undergoing (once more) a process of deep self-reorganization. After the experience of the technocratic Monti cabinet (Giannetti 2013), the general election of February 2013 and its result seemed to put definitely an end to the so-called Second Republic – which had started in the mid-1990s – and gave birth to a new transitional phase, whose length and outcomes are still to be fully displayed.1 Looking back at the last twenty years, one can safely see that they have proved to be anything but years of stabilization for the Italian political system (Bull 2012; Almagisti et al. 2014). The expected ‘majoritarian turn’ of the Italian democracy has bumped into several obstacles and its realization has been only partial (Zucchini 2013; Conti and Marangoni forthcoming). One of the main feature of the period at issue has been the fragmented and unstable party system (Ieraci 2014), characterized by several parties structured around powerful leaders (Bardi et al. 2007).

According to some literature, this type of party system could be a major explanatory factor behind the (still) shifting nature of the Italian political system. Indeed, a functioning democracy would need a party system with a minimum of institutionalization (i.e., Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Kuenzi and Lambright 2001; Stockton 2001), and, in turn, the party system institutionalization would depend on the institutionalization of the single parties (Casal Bértova 2012). To focus on the latter seems therefore a worthwhile way to evaluate important aspects of the last twenty years from a narrower viewpoint in view of broader analyses. Moreover, such a study might also provide some interesting insights for the understanding of the future developments of the Italian political life.

This paper deals with the topic aiming at both enriching the debate on the Italian Second Republic and its salient characteristics and contributing to the more general literature on political parties and institutionalization, by tackling a theoretical puzzle recently come to light concerning three Italian political parties – namely, Northern League, Forza Italia-People of Freedom, and Italy of Values.

The work proceeds as follows: first, I point out such a conundrum and clarify the underlying research question and hypotheses as well as the method of inquiry. The fourth section of the

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paper examines the theoretical and conceptual bases of the investigation, whereas the subsequent coincides with the empirical analysis of the case studies. An interpretation of the finding precedes the final discussion and some suggestions for further research.

2. The Puzzle of Party Institutionalization in Italy

Berlusconi’s parties Forza Italia (FI, Go Italy!) and Popolo della libertà (PdL, People of Freedom) as well as the Lega Nord (LN, Northern League) have undoubtedly been key player parties of the Italian politics of the last twenty years. Berlusconi has always led the main center-right party since the foundation of FI in 1994 and was in government as prime minister with his own party for almost nine years in 1994, between 2001 and 2006 and from 2008 to 2011, wielding a leading role as coalition leader (Vercesi 2013). As for the Northern League, it was a Forza Italia-People of Freedom’s coalition partner every time Berlusconi was chief executive and has constantly kept a significant share of votes in the Italian Northern regions (Biorcio 2010). On the specular side of the political spectrum – the center-left – the party Italia dei Valori (IdV, Italy of Values) performed a substantial role among its allies over several years, in particular during the time span of the opposition to the fourth Berlusconi cabinet (2008-2011), when it became the main ally of the largest leftist party, the Partito Democratico (PD, Democratic Party) (cf. Braghiroli and Verzichelli 2011).

These three parties, which are very different under many respects, share some common traits and, first and foremost, a puzzle. All of them have been epitomes of parties with an internal organization clearly developed to sustain and preserve, rather than counterbalance, the leadership of their founder-fathers. The prominence of the party leaders inside the party has never been really challenged for most or the entire part of the parties’ life (Sandri et al. 2013).

The theoretical literature on political parties and party institutionalization generally argues that such a kind of relationship between the chief and the organization would impede the survival of the party ‘beyond’ its leader, or, at least, seriously undermine its chances to resist to a possible substantial loss of importance consequential to his or her succession (cf. Panebianco 1988; Harmel and Svåsand 1993; Randall and Svåsand 2002; Chiapponi 2010); in other words, the party would comparatively face more obstacles along the path to institutionalization, having developed internal dynamics that make it unfitting to cope with the process. And, generally speaking, any weakening of the leader would mean an equal weakening of the party. Actually, the history of Berlusconi’s parties and the IdV seems to confirm this expectation, but the case of the LN, on the contrary, departs from the theory.
Between 2012 and 2013, all the leaders of the three parties – Berlusconi from FI-PdL; Umberto Bossi from the LN; and Antonio Di Pietro from the IdV – were rocked by scandals linked to their figures.² In April 2012, a financial scandal regarding an embezzling of party funds hit Bossi and some of his relatives and closest party collaborators;³ whereas, six months later, it was the time of Di Pietro, against whom an investigative report of a well-known TV broadcast hypothesized a personal use of party funds.⁴ Finally, on 1 August 2013, Berlusconi underwent a final conviction for tax fraud,⁵ which, ultimately, set the bases for the crisis of the grand coalition Berlusconi’s party was part of and, eventually, for the party’s withdrawal from it.⁶

It is not surprising that these episodes have had negative repercussions on the image of the three leaders and, to some extent, on the electoral hold of the relevant parties (cf. Chiaramonte 2014) – as just said, strongly dependent on the political strength of their ‘masters’. Nonetheless, the outcomes have been very different and show an intriguing variance. The then PdL and later FI has been not able to reshape itself with a new leadership, knowing that without Berlusconi it would probably lost even more; when some party members decided to oppose his guidelines – as the affiliates of the current Nuovo Centrodestra (NCD, New Center-Right), led by the former PdL’s secretary Angelino Alfano (see below) – a party split, and not a leadership succession, occurred. The IdV, instead, entered a phase of deep crisis; did not reach enough votes for the parliamentary representation in 2013; and somehow even tried, prompted by Di Pietro, to refresh its leadership, but without any significant success. The LN is the only party which, despite a first bewilderment, has cornered its leader, changed the office holder twice and, nevertheless, kept the status of party with a blackmail potential. In other words, the Northern League, unlike the other two cases, has successfully overtaken, as we shall see, one of the most important passage towards the own institutionalization.

² I refer to scandals with a broad media covering and producing substantial consequences for party leaderships. I exclude, for example, judicial inquiries that have not been perceived, strictly speaking, as scandals and/or critical episodes by the respective party members.

