Volatile and tripolar: The new Italian party system

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The extraordinary success of Grillo and the electoral collapse of the PdL and the PD deeply transformed the landscape of the Italian party system.

A "limited bipolar" party system emerged after the 2008 general elections, with two parties, PdL and PD, collectively getting more than 70% of the votes [Chiaramonte 2010]. This represented a great innovation with respect to the "fragmented bipolar" system that had characterized the recent years, a system in which many small parties could exert considerable power upon the two main political coalitions. Additionally, this represents an innovation with respect to the First Republic, in which the competitive dynamic between the two main parties (the PCI and the DC) played on strong ideological polarization and an international context that hindered any sort of alternation.

The Italian party system has once again changed its nature with the most recent election. A party undergoing its first electoral test was able to achieve 25.6% of the vote, a truly unique event in Western European history (excluding the foundation of democratic regimes). Even the unprecedented success of FI in 1994 (21%) was exceeded. Moreover, for the first time, three parties each received more than 20% of the vote, thus transforming the Italian political system from a bipolar system, which characterized the Second Republic, into a tripolar system.

The index of bipolarism (Figure 1) is the sum of the vote shares (or seats) received by the two main coalitions. As it appears in the figure, the two curves register a true breakdown. The total votes assigned to the two largest coalitions had grown throughout the Second Republic, reaching its peak in 2006 (99.1%), in an election characterized by a perfectly bipolar competition. Then in 2008 the, bipolar nature of the system lost some strength (84.4%); however, it remained at about the same level from 1994 to 2001. Today, it registers a breakdown of almost 26 points, as only 58.7% of the votes were won by the two main political options, and more than 40%

of voters betrayed the classic bipolar dynamic of the election. The same trend can be observed through the variation in seats, although in a less striking way due to the disproportional mechanism of the electoral law that favors the main political options. Today, one-fourth of the seats in the Chamber are assigned to the representatives of the third (and the fourth) pole.

The sizable drop in the two-party index, which measures the shares of votes and seats collected by the two main electoral lists, is an obvious consequence of a system where three parties surpass more than 20% of the votes. Today, the index has dropped to 51%, from 70.6% in 2008 (representing the peak since 1979). This share is greater than those encountered during the Second Republic (figure 2) but still is not comparable to the numbers seen in other Western democracies. Today, approximately half of the voters do not vote for either of the two main parties.

If we widen our analysis beyond the three main political options, we observe the reappearance of small parties in the 2013 elections. In fact, 10 lists received 1% of the vote, the same number represented in the Parliament. These lists, however, are not the same: RC (2.2%) and FiD (1.1%) will not enter into the Parliament, while the CD, led by Tabacci, and the South Tyroleans of the SVP had access to seats despite having only 0.5% and 0.4%, respectively, of the votes.

These numbers signal an inversion with respect to the tendencies registered in 2008, when there were nine parties receiving over 1% of the votes, but only six of their lists were represented in Parliament. The political choices of party leaders had produced a drastic reduction of the fragmentation compared with the previous election. Today, even though the same electoral system is in place, different choices have generated an increasing number of political parties. The effective number of electoral lists (namely, the Laasko-Taagepera index [1979])

