

# Italian Parties and Party System(s)

*Enrico Calossi and Eugenio Pizzimenti*

## Introduction: The Italian Party Systems

### The Second Republic: The never-ending reform of the rules of the game

The party system that had been established in Italy after the end of the Second World War suddenly collapsed around 1992–1993 as a consequence of a combination of both exogenous and endogenous shocks ([Harmel and Janda 1994](#); [Pizzimenti 2020](#)).<sup>1</sup> Party system change was attributed to a number of different factors: a) the collapse of international communism and its impact on domestic electoral alignments; b) the disclosure of a widespread system of political corruption; c) the country's fiscal crisis at a critical time in the process that eventually gave birth to the euro; and d) a referendum that forced radical changes in parliamentary election rules. All these factors climaxed at the same time, and at least some of them had mutually reinforcing effects. The general elections held in March 1994 marked the beginning of the so-called Italian 'Second Republic'. A systemic change had occurred ([Jones and Pasquino 2015](#)), although the institutions did not significantly change compared to the previous period. In fact, the modification of the format and mechanics of the party system, as well as of the relevant parties, was significantly profound. Thus, the Second Republic has been characterized by an over-production of political reforms, in particular, concerning electoral rules and the public funding regime.

As for the electoral rules, three reforms were approved by Parliament, in 1993, 2005, and 2017. The underlying logic of all these reforms was the limitation of proportionality to strengthen the link between the parliamentary majority and the executive. Disproportional mechanisms were introduced in order to favour the establishment of a bipolar competition. A mixed electoral system (3/4 single member plurality and 1/4 party list proportional)

was initially introduced, which lasted until 2005; it was then replaced by a proportional system strongly unbalanced in favour of the winning coalition, which was guaranteed the absolute majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In 2014, the Constitutional Court established the partial unconstitutionality of this law. Three years later, a new mixed electoral system was approved (2/3 single member majority, 1/3 party list proportional). However, the debate about the need for a new reform persists.

Regarding the funding and regulation of party politics, the Italian constitution (Article 49) mentions political parties as fundamental actors in determining national politics through ‘democratic methods’. However, the constitution neither regulates specific aspects of intra-party dynamics (functional/organizational arrangements) nor defines binding requirements that political parties must conform to (Pacini and Piccio 2012). The Italian case has been defined as a case of ‘inclusive cartelization’ (Pizzimenti 2017). The inclusiveness of the cartel was the by-product of a bipolar electoral competition within a highly fragmented party system, which gave coalition potential to a number of small parties: these were ‘rewarded’ by progressively lowering the electoral threshold to access public funds.

The first legal framework disciplining public funding to parties was introduced in 1974; it was partly modified in 1979 and 1981 and it was significantly reformed after a people’s referendum in 1993. Direct funding was then provided only as electoral reimbursement. However, normative legislation and amendments (in 1997, 1999, 2002, 2006, and 2012) dramatically increased the total amount of money assigned to parties far beyond the level of electoral reimbursements (Pizzimenti and Ignazi 2011; Pizzimenti 2018). In 1999, an amendment was introduced that aimed at granting 5% of electoral reimbursements to initiatives that promoted the political participation of women. Since 2017, Italy has been an evident anomaly in the context of the European Union, as it is the only large country that does not provide any direct public funding to parties (Pizzimenti and Calossi 2020; Ignazi and Fiorelli 2021). In fact, as a consequence of a growing anti-party sentiment, between 2014 and 2017 direct funds destined to parties were abolished; simultaneously, a mild state regulation was introduced to discipline party organizations.

## Party system stability in time, 1948–2018

To appreciate the patterns of continuity and change between the First and the Second Republic, it is helpful to resort to a set of party system indicators

which are integrated with measurements of other important aspects of the political competition. First, by focusing on the propensity to change the rules of the game (number of relevant reforms/number of years) it is clear how the First Republic was more stable than the Second (0.16 vs 0.89, respectively). The same holds when looking at the degree of party organizational and electoral consolidation. Following [Pizzimenti \(2020\)](#), we resort to an indicator that measures the ratio between consolidated parties (ConsP; i.e. parties that show both organizational and electoral stability for at least 15 years and/or four general elections [[Arter and Kekkonen 2014](#)]) and competitive parties (ComP; i.e. parties that win parliamentary seats). Our data show that the ConsP/ComP ratio was much higher during the First Republic (0.6) than in the Second Republic (0.2).

As [Table 7.1](#) shows, significant changes affected electoral turnout (TO): while the mean 1948–1992 value was 91.6%, in the following decades it fell to 80.4%, thus signalling an increasing disaffection towards politics, a

