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Electoral Systems in Context: Italy

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Abstract and Keywords

Italy stands out among advanced industrialized democracies because of its frequency of major electoral reforms. In the postwar period, Italy has experienced four major electoral systems: the proportional representation (PR) system of the First Republic (1948–1992), mixed-member majoritarian (MMM, 1993–2005), and two varieties of PR with majority bonus (2005–2015, 2015–). In addition, there have been many failed attempts at electoral reform through legislation or referendum. The frequency of electoral reform makes Italy an important case for investigating the causes and effects of electoral system change. However, the path to each change has been somewhat idiosyncratic: the major reform of 1993 came against the backdrop of revelations of massive corruption, while the 2005 reform can be understood as an attempt to engineer divided government by an incumbent coalition expecting losses in the next election. The effects of the electoral reforms have also not always been as expected.

Keywords: Italy, electoral systems, electoral reform, governmental stability, party systems, preference votes, majority bonus

Italy stands out among established democracies because of multiple reforms of its electoral system. Established democracies generally tend to retain their electoral systems (Katz 2005), and the total number of electoral reforms over the last seventy years in established democracies stands at approximately twenty. Among the worldwide reforms, Italy is remarkably well represented, with three main electoral system changes during its democratic experience (and a fourth[1] reform has now come into operation, as we shall see). After the end of fascism and the dictatorship, a new democratic regime was established and a parliamentary republic initiated in 1948. Since that time, Italy's electoral law has been amended several times, and many other attempts to reform it were repelled. What were the triggers of such reforms? In Italy, the "causes" for electoral reforms were a mix of conjunctures: leadership initiative, judicial action, mass pressure, and international change and constraints. Moreover, if triggers of reform are "unlikely to be predictable from systemic characteristics" (Katz 2005, 74), in Italy it is not easy to generalize about the causes of reform. Thus, in the presence of such a mix of variables, it is necessary to analyze both the characteristics of each electoral reform in Italy and the context in which it is generated.

A diachronic study of the Italian case is opportune both for an in-depth analysis and for a general test of theory. As we know, electoral systems matter: they "may make a big difference to the shape of the party system, to the nature of government (coalition or single-party), to the kind of choices facing voters at elections, to the ability of voters to hold their representative(s) personally accountable, to the behavior of parliamentarians" (Gallagher and Mitchell 2005, 4). The next sections detail each of these systems and the reasons for their adoption, before turning to an assessment of the consequences.

Italy's Electoral Systems: Provisions and Origins

Italy has formally had four different electoral systems between 1948 and 2015, not counting the proportional representation (PR) system used to elect the Constituent Assembly in 1946. The provisions of each law to be discussed in this section are summarized in detail in Table 1.

Table 1 Electoral Systems in Italy (1946–2017) (Chamber of Deputies)

Electoral law number and date of approval	Election	Electoral system	Formula and Quota	Threshold	Preference voting	Bonus	Number of Districts	Assembly Size
1946, n. 74, March 10	1946	Open-list PR (OLPR)	LR–quota (+1 or +2, depending on district magnitude)	-	up to 2-3 (1)	no	31	556
1948, n. 6, January 20 1948, n. 26, February 5	1948	OLPR	LR–Imperiali (+3)	1 seat (8)	up to 3-4 (2)	no	31	574
1953, n. 148, March 31	1953 (7) (did not come into operation)	OLPR with bonus	LR–Imperiali (+3)	1 seat	up to 3-4	380 seats to winning party or coalition > 50% (5)	31	590

1954, n. 615, July 31 1956, n. 493, May 16 1957, n. 361, March 30	1958	OLPR	LR–Imperiali (+2)	1 seat *and* 300.000 votes	up to 3-4	no	32	596
	1963							630
	1968							630
	1972							630
	1976							630
	1979							630
	1983							630
	1987							630
1991, n. 200, July 3	1992	OLPR	LR–Imperiali (+2)	1 seat *and* 300.000 votes	up to 1	no	32	630
1993, n. 277, August 4	1994	MMM	Plurality (475) + LR-Hare (155)	4% national			475 SSD + 1 national	
	1996				no	no		630
	2001							

2005, n. 270, December 21	2006	PR with bonus (closed lists)						
	2008		LR-Hare	4% party; 10% coalition; 2% party in coalition	no	340 seats to the winning party or coalition	26	630 (4)
	2013							
2015, n. 52, May 6	none	PR with bonus (open lists with protection for list-heads)	LR-Hare	3% national	up to 2 (3)	340 seats to party with > 40% (6)	100	630 (4)

Source: Author's own elaboration on Italian Minister of Interior data.

([1]) In 1946 voters could cast three preferences votes in constituencies returning to up 16 members, and four preferences votes in larger constituencies.

([2]) Voters could cast three preferences votes in constituencies returning to up 15 members, and four preferences votes in larger constituencies.

([3]) If voters cast their first preference to choose a woman, the second vote must go to select a man, and vice versa. Otherwise, the second preference will be considered void.

([4]) 12 seats attributed to representatives of Italians living abroad, and one seat for the Aosta Valley region.

([5]) 380 of 590 seats in the Chamber of deputies would be given to any alliance of parties that won at least 50 per cent of the votes plus one vote. It must be underlined that two different quotas were indicated. First, if the bonus would be assigned, then the quota will be calculated on two different bases: votes / 380 seats for the winning party(ies), and votes / 209 for the loosing parties. Vice versa, if no party had obtained the 50% plus one vote, then the 1948 system would have worked with a quota plus 3.

