The new Italian electoral system and its effects on strategic coordination and disproportionality

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Abstract

On 26 October 2017, the Italian Parliament approved a new electoral system nicknamed *Rosatellum* after Ettore Rosato, head of the Partito Democratico's (PD, Democratic Party) parliamentary group in the Chamber, who was the first proponent of the law. The new electoral system is the fourth since 1993. It is a mixed system, like the others, and it applies to both the Chamber and the Senate. Roughly two thirds of the seats are assigned with a proportional formula in multi-member districts. The remaining seats are assigned in single-member districts with plurality rule. The impact of the new electoral system in terms of party representation has been more proportional than majoritarian. No party or coalition won an absolute majority of seats. However, if we look at its overall performance the picture is mixed. After all, the SMDs are a potent tool and they have made the difference in terms of voting behaviour and pattern of competition. Two pre-electoral coalitions have been formed, the centre-left and the centre-right, which presented themselves, along with M5S, as potential government alternatives. The agreements made among their members acted as a constraint on possible post-electoral alliances making difficult to form a government. This is one of the main reasons of the long stalemate.

Introduction: Why this electoral system?

On 26 October 2017 the Italian Parliament approved a new electoral system nicknamed *Rosatellum* after Ettore Rosato, head of the Partito Democratico's (PD, Democratic Party) parliamentary group in the Chamber, who was the first proponent of the law. The law passed with 76% votes in favour in the Chamber and 77% in the Senate[1]. It was supported by all the main parties with the exception of the Movimento 5 stelle (M5S, Five Star Movement).

The new electoral system is the fourth since 1993. The first was introduced with the Mattarella law and was a mixed system based on a combination of 75% plurality rule in single-member districts (SMDs) and 25% proportional (PR) seats (D'Alimonte and Chiaramonte 1995; Giannetti and Grofman, 2009; Katz 2001). It applied to both branches

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[1] These percentages are based on votes cast. In the Chamber the votes were 307 in favour, 90 against, 9 abstentions. In the Senate there were 214 in favour, 61 against, 2 abstentions. PD, Forza Italia (FI, Go Italy), Lega Nord (LN, Northern League), Alleanza popolare (AP, People's Alliance), Alleanza Liberalpopolare-Autonomie (ALA, Liberal-Popular Alliance-Autonomies) voted in favour. M5S, Movimento democratico progressista (MDP, Democratic Progressive Movement), Sinistra italiana (SI, Italian left) voted against.

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of Parliament. The second was introduced in 2005 with the Calderoli law (D'Alimonte 2007; Di Virgilio 2007; Pasquino 2007; Renwick, Hanretty and Hine 2009). It was also a mixed system, but the mix was different. All the seats were assigned with a PR formula, but the party or the coalition with a plurality of votes at the national level (Chamber) or at the regional level (Senate) would get a majority prize. In the Chamber the prize was majority-assuring. With this system the prize replaced the SMDs as the majority component of the mix.

The third system, nicknamed *Italicum*, was introduced in 2015 during the Renzi government and in connection with constitutional reform. It was another mixed electoral system. As in the Calderoli system, all the seats were assigned with a PR formula, but the party (not the coalitions) with at least 40% of the votes would get a majority prize, allowing it to obtain 54% of the seats. If, however, no party won 40% of the votes, the two parties with the most votes would face a run-off, the winner obtaining 54% of the seats. The losers would split the remaining 46% proportionally, based on first round results. The Italicum applied only to the Chamber. The fourth, discussed here, is also a mixed electoral system, but it is not the end of the story[2].

In addition to these 'parliamentary' electoral reforms there have been two other reforms dictated by the Constitutional Court. The first was introduced in January 2014 with ruling no. 1/2014 and it modified the Calderoli law. The main changes were the abolition of the majority prize and the introduction of the preference vote. The original Calderoli law provided for the majority prize to be assigned with no minimum percentage of votes received by the winner. In the 2013 elections the centre-left coalition won the prize with only 29% of the votes. This outcome reinforced the opposition to this electoral system on constitutional grounds, as the potential disproportionality was deemed excessive. Following this logic, the Court abolished the prize. In doing so, it basically transformed the existing mixed electoral system into a proportional one. With the same ruling it deemed unconstitutional another provision of the system, that is, the closed list of candidates, which according to the Court, included too many candidates.

