

Change in the Italian Party System

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I. Introduction ¹

The Italian party system appears to have undergone a rather dramatic transformation in recent years. Its extent is revealed by the fact that none of the 13 major competitors in the 1994 Chamber of Deputies' proportional election (accounting for almost 95% of the votes and all but a handful of seats) were present with the same names and symbols as in the 1987 election. Moreover, all but four of them, the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) and Communist Refoundation (RC) as well as the Catholic inspired La Rete and the Radical Party's (PR) new electoral incarnation, Lista Pannella, experienced important formal or even substantial changes since the 1992 election. Although only one of the 13 lists, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, appears to be completely new, the sheer number of these changes, albeit formal and superficial in some cases, reveals not only the magnitude of the party system's transformation, but also the radical shift in public attitudes toward the old, party-based, regime. Because party is now a word used only with contempt by politicians and commentators, it is a label which electoral competitors carefully try to avoid. In the 1994 election only three of the most important competitors (PDS, PSI, PPI) still called themselves "parties" ².

By 1994 even Italy's surviving historical parties had adopted new organizational models. The PDS remained closest to its earlier tradition, and the preliminary party rules accepted in 1991 provided a formal structure which resembled the mass party model, albeit in a context of emerging factionalism and stratarchy. All of the other traditional parties, by contrast, were caught up in self-reform processes which threatened to produce even more radical results ³. Moreover, there was also a widespread belief that representation should be developed through non-party organizations, with the idea of partyness being considered a thing of the past, and, as we have seen, with "party" itself becoming almost a dirty word. This article attempts to assess the extent and the significance of the change and to provide some tentative explanations for at least some of its aspects. These ob-

1 This paper is based on research on party organizations and anti-party sentiment conducted within the framework of international projects. More extensive analyses can be found in Bardi and Morlino (1994) and Bardi (1996).

2 The PSI has since dissolved and refounded itself dropping the word *partito* and calling itself *Socialisti Italiani* (SI). A fourth contender, RC, officially calls itself *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista*, but the word "Partito" is almost always omitted.

3 The 1995 split between the *Partito Popolare* and the *Cristiani Democratici Uniti* (CDU) may have put an end to post-1994 transformations, but the restlessness of Italy's political parties would be rekindled in case of a new electoral law and probably at election time even if elections should be held with the present system.

jectives will be pursued addressing three set of questions. For one, the magnitude of the change, involving parties, organizational models and even the party-based notion of representative democracy, is in itself a question that requires an explanation that goes beyond the consideration of the importance of the tangenti-topoli scandals and mani pulite investigations. These were perhaps necessary catalysts to start the process that led to the downfall of once very powerful, even if corrupt, individuals. But they cannot by themselves explain, among other things, why the process was not limited to the replacement of those individuals and spread to the party system and even to the party-based model of democracy. Secondly, it is important to determine the actual extent of party system change. If the effects produced by the change on the actors in the Italian party system, the parties themselves, were rather evident and dramatic, those affecting the party system's structural elements were more difficult to assess. In other words, the units interacting in the system definitely underwent profound changes, but the system's structure (number of parties, competitiveness) was not necessarily changed by the transformation or replacement of some or even all of its units. Finally, party system change, be it superficial or structural, requires in itself an explanation. Changes in the structure of electoral competition (the electoral law, the increasing importance of the media), anti-party sentiment, the erosion of sub-cultures, and even the emergence of new cleavages or the rekindling of dormant ones have all been blamed or praised, depending on viewpoints, for being factors in the party system's transformation. Although they all deserve equal consideration, special attention will be devoted in this paper to a discussion of anti-party sentiment. In fact, a study of anti-party sentiment, being directed at elites as well as masses can help us identify and analyze pressures for change coming from within the parties as well as those coming from without.

II. The organizational adaptation of Italian parties

The collapse of Italy's historic parties was rather sudden, but a certain malaise had been affecting them at least since the early 1960s (Bardi and Morlino, 1994). Throughout this period, social changes posed demands which required parties to attempt organizational reforms. However, the most important transformations did not really bear fruit until the early 1990s. Indeed most Italian parties underwent a gradual process of organizational adaptation with the declared intent to open up to the needs and requests coming from an evolving society. This process was in most cases very superficial and did not represent a proper response. In fact, at the same time, parties developed to its fullest extent the partitocrazia system with the clear effect of *making society and the state adapt* to their needs. During the early years of the Italian Republic political parties had established very important links with organized interest groups and created the conditions for their occupation of the state. This was to made possible by the intrinsic weakness of Italian civil society (Pasquino, 1985, p. 1 and passim). Most importantly, Italian civil society lacked a hegemonic class, a role never acquired by the Italian bourgeoisie. Party predominance over society became even stronger after 1960. The historic parties continued to maintain very well developed roots in at least some parts of the country. In the case of the MSI, however, the extension of such roots was rather limited. If anything, the nature of this relationship changed, especially after the end of the 1960s. A "growth" of civil society either caused or simply coincided with a decline of "ideology" and a parallel growth of "opinion" within the Italian electorate (Farneti, 1983, p. 156). Moreover, the frequent resort to referendums after 1974 tended to make the Italian electorate in-

creasingly more issue oriented and, consequently, less ideological⁴. The modest efforts made by political parties to respond to these changes proved to be inadequate. It would then appear that the parallel process of organizational adaptation and societal encroachment by political parties had the dual effect of delaying the crisis of party in Italy while at the same time deepening the separation between the parties themselves and important sectors of civil society, those that did not benefit directly from the *partitocrazia* system.