([6]) On January 25, 2017 the Constitutional Court dropped the second-ballot to allocate the majority bonus for the Chamber of Deputies in order to make “more similar” the two electoral systems for the two Houses, albeit the Senate would still have a regional allocation of seats. However, the supreme judges kept the provision of a majority bonus allocated to the party with 40% of votes.

([7]) The total score for the coalition parties was 49.2% with the DC being the pivotal party (40.1%).

([8]) The allocation of seat by large remainders method with Hare quota was allowed to parties able to obtain at least one seat (entire quota) in one of the districts. Since 1957, in addition parties had to obtain also at the least 300,000 votes nationally.

The PR Electoral System of the Italian First Republic (1948–1992)

For the first democratic parliamentary election in 1948, a PR formula (Imperiali quota with largest remainders)[2] with preference voting was adopted. The system of proportional representation was introduced before the approval of the constitution,[3] and was never included in it, so that reforming the rules does not require a constitutional amendment. The system combined comparatively high proportionality with intraparty competition. From 1946 to 1992, Italy had thirty-two electoral districts.[4] It was a two-tier "remainder pooling" system (for a general definition, see Gallagher and Mitchell's chapter) in which remainder seats were allocated in an upper tier. The number of seats allocated in the upper tier depended on the number of votes not used by parties to elect members of parliament (MPs) in the districts (typically about 10 percent of the total). Nevertheless, to participate in the allocation of seats by remainders, parties had to satisfy two requirements: to have obtained at least three hundred thousand votes at the national level *and* to have succeeded in electing at least one candidate in one district, which meant having a geographically concentrated electoral support of about sixty thousand to seventy thousand voters.[5]

The PR open-list system emphasized intraparty competition among candidates (Carey and Shugart 1995) and also generated—or at the very least did not impede—party factionalism. Between 1946 and 1991, voters were allowed to cast up to four preference votes depending on district magnitude (Passarelli 2017).[6] Therefore, the way in which candidates were elected from a list was completely determined by the individual preference votes cast by the party's voters in a given district.[7] During that period, the only reforms of the electoral system involved changes in the denominator used in calculating the quota (Passarelli 2014).[8]

Although it never actually came into operation, the *legge truffa* (swindle law) of 1953 could be counted among Italy's electoral reforms. This system aimed to ensure a parliamentary majority.[9] The Christian Democrats (DC) won an absolute majority of seats (53.1 percent in 1948) with 48.5 percent of votes. This was the only election in which a single party obtained a parliamentary majority. Nevertheless, the DC's decline in local elections and the fear of a neo-fascist resurgence induced the ruling party to seek a system that would secure a stable majority. Eventually approved over the vehement opposition of the Communist and Socialist parties, the law stated that after the elections, 380 of 590 seats in the Chamber of Deputies would be given to any alliance of parties that won over 50 percent of the votes (Katz 2001, 59; Renwick 2010). The coalition was composed of four parties: the DC, the Social Democrats (PSDI), the Liberals (PLI), and the Republicans (PRI). The total score for the coalition parties was 49.2 percent, with the DC being the dominant party (40.1 percent). However, this good performance was not sufficient for them to reach their goal. In fact, although they lacked only 204,742 votes to reach a majority and consequently the bonus of seats, the *legge truffa* did not come into operation. The law was repealed in 1954, restoring the 1948 system until the 1990s.[10]

Electoral Reform of 1993 from Proportional Representation to Mixed-Member Majoritarian: Mani Pulite, Tangentopoli, and Scorporo

The major change to the Italian electoral system that was introduced in the 1990s started with a citizens-initiated referendum held on June 9, 1991. This measure modified one critical component of the electoral law, although only partially. Voters were asked whether the clause relating to the law on the number of preference votes available to the voter should be reduced to just one. The result was 95.6 percent in favor, with a turnout of 65.1 percent. The catalyst for this change was the government's refusal to introduce a new electoral law to accompany the local government reform introduced in 1990. The referendum of 1991 represented the first step on the path away from proportional representation in the Italian system, although only partially, as we shall see.

In the early 1990s, Italy's established political system collapsed amid dramatic changes in the international political system with the end of the Cold War, judicial activism and investigations, and a widespread popular disaffection, culminating in several referendums. The judiciary, especially in Milan, laid bare the widespread links between politicians and illegal activities. The so-called *mani pulite* (clean hands) investigations targeted many MPs and party secretaries such as those of the DC and the PSI. The *Tangentopoli* (bribe city) scandal finally discredited the Italian ruling class among a public fed up with rampant corruption.

Among other consequences, these events led to the adoption in 1993 of a new electoral law. Although a referendum (based on the citizens' initiative) on the Italian constitution does not allow the initiation of new laws—it merely allows the abrogation of a bill or part of it—the referendum of April 1993 clearly represented a breakthrough in the political system and the electoral framework. The overwhelming result undoubtedly paved the way for the successive complete reform of the electoral law. The parliament could not ignore the "popular will," namely, the demand for a significant and real change that would especially emphasize the role of voters in determining the formation of the government and the choice of its leader. The long-standing phenomenon of prime ministers chosen via a bargaining process among the party leaders was an established ritual that was particularly disliked by voters. More than eight voters in ten (82.7 percent, on 77.1 percent turnout) decided to answer yes to the question posed by the referendum on the desire to modify the rules for the election of the Senate, in particular by eliminating the proportional part of the seat distribution[11].

