

The evolution of the Italian opposition in the last twenty years: has anything changed?

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In order to understand the evolution of the Italian political system over the past two decades, we have to consider the changes undergone by one fundamental institutional actor, that is, the parliamentary opposition. Its transformation can in fact be used as a valid indicator of change in the whole political system and it will also help us to reflect on the possible transformation of the Italian model of democracy. The 20-year path that has brought Italy to the current political situation, with the emergence of three different poles of approximately equal strength; the rise of the Five Star Movement; and the creation of a grand coalition consisting of traditional political opponents will be reconstructed by re-examining the evolution of the political system from the perspective of the changing role and functions of the parliamentary opposition, thus contributing to a better understanding of the (new) political phase initiated by the outcome of the 2013 election.

Keywords: parliamentary opposition; government; Five Star Movement

Introduction

This article focuses on one essential aspect of the existence and functioning of all parliamentary democracies (Dahl 1966), namely, parliamentary opposition. In order to fulfil the general objective of the contributors to this special issue of understanding the evolution of the Italian political system over the past two decades, we undoubtedly have to consider the changes that have taken place in the behaviour of this fundamental institutional actor. Its transformation can in fact be used as a valid indicator of change in the whole political system, and it will also help us to reflect on the possible transformation of the pattern of democracy in the country.

According to the literature, different types of opposition – in terms of composition, behaviour and expectations – correspond to different patterns of democracy (Lijphart 1999). In the case of majoritarian democracies, the parliamentary opposition has no possibility of any consociation or space for negotiation with the government. Nevertheless, this situation prompts the opposition to present itself as constructive and alternative so as to compete for power at the next election, as alternation in office is frequent and guaranteed. In the case of consensual democracies, opposition life is more advantageous in terms of daily benefits thanks to the consociational dynamics within the parliament. Opposition, or to be more precise, plural oppositions are not motivated to present themselves to the electorate as genuine alternatives to the incumbents because

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alternation in office is rare, if not impossible (Fabbrini 1994; Pasquino 1995). In other words, as Maeda (2014, 11) has accurately noted, the

Westminster model, in which the opposition is deprived of political influence and the legislature quickly passes the executive's proposals, may seem less democratic to the proponents of consensus democracy, but it may have an advantage in enhancing competition between government and opposition and realizing a regular alternation in ruling parties.

In this context, the history of the Italian political system until 2013 could be split into two different phases: a *consociational* era, corresponding to the years of the so-called First Republic, and a *competitive* (or alternation) era, mid-1990s onwards. But after a long period of bipolar competition –, and the parenthesis of the technocratic government, which can be defined as a period of 'suspended opposition' (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2014) – the 2013 general election saw the unexpected emergence of a strong third political force, namely the Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle, M5S), led by the former comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo. This challenged the new bipolar structure that Italy had acquired in recent years and, because of the absence of a majority in the Senate, generated a major political crisis that eventually led to the creation of a *grand coalition* composed of two former political competitors¹: the centre-left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) and the centre-right People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PDL).²

These political events bring us to the crucial question we intend to address in the present article: can we speak of the onset of a third major political phase in Italy following the 2013 election? Our aim is to answer that question by taking the transformation of the Italian parliamentary opposition since the beginning of the alternation era as our main indicator. We will start by investigating the opposition's composition and behaviour since the mid-1990s in order to ascertain whether it has actually come closer to the Westminster model – which envisages an opposition that is loyal, alternative, singular and parliamentary (Punnett 1973) –, and then we will try to go further by exploring whether the results of the 2013 election and the entry of a new strong opposition actor like the M5S in the parliamentary arena allow us to speak today of the initiation of a new phase.

In relation to the bipolar era, in our opinion it is time to revisit and re-evaluate what actually changed for both the parliamentary opposition and the whole political system in that period. So in the second section, we will reconstruct the 20-year path that brought Italy to the current political situation by highlighting the key stages of the changing processes that have affected the Italian parliamentary opposition since the mid-1990s, and by exploring the reasons that explain the inability of this institutional actor, and consequently the entire political system, fully to adhere to the majoritarian model.

As regards the new phase that began in 2013, it is clearly harder to make conclusive remarks about what has changed and whether or not we should speak of a permanent (systemic) transformation. But it would certainly be useful to discuss and test some hypotheses – or to be more precise, expectations – concerning the possible changes brought about by the above-mentioned election results and the new parliamentarians (MPs) sitting on the opposition benches. How is the new opposition represented by the M5S behaving in the parliamentary arena? Does the politically novel image that they transmit outside Parliament correspond to novelties in the conduct of the opposition in Parliament? We will try to answer these questions by examining the M5S' parliamentary activity and comparing it with that of the other main opposition parties and with the results of an expert survey administered to a sample of Italian journalists.

Before turning to the empirical part of this work, in the next section we will outline our theoretical framework and discuss some preliminary research hypotheses.