Indeed the amount of resources drained by the *partitocrazia* system had reached enormous proportions. The reality of Italian party organizations can be grasped only by exploring the complex, and often illegal, system of relationships between political parties and organized or even individual interests. Italian party organizations certainly were enormously expensive machines, even if scarce availability and unreliability of financial data makes accurate assessments very difficult. Official party finance data are practically impossible to obtain prior to 1974, when party budgets first became public and standardized according to the law on the public funding of political parties. The new law was also intended to discourage illegal contributions, but failed to curb political corruption as well as the involvement of public companies in illegal party financing. The cost of party politics in Italy increased enormously since the mid-1970s as a result of the "media revolution", of the "office revolution", which required huge investments, and of increasing paid staff salary expenditures. Parties could therefore hardly afford to give up funding from public companies, despite its becoming illegal; hence the explosion of the *tangenti* system since the 1970s. The total amount illegally obtained by Italian political parties was estimated at some 3,400 billion lire a year (*La Repubblica*, 20 February 1993, p. 7), at least ten times the total official income of all Italian political parties. The *tangentopoli* investigations should have considerably reduced these amounts, determining serious financial problems for all traditional parties.

Italian parties' links with civil society were also very problematic. During the first two decades of the Italian Republic the most important parties had a firm grip on the trade unions which were seen as voters' and activists' reservoirs to be used at election time. The situation changed after the momentous late 1960s in response to growing popular demands for more assertive behavior. As a result, the unions sought and obtained more autonomy and even a degree of independence from the political parties. This could be seen in the near-unification of the three major confederations (CGIL, CISL, UIL) and in the acquisition of an autonomous role in their relationships with the government and with the State at large. Party hegemony over the unified workers' movement was definitively broken during the 1980s. The prime minister Craxi's decision to modify the cost of living adjustment mechanism known as the *scala mobile*, created a split in the union movement, and in the CGIL itself, between the Catholic and socialist components, on the one hand, and the communist component, on the other⁵. The emergence in the late 1980s of powerful autonomous unions and COBAS (*comitati di*

⁴ It could be surmised that the referendums, for the first time in Italian history, forced electors to make decisions on the basis of desired policy outcomes rather than ideological prejudice. On these grounds one could perhaps explain why sizeable minorities of Catholic voters supported divorce and abortion in extremely divisive referendums. Moreover, such issues cut across the traditional left/right dimension, which can be arguably construed as weakening ideological positions.

⁵ The communist and socialist components of the CGIL have since been disbanded.

base, or grassroots committees), which mainly organized teachers, civil servants and railroad workers, eventually favored a return to more unified action by the traditional confederations, but by then they had lost most of their political importance.

The de-ideologization and secularization of the 1960s also strongly affected the relations between the parties and their collateral organizations. As the traditional organizations declined through the erosion of the subcultures, the parties tried to develop new structures or strategies in order to open themselves up to new social movements and actors in civil society as a whole. Moreover, they made every effort to obtain control of mass-communication media and expand their reach beyond the fading subcultural confines. Political parties always had a very important role in news publishing in Italy. During the 1950s, in addition to their official newspapers, the larger parties had also acquired control of some important "independent" titles, whose line was then controlled by the party-sponsored appointment of editors and journalists. The DC, as the cornerstone of every governmental coalition, also had a strong predominance in the control of radio and television until a 1976 Constitutional Court ruling put an end to state monopoly of radio and television broadcasts. The ruling permitted private broadcasts at the local level. But by the mid-1980s, many of the newly created local stations were concentrated into three national networks owned by Silvio Berlusconi. Berlusconi was able to go beyond the limits posed by the Constitutional Court with the decisive support received from the PSI and Bettino Craxi, who was in turn able to redress the television media balance which at the time was still heavily pro-DC (Marletti, 1987). The DC controlled the presidency of RAI (the state-owned broadcasting network) and RAI 1, the most popular channel, while the PSI controlled RAI 2. A possible PCI opposition to this partition was prevented by giving that party control of RAI 3, the most recently created and least popular state channel. The impression made on the public by this strategy was extremely negative because of the visibility of the sector affected by the partition and was very effectively exploited by the opponents of the *partitocrazia*, such as Marco Pannella.

This brief description of the organizational evolution of Italian political parties and of their changing relationship with civil society illustrates how changes in the party system and in the party organizations themselves, which were triggered off by the *mani pulite* investigations in 1992-93, can only partially be explained as the simple consequence of these investigations. The investigations rather served as a catalyst for changes which the party leaderships had been trying, successfully up to then, to postpone indefinitely, even if pressures for extensive reform had been building up for almost thirty years. To be sure, the discovery of *tangentopoli* and the consequent public outcry against the political parties and "their system" may well explain the *timing* of the transformation, but they shed only limited light on the reasons why it occurred. Italian party organizations' inadequacies could already be seen in the important changes that took place *prior* to 1992. These include: the 1991 reform and split of the PCI (Ignazi, 1992) and the emergence of new actors, such as the PR, the Verdi, and La Rete, all of which organized according to non-traditional models, not to mention the Lega Nord, with its overtly anti-system goals. Each of these new actors (and later again, Forza Italia) seemed better able than many of their traditional counterparts to respond to the emerging needs of certain sectors of civil society. While the party elites rhetorically emphasized the need to adjust their organizations to these new circumstances with repeated calls for the "opening up" of parties to civil society, reforms responded only superficially to social demands, and were in fact catering only to the needs of the party elites themselves at various levels. After 1992, the

manipulative investigations had some direct effects on the political parties and their organizations (for one, the complete disruption of the illegal system of party financing made the old party models obsolete), but, most of all, started a process of much more radical changes that were simply long overdue. Political parties' responses to ostensibly "adapt" to societal demands were certainly important in delaying such changes but could not hold off indefinitely the transformation.