The consequences of the referendum were significant institutionally and politically. The result was a Senate in which 75 percent of seats were allocated by plurality in single-seat districts (SSDs), and the rest by PR. Had the new system been applied to the following general elections, it would have meant there was a real chance of having a "divided" government between the two chambers. Such division would be a particular problem because the chambers have equal power to confer or withdraw their confidence in the

government. Although popularly discredited, the parliament was thus forced to legislate electoral reform before eventually going to early elections (which are called by the president of the republic).

The new electoral law introduced a mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) system (Shugart 2001; Shugart and Wattenberg 2001) in which three-quarters of the Chamber seats (475) were allocated in SSDs via plurality, and the remaining one-quarter (155) via party lists through proportional representation. The PR seat allocation formula was changed to Hare quota and largest remainders (LR) with a nationwide threshold of 4 percent, now with closed lists instead of the open lists that had prevailed in the preceding PR period (see Table 1). The MMM system was in operation between 1993 and 2005.[12]

The plurality and PR tiers were linked through a complex mechanism of "negative vote transfers (*scorporo*)" (D'Alimonte 2005, 257). The aim of this mechanism was to reduce the disproportionality typical of plurality elections by deducting votes from those parties that win SSDs. In the assignment of PR seats, the first step is the calculation of the "effective vote" for each list in each constituency. This is done by subtracting, from a list's total vote, a number one greater than the votes received by the second-placed candidates in all the SSDs where candidates affiliated with that list have won seats. The "effective vote" then becomes the tally used for determining the number of PR seats that go to each list. Once this calculation has been made, the second step is to determine which lists have received more than 4 percent of PR votes at the national level (regardless of the *scorporo*). These lists will get seats on the basis of their "effective vote" according to the LR-Hare method (D'Alimonte 2005, 257).

The biggest parties were more likely to win in the districts and thus would tend to suffer *scorporo* transfers. As a result, these parties sidestepped the negative vote transfer rule. They created "fake lists" that no voter knew about, and the surplus votes were subtracted from that list, avoiding the penalty to the real list.[13] The result of the *scorporo* was to render the system only partially compensatory, which is why it is properly considered a type of MMM system, rather than mixed-member proportional (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001).

The system hardly differed for the two houses: as noted earlier, for the Chamber of Deputies, the proportional seats could go only to those parties that had received on a separate ballot at least 4 percent of the national vote. Such a nationwide threshold was not introduced for the Senate, where the PR seats were allocated on a regional basis. In addition, the Senate system allowed the best losers in regional constituencies to join the parliament. However, the *scorporo* negative vote transfer also operated in the Senate, albeit with a significant difference from the Chamber of Deputies: subtracting *all* the votes gathered by the winner in each district, and not just the vote difference between the winner and the first loser. This greatly limited the majoritarianism in the system, relative to that of the Chamber.

The Electoral Reform of 2005: Back to Proportional Representation but with a Majority Bonus

Another electoral reform took place in 2005. In this case, the system was changed as a defensive mechanism in response to anticipated potential electoral losses by the governing center-right coalition, headed by Silvio Berlusconi and his Forza Italia party. The new law scrapped the mixed-member system and was touted as a possible "simplification" of the party system structure. The law stipulated a proportional system with closed lists that allocates a sizable seat "majority bonus"—guaranteeing 55 percent of seats—to whichever pre-electoral *coalition* of parties obtained the highest number of votes. The new law introduced a defined rule for these coalitions, obligating lists to adhere formally to them by specifying the name of the political leader of the coalition from the outset. *It thus introduced a strongly majoritarian element, by prioritizing pre-electoral coalitions that could obtain a plurality*. The proportional element came in only after the majority bonus was applied, allocating seats among the component parties of the winning and other coalitions.

Berlusconi's government changed the electoral rules in advance of elections scheduled a year later (Massetti 2006; Benoit 2007). The leading advocates for changing the law were the smaller parties of the center-right coalition, such as the Union of the Centre (UDC) and the National Alliance, with strong support by the Northern League, whose leader was the principal rapporteur and author Roberto Calderoli. The law was approved only a few months before the 2006 election (Law 270, December 21, 2005) (Bardi 2007; Pasquino 2007). The center-right coalition explicitly wanted to reintroduce a PR system given its better electoral performance in that tier vis-à-vis the SSDs in the past electoral system. However, the often-evoked implicit goal of the law to attempt to impede the likely success of the center-left resided in three aspects: (1) the nationalization of electoral competition, which was thought to be advantageous to Forza Italia, because of the gap between the appeal of its candidates and that of its party leader; (2) the way that the majority bonus was conferred (see next paragraph) and the geographic concentration of center-right support in two large districts in the north; and (3) differentiating the basis of allocation of seats in the two chambers. To elaborate on the last point, the likelihood of different coalitions winning each chamber would be increased through the differentiation of their rules for allocating seats, combined with the different geographical pattern of the electoral strength of the parties. In other words, Berlusconi's goal was, in part, to engineer divisions among his opponents, as well as enhance his own party's prospects of seat maximization.

The peculiarity of the 2005 electoral reform is the way the majority bonus was attributed in the Senate: the majority bonus was allocated region by region. Therefore, each electoral plurality in each region obtained 55 percent of seats attributed to that specific region. Consequently, winning in the most populous regions with the largest district magnitude would increase the possibility of obtaining a majority of seats in the Senate.[14] Given the different parties' electoral strongholds, the possibility of having a "divided

government" was very likely. The consequence is that this mechanism does not guarantee clear majority for any block in the Senate, unlike the national majority-bonus provision in the Chamber of Deputies Thus, the result of the Senate became a sort of lottery. In fact, the center-left obtained a sizable majority of seats in the Chamber, but not in the Senate, where it was in the majority by only two seats.