Research questions and hypotheses

Parliamentary oppositions are not unitary actors, whether they are officially composed of one single party as in the case of two-party systems, or of several parties as in the case of multiparty systems. Oppositions may be unitary objects of analysis, but they are always formed by numerous actors: these actors are political parties and individual MPs within them. This is why we believe that the study of parliamentary oppositions should be divided into at least two different levels of analysis (De Giorgi 2011). The first concerns their internal characteristics and the relationships among their own members, which is examined in the first two parts of the next section. The second regards the relationship with the executive, which we explore in the third part of the next section.

Turning now to our review of the period that was expected to lead the country to the establishment of a bipolar (majoritarian) system, we will undertake a fresh analysis of the development of the Italian political system from the perspective of parliamentary opposition in order to understand what has brought us to the current political situation. What do we expect from the changes that took place in the 1990s as regards the evolution of the opposition in Parliament? As far as the first level of analysis is concerned, the degree of internal cohesion of oppositions usually varies in relation to variations in electoral and party systems and the strength and composition of executives. So in a two-party system, the internal cohesion of the opposition, usually composed of a single party, is certainly stronger than that in a multiparty system. But there are significant differences even between multiparty systems: our expectation is that there will be a higher level of organisational cohesion among the opposition members in a multiparty system with structured bipolar dynamics than in a fragmented multiparty system with unpredictable electoral alliances. What has happened in the Italian case with the change in the electoral system since the mid-1990s? Has party fragmentation decreased and the organisational cohesion of the opposition parties increased? We would expect the answer to that question to be positive, but as we will see in the next section this has not always been the case.

As far as the second level of analysis is concerned, namely the relationship between government and opposition and, more specifically, the strategy adopted by opposition parties in their interaction with the government, the above-mentioned systemic changes should have encouraged the parliamentary opposition to behave in a more competitive way. Nonetheless, previous research has demonstrated that favourable stances of opposition members towards legislation promoted by the government are quite common in both consensus and majoritarian democracies (Andeweg, De Winter, and Müller 2008; Christiansen and Damgaard 2008; Cowley and Stuart 2005; Giuliani 2008; Kaiser 2008; Mújica and Sánchez-Cuenca 2006). A more in-depth analysis of data on voting behaviour reveals that this tendency towards consensus is mainly influenced by non-systemic factors such as bills' initiators and the policy area concerned (Tsebelis 2002; Green-Pedersen 2007; Jenkins 2010; De Giorgi 2011). So rather than an increase in the level of conflict between government and opposition, we would expect opposition parties to behave differently in relation to the substantive characteristics of government legislative proposals.

As we know, even if all of these dynamics are confirmed, they came to a standstill in 2013. In fact, the election led to the rise of a strong third pole, represented by the M5S, which seriously challenged the bipolar structure that Italy had achieved in the years

previously. It is therefore necessary to explore how this new opposition actor has behaved in Parliament and, more importantly, to discuss the possible launch of a completely new phase in the evolution of the Italian political system. From this perspective, it should be noted that Italy has followed a path similar to that of many other European democracies in recent years: a significant transformation in the party context and the fall of many governing parties due to the onset of the economic crisis, which led to ‘the growth of abstention, increasing parliamentary fragmentation and the emergence of new political forces, notably those expressing anti-party, extreme right-wing or even racist positions’ (Bosco and Verney 2012, 150). In the case of Italy, it was anti-party sentiment in particular that brought about the downfall of both the centre–right and the centre–left coalitions and the rise of the M5S (Moury and De Giorgi 2014). As pointed out by Mair (2011), it seems generally that ‘governing capacity and vocation’ have become characteristic of a more or less restricted group of parties belonging to the mainstream of the party system – parties able to offer voters a choice of government. On the other hand, the capacity of ‘representation’, that is, the expression of the people’s voice, has become the characteristic of a different group of parties. These parties constitute the ‘new opposition’: they rarely govern, they usually make frequent use of populist rhetoric and, to employ Sartori’s terminology, they represent a kind of ‘semi-responsible’, if not completely ‘irresponsible’, opposition (1966). Assuming that the M5S might represent such a ‘new opposition’ in Italy, how are they behaving now that they have entered the parliamentary arena? Can we speak of two different types of opposition in Parliament: that of the ‘old’ parties on one hand and that of the M5S on the other? And in what respect is the M5S different from the other opposition parties? First, we expect the voting behaviour of M5S to be more cohesive and conflictual than that of the ‘traditional’ parties. Second, we also envisage that the strategy adopted in Parliament will be different. In particular, we assume that the M5S will present themselves as a radical alternative not only to the government in office but also to the other opposition parties. As a result, we expect they will be more active in the *input sphere* (that is, in the sphere of legislative proposals and amending activity) and in scrutiny of the government (through tabling questions and interpellations and introducing motions) than the other opposition parties.