III. The party system after the 1994 elections

Although the full extent of the change only became manifest as a result of the vote, the 1994 elections did nothing but formalize changes that had been unfolding since the beginning of the decade. In fact, the period was also marked by important societal and political system changes: in the electoral laws and in the relations between politics and civil society, besides those in the party system and in individual parties⁶. The *Leghe* (Leagues), now collectively known with the name of their federation, *Lega Nord* (LN), became a force to be reckoned with already in the regional elections in May 1990; in February 1991 the Communist party (PCI) dissolved itself and formed the Democratic Party of the Left (*Partito democratico della Sinistra*, PDS); in June 1991, for the first time, the result of a referendum ran counter to the positions of the traditional parties; the general elections in April 1992 witnessed the establishment of a new dimension in the national political space represented by the opposition of a variety of new parties (e.g., the *Leghe*, *Verdi*, *La Rete* and *Lista Pannella*) mobilizing against the traditional formations⁷; in 1993, the complex relationship developed over the years between political parties, civil society, and the economy virtually came to an end as a result of decision by the government to privatize a large share of the Italian public sector⁸; and finally, the March 1994 general elections that resulted in a substantial victory for a right-wing electoral alliance led by Silvio Berlusconi's newly-formed *Forza Italia*, and including both the *Lega Nord* and the former *Movimento Sociale* (MSI), now renamed *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN), appeared to have made the change irreversible.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that the Italian academic debate after the 1994 election has been focussed, among other things, on the assessment of the magnitude and the quality of party system change (Bartolini and D'Alimonte, 1995; Melchionda, 1995; Bardi 1996; Morlino, 1996; Pappalardo, 1996). In general such efforts have analyzed changes in the party system's structural elements such as number of relevant parties, ideological distance and concentration, competitiveness and direction of competition, size and distribution of opposition parties, referring more or less explicitly to Giovanni Sartori's (1976) well known criteria. Here we shall limit our attention to Sartori's model's more clearly structural ele-

6 In this article I will only refer very briefly to the new electoral law and to the debate on electoral reform, topics of another contribution in this issue. Considerations on societal changes will be included in the second part of this article, which will attempt to formulate some hypotheses about the change.

7 It could be argued that, even before the reform of the electoral law, the 1992 elections also marked the beginning of important changes in the Italian party system (Bardi, 1996).

8 It must be admitted, however, that the implementation of this decision, the symbolic value of which remains very high, has encountered many more difficulties than originally expected.

ments, number of parties and ideological distance, and only cursorily to other, non-structural, characteristics.

TABLE 1
ITALY 1987-1994
Parties in the Italian party system: indicators

	TV	BV	MP	PwS	EP	PP
1987	8.4	1.3	9	14	4.1	12- 9
1992	14.2	7.5	10	16	5.7	13-10
1994	36.2	8.9	10	20	5.7	8-10

Sources:

TV = total volatility; BV = Block volatility; EP= Number of effective parties; MP = Number of major parties: my own calculations based on official electoral results.

PP = Number of parliamentary parties; PwS = Number of parties that obtained seats: Bartolini & D'Alimonte (1995).

Notes:

In 1994 the number of effective parties' index in the Chamber of Deputies is calculated on the basis of seat distribution among parliamentary parties; the index is 3.6 when calculated counting electoral cartels as single parties.

The TV, BV, and MP indices were calculated according to criteria used by Bartolini & Mair (1990); the EP index is from Laakso & Taagepera (1979).

PP: the first figure in each cell relates to the Chamber of Deputies and the second one to the Senate.

Table 1 lists scores on a number of indicators of the extent of changes in the party system concerning voter mobility and the number of parties between the 1987 election, whose scores well summarize the continuity experienced by the Italian party system since 1958, and the 1994 election⁹. The immediate impression one gets from at least some of the indices is that the 1992 and 1994 elections have almost completely transformed the Italian party system. In fact, if the 1993 electoral law reform is certainly responsible for some of the dramatic effects reflected in most 1994 scores, some of the factors at the root of the Italian party system's transformation must have already been at work at least two years before as demonstrated by values registered in 1992. Between the two elections there is indeed more continuity than initially meets the eye. To be sure, the 1994 TV score, perhaps the highest ever observed in non-exceptional democratic elections (Bartolini & Mair, 1990, p. 69), gives a dramatic impression of the change. But volatility is a measure which is very much affected by changes that may occur in the composition of the field of parties contesting the election, some of which, such as the emergence of Forza Italia and the splits that affected the DC, were very important in 1994. This consideration points to the relevance of the 1992 TV score, which was not influenced by equally important changes on the offer side and remains, after the 1994 one, the highest ever in the Italian Republic's

⁹ Analyses of such continuity and pre-1987 values for most Table 1 indices can be found in Bardi (1996) and Morlino (1996).

electoral history. The departure from the past and the relative continuity between 1992 and 1994 are confirmed by the similarity in the two elections' BV scores which are obviously more impervious to effects determined by variations in party labels.