**Table 7.1** Party system indicators: Second Republic, 1993–2018

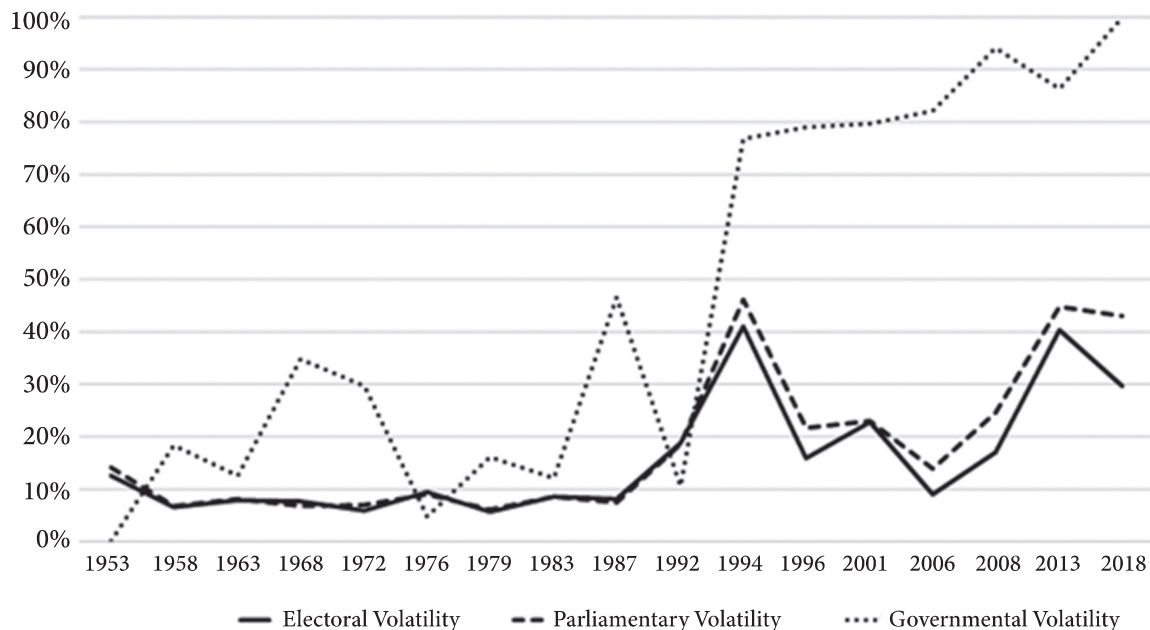
	TO	EFRG	ENEP	PFRG	ENPP
1948	92.2	0.66	2.94	0.611	2.57
1953	93.8	0.761	4.18	0.718	3.54
1958	93.8	0.741	3.87	0.71	3.45
1963	92.9	0.759	4.15	0.733	3.74
1968	92.8	0.747	3.95	0.717	3.53
1972	93.2	0.754	4.07	0.719	3.55
1976	93.4	0.716	3.52	0.684	3.16
1979	90.6	0.744	3.91	0.713	3.48
1983	89	0.778	4.51	0.751	4.01
1987	88.8	0.783	4.61	0.755	4.08
1992	87.3	0.849	6.62	0.825	5.73
st.dev	<b>2.30</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>0.91</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>0.78</b>
Mean	<b>91.61</b>	<b>0.75</b>	<b>4.21</b>	<b>0.72</b>	<b>3.71</b>
1994	86.1	0.868	7.58	0.862	7.58
1996	82.9	0.86	7.14	0.868	7.14
2001	81.4	0.841	6.31	0.823	5.65
2006	83.6	0.818	5.5	0.797	4.92
2008	80.5	0.738	3.82	0.675	3.08
2013	75.2	0.815	5.39	0.715	3.51
2018	72.9	0.807	5.19	0.768	4.32
st.dev	<b>4.71</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>1.23</b>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>1.72</b>
mean	<b>80.37</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>5.85</b>	<b>0.79</b>	<b>5.17</b>

TO—turnout; EFRG—electoral fragmentation; ENEP—effective number of electoral parties; PFRG—parliamentary fragmentation; ENPP—effective number of parliamentary parties

Source: Authors' elaboration on [Siaroff \(2019\)](#).

well-known phenomenon in all Western democracies. However, the destructuring of the party system emerges in both the electoral and parliamentary arenas. In fact, all the indicators measuring the level of fragmentation increased: this is particularly evident concerning the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) and the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP).

Finally, Figure 7.1 presents the changes which occurred between the First and the Second Republic in terms of party system volatility in the three main arenas of political competition (Bardi and Mair 2008). As for government volatility—the percentage of ministers belonging to new parties which were present in the previous executive—the Second Republic actually shows elements of typical competitive and majoritarian democracies, while the First Republic was characterized by a strong stability in parties occupying the executive. Regarding electoral and parliamentary volatility, the highest values are observable in 1994 and 2013. These years coincide with general elections that followed deep economic, political, and even moral crises of the country; these elections registered the success of brand-new parties, namely Forza Italia in 1994 and Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) in 2013, whose success was heavily based on a rhetoric of rupture with the past.



**Figure 7.1** Party system volatility, 1953–2018

*Note:* Governmental volatility is calculated in analogy with parliamentary volatility. Thus taking into account the number of parties present in the previous executive, and the share of the occupied ministerial positions. These data are compared with the number of parties and ministerial positions occupied in the following cabinet.

*Source:* Calossi and Cicchi 2018

## The Organization, Ideology, and Communication of Four Italian parties

### The relevance of the selected parties

Our empirical analysis focuses on four parties: the largest parties of the two main competing coalitions and two parties that have played (and still play) a crucial role in influencing the mechanics of the party system. These four are the Partito Democratico (PD) and its major predecessors, the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS) and the Democratici di Sinistra (DS), which have always been the pillars of the centre-left alliance. We also include the two ‘editions’ of Forza Italia, around which the centre-right coalition was formed in 1994, and which was re-established in 2013 after the failed merger with Alleanza Nazionale that led to the birth of the short-lived Popolo della Libertà (PDL) in 2008. The third party is Lega, which was created in 1991 as Lega Nord by federating several regionalist and autonomist lists, adopting the name of Lega Salvini Premier in 2019. Lega is the oldest party in the Italian party system, even though it has changed its electoral strategies several times. The fourth party is the M5S. It took part in the 2013 general elections outside the bipolar scheme by not placing itself along the left–right axis. Thereafter, it suddenly and unexpectedly became the largest party in terms of votes. Its success was further reinforced in 2018, when it increased its percentage of votes, gained more seats, and formed a government for the first time.

As shown in Table 7.2, until 2008, the most important centre-right and centre-left parties plus the Lega obtained, on average, 57.9% of votes cast. After the entrance of the M5S into the electoral arena, these four parties accumulated far more than 75% and 80% of the votes cast in 2013 and 2018, respectively, even if the electoral results of each party significantly changed over time (in particular those of the Lega and PD). As for seats, in all seven elections the analysed parties have obtained, cumulatively, more than 50% of the seats. In 2008, 2013, and 2018 they won more than 80% of the seats.

**Table 7.2** Aggregated votes and seats to the four parties (%), 1994–2018

		1994	1996	2001	2006	2008	2013	2018
TOT	Votes	49.8	51.7	49.9	59.1	78.9	76.6	82.8
	Seats	53.9	56.2	55.1	60.8	86.2	81.8	85.4

Source: Authors’ own calculation on official data provided by <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/> (Accessed 15 December 2023)

Furthermore, all these parties had a coalitional potential. In this respect, the relevance of the M5S is well represented by its changing partners that have been included in government since 2018 (first the Lega, later replaced by the PD), until the launch in February 2021 of a technocratic government lead by former president of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi, supported by almost all parliamentary parties.