³ ‘Lega: «I rimborsi elettorali per i viaggi dei figli di Bossi e per i lavori nella villa di Gemonio».’ Corriere della Sera, 3 April 2012 (changed on line on 4 April 2012).


⁵ Since 1994, Berlusconi had already faced several judicial prosecutions, but I do not take them into account as scandals in this paper because they did not really affect the figure of Berlusconi inside his own party. On the contrary, he often referred to them in his speeches as indicators of a judicial persecution against him and used them to consolidate his support among party members and voters. The 2013 sentence is instead different, because it somehow jeopardized his political room for manoeuvre by producing law limitations to his possibilities to be involved in active politics and to occupy public offices.

⁶ The government, led by the Democrat Enrico Letta, entered office after the 2013 general election, swearing in on the 28th April of that year and lasted until 22 February 2014, when Matteo Renzi became the new prime minister. Initially, it was made up of the Democratic Party and the People of Freedom plus minor allies. On 2 October 2013, it had to face a no-confidence motion after the announcement of the resignation of PdL’s ministers, formally because of a confirmation of a VAT tax increase decided by the previous Monti cabinet. Vis-à-vis the possibility of his strategy’s failure, on the day of the confidence vote Berlusconi decided to oppose the motion and the party followed him. However, less than two months later Berlusconi’s party left the government. For details, see Newell and Carbone (2013) and ‘Forza Italia esce dalla maggioranza.’ Corriere della Sera, 26 November 2013.
3. Research Question, Hypotheses, and Method

The question the paper seeks to address is ‘why has the LN succeeded in doing this, whereas the Berlusconi’s party and the IdV have not?’ The answer could give important insights for some theoretical generalizations about the topic of organizational institutionalization. In order to tackle the puzzle, I will use the literature on party institutionalization and party organization as the framework for the analysis. Some scholars posit that different party origins can facilitate or restrain the possibilities to become institutionalized. For instance, Bolleyer and Bytzek (2013) argue that parties created by individual political entrepreneurs without any tie to already organized group are less likely to be ‘sustainable’. However, the formative approach cannot be useful for our purposes, since our three case studies do not show significant variances under this respect and match such a type of origin. Another strand bestows the highest impact to the organizational factors (e.g., Mudde 2007). On these bases, two alternative hypotheses stem: the first is that, in spite of its personalistic nature (see below) and unlike the other two parties, the Northern League has been able to separate its fate from its founding-father’s thanks to some key distinctive arrangements in the party organization which made it possible to remove the leader and, subsequently, to withstand the shock wave of the change. If, on the contrary, the Northern League could not actually be distinguished from FI-PdL and the IdV under this respect in a substantial manner, the explanation could lie in a peculiar interplay between similar internal features and different exogenous inducements.

The following study will organize around one dependent variable which has informed the choice of the case studies – the party institutionalization – and two independent variables – (the functioning of) the party organization and events – and their interactions. For the sake of simplicity, behavioral variables will be kept fixed, assuming that the party elites – e.g., the potential contesters for the leadership – constantly want to draw, similarly to the leaders, the highest benefit (whatever it may be) from the perpetuation of the organization, as long as it is convenient for them, and rationally pursue this goal.

The analysis will be qualitative; in particular, I will retraced the pathways of the three parties’ organization and dynamics at the level of the ‘party in central office’ (Katz and Mair 1994), where the decisive barriers to the change of leadership are supposed to be found, and their significant connections with the other faces of the party. Attention shall be devoted also to the

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7 While Northern League and Forza Italia are clearly externally (with respect to the parliament) created parties, the Italy of Values shows some traits of an internally created party, but, overall, cannot be put inside this category as well. Cf. ‘Di Pietro vuole fare l’anti Cossiga.’ Corriere della Sera, 19 February 1998.
identification of the critical junctures\textsuperscript{8} which have set the direction of the organizational changes and the ways in which the parties have coped with them.

Anyhow, before going into the empirical inquiry, a few conceptual clarifications are needed.

4. Conceptual Foundations

\textit{Party Institutionalization}

The first step is the definition of institutionalization. An institutionalized organization – in our case, a party – is an organization with some specific properties, and the institutionalization is the process that takes a non-institutionalized or not completely institutionalized organization towards this state. The reverse process can be named de-institutionalization. Being the institutionalization a multi-dimensional concept (referring to more than one property), the degree of institutionalization is conceivable as dependent on the closeness of each dimension to the level of the ‘fully-fledged institutionalization’.

Huntington (1968: 12) states that an institutionalized organization shows three features: recurring behaviors, stability, and value in itself. Hence, ‘institutionalization is the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability.’ In line with him, Panebianco (1988: 53), studying political parties proper, defines it as ‘the process by which an organization incorporates its founders’ values and aims.’ What he does not take in enough consideration is the role of the electoral success as an indicator of party institutionalization, as convincingly argued by Pedahzur and Brigha (2002). According to them, the acquisition and maintenance of votes as well as the placement of candidates for public offices are at the core of the party activity, and therefore cannot be discarded in any definition of party institutionalization. Nonetheless, in order to avoid a too narrow definition, the two authors fall in the opposite mistake. They use only the continuous participation in elections and the electoral and legislative stability as measurements of institutionalization; in doing this, they somehow look at the stability face of the concept, but forget the requisite of the value per se. The former is relational and concerns links with the environment; the latter is internal and sets the bases for the party behavior’s routinization and a greater autonomy from the leadership (cf. Arter and Kestilä-Kekkonen 2014: 935). Arguably, both help the reification of the organization, that is, ‘the extent to which the party’s existence is established in the public imagination’ (Randall and Svåsand 2002: 14).

\textsuperscript{8}I take the liberty to borrow the concept of critical junctures from the historical institutionalism literature (Collier and Collier 1991; see also Acemoglu and Robinson 2012) and to apply it, \textit{mutatis mutandis}, to the argumentation.
Somehow, the definition of party institutionalization of Harmel and Svåsand (1993: 74-5) summarizes the argument. According to them, an institutionalized party has a routinized behavior; is perceived by the other actors as ‘staying power’; and has an established record of survival. Since all the three parties of our analysis are still alive, I will not take the third indicator – however important it might be – in consideration. On the contrary, I will take the change of party leadership as a proxy of the *internal* stabilization and growing autonomy from the incumbent leader. I assume that, if the new leader does not come from the first set of individuals who founded the party, the party will move even more towards its institutionalization (cf. Huntington 1968: 14).