It would then appear that a higher degree of voter mobility was already at work in 1992. The full extent of the phenomenon, partially reflected in TV scores ¹⁰, was certainly magnified in 1994 by changes on the offer side caused by the effects of the manipulative investigations, but also by anticipations of the possible effects of the new electoral law. The Chamber of deputies' new electoral law and the referendum that modified the Senate's introduced the plurality system for 75% of the seats, which were to be elected in single-member districts. This feature of the new electoral law(s) was expected by many to produce structural effects on the party system, such as a visible reduction in the number of parties. Critics of this view on the other hand asserted that the remaining 25% of the seats to be assigned through proportional representation, were a sufficiently large portion to help perpetuate the Italian party system's chronic fragmentation. One election is certainly not enough to produce the full effects of electoral reform, but at least some were expected. The new electoral law, indeed forced a multitude of parties to join electoral cartels. But post-election political dynamics, such as the formation of parliamentary parties, showed that some parties and groups interpreted electoral alliances as means to obtain more seats in the election, and not as first steps towards the formation of more permanent common party structures. As we just said, this was indeed expected and even anticipated by critics of the new law (for one Giovanni Sartori who did so in numerous newspaper commentaries) even before the 1994 elections. But this is not to be ascribed exclusively to inadequacies of the new electoral law. In fact, only electoral competition rules have been changed with respect to the past, whereas parliamentary organization and procedures, government formation tactics and rules, coalition strategies and dynamics have virtually remained the same ¹¹. In other words, even if new electoral competition rules can perhaps foster tendencies towards a reduction in the number of relevant parties in what could be called the "electoral" party system, such pressures lose much of their importance after the election, and other sets of rules condition inter-party relations in what could be defined the "parliamentary" party system. Obviously this is an analytical more than a conceptual or even substantial distinction. The two labels actually represent two facets of party systems which in the present Italian one appear to be particularly distinct: the "electoral" one responds to the requirements of plurality competition and is structured accordingly around two major coalitions, now generally referred to as *Polo* (center-right) and *Ulivo* (center-left); the "parliamentary" one is on the other hand regulated by the other, mostly consensual (Lijphart, 1984), features of the Italian political system and is still characterized by very high frag-

10 As is well known volatility is not a very accurate measure of voter mobility and does not reflect the actual number of voters who switch preferences between elections. Changes in volatility indices are however assumed to reflect changes in voter stability/mobility trends.

11 The only modification are the result of the disappearance/emergence of actors in the system and not of reforms of the formal rules of the game(s).

mentation¹². The two "systems" coexist, with the electoral one surviving even between elections, but with very limited impact on inter-election dynamics¹³.

It should come as no surprise that electoral reform has produced in Italy a greater divergence between the "electoral" and the "parliamentary" party systems that is commonly observed, and that changes in the former are much more evident than in the latter. All the other table 1 indices, which are calculated on the basis of individual parties and lists rather than on electoral cartels, in fact show no or very little change between 1992 and 1994. MP and EP scores are exactly the same, as are the PP ones for the Senate. The 1994 Chamber of Deputies' PP score, 8, is on the other hand much lower than the 1992 one, 13. But this appears to be much more a consequence of a more rigid application of rules for the formation of parliamentary groups (Bartolini & D'Alimonte, 1995, p. 432) than to an actual reduction in the number of parties that obtained seats, which actually increased from 16 to 20¹⁴. Overall the situation is perhaps best summarized by taking a closer look at EP index scores: 1987's 4.1 is slightly above the average (3.7) for all the elections contested up to that point whereas for 1992 and 1994 we can observe much higher, identical, scores (5.7). On the basis of these indicators alone, it would appear that the greater fragmentation, produced perhaps by increased voter mobility between 1987 and 1992 was not offset by the new electoral law and in general by developments that occurred between the last two elections. Obviously indices are biased by the methods that are used to calculate them. But if we accept formal parliamentary affiliation as a criterion for determining the number of parties in a party system, we must come to the conclusion that, at least from a numerical viewpoint, the structure of the Italian party system changed somewhat between 1987 and 1992, but did not change at all between 1992 and 1994.

One should not however discount completely the importance of changes in the electoral party system, as its shape is crucial for one very important overall party systemic dimension: competition (Sartori, 1976, *passim*). The EP index, if calculated on the basis of electoral cartels is 3.6, a score slightly below the general Italian average and much lower than the 1992 one. Sartori (1976, p. 315, *passim*) considers mathematical indicators useful and perhaps even important, but certainly prefers what he calls "nominal routes" for counting relevant parties. The use of nominal criteria for the counting of parties in the electoral party system requires an analysis of electoral competition under the new electoral laws. The new laws effectively divide the competition into two different arenas, respecti-

12 The two labels have the sole purpose to highlight the nature of the units making up the two systems' units (*electoral* cartels and *parliamentary* groups). The latter, however, in most polities, especially those where the identification of extra-parliamentary parties is easier than in the current Italian situation, would correspond to parties proper.