## Membership and intra-party democracy

Regarding the organization of the selected parties, we first focus on the evolution of party membership. Table 7.3 indicates the evolution of party members in the Second Republic.

The PDS-DS inherited the mass-party tradition from the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and continued to be the largest party in terms of members until 2007, notwithstanding a constant decline. On the right, the newly founded Forza Italia had a fluctuating membership, while the Lega Nord kept constant figures of about 120,000 members. In 2007, the almost simultaneous birth of PD and PDL led to an increase in overall membership figures. In 2008, the PD exceeded 800,000 members. Additionally, the PDL publicly announced its membership in 2011, when the central party organization confirmed one million members—a figure that the literature considers as implausible (Pizzimenti 2020). In the following years, a clear trend towards a continuous decline in total party membership emerged—this was particularly evident for PD, which lost almost half its members, but it holds also for the reborn Forza Italia. Figures referring to the Lega remained constant at least until 2013, the last year for which data are available. Finally, the M5S—which was launched as a digital party (Gerbaudo 2018)—registered shrinking figures, despite the remarkable increase in the number of members from 2010 onwards.

Moreover, the types of membership as well as the status and powers assigned to members are crucial aspects of the party system. In the literature, growing attention has been paid to the diffusion of more ‘relaxed’ forms of affiliation to political parties, with fewer obligations and limited rights (Biezen et al. 2012; Scarrow 2017; Archury et al. 2018). These types of affiliation often take different names, such as ‘supporters’ or ‘friends’, and are characterized by an inactive role in the life and organization of the party. This kind of membership is provided by the Lega, whose statutes explicitly indicate the existence of the ‘soci sostenitori’ (supporters) alongside normal members. Further, the PD, since its foundation, has adopted open primary

**Table 7.3** Evolution of party membership

	PDS-DS	PD	FI	PDL	Lega	M5S
1994	698,287	NA	NA	NA	167,650	NA
1995	682,287	NA	5,200	NA	123,031	NA
1996	686,713	NA	-	NA	112,970	NA
1997	640,838	NA	139,546	NA	136,503	NA
1998	613,412	NA	161,319	NA	121,777	NA
1999	656,146	NA	190,398	NA	123,352	NA
2000	555,171	NA	312,863	NA	120,897	NA
2001	598,085	NA	271,751	NA	124,310	NA
2002	534,358	NA	222,631	NA	119,653	NA
2003	549,372	NA	249,824	NA	131,423	NA
2004	555,481	NA	-	NA	-	NA
2005	543,907	NA	190,012	NA	131,423	NA
2006	615,414	NA	-	NA	-	NA
2007	571,583	NA	401,214	NA	-	NA
2008	NA	791,517	-	NA	150,000	NA
2009	NA	831,042	-	NA	-	6,123
2010	NA	617,897	-	1,000,000	182,505	60,456
2011	NA	607,897	-	-	-	100,789
2012	NA	500,163	-	-	-	255,339
2013	NA	539,354	-	-	122,000	80,383
2014	NA	378,187	-	NA	-	87,656
2015	NA	395,320	110,000	NA	-	120,369
2016	NA	405,041	-	NA	-	135,023
2017	NA	-	111,000	NA	-	140,147
2018	NA	374,786	-	NA	-	100,258
2019	NA	412,675	-	NA	-	115,372
2020	NA	-	-	NA	-	175,281

Source: Adaptation from [Pizzimenti \(2020\)](#)

elections to choose the party leader. Voting rights in primary elections are granted to all those who agree to pay a small contribution (over time it has increased from one to two euro). Furthermore, voters must agree to be registered as ‘party supporters’ ([Seddone and Sandri 2020](#)).

By focusing on the rights and powers accorded to ordinary members, it is possible to resort to the Index of Members’ Prerogatives. This is calculated by combining eight variables, which assess the prerogatives of members within party organizations<sup>2</sup>. We rest on the rationale of the Political Party Database Project; thus, we analysed and codified party statutes by assigning values ranging from 0 to 1. The two polar models are represented by a party in which democracy follows a bottom-up process of delegation and membership borders are clearly defined (score: 1). In contrast, in a plebiscitary/top-down

**Table 7.4** Index of Members' Prerogatives\*

Party	1991–1998	2002–2006	2008–2009	2015–2017
PDS-DS-PD	0.61	0.33	0.22	0.16
FI-PDL-FI	0.55	0.72	0.44	0.72
Lega	0.61	0.61	NA	0.27
M5S	*	*	0.55	0.27

Source: Pizzimenti (2020)

model, membership is open and the leadership is legitimized by a large base of sympathizers (score: 0). The first pole is typical to mass/traditional parties, while the second pole is expected to be associated with newer parties.

Table 7.4 shows that during 1991–1998, the PDS and Lega adopted a mass-party/traditional model. Forza Italia, which was then the newest party and was characterized by the strong leadership of Berlusconi, was more oriented towards plebiscitary democracy. Over time, both Lega and, even more evidently, DS and later PD adopted a plebiscitary model: the DS introduced a closed primary election to elect the party leader, which turned into open primaries in the PD; the Lega introduced closed primary elections in 2013. In contrast, the organizational consolidation of Forza Italia resulted in a more traditional internal functioning. The M5S, which entered the scene only in the early 2010s, adopted an internal functioning typical of traditional parties. In fact, despite its strong anti-party rhetoric and pro-novelty propaganda, the M5S accorded rights and active roles only to officially registered members. It was only in the mid-2010s that the movement adopted a rather plebiscitary style through the introduction of closed primary elections. The paradox is that Forza Italia, which in the 1990s was the party with the least traditional internal functioning, is now the party with the most traditional membership regulation. The inverse development characterizes the post-communist family, that is, the PDS-DS-PD evolution, which currently displays the most plebiscitary internal functioning.