Figure 1. Index of bipolarism (Chamber of Deputies, 1994–2013).
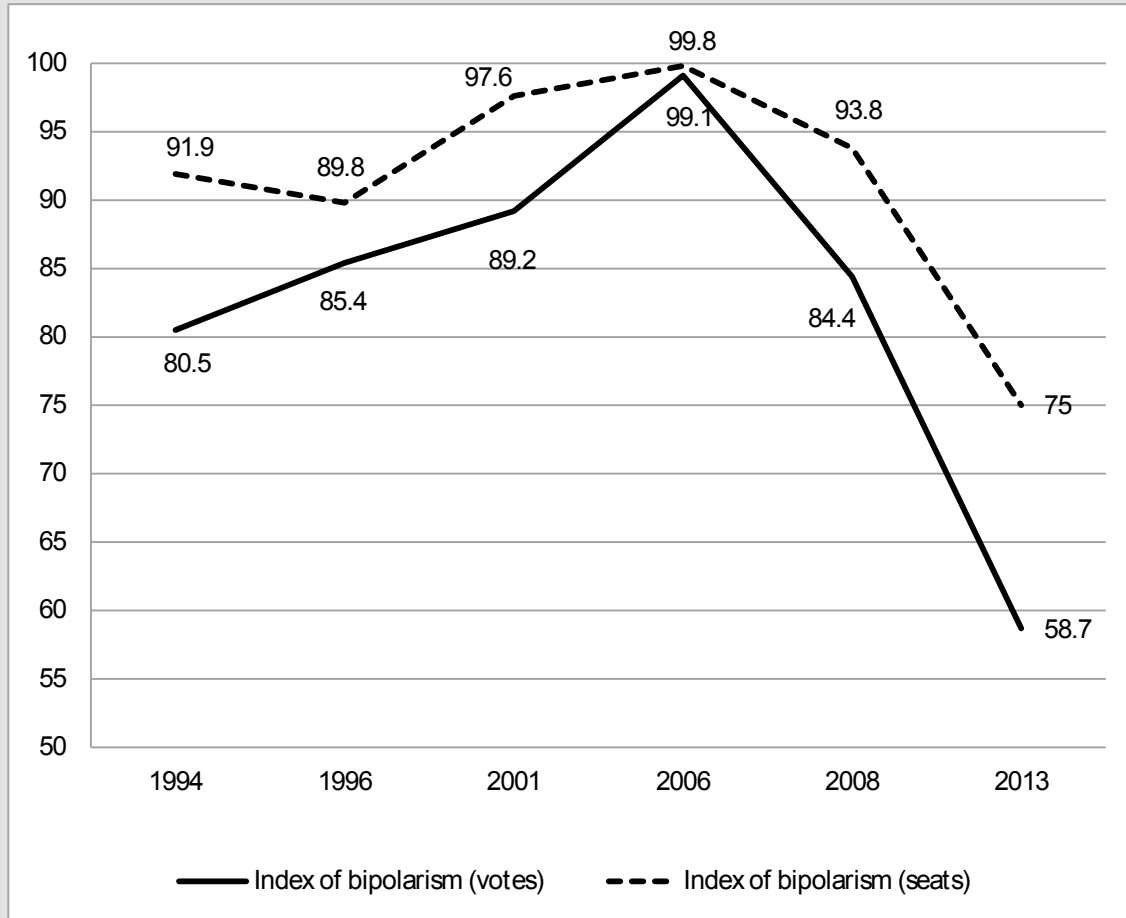
Note: The index of bipolarism is the sum of the votes (or seats) of the two strongest coalitions. In particular, in the elections between 1994 and 2001, it is the joint percentage of the majoritarian/uninominal votes of the "enlarged" coalitions (including eventual territorial differences and partial alliances) of the center-right and center-left. For the 2006 and 2008 elections, it represents the joint percentage of the proportional votes of the two strongest coalitions (as defined by the same coalition leader).

provides a synthetic measure of the number of parties competing in the electoral arena (in terms of votes) or in Parliament (seats). It is an effective way to count parties while highlighting their actual electoral strength. For instance, in the case of a perfect two-party system, if the two electoral lists each receive 50% of the votes, then the index has a value of 2. As it appears in figure 4, the number of effective parties in 2013 has increased to 5.3% from 3.8% in 2008, closer to the 2006 value of 5.7%. As for the number of effective parties in the Parliament, it has increased only slightly compared with 2008, remaining at 3.5%.

The complex and sometimes contradictory dynamics in the Italian electoral system is very restrictive for the parties outside of political coalitions (the representation threshold in the Chamber is 4%), but quite open for those within a coalition (2% with an admission clause for the first-place finisher under the threshold). This can essentially explain the difference in the fragmentation between the electoral and the parliamentary arenas. In fact, this system, which allows parliamentary representation of up to 10 parties, produced the highest disproportionality of our republic's history in the conversion between votes and seats (figure 5). This disproportionality can be measured through the Gallagher Index (1991), which examines the difference between the votes and seats attributed to the various political parties: the greater this difference is, the greater the bias induced by the electoral system and therefore the higher the Gallagher Index.