The third 'parliamentary' electoral reform mentioned above, the Italicum, was a response to this decision by the Court. It was, however, approved only for the election of the Chamber of Deputies, the reason being the connection with the Renzi-Boschi constitutional reform which was to have changed the composition and functions of the Senate. The decision to introduce a new electoral system for the Chamber left in place the electoral system of the Senate introduced by the Constitutional Court with ruling no. 1/2014. This created a peculiar situation whereby the two branches of Parliament would be elected by two radically different voting systems: the system for the Chamber was two-round and majority-assuring, whereas the system of the Senate was single-round and proportional.

The second electoral reform dictated by the Constitutional Court was introduced in January 2017 with ruling no. 35/2017. This second decision was made after the rejection of the constitutional reform in the referendum held on 4 December 2016[3]. In this case the Court deemed unconstitutional the run-off provided for by the Italicum. What was

[2] For a comprehensive analysis of (at least some of) the main Italian electoral reforms since 1993 and their effects on the party system see Baldini (2011) and Chiaramonte (2015).
[3] On the 2016 constitutional referendum and the reasons leading to the rejection of the Renzi-Boschi constitutional reform see Bordignon and Ceccarini (2017) and Pasquino and Valbruzzi (2017).

left after the ruling of the Court was still a mixed system but no longer majority-assuring. If a party obtained 40% of the votes it would be given a prize, allowing it to have 54% of the seats in the Chamber, but if nobody reached the 40% threshold all the seats would be assigned proportionally. This system would apply only to the Chamber. The Senate would still be elected with the proportional system introduced by the Court with its 2014 ruling.

This is the background to the fourth and last (for the time being) 'parliamentary' electoral reform. After the second intervention of the Court, the status quo was based on two electoral systems, both designed by the judges. The system for the Chamber included a majority prize and a 3% threshold for winning seats. The system for the Senate was a proportional system without a majority prize and an 8% threshold. Added to this heterogeneity we must mention the fact that the two chambers are elected by two different electoral bodies, as voters in the 18-24 age group vote for the Chamber but not for the Senate. Given the fact that Italy's bicameral system assigns exactly the same powers to both branches of Parliament, this could be a serious problem. In light of these anomalies one can understand the concern of many observers, and particularly the President of the Republic, that voting with these different systems might produce confusion, and possibly different outcomes. These concerns led to several attempts to change the status quo. The one that came close to being successful before the final decision was reached on the present system was based on the German model. The proposal was approved in the Committee for Constitutional affairs in the Chamber with the support of all the major parties, including the M5S, but it was defeated once it reached the floor. The subsequent attempt was the Rosato law.

1. The new rules of the electoral game

With the new electoral system, the differences between the Chamber and the Senate have disappeared. The two systems have finally been harmonized as their main features are basically the same. Both systems are mixed with roughly one third of the seats allocated in SMDs with plurality rule and two thirds by a proportional formula.

District structure. The allocation of seats, both in the Chamber and in the Senate, occurs according to a three-tier system. The first tier is made up of SMDs, of which there are 232 in the Chamber and 116 in the Senate. The second tier involves the election of the remaining candidates in multi-member districts (MMDs). Excluding those who are elected in a separate constituency by Italian residents abroad (12 in the Chamber and 6 in the Senate), 386 deputies and 193 senators are elected by PR in MMDs. There are 63 of these districts in the case of the Chamber and 33 for the Senate. The number of seats per district ranges between 3 and 8 in the Chamber and 2 and 8 in the Senate. The last tier is represented by the 28 constituencies of the Chamber and the 20 regions of the Senate.

List and candidates. SMDs candidates, party lists and coalitions are the actors who participate in an interdependent game. SMDs candidates cannot run alone. They have to be affiliated to a single party list, as happened in the 2018 elections for all the M5S candidates, or to a coalition formed by different parties, as in the case of the centre-right and centre-left. Each coalition can be associated with just one SMD candidate and vice versa, but each member of the coalition has its own list of PR candidates. These PR lists are connected to the MMDs discussed above. They are closed lists, i.e., no preference votes are permitted. For both branches of Parliament, the number of candidates in the list cannot

be less than half of the number of seats assigned in the MMD and cannot be more than the total. However, regardless of the number of seats in any MMD, the number of candidates in each party list cannot be less than two or more than four.