Therefore, I will look at the electoral performance and the blackmail potential (cf. Sartori 1976) of the party on the one hand and, on the other, at its ability to change the leadership in a successful way. I refer to the definition of successful succession outcome of Bynander and ’t Hart (2008: 390), according to which a successful outcome is ‘one that: 1) sees the main protagonists cooperate harmoniously from the moment of the designation of the heir apparent until at least the first major elections after the succession took effect; and 2) brings to power a new party leader who remains in office for at least one full parliamentary term, is widely credited with performing competently in the (first) elections contested under his leadership and/or secures government office for the party during at least one full parliamentary period’. The last criterion seems however too strict; simply keeping a blackmail potential can be assumed as a condition as well.

**Personalistic Parties**

So far, I have only touched on the issue of the definition of FI-PdL, the LN and the IdV as parties of a certain kind, i.e., personalistic. Diverse scholars find an agreement upon their populist nature (Tarchi 2003, 2008; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2010; Albertazzi *et al*. 2011; Chiapponi 2013), and many connects populism to some ideas about representation (as far as possible, free from representative filters) and some attitudes towards the elites and the ‘people’ (bad vs. good), variously defined (Taggart 2000; Mény and Surel 2002; Chiapponi 2012). However, we are not interested in these aspects, but rather in the fact populist parties are often associated with a particular form of party leadership, that is, the personalistic leadership. It is
different from a simply personalized leadership, because it implies an almost symbiotic relationship between leaders and party; sometimes, it is also charismatic.

The point is touched by Chiapponi (2013). He distinguishes between two types of (populist) personalistic leaderships exercising a strong control on the members of the party dominant coalition: patronage and charismatic. The former differs from the latter because it relies on a pretty instrumental orientation of the followers (namely, the dominant coalition), whereas the charismatic bond is nourished by a highly symbolic deference. According to the author, the political careers of Berlusconi and Bossi can be divided into two phases: that of a long charismatic leadership and, as the internal opposition was growing, that of a late patronage leadership. Instead, Di Pietro would be closer to an agitator leader, with a comparatively lower control on the followers.

Having or not lacked typical elements of charisma (Friedrich 1961; Weber 1978; Pappas 2011), all the three leaderships have been endowed with some crucial features that charismatic leaderships share with other personalistic leaderships: they have been embedded inside organizations over which the leader has exerted a centralized control and for which has been the ‘unifying symbol’ (Panebianco 1988: 145-6; Pappas 2011: 3), making the entire organization dependent on him – whatever the reason has been – and the internal power dynamics unstable and uncertain. ‘[T]he party … has been] the product of a leader rather than he […] the product of a party’ (McDonnell 2013: 221-2).

As for the formal structure and its ‘sturdiness’, the three parties have displayed some variance. The Northern League has been depicted as a party oscillating between a mass-based party organizational model and an elite-based model depending on the viewpoint, from the party on ground level in the former case and from the party in public (and central) office in the latter (cf. Morlino 2006: 138). From the late 1990s, Berlusconi’s parties has made, with ups and downs, attempts to move towards a more traditional formal organization with local ramifications, but

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9 A personalized leadership could be what Ansell and Fish (1999) call noncharismatic personalist leadership. Leaders are recognized more as persons than as office holders, nonetheless, ‘they are [simply] brokers who manage internal conflict in pursuit of preserving party unity’ (p. 288). Their existence does not mean at all that the party is weakly institutionalized. By way of example, the two authors take Helmut Kohl in the German CDU and François Mitterrand in the French Socialist Party. In Italy, Matteo Renzi in the Democratic Party seems to match this type of leadership.

10 The author chooses the term ‘personal’ leadership. I prefer using ‘personalistic’ to avoid any confusion with the leadership of personal parties (see below).

11 I buy the Panebianco’s (1988: 37-8) argument about why ‘dominant coalition’ is to be preferred to Duverger’s (1954) ‘inner circle’ when it comes to identify the small group holding the power resources in a party.

12 The growing opposition would be an indicator of the change. Indeed, pure charisma ‘contextually produces a cohesive dominant coalition despite the absence of a process of […] institutionalization’ (Panebianco 1988: 66) and differs from Tucker’s (1970) situational charisma. It is worth remembering that charisma is not something that the leader owns, but rather something that followers acknowledge to him or her. The charismatic leader constantly needs to give proofs of the qualities on which the acknowledgement is based.
met some failures in this sense (Paolucci 2008); the Italy of Values has been described as characterized by ‘organizational fragility’ (Tarchi 2003: 200). However, in all the three cases, the populist anti-institutional orientation together with the vertical use of the leaders’ power have arguably hindered the development of any thick and/or effective organization. Referring to charismatic parties, Panebianco (1988: 67, 146) contends that ‘the division of labor is constantly redefined at the leader’s discretion, career uncertainties are considerable, no accepted procedures exist, and improvisation is the only real organizational “rule”.’ This condition tends to reproduce itself because ‘the leader […] has no interest in organizational reinforcement which would inevitably set the stage for the party’s “emancipation” from his [sic!] control’. For the paper’s purpose, it seems possible to extend this argument to all personalistic parties – as I have defined them – without any big conceptual impoverishment.

To summarize: the personalistic nature of our three case studies is a product of a two-way interplay between leadership and organization, no other factors matter. There is no typical organizational model defining the party; at least in theory, the personalistic relationship between leader and party can coexist with more than one party template.

In the next section, I will seek to find a solution to our aforementioned theoretical puzzle by analyzing how the three leaderships have actually interacted with the relevant organizations and how the parties have reacted to the external pressures.

5. The Road to (a Missed) Institutionalization: An Empirical Reenactment

The following analyses will be structured around a common pattern. For each party, I will look at the political and organizational history, with an eye to the internal power dynamics. A particular attention will be paid to the observation of how the parties have reacted to the scandals; how the leaders have used their power resources to cope with them; how the internal party dynamics have evolved in the aftermath; and, finally, which outcomes have been consequential. The parties will be taken into account from the oldest to the newest.