As it appears, the index retained extremely low levels throughout the First Republic (1948–1992) due to the almost purely proportional electoral law.

Figure 2. Two-party index (Chamber of Deputies, 1994–2013)
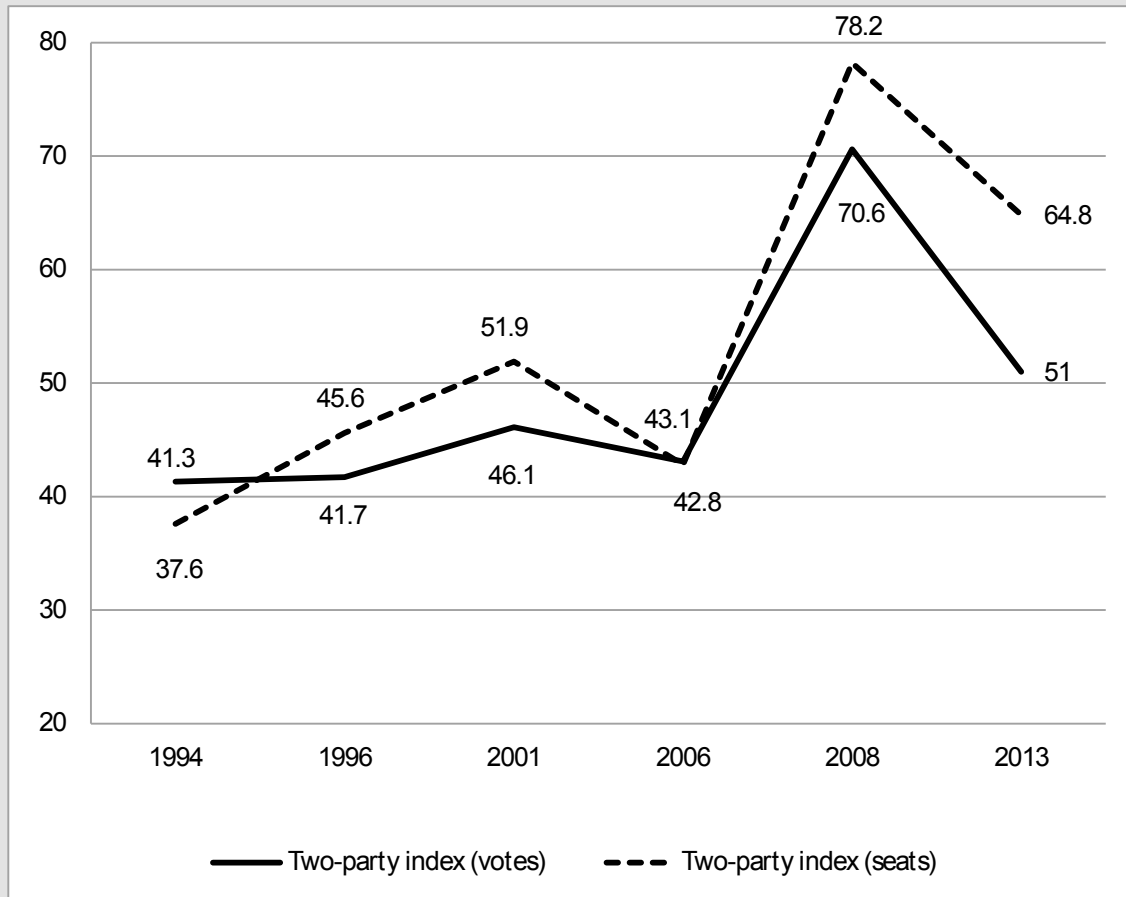
Note: The two-party index represents the sum of the votes (or seats) cast for the two biggest electoral lists. In 2006, DS and DL were considered separately instead of a unitary list of the center-left (Ulivo).