Table 1. Constituencies, SMDs, MMDs, PR seats and total seats (Chamber of Deputies and Senate)

Chamber of Deputies					Senate				
Constituency	SMDs	MMDs	PR seats	Total seats	Constituency	SMDs	MMDs	PR seats	Total seats
Piedmont 1	9	2	14	23	Piedmont	8	2	14	22
Piedmont 2	8	2	14	22					
Lombardy 1	15	4	25	40	Lombardy	18	5	31	49
Lombardy 2	8	2	14	22					
Lombardy 3	8	2	15	23					
Lombardy 4	6	2	11	17					
Veneto 1	8	2	12	20	Veneto	9	2	15	24
Veneto 2	11	3	19	30					
Trentino-Alto Adige	6	1	5	11	Trentino-Alto Adige	6	1	1	7
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	5	1	8	13	Friuli-Venezia Giulia	2	1	5	7
Liguria	6	2	10	16	Liguria	3	1	5	8
Emilia Romagna	17	4	28	45	Emilia Romagna	8	2	14	22
Tuscany	14	4	24	38	Tuscany	7	2	11	18
Umbria	3	1	6	9	Umbria	2	1	5	7
Marche	6	2	10	16	Marche	3	1	5	8
Lazio 1	14	3	24	38	Lazio	10	3	18	28
Lazio 2	7	2	13	20					
Abruzzo	5	2	9	14	Abruzzo	2	1	5	7
Molise	2	1	1	3	Molise	1	1	1	2
Campania 1	12	3	20	32	Campania	11	3	18	29
Campania 2	10	3	18	28					
Apulia	16	4	26	42	Apulia	8	2	12	20
Basilicata	2	1	4	6	Basilicata	1	1	6	7
Calabria	8	2	12	20	Calabria	4	1	6	10
Sicily 1	9	3	16	25	Sicily	9	2	16	25
Sicily 2	10	3	17	27					
Sardinia	6	2	11	17	Sardinia	3	1	5	8
Aosta Valley	1			1	Aosta Valley	1			1
Abroad - Europe			5	5	Abroad - Europe			2	2
Abroad - North America			4	4	Abroad - North America			2	2
Abroad - South America			2	2	Abroad - South America			1	1
Abroad - Rest of World			1	1	Abroad - Rest of World			1	1
Total	232	63	398	630		116	33	199	315

No candidate can run in more than one SMD, but an SMD candidate, as well as any PR list candidate, can run in up to five MMDs. These multi-candidacies are the preserve of the most influential party members. They serve a double purpose. On the one hand they give visibility to the list and might attract votes on the basis of the popularity of the candidates. On the other hand, they offer some privileged candidates more chances to be elected. As happened in the last elections, a number of these candidates lost in their SMD, but were 'saved' by the PR list in which they were included. The candidate winning the seat in more than one MMD is elected in the MMD where her list received the lowest share of votes of the total votes cast.

Each list has to field candidates in at least two thirds of the MMDs in any given constituency and must file candidates in all the SMDs in any given MMD.

A complex set of gender provisions are included[4]. In the PR lists in MMDs, candidates of different genders have to be placed in alternate order. In the Chamber single lists or coalitions cannot field more than 60% of candidates of the same sex in the SMDs. The percentage applies at the national level. As to the MMDs, the first place on the list cannot be assigned to candidates of the same sex in more than 60% of the districts[5]. Also, in this case the limit applies at the national level. All of these provisions apply at the regional level for the Senate.

Voting structure. A great deal of attention has been given to ballot structure and to voting procedures. The ballot is designed in such a way as to provide voters with readily available information. Each SMD candidate is listed with his/her name next to the party or coalitions of parties that support him/her. On the ballot, voters can read not only the name of the SMD candidate but also the names of all the PR candidates of each party running in the MMD which includes the given SMD. Voting choices are limited. One of the most controversial elements of this electoral system was the choice between fused vote and split vote. The former eventually prevailed. Voters cannot vote for an SMD candidate and for a party list not affiliated to her. They have the following options: 1. They can vote just for the SMD. All of these votes are transferred *pro quota* to the parties affiliated to SMD candidates on the basis of the PR votes they get in the relative MMD. 2. They can vote for a party list. In this case their vote is automatically assigned also to the SMD candidate affiliated to the same list. 3. They can vote for an SMD candidate and for one of the lists affiliated to her. As mentioned above, voters cannot modify the order in which PR candidates are placed in the MMD lists. It is a 'take it or leave it' choice. Whether they like it or not, with one vote they get the entire package.