13 A different operational definition is given by McDonnell (2013: 222-3) in a study of his on Berlusconi’s parties. He singles out ‘personal’ (see above, fn. 10) parties on the basis of a subjective criterion, that is, the perception commentators and party activists have of the party itself. Note that the author does not take this perception as a proxy of the actual condition, but rather as an autonomous defining criterion per se.
Northern League

The Northern League was born from the union of several regional ‘leagues’ which had started advocating some (ethno-)regionalist issues in the early 1980s. The first two most prominent were the Union Piemontèisa (Piedmont’s Union) in Piedmont and the Liga Veneta (Venetian League) in Veneto. A couple of years later, the already founder – in 1979 – of the North-Western Lombard Union Umberto Bossi created the Lega Autonomista Lombarda (Autonomist Lombard League) for the Lombardy; it eventually became Lega Lombarda (Lombard League) in 1986. It was the first league to gain seats in the national parliament in 1987, and one of them – the one in the Upper House – was achieved by Bossi himself. Initially, the Lombard League relied on a very loose organization and lacked financial resources. Nevertheless, his leader could soon exploit the internal conflicts of the other leagues and obtain the hegemony of the Northern ‘leaguism’, by federating the single leagues into the Northern League.

The party was founded in 1989 and the first congress was held in February 1991; Umberto Bossi was chosen as party secretary, that is, party leader and kept this position until 2012. Initially, the leadership of Bossi was not completely undisputed, but, in particular after the withdrawal from the first Berlusconi cabinet (1994) and the management of some internal dissents, it became more and more powerful, able to win rebels, and based on charismatic foundations for many years. For supporters, Bossi was more than a mere leader; he was the only individual who could interpret the spirit and the doctrine of the party (Tarchi 1998; Passarelli and Tuorto 2012: ch. 1). The tie was deep-emotional and continuously nurtured by symbolic mass party rallies (Barraclough 1998; Blondel and Thiébault 2010: 180).

From the structural point of view, the Northern League is a quite intriguing case. Although a charismatic party for a long time, it has developed an enough articulate internal organization. The party in public office has grown in importance and, at local level (party on the ground), the party has followed the model of traditional mass bureaucratic parties, in particular with regard to the presence of local offices and ancillary organizations. It is interesting that a great part of party finances has come from local activists and private donations, unlike what has happened with the other parties of the Second Republic (Ignazi et al. 2010: 206). Activists have been distinguished between ordinary members/militants, with voting rights inside the party and the obligation to participate, and simple supporters, who are not allowed to vote and have no participative duties (Passarelli and Tuorto 2012: 166). This hierarchical division has been once

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14 Other tiny leagues/unions/movements existed.

15 It is interesting noting that strong conflicts were with the future leader Roberto Maroni. Unlike Maroni, several people left the party or were thrown out.
more renewed in the latest version of the party statute approved in the congress held on 20 July 2014.\textsuperscript{16}

The most important party bodies, however, are at the level of the party in central office. Here, the LN has not met many substantial changes throughout its history. At the apex of the entire organizational pyramid is the federal secretary (party leader). (S/)he forms the main organizational triad together with the federal secretariat and the federal council; (s/)he is selected by delegates to party convention (Sandri et al. 2013); and remains in office for at least three years. The federal council, earlier made up of only non-elected members, now comprises both ex-officio members and some representatives elected by the congress. Soon after the first leadership succession, an important innovation has been the weakening of the federal president, upon whom it has been conferred an almost only symbolic role. This office was deliberately assigned to Bossi – despite the scandal, still some sort of legitimizing figure – probably in order to keep him inside the high party echelon, but with no substantial power. According to Art. 14 of the latest statute (p. 9), ‘Umberto Bossi is the founder-father of the Northern League and is appointed Federal President for life, save renounce’.

However, it is safe to say that, at least until the removal of Bossi, the party structure was only a façade for a centralized leadership. To assess the extent it was, a viable way is to follow the suggestion of Ignazi et al. (2010: 198) and analyze the locus of power inside the party in the central office under two dimensions: power to control and power to appoint. From this point of view, the concentration of both types of power in the hands of Bossi was the highest. Bossi was used to change party policy directions and political strategies whenever he thought it had to be done (Tarchi 2003, ch. 6) as well as to lead the party in a very informal way; the main career rule among party ranks (and in institutions) was the final approval of the leader.

This kind of arrangement fostered the emergence of a narrow party elite, very close to him. For many years, the members of such a group corresponded to Bossi’s early collaborators and party companions, but something changed after an unexpected event in 2004. On 11 March, Bossi was subjected to a stroke. At that time, the LN was in government and Bossi was minister for institutional reforms and devolution; subsequently to the European election in June, he gained a seat in the European Parliament and left the cabinet position. With regard to his charismatic leadership, the illness did not at first seriously damaged it and, instead, strengthened the party unity around the leader: voters neglected recent poor electoral performances and party prominent shelved possible internal struggles and arranged a temporary more collective

leadership. Furthermore, the party held its ideological profile even more firmly (Passarelli and Tuorto 2012: 47-8).

Nonetheless, 2004 was a watershed for the structuration of the party dominant coalition. Factional divisions started growing and becoming stronger in the following years. The main division was between the favorites of Bossi on the one hand and the followers of Roberto Maroni – minister in all Berlusconi cabinets and Bossi’s comrade since the very beginning – on the other. In particular, the first faction referred to the so-called cerchio magico (magic circle), a very informal dominant group made up of people whose closeness to the leader had increased their decision-making influence as Bossi had been strained by the illness. Prominent members of this inner circle were the chief of the attached trade union Rosy Mauro (called the ‘caregiver’ because of her constant proximity to the leader since 2004); the European MP Francesco Speroni; Speroni’s son-in-law Marco Reguzzoni; Federico Bricolo; the president of Piedmont Roberto Cota; Bossi’s son Renzo; Bossi’s second wife Manuela Marrone; Francesco Belsito, party treasurer’s officer from 2010 to 2012; and the former regional councilor Monica Rizzi. Marrone created the circle to stop any attempt to substitute his husband as League’s leader and, at the same time, to pave the way to his son Renzo (Lombard regional councilor from 2010 to 2012). However, ‘[t]he excluding attitude of the magic circle had the unwanted and unforeseen effect of consolidating […] the front of the intermediate party prominent[s], who found Maroni as a plausible successor, respected and beloved by the membership base. But also […] unopposed […] by the Leader, at least manifestly’ (Passarelli and Tuorto 2012: 146, my translation).