Together with the majority bonus to the winning coalition and closed-list PR, the new electoral law introduced a complex set of thresholds for seat allocations: 617 out of 630[15] Chamber seats were allocated among the parties that passed thresholds of the total vote on a *national* basis. The thresholds were as follows: (1) 10 percent for a coalition, (provided that at least one list within the pre-electoral coalition got 2 percent);[16] (2) 4 percent for single parties; and (3) 2 percent for any party in a coalition, except for the first party below 2 percent in the coalition. For the Senate, the thresholds were the following, on a *regional* basis: (1) 20 percent for a coalition (provided that at least one list got 3 percent); (2) 8 percent for any party not in a coalition; and (3) 3 percent for any party in a coalition (there is no exception for the first party in a coalition below this threshold, unlike the Chamber).[17] These systems were in place for three elections, 2006, 2008, and 2013.

In 2014, the Constitutional Court entered the electoral-reform fray when it declared unconstitutional the previous electoral law of 2005. In particular, the Constitutional Court ruled inapplicable the majority bonus, and specified that the voter must be allowed to cast a preference vote (Constitutional Law n. 1/2014). The court thus reintroduced the electoral system in operation between 1991 and 1993, but also modified the law by also introducing preference voting for the Senate (Ceccanti 2016). In response, parliament approved a new electoral system in 2015.[18]

The Electoral System Reform of 2015 and the Italicum

The new electoral law came into force in July 2016 (D'Alimonte 2015; Chiaramonte 2015; Pasquino 2015). However, it has not been used in any general election, and it was partially modified by the Constitutional Court in 2017 (detailed in the chapter postscript). The main political actors involved in the process were the Democratic Party and its leader, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. Basically all other parties were against the reform, except Forza Italia, which had voted in favor initially and then later withdrew its support. At first glance, the 2015 system shows similarities with the 2005 laws. Both have bonus provisions. However, the new bonus adjustment mechanism—the so-called *Italicum*—differs in that the majority bonus is allocated to the most voted list, unlike in the 2005 system where it was allocated to a coalition of parties. The list receiving the plurality of votes is to be allocated 340 MPs out of 618[19] deputies, provided that it reaches 40 percent[20] of the valid votes at the national level (no further bonus is awarded if the list already had that quota through proportional distribution). If no list gets this many votes, the law provided that a runoff would be held two weeks later between the two most voted lists.[21] This is highly unusual, as there are few examples of runoffs in list systems for

national assemblies.[22] As it happened, the Constitutional Court invalidated the runoff provision in a ruling in 2017. The peculiarity of the *Italicum* is that it will only be in function for the Chamber. For the Senate, the electoral law is PR without a majority bonus, which was the 2005 law after the changes introduced by the Constitutional Court in 2014.

The *Italicum* foresaw only one legal threshold to enable access to the distribution of seats. Such access was allowed solely for those lists that reach at least 3 percent of valid votes nationwide. Once the majority bonus is assigned (in this sense the system is *majority assuring*, whatever the result of the first round), the rest of seats are allocated with PR (Hare quota and largest remainders) to the lists that have met the national threshold.

The new electoral law reintroduces a feature of the 1948–1993 system, the open list, but with features protecting list heads and encouraging gender balance. Voters will be permitted to cast up to two preference votes for candidates of their party by writing the corresponding names on the ballot. The first provision limiting the openness of the list is that parties may protect their list head in each of the hundred districts (ranging in magnitude from three to nine). Any list head can run in up to ten different districts but must opt for one if elected in more than one.[23] This provision potentially expands the number of seats allocated via preference votes due to the fact that in other districts where the list head has been elected, seats will be allocated to candidates solely via preference votes.

The second limitation on openness is that any voters' second preference is void if cast for a candidate of the same gender as the first one.[24] Further provisions intended to promote more balanced gender representation are (1) each party list must contain equal numbers of men and women; (2) in publishing their lists, parties must alternate men and women; and (3) no more than 60 percent of the list heads for any party across districts may be of the same gender. However, because the list is completely open other than for the list head, the final order of election from a list will not necessarily be gender balanced. On balance, these features mean that if a party wins only one seat in the district, it will be allocated to the list head, while from the second onward, seats will be allocated solely according to preference votes.

Consequences of Electoral Systems in Italy

Having now reviewed Italy's electoral systems of the postwar period, we turn to their consequences. For almost fifty years the political system had featured highly unstable governments in part due to the fragmentation of the party system, albeit with stability in political and governmental personnel (Cotta and Verzichelli 2009). This was a consequence of a *pure* proportional electoral system, which offered several chances to small parties to be represented (Ignazi 2002). Neither of the two biggest parties was able to govern alone, and the Christian Democrats were prone to forming oversized coalitions

(Newell and Bull 1997). Dissatisfaction with the performance of the PR system led to the first major electoral reform, that of 1993. This section will consider several indicators of electoral system impacts on the party system, for each of Italy's electoral systems over time.

Electoral Reform and Governmental Stability

As a result of the introduction of a polarizing political actor—Silvio Berlusconi—the party system and electoral competition moved toward a bipolar framework. Beginning with the 1994 general elections, there were three power turnovers between center-right and center-left coalitions. However, the fragmentation of the coalitions and the weakness and heterogeneous nature of the parties affected governmental stability and ability to implement programs and policies. In essence, Giuseppe Di Palma's (1977) words from more than forty years ago still rang true, in that Italian parties continued to survive without governing. Moreover, a new party, the Five Star Movement (M5S), which won the highest percentage of the vote for any individual party in the 2013 elections (albeit with only 25.6 percent), may be generating a tripolar party system as an unexpected outcome of electoral reform.