## Ideologies and programmes

Concerning party ideologies, in Italy all the main spiritual families have been represented in Parliament, except the agrarian/rural parties (Pizzimenti 2020). This was facilitated by the electoral system, which was almost purely proportional in the First Republic; the Second Republic forced the main



parties of the centre-right and the centre-left coalitions to include representatives of minor and often ideologically distant parties. In order to assess party ideological orientation, we resort to European Parliamentary (EP) Group membership, which is a useful indicator in the field (Hix 1999; Hanley 2008).

The PDS-DS was the result of the social-democratic turn of the former Communist party. This change was already confirmed in the early 1990s after the entrance of its European Parliamentarians into the Socialist Group. The situation is more complicated for PD: the party is the result of a merger between DS and Margherita. The latter, established in 2001, was itself a heterogeneous party in which the heirs of the Democrazia Cristiana—reorganized in the smaller Partito Popolare Italiano—coexisted with other parties (Pizzimenti 2007). The ambiguous positioning of the PD was partially clarified in 2014 when the party officially joined the Party of European Socialists.

Forza Italia has also experienced several changes in its ideological orientation. Although, according to its founder Berlusconi, the party was destined to be a ‘liberal mass party’, it quickly strengthened its links to liberal conservatism. In 1994, the MEPs of Forza Italia formed the original and almost mono-national group of Forza Europa. However, in 1998, first as individual MEPs and then as an entire party, Forza Italia embarked on the path to joining the Christian-Democratic European People’s Party (EPP). Hence, Forza Italia, with the PDL, became one of the most important parties of the EPP. Forza Italia, which had become more conservative when it merged with post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale (AN) in 2008, recovered its neoliberal and moderate orientation after its re-establishment in 2013.

The ideological profile of Lega and its international affiliation is even more interesting. When it was created, Lega Nord wanted to focus its efforts only on Northern territorial and political autonomism. Although many of its founders (above all its leader Umberto Bossi) had a left-wing orientation, the party’s goal was to include all the autonomists (or even the separatists) whatever their political placement on the left–right axis. Despite this heterogeneous origin, the party has permanently joined the right-wing coalition since 2001. In 2014, the new leader Matteo Salvini imposed a decisive turn towards a nationalist orientation upon the party. The adoption of the slogan ‘Prima gli Italiani’ (Italians First!) instead of the former ‘Prima il Nord’ (North First!) was emblematic. These ideological changes are reflected by the European affiliation of Lega. It was part of the Rainbow group in the European Parliament until 1994. Between 1994 and 1997, it was member of the Liberal group, and in 1999–2001 it was part of the ‘Technical

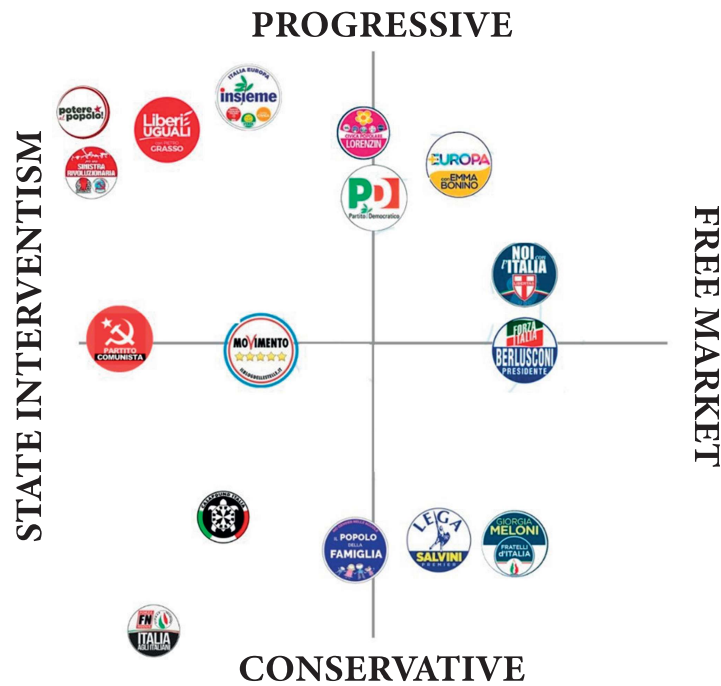
group of Independent MEPs', demonstrating its difficulties in finding a clear international collocation. Since 2004, it has been member of Eurosceptic groups, such as Independence/Democracy (Ind/Dem) and Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD), or of right-wing groups, i.e. Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN), Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), and Identity and Democracy (ID)).

The ideological orientation of the M5S has attracted the attention of many scholars as the Movimento has explicitly rejected any collocation along the classical left–right axis of competition. It has certainly emphasized its strong anti-party sentiment (Viviani 2019) and its anti-establishment attitude (Hartleb 2015). For these reasons, some authors define the M5S as a pure populist party, instead of including it in the family of populist radical right parties (Mudde 2007). This confrontational behaviour against other (established) parties made it difficult for the M5S to find a political group within the European Parliament. In 2014, the M5S joined Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP) and together formed the 'Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy' group, in which anti-EU sentiment and a right-wing spirit coexisted. Ahead of the 2019 election, the M5S tried to find another alliance. An attempt was made with the Liberal group (ALDE) in 2017, but the EP group's president Guy Verhofstadt publicly rejected the proposal. In 2019, the fears of remaining alone materialized and the M5S did not find any suitable group to be part of. Therefore, its MEPs joined the 'non-inscrits' group, demonstrating the M5S's difficulties in positioning itself among the traditional political families.

As for the parties' political programmes, Figure 7.2 offers a snapshot of the placement of the Italian parties along the state–market and the progressive–conservative axes of political competition in the 2018 national elections (Bardi et al. 2018).<sup>3</sup> In 2018, the most pro-market party was Forza Italia, while the Lega and the PD were almost in a centrist position on the left–right dimension. Surprisingly, the M5S was more pro-state than the PD. As for the cultural dimension, the Lega and PD occupied the two opposite poles. Forza Italia and M5S had a median orientation, as the M5S did not take clear positions on many issues.