In the third section of this work we try to test these hypotheses by examining the opposition’s parliamentary activity in the XVII legislature – comparing the behaviour and strategy of the M5S with that of the other minority parties – and also by identifying the media’s opinion of the ‘new’ opposition carried out by the M5S.

The opposition’s evolution in the bipolar era

The steps forward

As we know, one of the most significant features of the Italian political system in the years of the so-called First Republic was the absence of alternation.³ Only a series of political and institutional events in the late 1980s and early 1990s – the crisis of communism, the *Tangentopoli* scandal and the reform of the electoral system among others – gave rise to the changes that marked the beginning of the so-called Second Republic, the end of the exclusion of the anti-system parties⁴ from the government arena and, for the first time in the history of the Republic, the realistic expectation of alternation in government (Verzichelli and Cotta 2000).

What is particularly interesting for us is whether these political and institutional developments have affected the role and functions of the parliamentary opposition in

any way. In our opinion, there are three political–electoral moments that marked a definite turning point for the parliamentary opposition by acting as a stimulus for the evolution of this actor in a majoritarian direction, and they correspond to three election years: 1996, 2001 and 2008.

The first general election of the ‘new era’ took place in 1994. On that occasion, a new electoral system – a mixed system, largely based on single-member constituencies – was employed and, for the first time, both the centre-right and the centre-left parties formed strategic pre-electoral alliances. It was the centre-right coalition formed by Forza Italia (FI), the National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN) and the Northern League (Lega Nord, LN) and led by Silvio Berlusconi that won the election, beating the centre-left group. But the heterogeneity of this coalition meant that the first Berlusconi government lasted only a few months and a caretaker government, headed by Lamberto Dini, held office from 1995 until the following election. Despite the undisputed importance of the 1994 general election, it was the 1996 election that marked major change for the parliamentary opposition and initiated a new phase in the evolution of the Italian political system as a whole. In fact, this was the first time political parties formed only two major pre-electoral coalitions at the polls, following a purely bipolar logic and effectively excluding any third force from the competition. The 1996 election led to the victory of the centre–left coalition, called the Olive-tree Alliance, and the formation of the first Prodi government. But more importantly, it was the first time that two different groupings sat in Parliament and that, despite their heterogeneity, they could be clearly identified by the electorate as a majority and an opposition. This made the subsequent election, held in 2001, a real ‘watershed’ (Pasquino 2002), for both the parliamentary opposition and the political system, and this for two reasons: there was a bipolar contest between an incumbent government and a genuinely alternative opposition, and therefore alternation in government became possible. With the establishment of the second Berlusconi government, this possibility was realised and, once elected, the centre–right coalition became the first majority government in the history of the country to emerge from a bipolar electoral contest based on the choice of a specific coalition and the clear indication of a prime ministerial candidate. The Westminster model had never been as close.

In 2006, the incumbent government led by Silvio Berlusconi was defeated and replaced by the centre–left coalition led again by Romano Prodi; however, the new electoral law introduced at the end of 2005⁵ meant that the victory was so narrow that the government was forced to resign and new elections were called less than 2 years later. The 2008 election represents the third crucial step towards the consolidation of a majoritarian system in Italy: the institutional framework was actually much less fragmented than in the past. As we can see from Table 1, there were only six parliamentary groups (PGs) in both chambers (including the mixed group). This allowed the new government led by Silvio Berlusconi to control an unprecedentedly ‘simple’ majority of only two parties, the PDL and the LN. The simplification of the party system was evident even when we look at the composition of the parliamentary opposition, which included only three political forces: two from the centre-left, the PD and Italy of Values (Italia dei Valori, IdV), and one from the centre-right, the Union of the Centre (Unione di Centro, UDC).⁶ In addition, the formation of the first *shadow cabinet* in the history of the country, led by the PD General Secretary and defeated prime ministerial candidate, Walter Veltroni, seemed to add to the parliamentary opposition’s growing recognition as a fully fledged institutional actor. But the Italian shadow cabinet survived for only a few months being disbanded with few regrets early in 2009 following the resignation of Walter Veltroni.

Table 1. Government majorities (in percentages) and the number of parliamentary party groups at the beginning of each legislature (1994–2014).

	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008	2013	2014
	Berlusconi I	Prodi I	Berlusconi II	Prodi II	Berlusconi IV	Letta	Renzi
Government majority – Inaugural vote of confidence (Chamber)	366 (58.1)	322 (51.1)	351 (57.2)	344 (54.6)	335 (53.2)	453 (71.9)	378 (60)
Government majority – Inaugural vote of confidence (Senate)	159 (48.8)	173 (53.2)	175 (54)	165 (51.2)	173 (53.7)	233 (72.8)	169 (52.8)
Number of Parliamentary Groups (Chamber)*	8	9	7	8	6	7	10
Number of Parliamentary Groups (Senate)*	10	11	9	8	6	8	10

Source: <http://www.circap.org/governo-renzi-in-parlamento-report.html>

Note: Data for the Renzi government have been included as they are crucial for our analysis of the opposition's behaviour in the XVII legislature.