The introduction of the 4% representation threshold for all the electoral lists in 1994 produced an increase in the index, which reached its maximum in 2001 (10.2). With the introduction of the Porcellum electoral law, the system became more proportional again as the two main political coalitions tried to ensure representation of the smaller lists, enabling them to avoid the 4% threshold. Today, the Disproportionality Index has shot up to 17.3, more than three times the 2008 value. This was made possible by the fact that the winning coalition has received 54%, with only 29.5% of the votes. On the contrary, in the 2006 elections, the center-left coalition (L'Unione) had a majority in the Chamber with 49.8%, while the PdL and the LN received 46.8% of the votes. This bias in the representation mechanism ranked Italy second in Western Europe, just below France (17.7) and ahead of the UK (15.1) in 2010. Notwithstanding, both France and the UK have majoritarian electoral systems, while Italy has a (formally) proportional one.

There are no doubts that the 2013 elections has created a turning point, bringing with it the crisis of the two-party system, an increase in fragmentation, and disproportionality at an all-time high. Despite these, the evidence indicates that the greatest change is not one of the previous; rather, it is the index of aggregate volatility. This index simply measures the net aggregate switch in votes between two successive elections [Pedersen 1979; Bartolini 1986], and it is calculated by summing up the differences in terms of votes shares among parties between an election and the previous one. Volatility is therefore a measure of stability for a political system.

In 2013, Italian volatility reached an incredible value of 39.1 (the index ranges between 0 and 100), more than four times the value registered in 2008. Mair (2011) indicates that a highly volatile election is one scoring higher than 20, making the value of 39.1 very significant. Looking at a sample of 279 elections in 16 countries since WWII, only the dramatic Greek elections of May 2012 and the

Figure 3. The fragmentation of the electoral lists (Chamber of Deputies, 2006–2013)

☑ Number of lists with more than 1% of votes

☒ Number of lists gaining seats
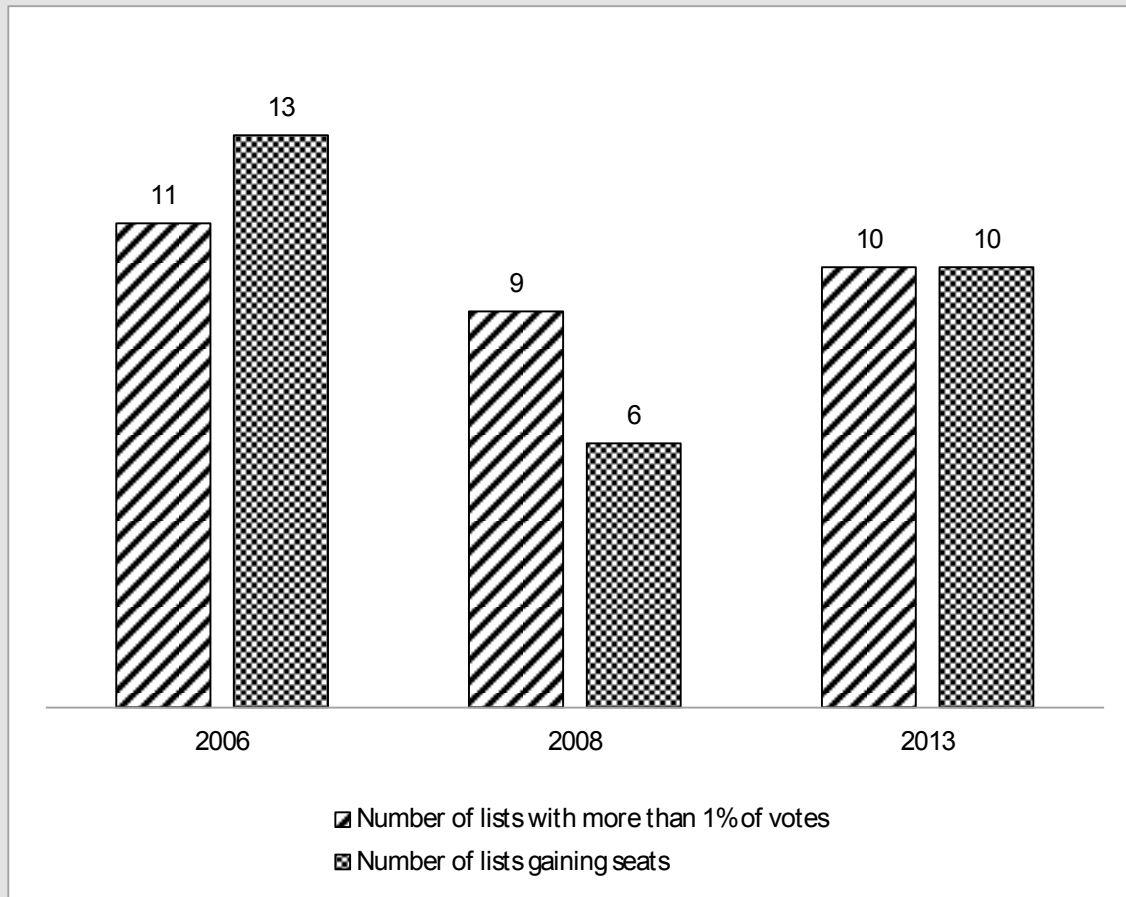
Spanish elections in 1982 have shown a greater volatility than that of Italy in 2013. These numbers provide an idea of the historical extent of the ongoing realignment of party system changes that seem to change with each election. In 1994, the index scored an analogous peak (Figure 6) and that election was characterized by the fall of the old parties (primarily the DC) and the rise of new ones (FI being the main one). In that moment, the First Republic was brought to a close, and the Second Republic was born. Only time will tell if the 2013 elections will be the catalyst for the birth of the Third Republic.