## Connection to social groups

In the First Republic, many strong links existed between Catholic associations and the Christian Democrats (DC), between some trade unions



**Figure 7.2** Parties' placement in 2018 general elections

*Note:* Of the analysed parties, we can identify Lega in the IV quadrant, M5S between the II and the III, Forza Italia between 1 and 4, and PD between II and I (anti-clockwise, starting in the upper right quadrant).

*Source:* Authors' elaboration of data provided by Voting Advice Application *Navigatore Elettorale*, released during the 2018 national elections.

and some leftist parties, and between sporting and cultural associations and parties. However, these connections with social groups have never been made explicit formally in party statutes. In this respect, we do not observe any evolution in the past 25 years. A partial exception is constituted by Lega, which tried to establish a party-associated trade union, the 'Sindacato Padano', which however did not have significant success. In contrast, the M5S has never been supported by any collateral organization. Moreover, the movement did not create intermediate organizational layers (such as regional or provincial layers). Further, the M5S had expressed its rejection several times for any kind of intermediate organs that might interfere with the direct connection between the leader and the members (Mosca 2020).

If we focus on party organizations, some kinds of special representation exist, especially for younger members. In the PDS-DS, young people were given a special status through the 'Sinistra Giovanile'; the same happened

when the PD was founded in 2008 ('Giovani Democratici'). In Forza Italia, from 1994 to 2008, we find 'Forza Italia—Giovani per la Libertà'; and 'Studenti per le libertà' as a specific organization for students. In the post-2013 party, we find 'Forza Italia Giovani'. During the brief existence of the PDL, the youth group was named 'Giovane Italia'. Within the Lega, the young members were organized in the 'Movimento dei Giovani Padani', which, alongside the nationalist/right-wing turn launched by Salvini, dropped the reference to the North and became 'Lega Giovani' in 2008. Much more variance can be found when focusing on intra-party organizations based on gender (women's organizations) or age (senior citizen organizations). The PDS-DS explicitly provided for a National Coordination of women—which became a 'Permanent Conference' in the PD—that was granted specific participation rights; Forza Italia also always provided for organizations based on both gender (Movimento Azzurro Donna) and age (Movimento Seniores) criteria. In contrast, the M5S has never recognized intra-party organizations of these kinds.

Finally, it could be interesting to analyse changes in the socio-demographic profile of party constituencies. Like the PCI, PDS and DS were able to keep a meaningful connection with workers, but they also progressively increased their appeal among executives and middle-class employees (Pizzimenti 2020). Forza Italia had an inter-class profile, but the party was particularly attractive for professionals and entrepreneurs. Lega was popular with artisans and shopkeepers, but it was not able to find a widespread consensus among public officers. However, during its recent expansion phase, Lega broadened its appeal among manual workers. The rise of the M5S caused a shock among the traditional *classe gardée* of other parties. It became immediately interesting to manual workers and unemployed people (who previously voted mainly for the centre-left), but also to entrepreneurs and autonomous professionals (who were previously strongly linked to the centre-right). Thereby, the movement soon became an inter-class party by receiving votes from several and differentiated social sectors (IPSOS 2018). By contrast, the PD has been the party that has changed its electoral constituency the most (Pizzimenti 2020). In fact, despite the roots of its predecessors, the PD has lost its appeal among people with lower incomes and, conversely, has strengthened its links with higher-income classes. In some respects, it has become and is perceived as the 'party of the elites' (De Sio 2018): while it could not be maintained that this was an explicit aim of the party's founders, the commitment to 'break' with the original political cultures (communist and catholic) facilitated a move towards the *bloc bourgeois*.

## Parties' resources and state subsidies

The structure of party revenues followed the main trajectories of the reforms of state funding (Table 7.5). From 1994 to 2007, all the analysed parties show decreasing ratios between private funding (grassroots revenues plus plutocratic funding) and total party income. Needless to say, the data must be interpreted in the light of the dramatic increase in state funding, which had a clear impact on the relative weight of parties' autonomous financing. Be that as it may, all parties (apart from Lega) were heavily dependent on public funds. The data seem to tell us a different story in the following periods, when all parties (except the PD) show a reverse trend. However, the data must be read as a consequence of the cut to state funding until its final abolition in 2017. In addition, it must be noted that a significant amount of the revenue raised by the parties comes from their MPs according to intra-party agreements.

Another interesting indicator of party strength is represented by the percentage of expenditure used for party staff. Wages, fiscal dues, liquidation, and pension contributions are all revealing elements which can be compared with the resources spent by parties for electoral campaigns. Forza Italia has always privileged spending for electoral campaigning rather than for the functioning of the party, while the Lega has devoted a significant proportion

**Table 7.5** Party private revenues on total party income, expenditures for personnel and electoral campaigns on total expenditures (%), 1994–2018

		PDS-DS-PD	FI-PDL-FI	Lega	M5S
1991–1998	Private income	47	33.7	58.7	*
	Staff	41.4	12.7	13.5	*
	Campaigns	5.8	22	10	*
2002–2006	Private income	25.2	29.2	46.5	*
	Staff	20	6.4	25.2	*
	Campaigns	9.1	27.5	6.4	*
2008–2009	Private income	7.8	31.6	NA	NA
	Staff	9.3	7.4	NA	NA
	Campaigns	27.1	42.6	NA	NA
2015–2017	Private income	42.8	77.5	71.8	NA
	Staff	42	8.4	20	NA
	Campaigns	7.1	10	16.3	NA

*Note.* \* refers to parties that did not exist at the time.

*Source:* Authors' own work based on [Pizzimenti 2020](#)

of its income for party staff. In the centre-left camp, the tendency is less clear. PDS and DS prioritized the maintenance of party staff (in line with the mass-party principle), while the interpretation of the balance sheets of their successor PD is less univocal. Finally, it is not possible to assess the profile of the M5S along this dimension, as the movement reports neither income nor expenditure.

## Degree of internal cohesion of parties

To assess the degree of internal cohesion of political parties, we resort to three indicators: the continuity of their leadership, the number of significant splits suffered by the party, and the loyalty of the elected personnel.