13 The two electoral cartels even have official leaders (Silvio Berlusconi for the center-right, Romano Prodi for the center-left), but it is clear that the political game is again the prerogative of individual *party* leaders, who often express positions which cut across electoral cartels as is the case of the debate on institutional reforms. According to Giovanni Sartori (1996), Italy has a two-layer political system whose units are "the cartels at the official level.... and the parties at the actual operational level" and whose dynamics are highly dysfunctional.

14 As our interest here is to assess the structure of the "electoral party system", all figures in table 1 refer to the immediate post election situation and do not reflect ulterior, successive, fragmentation (see below).

vely regulated by proportional and plurality criteria for seat assignment. In the proportional arena numerous parties appear to be relevant (Bartolini & D'Alimonte, 1995; Melchionda, 1995), whereas only two/three parties/coalitions seem to be competitive in the plurality one. Only the left-wing coalition (then called *Progressisti*) presented candidates in most single-member constituencies. The right wing on the other hand presented candidates under different labels in the North and in the South respectively called *Polo delle libertà* and *Polo del buon governo*. Berlusconi's Forza Italia joined forces with the Lega Nord in those regions where that party had at least some electoral following and with Alleanza Nazionale in the rest of the country. While jointly the left and right coalitions won all but handfuls of plurality seats in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate, the center coalition *Patto per l'Italia*, besides winning about half of the remaining plurality seats (seven in total), was competitive in about 15 percent of the constituencies (Melchionda, 1995, pp. 143-144). The combined effects of the proportional and plurality electoral competitions were different in the two chambers: in the Chamber of Deputies the right's strong overall majority (366 seats out of 630) made, in Sartorian terms, every other group irrelevant, with the sole exception of the leftist opposition (213 strong); but in the Senate, the right's failure to obtain an absolute majority allowed also the centrist pact (31 seats) and even the three senator strong *Südtiroler Volkspartei* (SVP) to meet Sartori's relevance criteria by giving them coalition or at least blackmail potential¹⁵. It must be stressed, however, that the Senate's results were to a large extent determined by the right wing coalition's flawed electoral strategy in a number of regions. It is almost certain that similar errors will not be repeated in the future. We can therefore conclude that at least potentially the number of relevant parties in the Senate's electoral competition is very close to the Chamber of Deputies and significantly lower than in the pre-1994 system.

But shortly after the elections, with the formation of parliamentary groups no longer bound by electoral pacts to respect coalition agreements, and even more evidently a few months later when the Lega Nord withdrawal from the right wing coalition brought down the Berlusconi government, the Italian party system was returned to its pre-1994 fragmentation in both houses, with the additional complication represented by the absence of a strong center pivot such as the DC (Morlino, 1996)¹⁶. Even what appears to be a deliberately conservative count made according to Sartori's nominal criteria identifies six relevant parties, which can be reduced to five (Sartori's crucial threshold) only by admitting that the Lega Nord (whose coalition/blackmail potential during the present transitional phase has on the other hand been proven to be crucial) lies outside the left/right dimension (Pappalardo, 1996). In any event, there is almost unanimous consensus that what we have defined as the parliamentary party system remains very fragmented; the pressures that come from the electoral party system do not seem to be sufficient to reduce such fragmentation, even if, as Pappalardo points out, the independence of some of the parliamentary fragments from the political line of

15 Actually even individual senators were relevant in the election of the Senate's President which was decided, in favor of the right coalition's candidate, Carlo Scognamiglio, by only one vote.

16 The trend towards fragmentation is still in process. The recent split of the PPI and the emergence of numerous other groups and parties have made parliament more fragmented than it ever was, as demonstrated by the record twenty-six parties consulted by President Scalfaro after the resignation of the Dini government.

the dominant parties within their respective electoral cartels is rather limited. This last observation makes more uncertain a prognosis for the future of the Italian party system, at least on the sole basis of the relevant number of parties criterion.

Of course no conclusion, let alone prognosis, can even be attempted without an analysis of the other structural variable: ideological distance. The assessment of ideological distance, just like counting the relevant parties in the system, depends on the indicators one chooses, but also on the type of party system, electoral or parliamentary, one considers. Two contributions that have recently tackled the task of measuring or assessing ideological distance in the post-1994 party system (Morlino, 1996; Pappalardo, 1996), have come to rather diverging conclusions, possibly as a result of the different indicators they used. Moreover Pappalardo's own indicators can have different values depending on the level (type of system) chosen in the analysis¹⁷. Morlino observes that after a period of party system de-radicalization, leading to the 1994 elections, we are now observing a new radicalization resulting from post-election instability (high volatility, uncertainty about the rules of the game, low institutionalization and weak societal rooting of the new actors). This new radicalization, and the associated increase or maintenance of ideological distance at values typical of the old, polarized, system is illustrated with electoral data, which show a post-1994 increase in support for left and right and a drop for the center, and with the description of an "accentuated verbal violence in political discourse throughout 1994 and 1995", and of the associated intensity of the political conflict. Pappalardo uses other indicators attributing most importance to one based on mass-surveyed left-right self-placements which he calls "left-right polarization". The index is calculated as the difference between the two extreme parties' identifiers' left-right self-placement averages, customarily measured on a one to ten scale. Pappalardo traces the evolution of the index with time-series data between 1975 and 1995. During this period, and as a consequence of the already described party-system transformation (at least in terms of its basic units, as we are still looking at the structure), the two extreme parties have undergone some changes: on the left, the PCI has been replaced by one of its splinters, RC; on the right, the MSI has evolved into AN, an organization that includes it, while at the same time trying to appeal also to broader, more moderate, sectors of the electorate. It is felt that both these parties no longer have their predecessors' anti-system characteristics (Morlino, 1996), but this does not produce a dramatic change in ideological distance, which drops from 5.8 to 5.4 between 1975 and 1995 (Pappalardo, 1996). This finding would seem to confirm Morlino's differently based analysis according to which the Italian party-system is presently at least as radicalized as it was in its polarized pluralism heyday. But according to Pappalardo extreme parties and lateral "poles" are no longer one and the same thing: the latter would now coincide with the center-left and center-right "blocks", as a consequence of shifts in both the electoral and the inter-electoral competition's "centers of gravity". The system's relevant maximum ideological distance has to be measured as the difference between *electoral-coalition* averages. If this is done, the 1995 index score drops to 4.2, a value considerably lower than those previously observed in Italy and closer to other European countries', such as Great Britain's (3.0 in 1993). Even if we are not yet in a position to accept Pappalardo's argument that both the electoral