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Figure 4. Number of effective electoral lists (Chamber of Deputies, 2006–2013)
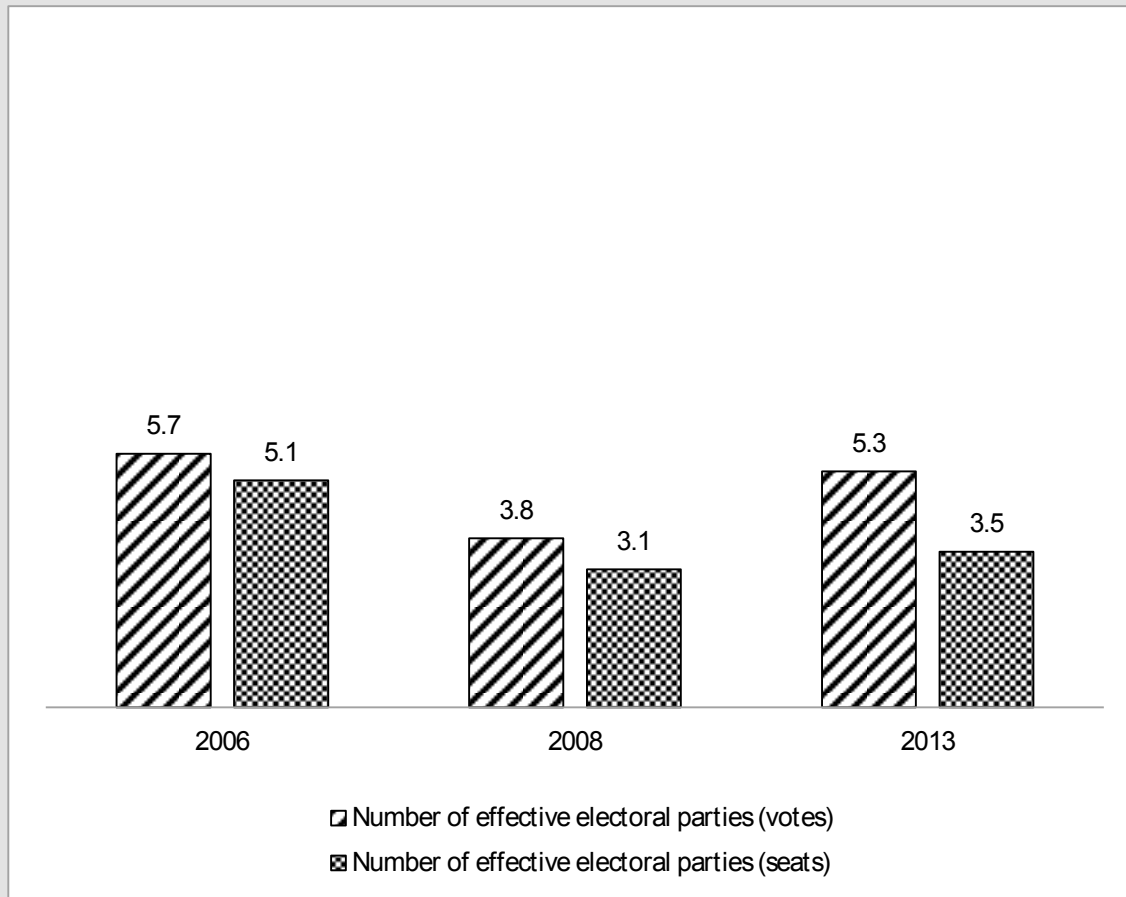
Note: The effective number of electoral lists in terms of votes was calculated taking into account the votes from the proportional component of the electoral representation. For the 2006 elections, the two separate lists for the DS and the DL (center-left Christian-democrats), rather than the joint list of the Ulivo, have been used. We obtained this data by interpolating the relative strength of the two lists at the Senate (where they were divided). In 2008, both PD and PdL were considered as unique lists since the PdL's constitutive parties would have merged only a few months after, even though they were still officially split. As for the effective number of electoral lists in terms of seats, for the elections between 1994 and 2001, it was calculated taking into account, separately, all the parties that received at least one seat in the proportional component (either with their own list or with an associated one) or in the majoritarian one (either on their own or in coalition with other political parties). Analogously, we have taken into account all the parties' seats irrespectively from the fact that they were assigned to their own lists, to associated lists, or as "guests" on other lists.