Table 7.6 shows us data regarding the first two indicators. Among the right-wing parties, there has been high leadership stability. Berlusconi, who passed away in June 2023, was always the leader of Forza Italia (1994–2009 and 2013–2023), and also of its (temporary) evolution, the PDL (2009–2013). In practice, the major centre-right parties have always kept their founder as the only leader. The Lega also presents a high level of stability in its leadership. The founder of the party, Umberto Bossi, served as leader from its foundation in 1991 and held the office until 2012. After the brief leadership of Roberto Maroni, Salvini became the party secretary in 2013 and radically changed the orientation of the party by transforming it from an autonomist/separatist anti-Italian actor into a pro-Italian nationalist right-wing party. Further, in the M5S, the founder of the party has long held the top-level leadership. Between 2007 and 2017, Grillo behaved as the movement's leader, even if no official role was specified in party statutes. In 2017, a 'Capo politico'<sup>4</sup> (Political Chief) was formally introduced, to be chosen through closed primary elections, but Grillo kept the role of the 'guarantor of the movement' and has remained the owner of the party logo. However, the events associated with leadership changes in the main centre-left parties are more complex. For both the PDS and the DS, we find continuity in the leadership. If we consider the

**Table 7.6** Number of leaders and of significant splits, 1994–2018

	PDS	DS	PD	FI	PDL	Lega	M5S
<i>Number of leaders</i>	2	3	6	1	1	3	2
<i>Significant splits</i>	0	0	1	0	1	0	0

Source: Authors' elaboration from Pizzimenti (2020: 178)

two parties as one, there were four general secretaries from 1991 to 2007. The average time in office is reduced for PD leaders. In fact, after Walter Veltroni (founder and first general secretary in 2007), we find a long list of ‘regents’ (temporary leaders) and new appointed secretaries—a total of 7 in 14 years.

Less variance is recorded for relevant party splits. By taking into account only those splits that gave birth to a competitive party (i.e. a party that is able to appoint some cabinet members or to elect parliamentary representatives in the following elections), we can identify a few episodes. On the left, we find only the ‘Movimento Democratico Progressista—Articolo 1’, which in 2017 left PD because of its strong opposition to the centrist and moderate path chosen by the then secretary Matteo Renzi. On the right, the ‘Nuovo CentroDestra’ left the PDL under the leadership of the former deputy leader Angelino Alfano, who wanted to continue to be part of the grand coalition cabinets led by Enrico Letta in 2013 and Renzi in 2014. Neither Forza Italia nor the Lega have experienced relevant splits.

Another type of departure, more significant in quantitative terms, is represented by the number of parliamentarians who changed the group that they had joined at the time of the elections. Table 7.7 clearly shows that at the end of the term, the number of deputies still part of the same group they joined at the beginning of the term is usually lower. One exception is the PDS in 1994, which was able to enlarge its group by welcoming many individual deputies who had been elected in the first-past-the-post constituencies by the left coalition without a clear partisan affiliation. The other exception is the Lega in the 2018–2022 term. The Lega group grew from 125 deputies in 2018 to 138 in 2022. However, the most important feature is that, in all other cases, party parliamentary groups progressively lose members during the term, in some cases in sizeable numbers. Particularly significant is the decline of the M5S group in the 2018–2023 term (–27% of deputies). But the biggest failure of group unity occurred in the 2013–2018 term for the PDL. In fact, the result of 2013 election saw a heavy decline of 15.88 percentage points for the centre-right party. This led Berlusconi’s party into a strategic crisis. At first, it decided to form a grand coalition with PD, but in November 2013 he decided to leave the governmental coalition and to re-establish Forza Italia, with the aim of giving a new priority to the centre-right alliance. However, a large share of parliamentarians did not follow the leader and formed the Nuovo CentroDestra (NCD), choosing to support the executive of Letta.

**Table 7.7** Evolution of the party group composition in the Chamber of Deputies, 1994–2021

	PDS		DS		PD		FI		PDL		Lega		M5S	
	BEG	END	BEG	END	BEG	END	BEG	END	BEG	END	BEG	END	BEG	END
1994	143	164					113	110			117	71		
		+15%	NA	NA	NA	NA		-3%	NA	NA		-39%	NA	NA
1996		NA	172	161			122	117			59	46		
		NA		-6%	NA	NA		-4%	NA	NA		-22%	NA	NA
2001		NA	136	129			178	167			30	26		
		NA		-5%	NA	NA		-6%	NA	NA		-13%	NA	NA
2006		NA		NA	218	194	134	131			23	22		
		NA		NA		-11%		-2%	NA	NA		-4%	NA	NA
2008		NA		NA	217	203		NA	275	202	60	58		
		NA		NA		-6%		NA		-27.00%		-3%	NA	NA
2013		NA		NA	293	282		NA	97	56	20	22	109	88
		NA		NA		-4%		NA		-42.00%		+10%		-19%
2018		NA		NA	111	93	104	78		NA	125	132	222	161
						-16%		-25%				+6%		-27%

BEG—beginning of term; END—end of term

Source: Authors' own calculation



## Means of communication

Regarding the means of communication, the PDS had inherited from the PCI the historical communist newspaper *l'Unità*. Although it saw a huge crisis in the early 2000s—it was temporarily closed between 2000 and 2002—in 2007 it became the official newspaper of PD. The party also inherited the newspaper *Europa* from La Margherita, the other merging party. Eventually, the two newspapers closed in the 2010s (*Europa* in 2014 and *l'Unità* in 2017), leaving the PD without any official newspaper. Even the online magazine *Democrat-ica*, which was established to fill the gap left by the disappearance of the two newspapers, closed in 2019. The newspaper of the Lega, *La Padania*, and its official radio broadcaster, Radio Padania Libera, were both founded in 1996. However, in the 2010s, following the nationalist turn of the party, these two channels of communication—whose names harked back to the party's separatist past—were liquidated. A new official party newspaper, *Il Populista*, had an online circulation between 2016 and 2020 (Tizian 2021). Neither Forza Italia nor the M5S aimed at owning official party media. However, Berlusconi was the owner of Italy's biggest private broadcasting company, Mediaset, which also had interests in book publishing and magazines. Furthermore, some newspapers were directly owned by political and economic collaborators of Berlusconi or even by his relatives. Newspapers like *Il Foglio*, *Libero*, *Il Giornale*, to mention a few, all had experienced editorial direction closely connected to Berlusconi and, therefore, to Berlusconi's party (Poli 2001). Something similar happened for the M5S. In this case, although the M5S does not own any newspaper or radio channels, its founder Beppe Grillo had a very popular website. In the mid-2000s, the blog *beppegrillo.it* offered the first space for political discussion, organization, and external promotion for the 'Amici di Beppe Grillo'. In 2008, *The Observer* placed Grillo's website in ninth position in the global ranking of most influential blogs, and in 2009 it became the web-space for the 'Liste Civiche 5 Stelle', which became the 'Movimento Nazionale a 5 Stelle' by the end of that year. Going through several changes, 'Il Blog delle Stelle' became the official online party organ only in 2018. Furthermore, in its history, the M5S and its leader Grillo have repeatedly shown that they employ private social media in an effective way.