The electoral law first adopted in the general election of 1994 did not produce governmental stability. The paradox is that it generated identifiability without stability (durability of governments). In the space of less than twenty years, Italy experienced twelve governments (two of which were technocratic), six different prime ministers, two oversized coalitions, and two changes of parliamentary majorities during the same legislature. The first Berlusconi government collapsed—due to the defection of the Lega Nord (*Northern League*)—after just over half a year in office (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Passarelli and Tuorto 2012; Passarelli 2013b). The early dissolution of parliament, the change of prime ministers, the lack of support by a parliamentary majority, and the ensuing instability and party fragmentation have remained the main characteristics of the Italian political system despite the 1994 and 2005 reforms.[25] Such tendencies were detectable in the political and institutional dynamics, which are exemplified by both the 1994–2001 and 2006–2008 periods, lasting through both "majoritarian" and a "proportional" electoral law, respectively (Capano 1997; Bull and Pasquino 2007; Donovan 1995; Hine 1996; Gilbert 1998).

The Party System and the Electoral Reforms

Italy's electoral reforms also offer an opportunity to explore the effect of the electoral system on the party system. Table 2 shows several indicators of the party system, by election and by period means, representing Italy's different electoral systems. For the effective number of seat-winning parties (N_S) (Laakso and Taagepera 1979; see also the chapter in this volume by Shugart and Taagepera), we can observe the following: during the First Republic (1948–1992), the average was 3.71, while during the majoritarian

electoral system for the Second Republic, the average was 6.35. For the majority-bonus PR system, 2006–2013, it was 3.87. Thus, surprisingly, N_S was at its highest during the period of the MMM electoral system. We see the same pattern with N_V, the effective number of vote-earning parties.

Table 2 The effects of electoral systems on political and electoral outcomes in Italy (1948–2013)

	Legislature	**Two biggest parties**		**Gallagher index**	**Eff *Nv***	**Eff *Ns***	**Parties with seats**	**Electoral Volatility**	**Index of nationalization**
Electoral system	**year**	**votes**	**seats**						
OLPR (up to 4 votes)	1948	79.5	77.5	3.64	2.95	2.57	10	-	0.833
	1953	62.7	64.4	3.68	4.18	3.54	9	14.1	0.836
	1958	65.0	65.6	2.74	3.87	3.45	12	5.2	0.856
	1963	63.5	67.6	2.58	4.16	3.74	10	8.5	0.864
	1968	66.0	70.3	2.66	3.94	3.53	9	7.8	0.870
	1972	65.8	70.6	3.25	4.08	3.55	9	5.3	0.866
	1976	73.1	77.8	2.75	3.53	3.16	11	9.1	0.888
	1979	68.7	73.5	2.69	3.91	3.47	12	5.3	0.874
	1983	62.8	67.1	2.57	4.52	4.02	13	8.3	0.861

	1987	60.9	65.2	2.52	4.62	4.07	14	9.1	0.859
OLPR (1 vote)	1992	45.8	49.7	2.51	6.63	5.71	16	19	0.785
MMM	1994	41.4	35.2	7.81	7.58	7.67	7 (9)	36.7	0.749
	1996	41.6	46.8	6.91	7.17	6.09	8(10)	13.0	0.798
	2001	46.0	52.4	10.22	6.32	5.3	5 (6)	22.4	0.830
Majority-bonus PR	2006	41.5	41.7	3.61	5.69	5.06	13	9.5	0.865
	2008	70.6	76.7	5.73	3.82	3.07	7	9.7	0.836
	2013	51.0	63.5	17.34	5.33	3.47	10	39.1	0.836
period means	1948–2013	59.2	62.7	4.89	4.84	4.20	10.3	13.9	0.841
	1948–1992	64.9	68.1	2.87	4.22	3.71	11.4	9.2	0.854
	1994–2001	43.0	44.8	8.31	7.02	6.35	6.7 (8.3)	24.0	0.792

	2006–2013	54.4	60.6	8.89	4.95	3.87	10.0	19.4	0.845

Sources: Author’s calculations from data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior; Passarelli (2014).

(*) For the MMM period, data refer to the PR component except the numbers in parentheses for parties with seats, which refer to SSDs.

The reason for the seeming anomaly of party system fragmentation peaking under MMM lies in a peculiar complexity of the system identified earlier—the establishment of fake lists to benefit from the *scorporo* process of partial compensation. While many new parties thus entered and won votes and seats, these parties were grouped into alliances, which were coordinated in the SSDs of this system, and generated "fake lists" to minimize their negative vote transfers from the SSDs to the PR component. In fact, when we consider the actual number of parties that won at least one seat, we find that number declined in the MMM period, but—strikingly—it was greater in the SSDs (8.3, on average) than in the list component (6.7). This is due to the alliances being represented by different parties in different districts, and also to ethno-regionalist parties being able to win (very few) seats in their strongholds.[26] The number of seat-winning parties was higher in the pure-list periods (1948–1992 and 2006–2013), as we might expect. However, many of these parties were very small, as revealed by the lower effective numbers during that period.

As reported in Table 2, in 2008, there was a significant reduction in the number of parties winning seats, compared to 2005, the first election under the majority-bonus list PR system. However, that was due to the birth of two new parties, each resulting from the merging of two existing parties. The merger between Forza Italia and the National Alliance created the People of Freedom led by Berlusconi, while the Democrats of the Left and the Daisy formed the basis of the Democratic Party on the center-left. These parties obtained approximately 75 percent of votes and as many seats, the highest top-2 percentage since 1976. Nevertheless, the power acquired by the two parties eroded, not least due to their joint participation in the unity government "rainbow coalition" they formed after Berlusconi's resignation due to judicial and financial troubles.