17 In actuality, as we shall see, Pappalardo, in measuring ideological distance, examines two sets of values of his indicators, but his conclusions are based on only one set, relative to electoral cartels, which he considers more relevant than individual parties.

and the inter-electoral competition's "centers of gravity" have shifted, his analysis confirms the differences that exist between what we have defined as coexisting party-systems. In fact his center-left and center-right blocks are nothing but the basic units of the electoral party-system.

Summing up, the two components of the dual party-system created by the electoral reform, in the absence of a more extensive, and with it consistent, institutional reform, the electoral and the parliamentary party-systems, are not only formed by different basic units, but also present different structural characteristics. To be sure, the parliamentary party-system's transformation concerns its basic units more than its structure: number of relevant parties and ideological distance seem to be practically unchanged¹⁸. The electoral party-system, on the other hand, in terms of both number of relevant parties and ideological distance tends towards a form of moderate pluralism. Although post-electoral political events seem to indicate that the electoral party-system and its actors are playing a subordinate role, it is evidently exerting some pressure on the parliamentary one. This is certainly visible in the efforts made by the various components of the two major electoral coalitions to present united fronts on most major questions. Effects on ideological polarization are not as visible in this transitional phase, but on specific policy questions, such as institutional reforms, a degree of convergence can be observed at least between selected components of the two major electoral parties.

IV. Anti-party sentiment as a factor of change

If one single factor of party-system change should be singled out in the current Italian case, anti-party sentiment would be the obvious choice. Although other factors contributed to the change, anti-party sentiment, expressed in the vote for anti-party parties in the 1994 general election, appeared to be its immediate cause. Moreover, it also contributed to make or made more effective other factors of change, such as, respectively electoral reform (via a referendum) or the investigations on political corruption (through unprecedented popular support). Focussing on anti-party sentiment also presents an analytical advantage "as it can profitably be studied at two levels: the elite level and the mass level" (Poguntke and Scarrow, 1996). This could also permit some inferences about the existence of a causal relationship between the two. Elite anti-party sentiment may develop first and then generate mass anti-party sentiment, with the aim of producing changes agreeable to both masses and elites; elites may instrumentally use for their own purposes existing mass anti-party sentiment; or elites may even have to bow to insuppressible eruptions of mass anti-party attitudes. To understand their relationship and their joint or separate effects, it is necessary to observe empirically the evolution of both sets of sentiments.

Italy's major party system change indeed appears to be connected to the development of anti-party sentiments at both levels. An unprecedented number of anti-party parties contested the 1994 parliamentary election possibly reflecting a visi-

18 The only caution here is suggested by the disappearance of anti-system parties. This would mean that, even if the system is very fragmented and radicalized, it no longer responds to Sartori's polarized pluralism model. Hence, probably, Morlino's (1996) definition of the current system as "neo-polarized pluralism".

ble manifestation of elite anti-party sentiment¹⁹. Moreover, all three major components of the winning coalition(s), Forza Italia (FI), the Lega Nord (LN), and Alleanza Nazionale (AN), appeared to be standard-bearers of anti-party sentiment. Their electoral success was interpreted as a triumph of anti-party sentiment at the mass level as well. A closer look, however, shows that the values embodied by the winning coalition(s) were also strongly anti-system and represented challenges to the country's very Constitution. This was the case for the MSI, the anti-constitution party *par excellence*, for the LN, perennially demanding a decentralization of powers and threatening secession, but also for FI, which rejects the Constitution's solidaristic ethos. This characteristic of the beneficiaries of anti-party sentiment is very important because it can help us understand the magnitude and the suddenness of the change.

