

## INTRODUCTION

### The Italian political system in the last twenty years: change, adaptation or unfinished transition?

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The goal of this special issue is to analyse how the Italian political system has changed in the last 20 years and, depending on the outcome of this analysis, to (re)locate Italy in the context of contemporary democracies. How different is Italian democracy today compared to the democracy of the so-called First Republic? The answer may be different depending on the indicators considered. In order to choose the main dimensions to focus on, we believe Lijphart's multidimensional design may help. Therefore, we explore the main structural changes that have taken place in Italy over the last 20 years by examining, on the one hand, the transformations on the first Lijphartian dimension – transformations that tend towards the majoritarian pole – and, on the other, the evolution of some indicators belonging to the second dimension, ones that push Italy towards the consensus pole, though more ambiguously. More specifically, we analyse the never-ending attempts to reform the electoral system, the transformations in the party system and the evolution of the relationship between the government and parliamentary opposition. Furthermore, we explore the variation in the distribution of decision-making power among national, supranational and subnational (regional) bodies and the new role of the President of the Republic as an increasingly important counterbalancing power. In doing so, we attempt to understand how Italian democracy has changed in recent years and where Italy can be placed in the context of contemporary democracies.

**Keywords:** Italian political system; majoritarian democracy; consensual democracy

The goal of this special issue is to analyse how the Italian political system has changed in the last 20 years and, on the basis of this analysis, to (re)locate Italy in the context of contemporary democracies. For this purpose, it is crucial to choose the right indicators. As we know, many attempts have been made to classify democracies and to evaluate their performance. One of the most universally recognised (though also criticised) is Lijphart's multidimensional analysis and consequent classification, which distinguishes between two main patterns of democracy: *majoritarian* and *consensual*.

Understanding majoritarian and consensus principles, as per Lijphart's definition (1999), involves using 10 variables for the most important democratic institutions and rules, all of which are closely related to each other and clustered into two separate dimensions. The first of these is the executives–parties dimension; the second is the federal–unitary dimension.<sup>1</sup> The 10 variables are formulated in terms of dichotomous contrasts between majoritarian and consensus models; however, countries may be either at the end of or anywhere between the axes for all these variables, and it is very rare to find a

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system that fits completely into them all. We should then imagine a sort of continuum between two extremes in which all of the countries might be placed according to their relation with all of the 10 variables, rather than two extreme and impenetrable models of democracy.

Various criticisms of Lijphart's design have been made, in particular with reference to the variables the author chose to use to build his models, and ultimately with reference to the models themselves (Bogaards 2000; Nagel 2000; Blondel and Battagazzorre 2002; Taagepera 2003; Pasquino 2007; Ganghof 2010; Bormann 2010). According to Pasquino (2011), the two adjectives refer to quite different elements: 'majoritarian' summarises several structural characteristics of democratic regimes, while 'consensual' can only provide the label for a type of behaviour.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, a better classification would be the result of 'the combination of structural features with behavioural components' (2). In addition, on the federal–unitary dimension, only some of the actors involved in the decision-making process other than the government are taken into account and no explanation is given for this choice. The role of the Head of State in parliamentary democracies, for instance, is not taken into consideration, although the presidential role can be fundamental when majoritarian institutions are unstable: on that occasion, in fact, the President can become a powerful veto player, as has happened in Germany and, above all, Italy (Grimaldi 2012). Furthermore, the heuristic capacity of this second dimension is likely to be undervalued if its only aim is to test the existence of legalistic 'checks and balances' that might reduce the power of the cabinet. This is why we believe it is important to consider how these non-majoritarian bodies act and whether (and to what extent) they have changed their behaviour in recent years.