Furthermore, bad electoral results between 2005 and 2010 called Bossi’s (and circle’s) management into question, undermining the charismatic foundations of the leadership and exacerbating the cleavage.

The apex of the conflict came in 2011-2012. In this period, Maroni was threw out from the party and soon readmitted as a consequence of strong protests of party members. If an open discussion about the succession to Bossi was still quite a taboo, nevertheless an open opposition was not anymore. And, contrary to the past, Bossi could not use expulsions as an effective weapon against one of his opponents, who, in this case, had meanwhile built a net of party officials close to him; in other words, organized an opposition (Passarelli and Tuorto 2012: 133-6).

The 2012 scandal unlocked the situation and opened the space for the change. It is worth noting that this event simultaneously affected the leader as well as members of the cerchio magico,
charged with a personal/family use of public party funds. The twofold nature of the scandal was fundamental for the leadership succession. Indeed, Maroni, who had set the stage, could seek the office without directly accusing Bossi; he argued that Bossi had been a victim of his close entourage. By doing this, Maroni could both safeguard the founder-father’s figure and show his inappropriateness as party leader. In April, Bossi stepped down (that is, was ‘forced’ to step down) and a triumvirate took the leadership until July, when Maroni, being the only candidate to the office, became the new leader. However, Bossi did not stop seeking to affect party strategies and Maroni spent the following months to strengthen his own position inside the party (Cento Bull 2013).

It goes without saying that these events opened a transitional phase, during which the party fought to find a new identity beyond its former leader and met some unsatisfying electoral results, being the election of Maroni himself as president of the Lombardy region the most important exception. Such a transition ended in December 2013, when the then secretary of the Lombard League Matteo Salvini – close to the new leader – defeated Bossi in the primary elections to succeed Maroni, who resigned after gaining his new institutional office. In this circumstance, all militants could vote for the new federal secretary; Salvini won with 82% of the votes and his success was later ratified by the party congress. This fact is critical for the assessment of the degree of institutionalization of the party; as already said, it has been argued that the change that really matters is the generational turnover, and, in fact, Salvini, unlike Maroni, does not come from the party founding cohort, but rather from its second generation.

With Salvini as party leader, the Northern League has gained once more a clearer programmatic identity and somehow gone back to the early ‘movement’ attitude. A good electoral performance at both the European and local elections of May 2014 has produced some sort of new stabilization and endowed the party with a renovated coalition potential and bargaining power towards the center-right parties (Passarelli and Tuorto 2014).

Forza Italia-People of Freedom-Forza Italia

Formally, the first Forza Italia, the People of Freedom and the current Forza Italia are three different parties. Nonetheless, they are strictly linked each other and can be treated as three

17 Judicial investigations are still ongoing.
18 Made up of Maroni himself, the party prominent Roberto Calderoli and the former president of the Venetian League Manuela Dal Lago.
19 ‘Salvini è il nuovo segretario della Lega. Larga vittoria su Bossi con l’82% dei voti.’ Corriere della Sera, 7 December 2013.
faces of the same Silvio Berlusconi’s creation. For the analysis, I will therefore deal with them as they were one party.

This party, unlike the Northern League, has clearly been a personal party, in other words an organization whose ‘only rationale […] has been’ to provide a vehicle for the leader to win an election and exercise power’ (Gunther and Diamond 2003: 187, italics in original. See also Ignazi 1996). The then tycoon Berlusconi founded it in December 1993 as a tool for his first electoral campaign that was to be held in March 1994. In September, he had commissioned to the Milanese survey institute Diakron – already involved in the marketing sector of Berlusconi’s holding company Fininvest – a survey to understand the ideological and electoral spaces left empty by the breakdown of the former party system. Forza Italia was born as a liberal-oriented and firmly anti-establishment party (later blurred into a more populist political discourse).

For the electoral campaign, Berlusconi relied on his personal financial resources as well as the very loyal personnel of the concessionaire for TV commercials Publitalia, one of the most important companies of the Fininvest Group. Its top management was involved to organize the campaign and find the candidates (some recruited among Berlusconi’s managers themselves); the strategy reproduced the model usually used to launch a new product on the market. From the structural point of view, the new party was extremely ‘light’ and lacked a clear hierarchy; thanks to such a new electoral machine and the successful idea to create an alliance with the rightist Alleanza Nazionale (AN, National Alliance) and the Northern League, Berlusconi won the 1994 general election and became prime minister (for only seven months) (Poli 2001, ch. 2). Forza Italia lasted until 2008, when the People of Freedom was set up (first as a simply federation of parties). Previously, Berlusconi had announced on 18 November 2007, during a crowded rally in Milan, his intention to create a broader center-rightist party together with all the parties which wanted to join; he took by surprise both party seniors and allies. One of him, AN’s leader Gianfranco Fini, eventually decided to enter the new party, after being very reluctant; other tiny parties did the same (McDonnell 2013: 218). The PdL won the 2008 election allied with the Northern League. In 2010, Fini left the party because of a deep conflict with Berlusconi concerning party internal strategies and founded a minor parliamentary group (Hine and Vampa 2011), that was unable to achieve any representation at the 2013 general election.

21 Quite confusingly for our analysis, the authors of the cited work call this type of party personalistic. I do not follow this path because I think it is conceptually straighter to use the term personalistic to refer to a type of leadership and personal to indicate some functionality of the organization. Besides being the leader, a personal party is also for the leader.
In 2013 the third drastic change occurred. In the summer, Berlusconi declared he wanted to turn the PdL into a new version of *Forza Italia* in order to revitalize the party, and the party actually came to life in winter, after the aforementioned withdrawal from the Letta cabinet and the split of the *Nuovo Centro Destra*.