* Including the Mixed group.

The problems of internal cohesion were not resolved, whether we look at the opposition as an individual actor or consider the individual parties within it.

The backward steps

In addition to the fall of the first (and last) shadow cabinet in the history of the Italian Republic, the Italian opposition's path towards the assumption of a fully recognised and institutionalised role within Parliament has recently encountered two major hurdles: the first, which was thought to be only temporary, occurred during the caretaker government led by Mario Monti; the second and certainly more significant came with the 2013 election, which initiated a completely new phase for the parliamentary opposition and the entire political system. As we have already noted, the last election saw the emergence of three (rather than two) main poles of almost equal size, the consequent distortion of majoritarian bipolarism and the serious risk of institutional paralysis. The political crisis that followed was finally overcome only through a compromise that led to the formation of a grand coalition formed by the political parties that had alternated in government until a few months earlier. The opposition to the new government led by PD leader Enrico Letta continued to be the new entry M5S – along with the LN and the PD's former electoral ally, the Left, Ecology and Freedom (Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà, SEL), together with some other minor forces. We will examine in greater depth the consequences for the parliamentary opposition of this new phase in the last section.

As noted above, the establishment of the technocratic government had already represented a breaking point in the evolution of the parliamentary opposition in a majoritarian direction, but this was not thought to be a halt but only a pause until new elections were held. Nevertheless, during the period of the caretaker government, the opposition's role was essentially 'frozen': the government led by Monti was in fact supported by a large variegated majority, which included the PD, the PDL, the UDC, the new centre-right group, the Future and Freedom for Italy (Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia, FLI),⁷ and a number of other minor forces. Only the LN, having supported the Berlusconi government for the previous three years, and IdV were officially in opposition. The LN had repeatedly stressed that the decision to stay in opposition was due not only to its disagreement with the policies of the government, but also to the desire to guarantee the minimum requirements of a democratic system, namely the presence of at least one opposition party in Parliament.

This assertion was only partly true: opposition is actually considered the crowning institution of a fully institutionalised political society and the hallmark of those variously called democratic, liberal, parliamentary, constitutional, pluralistic (Ionescu and De Madariaga 1968); but the mere presence of an opposition in Parliament is not enough. It is the *quality* of the opposition – together with the ability of the government – that is the crucial variable with respect to the efficient and effective functioning of contemporary democracies (Pasquino 1990). For example, we could take the case of the Swiss Confederation. Despite the absence of a formal opposition in the Assembly and the presence of all the major parties in the Federal Council (i.e. the government), Switzerland is fully recognised as a democratic system. On the other hand, during the so-called First Republic in Italy, it was impossible for the major opposition party, the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI), truly to compete for power by proposing itself as a real alternative to the government in office. This situation raised serious doubts about the quality of Italian democracy in that period. In fact, although the presence of an opposition in Parliament was largely guaranteed, the two main forces

concerned – the PCI on the one hand and the MSI on the other – could not actually act as a ‘government in waiting’. In contrast, the possibility of alternation was secured in all the other Western European democracies, even though it did not necessarily happen after any given election. This was the case, for instance, in the UK with the successive election victories of the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher. So it is not the mere presence of an opposition in Parliament that ensures the existence and the effective functioning of a democracy. The essential requirements are the opposition’s capacity to check and criticise the government’s action and the possibility of presenting itself to the electorate as a real alternative to the government in office.

To conclude, what can be said of the Italian parliamentary opposition and the way it performed its role in the alternation era? The creation of two (relatively) stable opposing poles and the presence of bipolar competition have proved to be necessary but not sufficient conditions for the complete realisation of a majoritarian system. In fact, the Italian opposition continued to lack some crucial attributes in terms of Punnett’s definition (1973): the persistent party fragmentation within each coalition and the absence of political will in both political camps have certainly undermined the organisational cohesion and coordinated parliamentary action required to enable the opposition to evolve into a genuine institutional actor. As a result, the image of the opposition transmitted outside Parliament has been confusing and not always clearly identifiable: certainly far from the model to which the country had seemed to aspire.

Relations with the government

In this part, we will explore government–opposition dynamics using the conduct of the opposition parties in the law-making process as an indicator, and verify whether they usually adopt a more or less consensual profile and whether there has been any change in this behaviour in the last 20 years.