However, our aim is not to enter into any dispute about the strengths and weaknesses of Lijphart's classification. It is enough in our opinion to say that although his patterns of democracy are still functional and effective, they rely on an idealtypical image of democracy that exists in theory, but no longer corresponds to the actual behaviour of political actors. And the behaviour of political actors clearly does make a great difference to the concrete performance of democratic systems. Nevertheless, it is the multidimensional structure of Lijphart's study that is striking and may be of particular use to our analysis. How different is Italian democracy today compared to the democracy of the so-called First Republic? The answer may take different directions depending on the indicators considered. In fact, there are areas in which we have seen significant improvements in Italy, but also fields that have suffered decelerations or even regressions (Cotta and Verzichelli 2007). How can we choose the main dimensions to focus on? Lijphart's multidimensional design may certainly help us.

In the present special issue, we focus on transformation rather than on continuity and we consequently explore the main structural changes that have taken place in Italy over the last 20 years. On the one hand, we examine the changes on the first Lijphartian dimension that tend towards the majoritarian pole, albeit with many backward and forward steps, and, on the other, the evolution of indicators belonging to the second dimension, an evolution that pushes Italy towards the consensus pole, though more ambiguously.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, in relation to the first dimension, we analyse the never-ending attempts to reform the electoral system, the transformations in the party system and the evolution of the relationship between the government and parliamentary opposition.<sup>4</sup> As regards the federal–unitary dimension, we explore the variation in the distribution of decision-making power among national, supranational<sup>5</sup> and subnational (regional) bodies and the new role of the President of the Republic as an increasingly important counterbalancing power. Therefore, in addition to the traditional Lijphartian variables, we explore some 'new' ones that we believe can help

us better understand the recent transformations that have taken place in the Italian political system. In doing so, we attempt to answer our initial question, namely, how has Italian democracy changed in the last 20 years and where can Italy be placed in the context of contemporary democracies?

The first contribution focuses on a fiercely debated aspect, one that has led many observers to speak of a majoritarian turn in Italy since the early 1990s: the reform(s) of the electoral system. In the last two decades, three electoral reforms have taken place. The first introduced a mixed electoral system in 1993, while the second consisted of a proportional representation (PR) formula with a majority premium and was approved in 2005; these were the most concrete attempts to build a more majoritarian-style democracy in the country. However, their effects on voters and parties did not produce all of the expected results and, in particular, failed to simplify the political arena. A third electoral reform was drawn up at the beginning of 2014, when the Constitutional Court ruled that some of the provisions of the 2005 electoral system were unconstitutional and re-introduced *de facto* a pure PR system. Chiamonte explains why and under what circumstances Italy had unconvincingly moved towards the majoritarian pole before taking a step backward towards the consensual pole due to the lack of a clear project shared by all the political forces, and the recent judgement of the Court. This last change, then, was made by a body beyond the legislator's control.

The second article explores the gradual adaptation of the Italian parliament to the majoritarian logic introduced by the electoral system in the period 1994–2014. In particular, it focuses on two important aspects connected with the executive–parties dimension: the evolution of the parliamentary party system and changes in the government-formation process. A simplification in the party dimension certainly occurred in the electoral arena with the emergence of coalitions, but the effects of the new bipolar competition have vanished in the parliamentary arena as fragmentation has generally increased due to the combination of an electoral system that fosters the forming of heterogeneous coalitions, and parliamentary rules that do not discourage party switching and party splitting. Therefore, the Effective Number of Parties (ENP) in Parliament remained quite high from 1992 to 2006; it then declined with the adoption of the 2005 electoral system (notably after the 2008 election), but grew again after the 2013 election when the Five-star Movement (M5S) emerged as a new significant third electoral pole. As a result, no clear step forward was made towards the majoritarian pole as the fragmentation of parties remained high, notably in the parliamentary arena. According to Russo, the most relevant move towards the majoritarian pole has to do with the process of government formation: while formal mechanisms remained unchanged, there was a major change in the investiture practice of postelectoral governments, with clearly identifiable coalitions formed before elections and their respective leaders presented to the electorate as formal candidates for the post of Prime Minister. Nevertheless, the consolidation of this aspect was also undermined by the appointment of a technocratic cabinet in 2011 and the results of the 2013 general election, which led to the creation of a grand coalition formed of traditional political opponents.