*Forza Italia*-People of Freedom-*Forza Italia* has undergone several organizational changes, except for the original and basic principle: the dominance of Berlusconi over the party, whatever the structure has been. Between 1994 and the birth of the PdL, *Forza Italia* tried out different models. From being a pure electoral ‘American’ party where the ‘Firm’ actually was part of the organization (Raniolo 2000: 166), it sought to build a more structured local apparatus after the fall of the first Berlusconi cabinet; in 1997, a new statute was approved and the party was reorganized according to the model of the old mass-party Christian Democracy. However, in spite of the electoral victory of 2001, in 2003 the new party coordinator Sandro Bondi turned once more into a ‘light’ party based on the elected representatives. After poor electoral performances, Berlusconi took the decision to pay new attention to the local level, even if still quite detached from the center (Poli 2001; Raniolo 2006; Mariotti 2011). In all the cases, Berlusconi was the ultimate decision-making center and the reorganizations reflected his changing strategic decisions; his supremacy always tempered the power of the party in the public office, whose members were the largely predominant part of the party in central office (Ignazi *et al.* 2010). The party president (that is, Berlusconi) always had an overwhelming power to select, to appoint and to dismiss. That was true also with regard to the most important organs at the central level, such as the presidential committee, the national congress and the national council (Poli 2001).

When FI and AN merged to form the PdL, they faced the challenge to blend their former structures. From the formal point of view, the personalistic nature of the party was even more emphasized. The presidential tenure moved from three years to an indefinite duration. The president’s office had to be made up of the president himself and other members nominated or suggested by him. The statute formalized the power of the president to decide on all the candidatures and provided an organization that was ‘nothing other than a structure created to facilitate a direct relationship between the President and the people, his people’ (Mariotti 2011: 46). At local level, the party was quite ‘aery’, with no provisions about membership and local offices (Ignazi 2012: 62-3). Overall, the most prominent organizational change was the creation of the office of the national political secretary in 2011, to whom the coordinating committee (made up of two members from the former FI and one from AN) was subordinated. According

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22 AN was a party with a top-down more traditional organization (see Ignazi *et al.* 2010).
to the statute approved in the same year, his (or her) term was three years and (s/)he was nominated by the president. The first and only secretary was – as already said – Angelino Alfano; he was proposed by Berlusconi at the July 2011 congress, which ‘approved’ the choice by acclamation (McDonnell 2013: 225). As for the selectorate for the leadership, the PdL followed in late FI’s footsteps and adopted a procedure based on delegates to a party convention\(^\text{23}\) (Sandri \textit{et al.}, 2013). It goes without saying that this had no real impact on the powerful leadership of Berlusconi.

A deeply vertical organization characterizes the current \textit{Forza Italia} as well. The new party (that is to say, once more, Berlusconi) has decided to go back to the party’s statute approved in 1997 with the subsequent changes.\(^\text{24}\)

At least in the first \textit{Forza Italia}, Silvio Berlusconi founded his powerful leadership on charisma, and this unquestionably further fostered its centralization. As Poli (2001: 284, my translation) points out, in the party there were ‘very strong allegiances, based on the perception of the charismatic and revolutionary nature of Berlusconi’s leadership, a perception that was widely widespread in particular among his closest collaborators’. Therefore, the leader could be a ‘monarch’, surrounded by trustworthy individuals with important positions in the party machine and in institutions. His leadership was not certainly brought into question.

Something changed when AN joined FI in order to create the PdL. Here Berlusconi was still the dominant leader beyond doubt, but the charismatic foundations of his power were not as strong as they had been in \textit{Forza Italia}. Such a change mostly occurred because of the entry of the former members of AN inside the party, which, in turn, gave life to internal factions, an outcome firmly hindered by early FI’s leading members. The former AN’s leader and then speaker of the Lower House Fini started contrasting Berlusconi’s behaviors and moving towards a possible succession to his leadership. The conflict radicalized up to the open verbal struggle during the party executive meeting in April 2010. After that event, Fini left (he was isolated) the party and a minority of PdL’s members followed him. Berlusconi gained an even higher control over the party without the ‘dissidents’; nonetheless, his leadership had been put into question from inside for the first time, and therefore the perception of his image changed (Mariotti 2011). It is worth noting that who decided to oppose Berlusconi had to leave the party. The same happened in 2013 with the split led by Alfano – who, anyhow, did not openly questioned the leadership, but rather his choices – after that the vote of no-confidence of 2 October had reaffirmed Berlusconi’s party dominance (see above, fn. 6).

\(^\text{23}\) Before 1997, the selectorate was an informal party elite.

\(^\text{24}\) The statute can be found on http://forzaitalia.it/speciali/statutoforzaitalia04.pdf.
The constellation of powers inside the latest version of *Forza Italia* seems to show some new arrangements, compared to the past. In fact, some sort of inner circle similar to the ‘magic circle’ of the Northern League has arisen; it would comprise Berlusconi’s personal advisor and European MP Giovanni Toti (a former TV newscasts director on Berlusconi’s channels); Berlusconi’s girlfriend Francesca Pascale; and the treasurer’s officer of FI Maria Rosaria Rossi. Following the unsatisfying electoral performance at the 2014 elections (Ignazi 2014), strong internal criticisms towards the party management came from outside that circle.25

*Italy of Values*

The Italy of Values was founded in March 1998. In the early 1990s, its leader Antonio di Pietro had been a famous examining magistrate involved in the *Tangentopoli* team (see Pasquino 2002: 61-8) and, after leaving the post, non-partisan minister for public works in the Prodi I cabinet for only six months in 1996. The following year, he had also been elected in a by-election under the center-left Olive Tree list, but, once in parliament, he acted as an independent MP.

Since the very beginning, the personal nature of the new party, based on the popularity of Di Pietro, has been clear. It is no coincidence that the organization was firstly known as *Italia dei Valori-Lista di Pietro* (Italy of Values-Di Pietro List). As underlined by Tarchi (2003: 188, my translation), ‘the Di Pietro List […] introduced] itself not as a party or a movement, but as “a leader and a team”, that is, a group of people supporting “an incorruptible leader”’.26

Still in 2001, the year of the first general election, the Italy of Values mostly based itself on the figure of the leader; it lacked territorial entrenchment and a stable internal political class. According to its first structuration, the party in central office was mainly organized into two bodies, the party president (the leader) and the party executive, made up of *ex-officio* members and others selected by the president. The leader was exclusively given several prerogatives concerning the management of the party, and the office was – up to a later change of the statute – assigned to Di Pietro until his resignation. Furthermore, he could nominate a small presidential office for being sustained in his party activity. A third organ, the congress, ‘ratified’ the intertwined relationship between party in central office and party in public office (as a matter of fact, also the executive did so); anyhow, the first congress was held only in 2010. The

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26 The quotations come from the manifesto of the list for the 2000 election *Si riparte dai cittadini. Dieci proposte per far funzionare il paese.*
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...party in central office was connected to the slight and weak party on the ground through the *trait d’union* of the regional level (Pisicchio 2008).