Regarding the proportionality of the system, we can use the Gallagher (1991) index of disproportionality (see also the chapter by Shugart and Taagepera) to compare across electoral systems. The lowest index value was recorded in 1987 and 1992 (2.5), when the purely PR system was in place. The average during the initial PR period was 2.87, whereas the two "majoritarian" periods have had high values, as we would expect from either MMM (average 8.31) or the majority-bonus system (8.89). The election of 2013, when the party system fragmented again due to the arrival of the Five Star Movement, saw an extraordinarily high value for a "PR" system, 17.3. This resulted from the bonus provision awarding nearly half the seats to a party with barely a quarter of the votes—the Democratic Party—as the main partner in the alliance that won the plurality.

Electoral Reform and Voters: Accountability and Volatility

Although we might detect a general shift toward a bipolar structure since 1994, and a quasi-two-party system in 2008, Italy has also seen substantial electoral volatility. This includes the eruption of new parties such as the populist Five Star Movement. In part, this comes as an unintended consequence of electoral reform, as discussed next.

Especially with the 2006–2013 period and the presence of a majority-bonus proportional system, without preference voting (closed list), the party (in central office) greatly strengthened its power in recruiting party personnel. This increased the voters' disaffection due to the diminishing ability to affect the choice of candidates and, to some extent, to determine social representation (especially in terms of gender, expertise, and generation). The frustration felt by citizens was, in the end, one of the main factors favoring abstentions, the rise of populist parties such as the Northern League, the flourishing of new (and significant) parties such as the Five Star Movement, and so on. Most interestingly, if we consider electoral volatility, it is possible to observe that the 1994–2001 elections registered a different score: they obtained the highest period average in terms of volatility (24.0, as shown in Table 2). In the 2013 election volatility was even higher (39.1), mostly due to the extraordinary success of the Five Star Movement, as well as from retrospective voting on ruling parties' performances (ITANES 2013).

Votes for a particular candidate were possible under the 1948–1993 electoral system, because of the open lists. However, given the SSDs of the 1993 electoral reform, voters started to attach more importance to the characteristics of candidates than previously (ITANES 2001, 2006, 2008, 2013; Bellucci and Segatti 2011). Moreover, voters have generally become increasingly accustomed to bipolar competition and the expectation of having a government that is a reflection of electoral results, and not, as in the past, based on parliamentary bargaining. The collapse of the pre-1989 party system further opened the door to different electoral behavior, in tandem with new parties that were not linked to historical political traditions. The success of the M5S in 2013, attractive to younger voters (about 44 percent according to ITANES 2013), and the Northern League since 1992–1994 highlights the need for parties to focus on a few regions where the number of seats allocated to the Senate was greater, as in Lombardy, Campania, or Veneto. This was particularly true for the Senate and especially after the 2005 electoral reform.

This brings us to a brief examination of electoral nationalization, shown in Table 2. There exists the possibility that electoral laws can affect the ratio between what parties obtain at a regional level and the numbers they achieve throughout the entire territory. The index of nationalization, which varies between 0 and 1—the lower the index, the higher the parties' concentration of votes in a few areas, and the higher the index, the higher the nationalization of the vote (Caramani 2004; Bochsler 2010; Passarelli 2013a)—has been quite homogenous during the entire period. The lowest level was registered in 1994 (0.749), and the highest in 1976 (0.888). In terms of the effects of electoral systems, we can observe a lower nationalization during the mixed-member period (0.79), when the SSDs meant that parties with regional base were privileged, vis-à-vis quite similar higher values in the other two periods (about 0.85).

Conclusions

Italy has experienced three major electoral reforms in the last twenty-five years and multiple elections under quite different systems: PR, MMM, and majority-bonus PR. The chapter's review of the main political results in the Italian context and electoral reforms has partially confirmed our knowledge of the effects that electoral systems have produced (Gallagher 1975, 1992; Shugart 2005). However, not all the political expectations were realized. For example, the effects of the 1993 reform on both parties and voters were important, even if it did not achieve the political goals of strengthening parliamentary majorities, prolonging governments, and increasing accountability. In particular, the absence of big, cohesive national parties has mitigated the effects of electoral reforms, especially in the case of the mixed-member majoritarian system (1994–2001), as the decline of the percentages of votes and seats allocated to the two biggest parties has confirmed. Beyond the electoral laws' technicalities and details, the important lessons from the Italian case is that so much system change compared to other countries is mostly explained by party system fragmentation and governmental instability. From a theoretical perspective, then, the Italian case perfectly fits with the research question on the effects of electoral systems. The case has empirically demonstrated that the electoral system alone cannot change the *political system* if the electoral reforms are not coupled with other features. Consistent with an observation made over forty years ago by Sartori (1976; see also Renwick 2010; Baldini 2011), the most important contextual reason that electoral reform in Italy has disappointed its advocates is the absence of strong national parties.

Postscript: Recent Developments

Following the outcome of a referendum and a ruling of the Constitutional Court, the electoral system of Italy remains in flux. This postscript will review some developments since the passage of the electoral reform of 2015. Beyond the technicalities and arguments for and against the reform, the ability of the reform to take effect was conditional on the approval of the constitutional referendum in 2016. On December 4, 2016, Italian voters expressed their vote on a referendum about constitutional reforms. The electoral results led to Prime Minister Renzi's resignation and, a week later, a new government headed by Paolo Gentiloni, former minister of foreign affairs under Renzi. Because it failed, the country was left for several months in a situation of potential stalemate.