According to previous research, the extent of the opposition’s support in Parliament has not decreased since the mid-1990s despite the confrontational style that emerged with the new electoral law. In the 1996–2006 period bills were approved with favourable votes that averaged 90.3% of the votes of those present (Giuliani 2008). It seems that none of the systemic changes that occurred in the political system in the last 20 years have affected the distribution of support between government and opposition. More recent analyses have not only confirmed this finding but also demonstrated that the opposition’s level of support depends on non-systemic factors and, in particular, on the subject of the legislative proposal⁸ and the effectiveness of the government’s action in parliament. In fact, it has been shown that the (voting) behaviour of the opposition party groups is significantly affected by the content and nature of government bills (De Giorgi and Marangoni 2013). In particular, the more programmatic commitments there are in a bill, the greater the number of dissenting votes becomes (Marangoni 2010). To this end, Table 2 shows averages of the index of support for government legislation by the parliamentary opposition in the 1996–2013 period, that is from the XIII to the XVII legislature (not including the Monti government).

The index of support is calculated, on the basis of the final vote in the Chamber of Deputies, as the number of non-dissenting votes (i.e. ayes and abstentions) cast by opposition MPs in relation to a government bill as a percentage of the total number of non-dissenting votes cast in relation to the same bill.⁹ In the last column of Table 2, we can observe the average index for the total number of bills approved in Parliament for each government under consideration. The most relevant finding relates to the nature of

Table 2. Index of opposition support for government bills* (1996–2011).

	Programmatic	Non programmatic	All
Prodi I	0.21	0.27	0.25
D'Alema I-II	0.25	0.33	0.32
Amato II	0.34	0.34	0.34
Berlusconi II-III	0.14	0.27	0.23
Prodi II	0.13	0.26	0.22
Berlusconi IV	0.17	0.27	0.23
Letta	0.17	0.15	0.16
Renzi	0.09	0.14	0.13

Note: *Not including the ratification of international treaties.

legislative proposals. Looking at the first two columns, we can observe that the programmatic origin of government bills significantly affects the level of support of opposition MPs, and this is true for all of the governments under examination with the sole exception of the Letta government.¹⁰ So, as we can see, while the general index of support during the two governments led by Silvio Berlusconi is 0.27, this index drops to 0.14 and 0.17 when we consider only those bills related to the executive's programmatic commitments. The same phenomenon can be observed during the two governments led by Romano Prodi: the level of support of the parliamentary opposition drops from 0.27 and 0.26 respectively to 0.21 and 0.13 when programmatic issues are at stake. The same is true for the Renzi government.¹¹ These data show that although the level of support of the opposition has not decreased as we expected, since the beginning of the alternation era it has been strongly affected by specific factors such as the content and the nature of the bills under discussion. Seen from a different perspective, it has been conditioned by the (increasing) capacity of governments to implement their programmatic promises and priorities: certainly one crucial result of the systemic changes that have taken place in Italy since the mid-1990s.

Of course, the consequences for the parliamentary opposition and its relationship with the government of the new political phase initiated by the 2013 election, are still hard to predict. Nevertheless, in the next section we will attempt to examine the first phase of the XVII legislature with a view to verifying whether a change has actually occurred both in the behaviour of the opposition, and in government–opposition interaction.

The XVII legislature: the emergence of a new opposition?

As already noted, the great success of the M5S at the general election of 2013 represents one of the most relevant political novelties in Italy in the last 20 years. Once in Parliament, M5S MPs stressed their extraneousness to the 'old' party dynamics and their unavailability for any post-electoral alliance aimed at overcoming the political paralysis that overtook Parliament in the initial weeks following the election. The M5S wanted to present itself as a brand new political movement, born precisely to make that paralysis happen and radically to change Italian politics. Therefore, they introduced themselves in Parliament as a new alternative opposition, with a firm resolve to get into government in the near future.

But what we want to know is whether the M5S has kept its pledges in the parliamentary arena and whether the party's PG has actually behaved in a substantially different way to that of the other opposition parties. In particular, as we said in the first section of

this article, first we would like to verify whether the M5S PG is more cohesive and adversarial in terms of voting behaviour than the other minority groups. Second, we will test whether their parliamentary action is more oriented to the *input sphere* (legislative proposals and amending activity) and scrutiny of the government (through questions, interpellations and the tabling of motions), given their aim of presenting themselves as a genuine alternative with respect to the old party system.

To this end, we followed two different but interrelated paths: we investigated the behaviour of the M5S through the analysis of parliamentary data – that is legislative and non-legislative activity – and then we turned to a very relevant actor in this context, namely the media. An *expert survey* was conducted among journalists responsible for reporting on the Italian parliament. This allowed us to see how the media – which are to some extent responsible for the image of parliamentary parties that is perceived outside the parliamentary arena – consider the new opposition activity of the M5S. The survey was conducted over about four weeks, beginning in early November 2013. The 28 journalists¹² who participated in this survey were from a total of 23 different news organisations and distributed quite uniformly across the print media, television and news agencies.