Formulas and thresholds. Plurality is the rule for winning SMDs. In a tripolar context, as it exists in Italy today, this means that most seats can be won with less than 50% of the votes. In the March elections this was the case in 188 SMDs out of a total of 232 (81%) in the Chamber. The largest remainder Hare quota is the method for the allocation of the PR seats. The procedure is top down. For the Chamber the distribution of the seats among parties is done first at the national level. The second step involves the 28 constituencies.

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[4] In the 2018 election these gender provisions proved to be effective, in that a record number of women were elected (34%).

[5] This provision may be (partially) circumvented by strategically placing the same female candidate as list head in multiple constituencies in order to promote the election of different male candidates following in the list.

The last step takes place at the level of the MMDs. For the Senate the procedure is the same, but the first step is at the regional level.

Thresholds of representation play an important role. They apply to both single parties and coalitions. In the case of single parties, the threshold is 3% of the valid votes calculated at the national level. This threshold does not apply to parties representing ethnic minorities. For these parties a threshold is set at 20% in their region. In addition, only for the Senate, any party can gain PR seats if it gets 20% of the votes at the regional level. In the case of coalitions, the picture is more complex. Coalitions as such participate in the allocation of PR seats only if they get at least 10% of the votes at the national level *and* if they include a party with not less than 3%. If these conditions are met, then the coalition can count on the votes received by all of its members which obtain at least 1% at the national level. However, only the parties in the coalition which have at least 3% of the votes can obtain a proportional share of the PR seats assigned to the coalition. This set of thresholds creates a situation by which the votes of party members of the coalition getting between 1% and 3% contribute to the total votes of the coalition for the benefit of the parties that have more than 3%[6].

2. How disproportional the new electoral system has been

The introduction of this new electoral system raised the question of whether it could have produced a winner in terms of an absolute majority of seats in favour of one of the main competitors. The widespread and largely misleading expectation in the public discourse was that this outcome could have materialized if either the centre-right coalition, the centre-left coalition or the M5S had gained at least 40% of the votes. Actually, to be precise, this would have happened only if any one of these three competitors had put together 40% of the PR seats and 70% of the plurality seats. As it happened, none of them came close to the target. In terms of PR seats, the centre-right was not too far off, with 39.1% in the Chamber and 39.9% in the Senate. But it fell way short in terms of SMD seats, as it won only 47.8% in the Chamber and 50% in the Senate. The conclusion is that the electoral system did not generate the kind of disproportionality that would have been required for a majority winner.

As we can see from Figure 1, at the systemic level the degree of disproportionality in the 2018 election – as measured through the Gallagher (1991; 1992) index – is, with one exception, significantly lower than that of the elections of the Second Republic and very similar to that of the elections of the First Republic.

More specifically, comparing the level of disproportionality of this election with that of the elections held under the pure PR electoral system in place during the First Republic, we do not see a significant difference, in spite of the fact that with the electoral system used today one third of the seats are attributed to SMDs under the plurality rule.

Moving from the systemic level to the level of individual actors, the picture is slightly different. Table 2 shows the share of votes and that of plurality and total seats for each of the main competitors (both for the Chamber and the Senate). If we look at the

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[6] In other words, if any party gets less than 1% of the votes, its votes cannot be used by the other members of the coalition who have more than 3%. These votes are effectively wasted, just like those of single parties who get less than 3%, as regards the allocation of PR seats. Not so for the allocation of SMDs seats because they are automatically transferred to the candidates in the SMDs.

plurality side, the level of over- and under-representation is indeed significant. In the case of the centre-right we are talking about 11 percentage points (pp.) in the Chamber, and even more in the Senate. In the case of the M5S it is about 7 pp. in the Chamber and 6 in the Senate. As to the centre-left, under-representation is 11pp. in both branches. However, taking into account the PR seats, the general picture shows a level of overall disproportionality which is relatively modest.