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Figure 5. Disproportionality Index (Chamber of Deputies, 1948–2013)
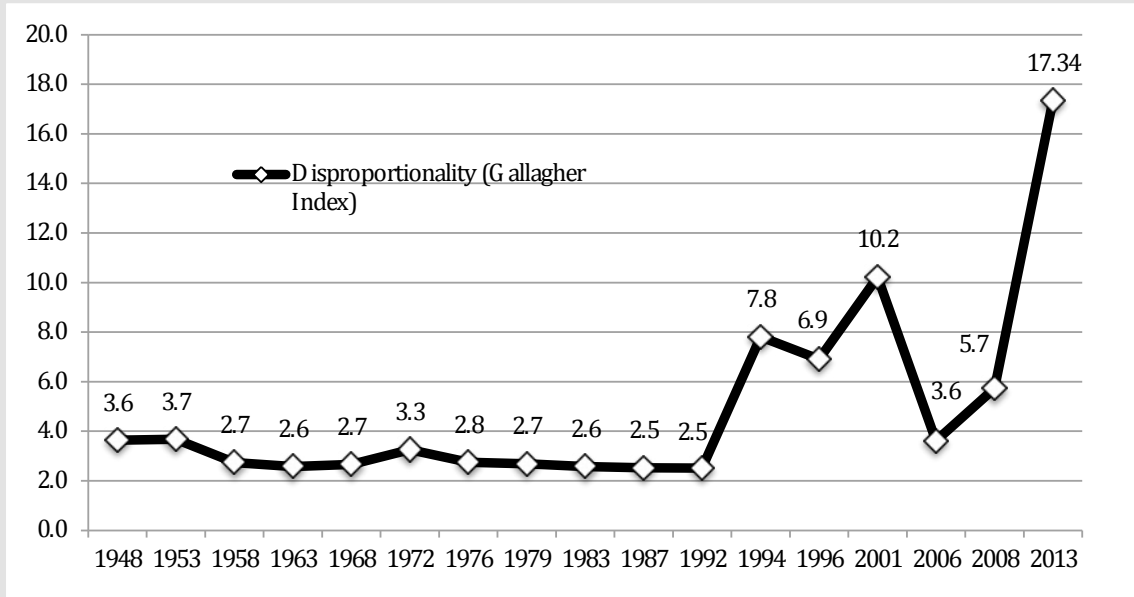
Note: The index was calculated with only the proportional component for the elections held in 1994, 1996, and 2001.

Figure 6. Total volatility (Chamber of Deputies, 1994–2013)