Let us start with the parliamentary data and the first level of our analysis, namely that of organisational cohesion. We employed an adjusted version of one of the most popular indices of cohesion in the literature, that is, the Agreement Index (AI) by Hix, Noury, and Roland (2005). This index takes into consideration three different voting options (Yes, No, Abstention) and reaches its highest point (1) when all of the MPs (in this case, belonging to the same PG) vote in the same way and its lowest point (0) when the same MPs are distributed equally among the three voting options. But the AI does not take into account the attendance rate, which we believe to be quite relevant. In fact, if more than 90% of the PG members are absent and the few who are present vote differently, the index would show a strongly divided group although this would not correspond to reality. For this reason, we calculated two different indices: one weighted by the attendance rate and another considering absences as votes against.¹³

The results are shown in Table 3. As we can see from the first two columns, the level of cohesion of the M5S is higher than that of the other opposition groups in both cases. In fact, the result remains unchanged even when absences are considered as votes against, as in the second column. In that case, the index increases for all the party groups,¹⁴ but the M5S remains most cohesive (from 0.72 to 0.91). This confirms what we were expecting, that is, that the unity of the M5S is markedly higher than that of the other opposition PGs. This is because their line of action, as is widely known, is decided outside of Parliament by their supporters (or by the leader Beppe Grillo, as many observers think) and then it is

Table 3. Index of cohesion of main opposition party groups and support in the XVII legislature.

	Level of cohesion with attendance rate	Level of cohesion with absences counted as dissenting votes	Level of support
M5S	0.72	0.91	0.27
LN	0.60	0.85	0.30
SEL	0.66	0.78	0.34
FI	0.36	0.67	0.25

Notes: The Forza Italia PG was (re)constituted on 19 November 2013 and was consequently taken into consideration in this analysis from that time onwards.

Votes for the approval of parliamentary bills and international treaties are excluded from the calculations.

strictly followed by the MPs.¹⁵ Party – or more precisely group – unity is a crucial, and proudly adhered to, characteristic of the M5S in parliament. According to Pinto and Pedrazzani (2015), the features of the M5S PG make MPs less likely to challenge the party line in legislative voting in comparison with other parliamentary parties. This is probably due to a distribution of resources between the leader and MPs that is skewed towards the former.

The second variable we aim to test is the level of M5S support for government legislative proposals. We examined the voting behaviour of the main opposition groups in the final stage of the law-making process. We created an index of consensus (IC) for each opposition party group that is equal to the relationship between the sum of favourable votes and abstentions and all the possible voting options, including absences. We included absences in the denominator because, given Parliament's standing orders, they can be considered as a particular kind of conflictual behaviour. The opposition party members can, in fact, choose absenteeism for either symbolic or strategic reasons, in order to distance themselves from a given legislative proposal or to try to prevent the House from reaching the legal quorum.

The results of our analysis are summarised in the last column of Table 3. As we can see, the behaviour of the M5S is quite conflictual but not very different from that of the other opposition parties: FI has an index score (0.25) that is even lower than that of the Five Star group (0.27). Their IC is certainly low, but this is also true for all the other minority groups: the LN (0.3) and SEL (0.34) seem only slightly less adversarial than the M5S and FI. So the conflictual behaviour usually attributed to the M5S is confirmed by looking at its actual conduct in the law-making process but it is not an exception if we compare it with the other opposition parties.

The response of journalists on this subject is in line with our findings. We asked them to indicate if, in their opinion, the M5S in opposition has a *competitive* attitude – aimed at demonstrating to the electorate that it could be a concrete alternative to the government in office –, a *cooperative* attitude – aimed at seeking and obtaining compromise in order to influence the politics of the government –, or an *adversarial* attitude – aimed at demonstrating dissent from government initiatives. The result is unequivocal. Out of all the interviewees, 85.7% think that the conduct of the M5S in Parliament is adversarial and not inclined in any way to cooperate with the government. So our results so far indicate that the 'new' opposition tends, as expected, to oppose rather than compromise with, the government in office, but is not particularly distant from the 'traditional' opposition parties.

Finally, let us explore whether the activity of M5S MPs is more oriented to the *input* sphere of the legislative cycle and to scrutiny of the government. First, we looked at the number of legislative proposals introduced by the M5S. The number of bills initiated by Five Star MPs as first signatories is not higher than that of the other opposition groups; on the contrary, more legislative proposals have been introduced by the LN. In concrete terms, we have 343 bills presented by the M5S, 437 by the LN, 146 by SEL and 161 by FI.¹⁶ As far as amendments are concerned, the findings show that the M5S seems to have been particularly active in this field: 4466 amendments as compared to 2178 and 1970 presented by the LN and SEL, respectively. But if we divide these numbers by the number of MPs belonging to each PG, the average number of amendments presented by both LN and SEL MPs is higher than it is for M5S MPs.