This brings us to another important aspect regarding the executive–legislative dimension, namely the role of parliamentary opposition and its relationship with the government. During the so-called Second Republic, a different type of opposition was expected to emerge, in terms of role, functions and public perception: an opposition that could finally present itself as an alternative to the government in office by engaging in competitive, rather than consociational, behaviour in Parliament. Nevertheless, there has been a high degree of consensus in the law-making process in the last two decades

(Giuliani 2008) although it is significantly different from that of the First Republic and is affected by the character and content of the legislation in question with a higher level of conflict on bills related to the government programme in particular (De Giorgi and Marangoni 2015). However, two major breaking points occurred in the opposition's path towards the majoritarian mode: the first, in 2011, was again the appointment of the Monti technocratic government which suspended *de facto* the opposition in Parliament; the second, after the 2013 election, was the emergence of a strong third pole which challenged the classic bipolar competition between an incumbent and a unique alternative parliamentary opposition. De Giorgi's work explores whether we might, for this reason, speak of the beginning of a new political phase in 2013 – different from both the consociational and the (nearly) majoritarian – by focusing in particular on the type of opposition of the M5S since it entered the parliamentary arena.

The other two contributions regard the changes in the federal–unitary dimension since the early 1990s. In the first, Borghetto investigates one of the most substantial dimensions of change in Italian democracy in recent decades: the vertical transfer of powers to the subnational and European levels. Empowering subnational actors and shifting an increasing number of competences to European institutions was normatively valued in the early 1990s as one of the levers for the modernisation of Italian democracy. The article shows that, formally, this vertical allocation of powers was indeed substantial – Italy drew closer to the consensual pole in Lijphart's scheme – and it has not experienced a reverse trend to date. Undoubtedly, it stopped short of fulfilling the expectations of the most radical advocates: Italy remains a regionalised state within a less-than-federal European Union. However, from a substantive viewpoint, the results of this drift of competence appear less straightforward. Central institutions adapted only partially and incrementally to the devolution process. Furthermore, policymaking dynamics vary quite widely across policy areas and territorial levels. With this in mind, the analytical lenses offered by the multilevel governance approach might prove a useful complement to the analysis of competence divisions across separate levels in order to capture the current developments, characterised by the interlocking of European, national and subnational actors.

The last contribution analyses the impact of the President of the Republic in Italy since 1992, although Lijphart does not consider the Head of State in parliamentary democracies to be 'a powerful body different from government involved in the decision-making process' (Blondel and Battegazzore 2002, 12). All the presidents of the so-called Second Republic have had a great impact on the political scene, especially when governments and parties have been particularly weak. But so far there have been only a few attempts to consider presidential involvement in the decision-making process as a variable affecting the possible shift from one pattern of democracy to another (Fabbrini 2000). The shift towards the majoritarian pole – notably the transformation in the government investiture practice – should have reduced the role of the Head of State as a veto player and even more his potential in the government-building process. But this is not what actually happened. Presidents not only increased their countervailing action towards the government but on some occasions decided on behalf of the government as never before. Grimaldi explores how the President has become both a powerful veto player vis-à-vis the government (when the parliamentary majority is strong enough and his popularity is high) and a sort of deputy chairman (when parties are unable to form a cabinet and again his popularity is high). Nevertheless, even when the role of the presidency is considered, no clear move of Italian democracy towards either the majoritarian or the consensual pole is evident.