Table 7.8 shows that social media represent an important means of communication for the four analysed parties, with different numbers and styles depending on the party organization and party leader. The M5S is the most popular party on social media among the four. Its unofficial leader Beppe Grillo is also the most followed leader on Twitter and the second most 'liked' on Facebook (Salvini being the most liked there). The Lega's leader, Salvini,

**Table 7.8** The four parties and their leaders in social media (number of followers)

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram
<i>PD</i>	367,384	360,495	117,000
<i>Enrico Letta</i>	122,179	624,857	65,100
<i>Forza Italia</i>	227,612	166,855	62,700
<i>Silvio Berlusconi</i>	1,090,896	166,452	356,000
<i>Movimento 5 Stelle</i>	1,543,434	713,941	356,000
<i>Beppe Grillo</i>	1,919,205	2,400,000	111,000
<i>Lega</i>	799,527	178,648	326,000
<i>Matteo Salvini</i>	4,542,639	1,400,000	2,200,000

Source: Authors' own elaboration of data gathered in Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (13 July 2021)

is by far the most followed on Instagram, with approximately seven times more followers than his party. Overall, as a further demonstration of their level of personalization, on both Facebook and Twitter leaders are generally more popular than their corresponding parties, along with Instagram in two out of the four cases.

## Summary Evaluation

The Italian political system has often been depicted as an outlier (Lijphart 1999). Although this well-rooted image mainly referred to the First Republic, the heavily criticized Italian 'particracy' has given way to an even more anomalous party system. The so-called Second Republic is characterized—since its beginning in the early 1990s—by a persistent weakness. The continuous reforms of the 'rules of the game' have been (erroneously) considered the means through which the party system and its units could have been reinforced. The perverse effects produced by redundant and incoherent political regulation has come to reduce the (already limited) incentives to party organizational consolidation. Parties have privileged their competitiveness in the electoral arena to survive in the institutions, thus becoming heavily dependent on the state (Pizzimenti 2018, 2020). This long-lasting dependency is no longer based on direct public funding—which was abolished in 2017. However, looking at the present parties' balance sheets, other public resources (such as parliamentary salaries) are still relevant.

To date, we can identify at least three problem areas in the relationship between political parties and the functioning of representative democracy:

institutional design, the format and mechanics of the party system, and party organizational features.

Considering institutional design, the electoral system is a factor of persistent instability and uncertainty. As we have outlined, the last 30 years have been characterized by frequent changes in electoral law. In some phases, these changes have also become prominent themes of political debate, with two negative effects on the proper functioning of Italian democracy. On the one hand, the instability of the ‘rules of the game’ has made the ‘game’ itself less credible and legitimized. On the other hand, the great attention and time paid by the political class to electoral regulation has worked to the disadvantage of other important issues. Recently, this situation has worsened since a referendum in 2020 reduced the number of members of both chambers of the parliament. This cut has further intensified the debate on the need for an umpteenth electoral law. However, whatever the new electoral system may be, lowering the number of parliamentarians will increase the ratio between MPs and inhabitants.

As for the format and mechanics of the party system, the Second Republic shows a clear inclusive nature. Even though most of the successful new parties have emerged as anti-establishment parties, the already existing parties had no problems in establishing parliamentary agreements or even electoral and government alliances with these actors. The socialization of anti-system or challenger parties is particularly evident during technocratic governments, when very few parties were excluded from the *unions sacrées* which sometimes emerge in Italian politics. The post-2018 parliamentary term proved that even the most populist and quintessential anti-party movement, the M5S, was able to ally with almost all the other competitor parties (from the right-wing Lega to the left-wing Liberi e Uguali—LeU; from the socialist PD to the conservative Forza Italia). However, the ductility of the system—which someone could interpret as a sign of maturity, tolerance, and sense of responsibility—could also be seen as a clear sign of the parties’ indistinguishability for voters, thus explaining the falling turnout figures. This aspect is detrimental to Italian democracy because it risks pushing more voters into abstention and apathy.

Finally, the organizational characteristics of Italian parties also show a number of dangerous weaknesses. The first element, which is common to all parties, is the extreme identification of the party with its leader. In our analysis, two out of the four parties were specifically founded as leader’s parties. This is the reason why Forza Italia and the M5S also follow the individual

fortunes and evolutions of their leaders. Forza Italia has not been able to experience a different leadership than that of its founder, Berlusconi; the M5S has unsuccessfully tried to overcome Grillo's prominence, first by electing Luigi Di Maio as a leader and then choosing former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. The parties' adaptation to their leader is also evident for the Lega. In 2012, the election of Salvini as federal secretary provoked a change in the party's goals. It moved from being an organization rooted in a specific area of the country (the North) to behaving as an 'opinion party', attractive to occasional sympathizers from the whole country. The extreme personalization of parties, which is less evident (albeit present) in the PD, has weakened the parties' organizations and also had consequences on the capacity of politics to respond to citizens' requests and expectations. In fact, most of the parties (including those in our sample) have striven to find brand-new organizational arrangements by changing their names or symbols or even merging with other parties, often in order to match their leaders' ambitions. In general, most of the parties have increased their plebiscitary profiles, mainly through the introduction of direct forms of legitimization of their leaders—such as primary elections, whether open or closed. However, the blurring of the organizational boundaries, the lightening of structures, and the parallel empowerment of the party leader have tended to weaken the parties as organizations. Overall, the general personalization of parties suggests a negative perspective on the future of Italian democracy.