We then asked the media representatives to state what they believed to be M5S' main strategy when it comes to convincing the electorate that it is a concrete alternative to the government in office. We proposed three possible options: presentation of alternative

proposals to those of the government; presentation of amendments; and the assumption in public of critical positions vis-à-vis government initiatives. According to 75% of the journalists interviewed, the M5S tends to assume a critical position towards the government, a response that is completely in line with the journalists' previous view that the M5S' attitude is clearly adversarial, something that also confirms that the M5S does not consider legislative activity to be as effective as other parliamentary activities.

This is also shown by our further analysis of non-legislative activity – that is, the tabling of questions, interpellations and motions, which are the main actions parliamentary oppositions can take to perform their scrutiny function – in the current legislature. We explored how much use the opposition parties have made of these instruments. The results are summarised in Table 4. As we can see, the M5S has made greater use of these instruments than the other opposition groups: specifically, M5S MPs have presented more than twice as many questions (3211) as SEL (1226) and more than three times those of LN (971)¹⁷; nearly the same can be said with regards to interpellations – 185 for the M5S, only 42 for LN and 141 for SEL – and motions – 224 presented by M5S MPs, 101 by LN MPs and 110 by SEL. It is evident that scrutiny is considered by the M5S to be much more important and effective than legislative activity.¹⁸ As all the Five Star MPs are total neophytes in Parliament, non-legislative activity might be strategically more important than participating in decision-making because of the complexity of the issues debated and the 'costs' of being sufficiently informed to participate effectively in legislative activity. This issue also arose from the responses to the last question from the expert survey.

We asked the journalists whether they thought that there was a concrete difference between the opposition activity of the M5S and that of the other minority groups in Parliament. According to a large majority of the journalists interviewed (92.9%), there is definitely a crucial difference. When asked to specify this difference, the result proved very interesting because three main ideas emerged regarding the difference between the M5S and the other opposition parties. One relates precisely to the (lack of) experience of the MPs rather than to their attitudes. A significant number of our respondents felt that the Five Star MPs are simply not competent enough to engage in parliamentary activities, unlike the other opposition members. The idea is that they might potentially have much greater influence but that this is frustrated by their lack of skills. The second response is related to their 'distinctiveness'. A large proportion of our interviewees thought that the main purpose of the activity of M5S MPs was precisely to be perceived as radically 'alternative' – to be perceived as the bearers of a totally alternative conception of government, as being willing to accept confrontation but unwilling to compromise. For this reason, they reject any collaboration with the other political forces other than occasional cooperation on single issues. Finally, another significant group of our respondents think that the M5S tries to offer an alternative to the current government, as other

Table 4. Non-legislative activity of the main opposition groups in the XVII legislature.

	Questions	Interpellations	Motions
M5S	3211	185	224
LN	971	42	101
SEL	1226	141	110
FI	633	44	43

Note: The Forza Italia PG was (re)constituted on 19 November 2013 and was consequently taken into consideration in this analysis from that time onwards.

opposition PGs have tried (and still try) to do. But they seem to propose an alternative to the entire system, while the others more ‘traditionally’ propose alternative policies. Anyhow, it is the conflictual aspect of the opposition rather than the alternative that prevailed in the past and seems to prevail today even more strongly with the M5S. So despite very high expectations, not much seems to have changed.

To conclude, even with the entry of the M5S in Parliament, the opposition’s attitude in the XVII legislature has remained mainly adversarial, and not only in legislative terms. What has changed is rather the object of conflict: until the XVI legislature it was mainly the controversial figure of Silvio Berlusconi (De Giorgi 2011); today the whole party system seems to be the object of the ‘new’ opposition’s action.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to reconstruct the 20-year path that has brought Italy to the current political situation by revisiting the changes that have taken place in the political system from the perspective of the evolution of the parliamentary opposition. As we said at the beginning, the history of the Italian political system until 2013 can be split into two different phases that could be called the consociational and competitive (or alternation) eras. The rise of a strong third political force like the M5S at the 2013 election, and the political crisis it generated, undoubtedly challenged the bipolar structure Italy had recently acquired, which makes us wonder whether we can speak of the onset of a third major political phase. Our aim was to answer that question using as our main indicator the transformation of the Italian parliamentary opposition since the beginning of the alternation era.

Italy’s consociational practices were well-known phenomena in the years of the so-called First Republic. The transformation of the Italian political system – notably the bipolarisation of party competition – started in the mid-1990s and we expected this to have an impact on parliamentary dynamics and the relationship between majority and opposition in particular. To ascertain this transformation, we identified the crucial steps taken towards a new model of opposition: the change in the party system; the creation of two opposing coalitions and the consequent rise of unprecedented bipolar competition; the accomplishment of the first alternation in government. Then, we explored the political events that led to this movement coming to a standstill: the establishment of a technocratic government in 2011; the emergence of a new strong third pole at the 2013 election and the political crisis generated by that election result. Finally, we investigated what had happened since the M5S entered Parliament. In particular, we tried to verify whether this resulted in a radical change in the behaviour of the opposition and whether a new conception of opposition has emerged both within and outside Parliament.