This was the third referendum of its kind in Italy, with the other two having been held in 2001 and 2006. The two options presented to voters in 2016 were related to the approval or rejection of the reform promoted by Renzi's government and his center-left parliamentary majority.[27] The result of the referendum was both clear and decisive. Approximately 60 percent of voters cast a "no" vote in opposition to the proposed reforms. Perhaps the most striking result was voter turnout. Nearly 70 percent of eligible voters cast a vote, a percentage that is similar to that reached in general elections in Italy (e.g., 75 percent in 2013). This figure also confirms that Italy remains a democracy with one of the highest electoral participation rates in the world. Despite this high turnout figure, one of the most notable features of the referendum is the persistent north–south divide in terms of turnout and the level of rejection of the reform. Rejection of the referendum was particularly high in southern regions, with peaks in Sicily, Sardinia, and Campania. Support for the referendum was limited and prevailed in only two regions (i.e., Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna), as well as in the province of Bolzano.

The elimination of Italy's "perfect" or symmetrical bicameralism was central to the reform. Such bicameralism is unique among contemporary parliamentary democracies and is a subject of much debate by politicians and scholars alike. It has contributed to political instability, especially after 1994, as the risk of different majorities in the two branches has increased due to differences in who selects deputies and how.[28] These different electorates have divergent electoral behaviors that are further accentuated by the regional allocation of seats for the Senate versus the national allocation for the Chamber.

The law approved in 2015 did not change the Senate's electoral law, because the reform's supporters thought the referendum would pass. Therefore, similar majorities cannot be ensured. The possibility of having two very different electoral laws for the two Chambers in a context of symmetric bicameralism may generate uncertainty and political weakness. A first clarification came from the Constitutional Court decision on January 25, 2017. The court intervened by invalidating parts of the law. In particular, the decision dropped the second ballot to allocate the majority bonus for the Chamber of Deputies to make "more

similar" the two electoral systems for the two Houses, albeit the Senate would still have a regional allocation of seats. However, the supreme judges kept the provision of a majority bonus allocated to the party with 40 percent of votes.[29] After the 2016 referendum, *another* (!) electoral law has been approved,[30] even beyond the changes the Constitutional Court made. Under the Italian electoral sky, it seems that many things happen and nothing changes. Theoretically, if the parliament would not approve any other change, it could also be possible to have general elections with two different systems for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

It remains true that Italy still lacks a coherent electoral law and still has two chambers with the same powers, and it cannot be taken for granted that parliament will approve a new electoral law. Electoral uncertainty continues in Italy.

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Notes:

([1]) Renwick (2010, 111) reports five reforms, including the first electoral law introduced in 1946 after the end of fascism, and the 1954 law that reintroduced that of 1948 after the 1953 change. See also Clementi (2015). In fact, Italy had five electoral laws: 1948, 1953, 1993, 2005, and 2015, to which we could add the electoral law—albeit never applied—generated by the 2014 constitutional judgement that abolished the 2005 law.

([2]) The calculation of the quota is as follows: $V/(M+n)$, where V is valid votes, M is the district magnitude, and n varies with the specific provision of the system. In the 1946 law, the provision was for $n = 1$ (equivalent to Hagenbach-Bischoff or Droop) in districts of $M \leq 20$ seats, and $n = 2$ in higher-magnitude districts. As explained later, and in Table 1, the definition of the quota was changed in subsequent laws of this period.

([3]) A constitutional referendum was held on June 2, 1946, and the Constituent Assembly was elected at the same time: the choice was between the republic or the monarchy, which was the existing Italian form of state. The republic obtained 54.3 percent of votes, whereas the monarchy obtained 45.7 percent. The law allowed for only one preference vote in 1946. The proportional system was used by the DC to divide the left field, especially the PSI from the PCI. In that way, the hegemonic role of the DC was not in danger, as it was guaranteed by the Cold war system (Clementi 2015).

([4]) Specifically, thirty-one multiseat constituencies and one single-seat constituency for the Valle d’Aosta.

([5]) The thresholds applied to the remainder seats only. Parties could thus gain access to the parliament through district seats, as in the cases of regionalist parties such as Union valdôtaine or the Svp (Südtiroler Volkspartei), which won their seats in a district but do not have access to the distribution of the remainder seats.

([6]) According to Article 59 of the presidential decree (n. 361/1957), voters could cast up to three preferences in a district with a magnitude equal to or less than fifteen. In bigger districts, four preference votes were allowed.

([7]) The steps to assign the remaining seats were as follows: (1) all votes not used to win a seat were collected together at the national district (*collegio unico nazionale*); (2) at this level the number of seats to each party was calculated; (3) to decide *where* those seats would be allocated, a rank among the districts was made—therefore, party X would have won its seats in the districts with the highest remainders in percentage (e.g., if party X obtained a 50 percent remainder out of the quorum, then the first seats will be allocated, etc.); and (4) finally, in terms of *which* candidate will be elected, that with the highest number of preferences will be considered first.

([8]) In 1948, the definition of the quota was changed to $V/(M+3)$, and in 1956 back to $V/(M+2)$. The 1948–1953 formula generated an extraordinarily low quota, which would benefit the larger parties (Gallagher and Mitchell 2005, 587; Shugart and Taagepera 2017, 36–39). See Table 1 for a summary of these changes.