As is generally well known and as research has adequately demonstrated, Italian society has been characterized by the presence of "chronic, widespread [citizen] dissatisfaction" with political system performance (Morlino and Tarchi, 1996). Italy's traditional parties were remarkably successful in responding, or rather in avoiding to respond, to latent demands coming from the "dissatisfied society". Their success was based on gradual co-optation of the opposition and slow organizational adaptation, clearly intended to limit party, and political system, response to a bare minimum (Bardi and Morlino, 1994). Such lack of effective response was supplemented through supportive policies and patronage practices. As a result, mass attitudes about parties were very contradictory, shifting between negative evaluations and positive orientations. Still in 1990, on the very threshold of the transformation, the great majority of Italian citizens (about three quarters of respondents to a survey on electoral behavior) appeared to be uninterested in politics, uninformed, frustrated, alienated (Bardi and Pasquino, 1995). Yet they seemed to be willing to give political parties a blank mandate and even to ignore their preferred party's errors²⁰. Anti-party sentiments were emerging but they were still confused with opposition to the system the parties were trying to preserve. To the extent that parties were able to deflect, mostly by dispensing the kind of material rewards we just mentioned, their responsibilities towards a more abstract target, such as the "system", such confusion persisted and so did the distinction between anti-party and anti-system sentiments. This is certainly an obstacle if the purpose of the analysis is to assess whether elite and/or mass sentiments express a refusal of the party-based model of democracy or more simply a rejection of Italy's traditional parties²¹. But our present interest is to determine whether such sentiments were a factor in the demise of once powerful Italian parties; in this case we can consider anti-party and anti-system sentiments as equivalent, given that established parties were the immediate target of anti-system sentiments as well.

Although popular dissatisfaction is an endemic Italian problem, as we have seen, clearly focussed anti-party sentiments were expressed first at the elite level. Italy has always had a number of anti-system parties and, from the 1970s on, also anti-

19 The presence of anti-party parties appears to be the best indicator of elite anti-party sentiment, at least in the Italian context (Bardi, 1996).

20 On this last point, there appears to be less consensus. In actuality only a bare majority of respondents indicated that they were willing to vote for the party they trusted irrespective of its possible errors (Bardi and Pasquino, 1995: 41).

21 This was a concern of one of this author's recent contributions (Bardi, 1996).

party parties. Mass response towards anti-system parties was constant, and very high, until the 1970s, when it rose sharply, as a result of the PCI's success. It is doubtful whether the post-1976 PCI can still be classified as an anti-system party. Certainly it cannot be considered one if the purpose of the classification is to infer mass attitudes towards the system from electoral behavior. Therefore it is not a coincidence that during the 1970s we have the emergence of the first clearly anti-party party, the PR²². In the following years, also as a result of the PCI's cooptation into the dominant party cartel (Katz & Mair, 1995), more anti-party parties emerged, such as two federations of ecological movements and several regionalist leagues, also to be federated in the 1990s. The irruption of the LN into the Italian political scene was perhaps the decisive factor in developing mass anti-party sentiment. Anti-partyism had grown rather slowly until the LN successfully channelled mass dissatisfaction and anti-system attitudes towards the system's custodians, the established parties. The PR's strategy and never been concentrated on an unrealistic mass electoral success but rather on challenging the party cartel by presenting issues directly to the public through referenda. The PR also tried to elicit mass anti-party response by encouraging abstentionism and considered the fact that from the 1979 election on valid votes constantly remained under the 90% level, to drop to about 80% in 1994, a demonstration of its strategy's success. Thus anti-party voting rose slowly and unevenly from the mid-1970s on. It surged sharply between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s precisely because of LN's success²³. The LN replaced its anti-party rhetoric with its "anti-First-Republic" equivalent after its successful 1994 electoral strategy, which involved an alliance with a newcomer (FI), with one established (albeit marginalized) party (the MSI), and with splinters from old established parties, like the DC and the PSI. The LN's new allies accepted and even shared this anti-system stance. Lists that described themselves as anti-party outnumbered (8 to 7) the traditional ones and obtained well over 50% of the votes and an even higher percentage of the seats. The success of ostensible anti-party groups was so sweeping as to result in a complete replacement of the pre-1994 governmental coalition (Bardi, 1996). To be sure, in 1994 old and new anti-system and anti-party lists obtained an unprecedented victory, but they were favored by institutional and political conditions that had radically been changed in the interim, also as a result of the 1993 referendums.

As we have mentioned, calling referenda is an important instrument in the manifestation of elite anti-partyism. Likewise, referendum voting can in itself be regarded as another important electoral indicator of anti-party or anti-system sentiment: referendum proposals can only aim at repealing existing laws or parts of existing laws, that is, at undoing what Parliament (dominated by the party cartel)

22 In actuality the Radical Party was founded in 1955 as a left-wing splinter of the PLI. For the first fifteen years of its existence it was not very active, but its un-party style was already evident in the late 1960s when it participated in the pro-divorce campaign mainly through one of its collateral, single-issue, organizations, the *Lega Italiana per il Divorzio* (LID). Only in 1976 did the PR run for the first time in national elections.

23 Depending on classification criteria anti-party lists obtained about 20-25% of the vote in the 1992 parliamentary elections. This level put Italy at the top among western democracies, a primacy which was greatly strengthened in 1994. For detailed data on anti-party voting and on other mass anti-party sentiment indicators see: Poguntke, 1996; Bardi, 1996.

has done ²⁴. Prior to 1987 the Italian electorate confirmed the established parties' parliamentary output and rejected all abrogation proposals; thereafter, they endorsed all referendum proposals. However, only from 1991 onwards can these results be interpreted as manifestations of popular anti-party sentiment, because most parties supported the five referendum proposals in 1987 ²⁵. The successful 1991 referendum on preference voting was interpreted as the first clear and effective manifestation of popular dissatisfaction with the party regime and in April 1993, at the crest of the anti-party tide caused by the *tangentopoli* investigations, majority parties' positions were defeated on eight referendums. This was described by analysts and commentators as the end of a regime. These referendums altered two of the institutional cornerstones of the party regime, the legislative electoral system (which was effectively modified into a mixed plurality/PR system) and the party funding laws. The referendum on public funding of political parties fully revealed the extent of popular anti-party sentiment when it received the highest percentage of "yes" votes, over 90%, among the eight referendums in 1993 ²⁶. The votes on the eight referendums, which took place between two political elections at the height of the political corruption scandals, were perhaps the highest and most genuine manifestation of mass anti-party sentiment in Italy. They certainly accelerated the collapse of traditional party organizations and set the institutional and political conditions for the 1994 elections, that officially marked with their results the beginning of the transition.