Over the years, the Italy of Values adopted diverse statutes. As for the office of the national president, a maximum duration was established from 2009 to 2013. Initially, it was three years with the possibility to be reelected and soon became four years. In 2013, the presidency was cancelled and – as an attempt of institutionalization – the office of national secretary was set up in place of it and confirmed in 2014. Since its introduction, Di Pietro has been honorary president. Similarly to the early *Forza Italia*, the Italy of Values has provided that the leader should be selected by a party council, that is, by a small selectorate (Sandri *et al.* 2013).

Whatever the case is, Di Pietro has never lost his central and powerful role inside the party, even after the latest changes. The Italy of Values has been a personal party like *Forza Italia* and the leader has been the party ‘dictator’ under many respects, the selection of candidates being one of the fields. His leadership has never met serious challenges along its way. According to the model of the personalistic parties, sharp criticisms have been more likely to produce a split and a renewed support towards the ‘boss’ inside the party. This is exactly what happened in the aftermath of the aforementioned scandal against Di Pietro of October 2012. The leader of the parliamentary party group in the Lower House Massimo Donadi questioned the party political lines and the too personal use of the party. Soon, he left together with some other dissidents.

At the end of that year, Di Pietro, with a view to the 2013 general election, made the Italy of Values join the broader list *Rivoluzione civile* (Civil Revolution), led by the public prosecutor Antonio Ingroia and comprising some left-wing parties. Subsequently to a disastrous electoral result, Di Pietro resigned from the party presidential office, but, nonetheless, the party opted for his line against the dissolution of the IdV. It is worth noting that, once again, the most prominent party member (Leoluca Orlando) who had been against Di Pietro chose the ‘exit’

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28 At a glance, the dynamics underlined by the scandal could seem similar to those behind the League’s magic circle. As a matter of fact, however, they cannot be equated. In the case of the IdV, they concern a more personal use of the funds in the strict sense and less the functioning of the party. For an overview, see the stenographic report of the TV episode on http://www.report.rai.it/dl/Report/puntata/ContentItem-35259be1-d161-443e-b23e-0b92e07f0dce.html.


30 Leaving aside the electoral strategy proper, the Italy of Values probably suffered, more than others, the challenge from the new party *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S, Movement 5 Stars), with which it had shared the rhetoric of the ‘honest’ and anti-corruption party (in fact, the leader of the M5S proposed Di Pietro as head of State in November 2012). As soon as Di Pietro lost much of his appeal, many voters dropped out. With some caveats, the data seem to confirm this. See, for example, Tronconi (2013).

31 Information can be found on the webpage of the party http://www.italiadeivalori.it/esecutivo-nazionale-lidv-non-si-scioglie-congresso-a-giugno/, with the title ‘Esecutivo nazionale: l’IdV non si scioglie. Congresso a giugno’. 
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from the party. In June 2013, the congress elected a new party secretary, Ignazio Messina. However, bad electoral performances have not stopped and Di Pietro has somehow continued setting some party strategies and receiving the attention of the media. The Italy of Values’ visibility still largely depends on his remaining popularity.

6. What Matters for Party Institutionalization?

The three analyzed cases are similar with regard to the personalistic relationship between the party leader and the party organization. Such a relationship – as we have seen – can be based on different power foundations; some of them can produce stronger devotion/loyalty bonds. But, when it comes to define the personalistic nature of the leadership, what matters is not its foundation, but rather its role and its ‘way to rule’. The leader is essential, the party and its functioning deeply depend on him or her, the party is the leader. And the stronger the symbiosis, the more robust the vicious cycle fostered by the leader’s interest in reducing the internal party autonomy.

The three parties have been instead different with regard to the formal organization of the three party faces (on the ground, in public office, in central office), more complex in the Northern League, less in the Italy of Values, and more variable in Berlusconi’s parties. However, as long as the party is a personalistic party, these differences are not as important as they are in institutionalized parties for the definition of the party type. When a party is ‘autonomous’ from the leader, the structure lays the leader’s room for manoeuvre as well as the distribution of the resources down (cf. Pizzimenti and Ignazi 2011). When instead a party is not institutionalized, the party bodies do not set the constraints and the opportunities the leader has, but the leader sets the borders of their influence. In other words, the power of the leader is barely channeled into them. This implies the unpredictability of the internal processes; in a personalistic party, the leader shapes the functioning of the party, not vice versa. If the leader falls, the party is likely to fall as well, irrespective of its formal structure.

Despite their similarity, the three parties differently reacted to similar environmental events against their own leader: one of them took the decision to corner him and try to keep the party alive beyond his figure (Northern League); in another case, the party could not do so and decided to stay at his side, deeming the choice as the most convenient in spite of an unavoidable

loss of support (People of Freedom-Forza Italia); the third party could not initially detach itself from the weakened leader and electorally went under with him (Italy of Values).

Our analysis has provided an explanation of this divergence of outcomes. I have chosen to split the concept of party institutionalization into two dimensions and to translate them into two indicators. I have argued that a minimal definition of party institutionalization is that according to which a party critically goes farther along the path to institutionalization when the founder-father is replaced as leader – in particular when the new incumbent does not come from the first generation of party members – and is able to preserve, after the change, at least a blackmail potential guaranteed by its share of votes in the first significant election.

The former criterion logically precedes the latter; the fulfillment of the second can be assessed only when the change has occurred. This means that the change of leadership is the first and unavoidable step towards the institutionalization. It is not a sufficient condition, but it is strictly necessary. Moreover, it is also the hardest to attain as far as personalistic parties are concerned. Once achieving that, the new leader has to face a new challenge, that is, to avoid a dramatic decline of a party used to rest on a symbiotic relationship with its former leader.