([9]) A similar proposal was adopted during the fascist era, in 1924. The Acerbo law gave the party that won the most votes two-thirds of the seats. However, the bonus was possible only if the party got at least 25 percent of the votes.

([10]) A minor change was approved in 1956: it slightly increased the proportionality of the system without changing its identity (Renwick 2010, 119). The value +2 in the Imperiali quota formula was introduced at the district level together with the provision of obtaining at the least three hundred thousand votes.

([11]) The choice to call the referendum was motivated by the fact that the Senate had a dual formula. It would function as an SSD system wherever a candidate obtained 65 percent of votes; seats not filled in SSDs were instead allocated at the regional level via the D'Hondt method. In fact, few seats were filled as SSDs: on average, only 3.6 senators per election (out of 315) were elected this way. Therefore, the referendum calling for the abrogation of the 65 percent clause implied shifting the Senate to a plurality system. In contrast, the Chamber had a strictly PR system.

([12]) For the election of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, in 1993, Italy was divided into twenty-seven districts (*circoscrizioni*). However, given that the distribution of the PR seats was calculated at the national level, as in the PR system previously adopted, districts served only to choose individual candidates inside the party lists. In contrast, for the Senate, each region is a separate district and votes are not pooled nationally. The

meaning of “the Senate is elected on a regional basis” provision (Article 57) remains subject to debate by scholars.

([13]) For example, if the “RED” candidate won an SSD with 45,000 votes and the runner-up got 42,100 votes, as a consequence, the vote to the PR list linked to the “RED” candidate was reduced by 2,901. The logic was to “drop” the vote surplus used to win the SSD. Moreover, if a party was connected to more than one list, then the “excess votes” (2,901 in our example) were partitioned among the affiliated list on the basis of the PR vote of each list.

([14]) In 2006 and 2008: Lombardy (forty-seven seats; forty-nine in 2013), Campania (thirty seats; twenty-nine in 2013), Lazio (twenty-seven seats; twenty-eight in 2013), Sicily (twenty-six seats; twenty-five in 2013), Veneto (twenty-four seats), Piedmont (twenty-two seats), Emilia-Romagna (twenty-one seats; twenty-two in 2013), Tuscany (eighteen seats), Apulia (eighteen seats; twenty in 2013), Calabria (ten seats), Sardinia (nine seats; eight in 2013), Liguria (eight seats), Marches (eight seats), Umbria (seven seats), Basilicata (seven seats), Abruzzo (seven seats), Trentino Alto Adige (seven seats), Friuli Venezia Giulia (seven seats), and Molise (two seats).

([15]) Additionally, one MP is elected from the Aosta Valley (SSD) and twelve are elected by a constituency consisting of Italians living abroad.

([16]) Among coalitions that do not satisfy this requirement, the list that passes 4 percent on a national basis has access to the seat distribution. The same provision applies to the coalition running for the Senate, where the threshold is equal to 8 percent for single list in the coalition.

([17]) The law also allowed multiple candidacies in different districts, thus placing a supplementary power in the hands of the central party in choosing candidates.

([18]) Together with parliamentary reforms, one must also consider the series of popular attempts to change the electoral system. Coherently with the tradition of 1991 and 1993, two referenda were called: in 1999 and in 2000. Although both obtained more “yes” votes than “no” votes, meaning that voters supported the changes (basically dropping the proportional part of the 25 percent of seats as established by the 1993 law), both referendums failed because they did not clear the required threshold of voter turnout of 50 percent +1 of voters (in part because the voter list was outdated).

([19]) In the Chamber, 630 deputies are divided into 618 members elected from the national territory and 12 members elected by Italians living abroad, elected through PR. Therefore, it is highly likely that the winning list would gain a few additional seats.

([20]) Different proposals were presented during the parliamentary debate: in particular, at the beginning the threshold was placed at 35 percent and then at 37 percent.

([21]) No formal alliances (the so-called *apparentamento*) are allowed for the runoff between lists that competed in the first round.

([22]) See the chapter on France by Hoyo for examples of runoffs among lists at the subnational level.

([23]) The Constitutional Court changed this provision to determination by lot.

([24]) The preferences are not ranked, but there are two lines for a voter to cast preference votes by writing in candidate names. If the candidate written on the second line is not of a different gender from the one on the first line, the second preference vote is invalid.

([25]) The average government tenure was eleven months during the First Republic (1948–1992).

([26]) For another prominent example of multiparty alliances coordinating on nominations in SSDs, see the chapter in this volume by Ziegfeld on India.

([27]) The reform was approved earlier by an absolute majority in both houses of parliament, but the proposed changes required a two-thirds majority in parliament to be implemented without a referendum according to the Italian constitution (Article 138.3). Since this threshold was not met in parliament, the referendum was called (by the government) by collecting the required number of voter signatures, as stated by Article 138.2, while the opponents to the reform were not able to get the minimum number of required signatures (five hundred thousand).

([28]) Chamber: minimum voter age is 18 years old. Senate: minimum voter age is 25 years old.

([29]) The Constitutional Court has changed another aspect related to the party list heads. Since list heads can be candidates in up to ten different districts, if they are elected in more than one district, then the allocation to the “district” will come by lot, rather than at the list head’s option.

([30]) In Autumn 2017 the Italian Parliament approved a new electoral law expected to later pass the Senate. The MMM system features 37% SSD seats and 63% elected by closed list PR (Hare) with a maximum M of 7 or 8, and no linkage between the tiers. The threshold is set at 3% for party/list or 10% for coalition, with a lower threshold for lists representing linguistic minorities. Parties can nominate no more than 60% of their candidates from the same gender.

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