Figure 1. Level of disproportionality (Lsq, Gallagher index) in the Italian elections of the Chamber of Deputies between 1948 and 2018
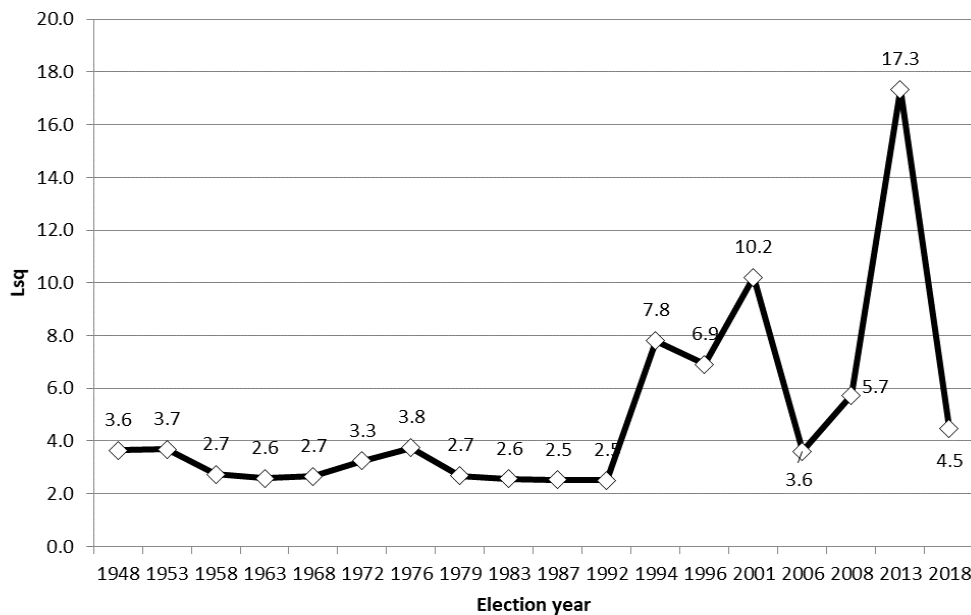
After all, this result should not be considered as surprising as it was perceived by the general public. There are three reasons that explain it. The first has to do with the nature of the electoral system, given the asymmetry between the share of PR seats and that of plurality seats. The second reason is that the share of wasted votes was quite low. As mentioned above, these are the votes cast for party lists running alone and receiving less than 3% nationwide and also for parties which are members of coalitions but get less than 1% of the votes. The sum of these votes turned out to be about 5% both in the Chamber and in the Senate. Such a low percentage has made a small difference in terms of over/under-representation for the parties above the threshold. The third reason is a sort of paradox.

This election has shown a clearly distinct territorial pattern of disproportionality. In the north of the country 87% of the SMD seats in the Chamber were won by the centre-right. In the south 83% of them were won instead by the M5S. In other words, the large disproportionality in favour of the centre-right in the north was almost entirely cancelled out by the large disproportionality in favour of the M5S in the south (see Table 3), and vice versa. The loser in this game was the third main actor, i.e. the centre-left coalition, which used to be dominant in the four regions of the so-called 'red belt' of the country. This is no longer true, as this coalition won only 40% of the SMD seats here. A mediocre performance in this area, combined with its abysmal performance in the north and in the south, left this coalition with a significant under-representation at the national level.

Table 2. Over- and under-representation of the main political actors (Chamber of Deputies and Senate)

Coalitions/parties	% votes	% plurality seats	% total seats	dis-representation	
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(b) - (a)	(c) - (a)
Chamber					
Centre-right	37.0	47.8	42.1	+10.8	+5.1
M5S	32.7	40.1	36.0	+7.4	+3.3
Centre-left	22.9	12.1	19.4	-10.8	-3.5
Senate					
Centre-right	37.5	50.0	43.5	+12.5	+6.0
M5S	32.2	37.9	35.6	+5.7	+3.4
Centre-left	23.0	12.1	19.0	-10.9	-4.0

Table 3. Over- and under-representation of the main political actors in each of the three geo-political areas of Italy (Chamber of Deputies)