Our findings should therefore be related to these two aspects. With regard to the change of leadership, the first result is that, overall, the theory does not prove wrong. All else being equal, a personalistic party should hardly pass through this step because of its inherent nature, and we have seen that our three cases confirm that. What we have learned is that this is true, unless the party meets some critical junctures that modify the relational system inside the party.

As long as the three parties were characterized by a pattern with an ‘overlord’ in the centre and a cohesive dominant coalition around him, no real alternatives were born. What has distinguished the Northern League from the other two parties has been the change in this arrangement in the aftermath of a critical juncture, namely, the illness of the leader. The way in which the leader and some of his closest collaborators responded to this event broke the dominant coalition into an inner and an outer group; some individuals became more excluded than in the past in their access to the leader (for career opportunities, spoils, decision-making resources, etc.). Who was excluded by the inner circle started calling the management of the party (not the leadership per se) into question. One of the most prominent party members, Maroni, built an own group of followers both inside and outside (among voters) the party in order to pave its road for the future.
However, this does not definitely mean that such a restructuration of power relations opened the door for succeeding the leader on its own. The party remained personalistic and, by definition, dependent on his leader. Given the previous conditions, the change occurred because of the scandal. As for it, it is worth noting that it helped Maroni in his race to the leadership because it involved the leader and the ‘magic circle’. If it had affected only Bossi, Maroni would not have had the same opportunities to corner him and prepare his succession. Indeed, Maroni could avoid to bash the main symbol of the party and, at the same time, indirectly hit him via the circle. Both the future leader and his allies ‘protected’ the image of the founder-father by deeming him as unaware and victim of hidden actions. However, the criticism toward the inner circle ultimately was a strategic move to remove Bossi, on whom the party was dependent. Only a particular coincidence of events and opportunities gave the chance to separate the destiny of the party from his first leader’s without making the party fall together with him. In the other two cases, this was not possible because there were no similar preconditions.

Therefore, the first finding is that the Northern League departed from the road followed by the other two parties not because of a more pronounced nature of grassroots organization or some organizational complexity (cf. McDonnell 2013). The social entrenchment and the structural factors are not enough to explain the divergence of outcomes. The League has changed because of a very specific chain of events (i.e., critical junctures) that eventually created a very brief window of opportunity exploited by a strategic actor, who had previously prepared himself for this. Without this mix, the Northern League on its own would have been unable to cope with the first big step towards institutionalization because inherently unsuitable for that.

However, the same argumentation does not apply with respect to the second stage of the process, that is, the preservation of a substantial role in the political system. In this case, the party structuration would seem a good explicative variable. As soon as the leadership succession occurred, Maroni managed the transitional phase and Salvini led the party to a good electoral result in the May 2014 election probably because they could rest on the previous party organization. The party was no more personalistic and the new leaderships were more institutional. The presence of a quite articulated organization – even at local level – helped the incomings by granting them a structure over which they could base their ‘impersonal’ power. The lesson would be that the party organizational form can give the new leader a basis for completing the process and reaching a successful leadership change. It would matter only in a later phase, but parties should prepare it beforehand.
To summarize: the Northern League was not structurally more ‘prone’ to the leadership succession before the scandals compared to Forza Italia-People of Freedom-Forza Italia and the Italy of Values. The Northern League could change twice the leadership and be led by a member coming from the second generation without collapsing because of an exogenous event; a subsequent change in the shape of the dominant coalition producing a dynamic of exclusion/inclusion; an excluded party prominent able to create an own set of followers; a scandal involving both the leader and the party inner circle. Secondly, but only secondly, it could remain a relevant political actor in the party system because it had built some sort of complex organization prior to the ‘fall’ of his founder-father.

7. Conclusion

This paper has sought to tackle the study of the Italian political system by means of an analysis of three personalistic parties which have characterized the last twenty years, on the assumption that the research on political parties – given their central role in the functioning of the democratic delegation process (e.g., Müller 2000) – matters when it comes to understand the system as a whole.

Nevertheless, the paper has sought also to give a contribution to the more general literature on party organization and party institutionalization. From this point of view, our analysis has overall confirmed the theory in spite of the theoretical puzzle. It has shown that such a puzzle was not due to any particular structural layout of the parties at issue, but rather it was explicable by a peculiar mix of events and reactions to these events that concerned the deviant case.

This finding has implications for the examinations of the Italian politics and its future. As I have mentioned in the introduction, it seems reasonable to argue that a stable party system needs a minimum of stability of its constitutive units. The Italian party system in the last twenty years can be only hardly pictured as stable, and a still ongoing fluidity seems to be correlated to the personalistic and sometimes personal nature of some parties, which are likely to follow the ups and downs of their respective leaders. In our analysis, we have seen that the Northern League has been able to go beyond a critical passage towards its internal and electoral stabilization. On the other hand, the Italy of Values seems definitely be out of game. Forza Italia continues being a major actor, even if suffering an electoral decline, and new changes could stem from the recent power restructuration inside the party. However, the near future does not seem to give it

33 I do not enter the complicated issue of the meaning of ‘stable’. I use the word just as a denotative term for the purpose of the argumentation.
opportunities for starting a process similar to the League’s; moreover, Berlusconi’s party lacks an analogous territorial ramification and entrenchment.

It is worth noting that currently Forza Italia is the main center of one of the three poles of the political competition (cf. Pasquino 2014); the other two being the Democratic Party on the left and the Movement 5 Stars, which is characterized by a tight relationship between leader and party (Corbetta and Gualmini 2013) as well. It is safe to say that having two out of three pillars of the party system so strongly dependent on leaders could be anything but a fostering element vis-à-vis a systemic stabilization.

I have already said that I have not been able to take in consideration the longevity of the parties after the successful leadership change as a dimension of the dependent variable for this study’s purposes. But further works could do that and improve our theoretical and empirical knowledge. Moreover, one could argue that a clear-cut programmatic identity rooted in the society along political cleavages helps last over the years more than vague and/or fragmented policy proposals useful only in the short-run. Testing this and observing the future evolutions of the Italian party system are potential subjects for prospective fruitful researches.
References