V. Conclusions

This paper addressed three basic questions concerning the ongoing process of party system transformation in Italy. 1) what accounts for the apparent magnitude of the change; 2) what is the actual extent of the change (in other words, does it only concern the basic units, the parties, or also the structure of the system); 3) what were most important factors in the change. To the first question the basic answer is that the magnitude of popular rejection of traditional parties and for some even of the party-based model of representation was due to the delaying strategies of the party cartel which stalled for thirty years necessary reforms by only apparently responding to societal demands while at the same time contributing to the deepening of the problems at the roots of such demands. The parties, albeit informally, did adapt very effectively to environmental changes. Indeed, in some cases, as was the case with the build-up of the public sector, they responded by modifying the environment themselves. Our answer to the second question has to be necessarily much more tentative. While it is clear that the system's basic units, the political parties, have individually undergone profound transformations, the impact of the change on the system's structure is much more difficult to assess, also because of the contemporary, even if perhaps temporary, presence of two party systems: electoral and parliamentary. The "hardest" indicator at our disposal, number of parties, gives contradictory answers, which are

²⁴ Because in a number of cases traditional opposition and even majority parties supported referendums, referendum results cannot be used as a time series indicator of anti-party sentiment. Selected results can however be extremely useful, albeit discrete, indicators.

²⁵ In fact, two of these proposals were not only introduced by the PR, but also by two government parties, the PSI and the PLI.

²⁶ A similar proposal had been defeated in 1978 by almost sixty percent of the voters.

to a large extent determined by the analyst's arbitrary choices. On other variables, the situation is even more uncertain because of the continuous changes in the party system's basic units and of the consequent difficulties in determining the various actors' ideological positions.

On the third question, we limited our attention to the impact of anti-party sentiment. Anti-party sentiment was indeed a factor in Italy's recent party system changes. Most indicators confirm experts' and observers' opinions according to which anti-party sentiment rose sharply near the end of the 1980s and culminated in the early 1990s. It would also appear, however, that the effects of recent, genuine, anti-party sentiment were magnified by the incorporation and transformation of long established elite anti-system orientations, and of mass apathy and disillusion. Anti-system parties have always existed in post-war Italy, but they always failed to effectively channel the popular dissatisfaction which was consistently revealed by opinion polls. The gradual incorporation of the PCI into the party cartel, in the mid-1970s marked the end of the prevalence of anti-systemic protest. Anti-party sentiment found its first expression, at least at the elite level, with the emergence of the PR in the early 1970s. Its open anti-party rhetoric and the long-term effectiveness of its referendum centered strategy gave frustrated anti-system or simply disillusioned electors a focus: it is because of the PR that abstentionism came to be considered as a political (anti-party) choice, and it is because of the PR that "party" replaced "politician" as a focus of popular disenchantment and frustration. The LN's ascent and the successful 1991 and 1993 referenda turned all forms of popular dissatisfaction into anti-party sentiment and contributed, with other factors, to the collapse of the old party system. The fall of the party cartel can thus be ascribed, at least partially, to the success of anti-party elites in channelling otherwise undirected or unfocused popular dissent.

The present phase is no doubt one of transition for the Italian political system. This cannot but have serious consequences for the party system as well. The problems facing Italian decision makers are so numerous and daunting that a full consolidation of the system appears to be many years ahead. The political vacuum left in the party system by the disappearance of the DC and the PSI has not been permanently filled yet. Most present day major actors are facing political and organizational problems of their own which are making the reaching of important decisions such as those necessary for the completion of the electoral reform or for the launching of an all-encompassing institutional reform extremely difficult. But unless these crucial compromises are reached the uncertainty about the future of the party system is bound to continue.

Abstract

The article attempts to trace the origins and to assess the extent of party-system change in Italy in the 1990s. It also examines some hypotheses on the possible causes of such changes. Building on research on anti-party sentiment and on changes in party organization the paper begins with an analysis of the evolution of the party system in the last 30 years which identifies organizational adaptation as a delaying factor in party system change. This is followed by a description of the party system after the 1994 elections based on generally accepted party system characteristics and indicators (volatility, number of parties, ideological distance). The assessment is made difficult by the, perhaps tem-

porary, coexistence of two party-systems, respectively relevant for electoral and inter-election competition. The evidence however, suggests, that party-system transformation is under way, while it might still be inappropriate to talk about structural change. Degeneration of parties and a deep institutional crisis appear to be the factors leading to the explosion of pent-up alienation and anti-party sentiments, and to demands for institutional and constitutional change that preceded and appeared to be the immediate causes of party system transformation.