In addition to these general tendencies, some specific problems affect the parties in our sample. Forza Italia, which is epiphenomenon of a personalized party and which was originally labelled as the prototype and model of new populist parties in Europe, seems to have an uncertain future. The party is experiencing a long decline in parallel with the personal ageing and physical deterioration of Berlusconi. Even the recent party relocation towards institutional, responsible, and fully pro-European positions seems to be more an effect of the cooling down of Berlusconi's lively personality than of a profound ideological evolution. What will become of Forza Italia after Berlusconi is one of the big question marks hanging over the future of Italian democracy. Another point of interest concerns the future directions of M5S's unstable electorate. The 'Movimento' was able to gain voters from all political orientations, with a specific attractiveness for those with an extreme and anti-establishment profile. However, the extent to which these voters will appreciate the change in the very nature of the M5S towards a centre-leftist profile is an open question. Another specific point of inquiry concerns the Lega's ability to keep together the original Northern regionalist

and governmental wing with the new extreme-right nationalist positioning of the party. As long as Salvini was on the top of opinion polls, there was no open criticism towards his nationalist course. However, after his removal from the national government in 2019, an increasing malaise has been moving through the party, initially in silence, and then after the forming of Draghi's cabinet in 2021. We will see whether the Lega is able to maintain its current two-headed nature. The PD has an opposite long-standing problem: the endemic weakness of its leaders. The party has experienced, by far, the largest number of leadership changes. This could be the result of the perverse effects produced by the open primary elections, a foundational myth of the party; of the uncertain and hybrid nature of the party's ideological profile; as well as of the extreme intra-party factionalism, which the party inherited from its Christian-democratic wing (Bardi and Pizzimenti 2020). All these features have undermined the stability and the autonomy of the national leadership. By contrast, the organizational consolidation of the major party of the centre-left coalition could be beneficial for Italian democracy as a whole.

Overall, we can affirm that, faced with multiple and highly complex challenges—such as globalization, monetary integration, or the financial crisis, to cite a few—Italian parties have proved totally inadequate, thus boosting the vicious circle of political and institutional delegitimization. Technocratic governments—another Italian anomaly—and the rise of new (or renewed) anti-establishment actors represent phenomena which are deeply connected to Italian parties' fragility. All of them look like 'paper tigers' whose apparent strength and legitimacy are only connected to their capacity to survive within the institutions in a persistent vacuum of any reliable organizational projects.

## Post-script

In late July 2022, the technical government led by Mario Draghi resigned due to increasing political tensions among the heterogeneous coalition of supporting parties. The President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, opted to dissolve Parliament and called for early elections, to be held in September. The unexpected resignation of the technical executive forced parties to run an unusual summer election campaign. While centre-right parties (FI, the Lega, and Fratelli d'Italia) had already agreed on a possible coalition pact, the other parties showed no clear strategies. The PD decided to break up the existing coalition with the M5S, as it was considered the main culprit

for Draghi's resignation. At the same time, the centrist liberal parties *Azione* and *Italia Viva* opted for a solo race by launching a new electoral cartel (AZ-IV).

These sudden events further hindered the (already unlikely) reform of the electoral system, which was deemed necessary after the reduction of the number of deputies and senators. As widely forecast, the centre-right coalition won the elections. However, compared to the past, the political profile of the coalition had changed. In fact, the extreme-right parties (*Lega* and the post-fascist *Fratelli d'Italia*) overwhelmed the parliamentary representation of the previous main party of the coalition, *Forza Italia*. The former two parties won a total of 184 representatives in the Chamber, while the latter had only 44 deputies. Unsurprisingly, *Fratelli d'Italia* (FDI) benefited from the opposition to Draghi's government, thus becoming the most popular party in the poll. Compared to the 2018 elections, the once anti-establishment *M5S* more than halved its electoral figures, while the *PD* confirmed its disappointing performance.

By mid-2023, the government led by FDI leader Giorgia Meloni has not fully addressed the issue of institutional reforms, despite its public inclinations towards increased regionalism and presidentialism. In parallel, however, several events have occurred that might alter the political competition in the years to come. First, in February 2023, the open primary elections set by the *PD* to select its party leader were won by Elly Schlein, a liberal-leftist politician who registered as a party member only in late December 2022. This unexpected result opened the door to a potential alliance with the *M5S*, which was marginalized until then. Second, and probably more important, Silvio Berlusconi passed away on 12 June 2023. This event symbolically put an end to the Italian Second Republic while posing a major threat to *Forza Italia*'s survival.

All in all, despite several scandals affecting relevant members of the ruling coalition, the centre-right government looks healthy and is fully supported by its member parties. In contrast, the opposition is still divided into different poles and thus does not currently represent a viable alternative.

## Notes

1. Acknowledgments. We would like to thank Editage ([www.editage.com](http://www.editage.com)) for English language editing.
2. The variables are: 1. Leader's selection, 2. Candidates' selection, 3. Differentiated membership, 4. Registration of non-members, 5. Possibility of party affiliation directly to the

- centre, 6. Possibility of enrolment to other parties, 7. Delegated affiliation, 8. Time limits for membership.
3. These analyses have been provided by the Voting Advice Application NavigatoreElettorale.it, developed by the Università di Pisa, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and Kieskompas BV.
  4. The expression ‘capo politico’ is the same as that explicitly mentioned within the Legge Rosato, which has regulated the electoral system and procedures since 2017. Indeed, its use to define political parties’ leaders is rather unusual. Other words, such as ‘segretario’, ‘presidente’, or ‘portavoce’, are usually employed. We can reasonably think that in this aspect—mainly symbolic—the M5S wanted to differentiate itself from the other traditional parties.

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