The M5S undoubtedly represents the most significant novelty in the Italian party system in recent years and, at the same time, it embodies what is defined all over Europe as the ‘new opposition’: a new political subject, founded precisely to oppose the older mainstream parties, which are perceived as inadequate and principally responsible for the dramatic economic situation that many countries have had to face since 2008. But when we look at its behaviour in Parliament, not much seems to have changed as far as the opposition’s conduct is concerned. What has prevailed in the last two decades and still seems to prevail today is the conflictual rather than the alternative aspect of parliamentary opposition. While the ‘traditional’ opposition failed to achieve a new institutional role due to a lack of formal rules and political will on the part of the actors involved, the ‘new’ opposition has not yet completely exploited its window of opportunity in order to present

itself as a complete alternative to both the government and the traditional opposition parties. The strategy adopted in Parliament by the Five Star MPs is to some extent different from that of the other opposition parties, but even in the media's opinion it is not enough to make them appear more alternative rather than simply adversarial.

There can be no doubt that the 2013 election has initiated a new phase in Italian politics. It is hard to predict exactly where this will lead, but there will probably be no going back. The new opposition embodied by the M5S certainly represents a step away from the path to bipolarisation the country had followed since the mid-1990s. However, this does not necessarily mean that a truly alternative and competitive parliamentary opposition will fail to appear. As has been shown in the past, the main reason for the failure of a new and more functional form of democracy to emerge is the lack of political will rather than of formal rules. And the challenge represented by a new political actor such as the M5S could serve the purpose of generating this will and activating a process of change on the part of all the opposition parties collectively.

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Notes

1. Together with some other minor parliamentary party groups.
2. This until November 2013, when the PDL split into two separate groups: on the one hand, the re-established Forza Italia (FI) that was led by Silvio Berlusconi and which opposed the new Renzi government, and on the other hand, the New Centre Right (Nuovo Centro Destra, NCD) led by Angelino Alfano, the current Minister of the Interior.
3. The main opposition parties (and above all the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI)) performed their role only in part by controlling and criticising the executive's activities and attempting to influence its policies – exploiting the governments' intrinsic weaknesses – and they were never able to present a realistic alternative to the incumbents (Di Palma 1977).
4. Particularly the PCI on the left, and the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI) on the right.
5. For a full explanation of the electoral laws approved in Italy since the early 1990s, see Chiaramonte's contribution to this special issue.
6. The UDC had until 2006 actually been a member of the centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi.
7. FLI was founded by the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Gianfranco Fini, who was expelled from the PDL, together with a number of PDL deputies and senators who decided to leave the party with him.
8. The majority of the bills approved deal with narrow issues that are usually quite consensual; it is consequently crucial to control, among others, the content variable when investigating the voting behaviour of the opposition parties.
9. Votes for the ratification of international treaties are excluded from the count.
10. This result can be explained by taking account of the fact that the 'programme' of the Letta government, especially at the beginning, was still bound by the situation of crisis (more than that of Renzi). Legislative initiatives addressing the crisis situation may have encountered fewer obstacles. Furthermore, for the XVII legislature (that is, for the Letta and Renzi governments) we should bear in mind that we are speaking of a small number of laws.
11. In addition, index scores are of course sensitive to the size of the opposition, which varies from one government to another. So it more useful for a comparison of the programmatic and non-programmatic initiatives of the same government than it is for a comparison of different governments.

12. An expert survey on the role and image of the Italian parliamentary opposition in the alternation era was conducted in 2011 (see De Giorgi 2012). Of the 55 journalists who had been interviewed on that occasion, 28 agreed to respond again to the same set of questions, this time concerning the M5S in opposition.
13. We do not consider MPs who are not present because they are ‘on a mission’ as being absent.
14. We decided not to include the centre-right Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d’Italia) in our analysis because, given the small number of MPs belonging to the group, the comparison might have been biased. In addition, data about FI are of course related to a shorter period, because the group was (re)founded only in November 2013 when they decided to move from the ranks of the governing majority to the opposition.
15. For this purpose, the Movement established an Internet-based platform to give citizens the possibility of regularly shaping political decisions. In addition, the heart of the M5S PG is the ‘assembly’, composed of all Five Star deputies and senators and it is responsible for taking decisions on legislative voting (including how MPs should vote on the floor), bill proposals and allocation of the places assigned to it in parliamentary committees (Pinto and Pedrazzani forthcoming 2015).
16. Data updated to early October 2014.
17. In this count, FI is not exactly comparable with the other opposition groups, since the group was formed 9 months later than the others.
18. However, if we divide these numbers by the number of MPs in each group, we see that the difference between the M5S and the other opposition parties is again not that big and it is again ‘in favour’ of LN and SEL MPs.

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