Coalitions/parties	% votes	% plurality seats	% total seats	dis-representation	
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(b) - (a)	(c) - (a)
North					
Centre-right	44.2	86.8	62.6	+42.6	+18.4
M5S	23.7	4.4	16.8	-19.3	-6.9
Centre-left	24.8	8.8	18.9	-16.0	-5.9
'Red Belt'					
Centre-right	33.0	47.5	39.8	+14.5	+6.8
M5S	27.7	12.5	23.1	-15.2	-4.6
Centre-left	30.6	40.0	35.2	+9.4	+4.6
South					
Centre-right	31.8	12.9	25.7	-18.9	-6.1
M5S	43.4	83.2	59.2	+39.8	+15.8
Centre-left	17.6	4.0	12.1	-13.6	-5.5

3. A proportional system after all? Not really

The preceding analysis has shown that the impact of the new electoral system in terms of party representation tends to be more proportional than majoritarian. However, if we look at its overall performance the picture is mixed. After all, the SMDs are a potent tool and they have made a difference in terms of voting behaviour and pattern of competition. Voters and parties have been affected by them, the latter more than the former, as parties have adapted better to the incentives of the new system.

This has to do with strategic coordination (Cox 1997). The clear evidence of strategic coordination by parties has been the building of pre-electoral coalitions. Italy already experienced this type of coordination between 1994 and 2001 when the Mattarella law was in place. The techniques for implementing this strategy were developed in that period. They included the selection of common coalition candidates, the ranking of SMDs in terms of electoral risk, and the proportional distribution of the common candidates among coalition members. These techniques were used with an electoral system that allocated three quarters of the seats by plurality rule in SMDs. They have been used again today with a system where the plurality rule applies to only one third of the seats. In other words, the smaller number of SMDs have still turned out to be a sufficient institutional incentive for parties to coordinate strategically.

From the point of view of voters' behaviour, the impact of the SMDs has been more limited. On the one hand, a number of factors made it difficult for voters to vote strategically. The first was the lack of information on the candidates and on their relative competitiveness. The large size of the districts, particularly those for the Senate, did not help[7]. The second, and most relevant, factor is the fused vote[8]. As we already explained, voters cannot vote for an SMD candidate and for an unaffiliated party list. This feature constrains voters' behaviour. From a purely majoritarian perspective, a strategic calculation would lead voters not to vote for their preferred SMD candidate who happens not to be competitive, but for the better liked candidate among those perceived as having a chance to win. This 'majoritarian' logic does not apply to our case, precisely because voting for an SMD candidate and voting for a party list are not separate. In other words, in order to vote for their most preferred party list, voters might have to forego casting a strategic vote in their SMD, the more so since the share of PR seats is twice that of SMD seats.

SMDs have had another kind of impact on the performance of the electoral system. It has to do with the nature of the pre-electoral coalitions and with their impact on the process of government formation. The point is that these coalitions have shaped the pattern of competition in a majoritarian fashion. That is to say that voters have cast their vote not only for a party, as they would do in a purely proportional arena, but also for a coalition since they perceived the two coalitions and the M5S as viable alternatives for government. Party leaders themselves have fostered this perception, by emphasizing in their campaign the possibility that the coalitions or the M5S could have gained an absolute majority of the seats, being able, therefore, to form a cabinet. This expectation per se might have affected voters' behaviour, giving them a reason to defect from parties

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[7] The average population of each SMD was about 250,000 in the Chamber and 500,000 in the Senate.
[8] By definition, a fused vote generates an effect of 'contamination' between the majoritarian and proportional logics. On the contamination effects in mixed electoral systems see Chiaramonte (2005) and Ferrara, Herron and Nishikawa (2005).

with no chance of winning at the national level. At this stage this is just a hypothesis. We will need data to check it, but it is a plausible hypothesis.

Last but not least, the existence of pre-electoral coalitions had a further effect which goes beyond the actual vote. The fact that parties presented them as potential government alternatives and that voters perceived them as such has consequences on the process of government formation. In a purely proportional context, after the vote parties are free to pursue whatever coalitional strategy suits their pursuit of office and policy. Post-electoral coalitions are rarely conditioned by pre-electoral agreements. In the Italian system it is not so. The agreements made for electoral purposes act, to a certain extent, as a constraint on possible post-electoral alliances aimed at forming a government. Voters expect parties to abide by their promise to stay together after the vote. In the realm of democratic regimes accountability is not always taken into consideration by party leaders and in Italy even less so. Nevertheless, it is potentially risky not to respond to voters' expectations. The cost associated with this risk does enter into strategic calculations by parties. This is precisely one of the reasons for the stalemate which characterized Italian politics immediately after the March election.

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