This special issue explores the main changes in Italy on the two dimensions Lijphart considers when building his patterns of democracy. To conclude, we can affirm that in the

last two decades, Italy has certainly undergone relevant modifications that have significantly affected the structure of the political system, but that the tension between the consensual and the majoritarian poles has not been resolved in favour of either of the two.<sup>6</sup> In this, Italy is certainly no exception since it is very difficult to find a country that entirely fits either of the two models of democracy, as we noted at the beginning. Furthermore, as far as a shift from consensualism to majoritarianism is concerned, according to Morlino (2009), real democratic change – i.e. the complete transition from a consensual to a majoritarian democracy or vice versa – is fundamentally impossible in contemporary political systems. What can happen – and has actually happened in many countries since the 1990s<sup>7</sup> – is that significant modifications occur on some of the dimensions that characterise Lijphart’s models of democracy, without altering the country’s basic democratic structure. This is what has happened in Italy: not all of Lijphart’s characteristics have changed significantly, and indeed some have remained completely unchanged.<sup>8</sup> It is as if Italy were a sort of ‘cross-eyed country’ where some variables have moved in the majoritarian direction and others towards consensualism. This is what we explore in greater depth in the pieces that follow in this issue.

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## Notes

1. The five differences on the executive–parties dimension are as follows: concentration of the executive power in single-party majority cabinets versus executive power-sharing in broad multi-party coalitions; executive–legislative relationships in which the executive is dominant versus executive–legislative balance of power; two-party versus multiparty systems; majoritarian and disproportional electoral systems versus proportional representation; pluralist interest-group systems with free-for-all competition among groups versus coordinated and ‘corporatist’ interest-group systems aimed at compromise and concertation. The five differences on the federal–unitary dimension are as follows: unitary and centralised government versus federal and decentralised government; concentration of legislative power in a unicameral legislature versus division of legislative power between two equally strong but differently constituted houses; flexible constitutions that can be amended by simple majorities versus rigid constitutions that can be changed only by qualified majorities; systems in which legislatures have the final word on the constitutionality of their own legislation versus systems in which laws are subject to a judicial review of their constitutionality by supreme or constitutional courts; dependence of the central bank on the executive versus independent central banks (Lijphart 1999).
2. Powell (2000) tries to overcome the problem by comparing proportional and majoritarian models, starting from an analysis of their respective electoral systems.
3. Two relevant variables are not taken into account in this special issue. The first belongs to the executive–parties dimension and regards pluralist interest-group systems versus coordinated and ‘corporatist’ interest-group systems. In Italy, there was a strong tendency towards consensualism in the First Republic and a turn towards majoritarianism afterwards, with a concertation phase between 1992 and 1998 and an interruption of neo-corporatist arrangements at the beginning of the second Berlusconi government in 2001. As far as the second variable is concerned, on the federal–unitary dimension, we have not taken into consideration the role of the Constitutional Court, despite the fact that it has become more active and less favourable to governments in its judgements since the start of the so-called Second Republic (Pederzoli 2008; Almagisti, Grimaldi, and Pasquino 2013).
4. Although the role of parliamentary opposition is not included in the Lijphartian variables, it might help explain the nature of the executive–legislative relationship.
5. Supranational bodies, notably the European Union, represent a significant variable in the (vertical) division of power and, in particular, in limiting the national executives.

6. In the 1990s, important steps were clearly taken towards the majoritarian pole as a result of the collapse of the traditional party system, the change in the electoral system, the strengthening of cabinets and prime ministers and the realisation of alternation. However, this was not a one-way path. Indeed, governments have not been strong enough to control fully their majorities. In addition, the role of the President has not diminished since the transition; rather, it has become a sort of second engine of the political system which might be activated in the event of a crisis. This happened recently with the appointment of the technocratic government led by Mario Monti. Cabinets, even if stronger than in the consensual phase, are not completely free to decide because parties, the EU and also the President are in a position to reduce their decision-making autonomy (Fabbrini 2000).
7. According to some scholars, certain significant developments in Western European democracies since the mid-1990s have revealed that all countries are moving towards a common form of parliamentary government which might be labelled ‘cooperative majoritarianism’ (Blondel and Battegazzorre 2002, 23). On the one hand, consociationalism seems to be on its way out while, on the other, the more acute forms of confrontation that have characterised adversarial or Westminster systems are to some extent being replaced by greater cooperation, particularly between government and opposition parties.
8. Italy continues to have coalition governments, a bicameral system in which both Houses have the same legislative power, a rigid Constitution and a strong Constitutional Court.

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