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Two politicians in search of a victory: Coalition formation in the new and old world

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JAMES L. NEWELL

Introduction

Parties' decisions about the other forces with which they would ally themselves were widely thought to have been unusually important to the outcome of the 2006 general election in view of the seeming narrowness of the gap between the two main coalitions. For example, in a piece entitled 'How Prodi's *Unione* won by a handful of votes', Alessandro Chiaramonte (2008: 214-15) has recently argued for the importance of the contribution of micro-lists to the centre left's victory, suggesting that in the Chamber contest, for example,

the 92,002 votes obtained by *Progetto Nordest* – a minor list that was fielded independently of the two coalitions but which certainly drew its support from the centre right's potential reservoir – would have been sufficient to allow the *Cdl* to overtake the *Unione*; as would the votes of the Pensioners' Party – which allied with the *Unione* in these elections but which, sub-nationally, has often been a partner of the *Cdl* – or the votes of *Alleanza Lombarda*, another small party hosted by the *Unione* but clearly supported by voters not of the left.

In fact it can be argued that the outcome was not as narrow as was widely assumed – across all three of the arenas in which the Chamber contest took place, the *Unione* outdistanced the centre right by the clear-cut margin of 130,322 votes¹ – while there is always the problem of knowing *how much* of an impact parties' alliance decisions make. To argue, for example, that *Progetto Nordest*, allied with the *Cdl*, would have been sufficient to give the latter victory in 2006, is to make the crucial assumption that when parties shift from one alliance to another, they take all or most of their supporters with them such that vote distributions are mere reflections of the configuration of party line-ups. Yet a *Progetto Nordest* allied with the *Cdl* would not have been the same offering as a *Progetto Nordest* running independently; while it is not at all clear how one can resolve the knotty philosophical problems involved in trying to gauge empirically, the impact of something that never happened, i.e. what 'would have happened if' *Progetto Nordest* had run with the *Cdl*.

However, as we know, a situation defined as real is real in its consequences and both analysts and politicians themselves seem widely to have believed in 2006, that voters do, by and large, follow their parties whenever these change their alliances. The

¹ The three arenas are the domestic and foreign arenas and the one constituted by the Valle D'Aosta constituency, in each of which the voting systems differ. It is only the outcome in the domestic arena that counts for the purposes of assignment of the majority premium. The fact that in the Senate the centre left won fewer votes than the centre right merely tells us – on the assumption that of those voting for both branches most do so in the same way (Agosta, 2006: 461) – that the centre right had a moderate advantage among that part of the electorate consisting of voters over the age of 25 (Newell, 2008: 246; Corbetta and Vassallo, 2006: 423).

evidence for this is given by the broad, all-embracing coalitions that were offered to voters at those elections. Since, so the reasoning goes, the votes of all parties, even those failing to surmount the vote thresholds, counted for the purposes of assigning the majority premium; and since, too, the thresholds are lower for coalesced parties than for those running independently, the incentive was very much to form the most all-encompassing coalitions possible. The upshot was that this is exactly what happened, with the result that third-force candidacies were very few and far between, succeeding as a consequence in garnering collectively less than 1% of the vote in either the Chamber or the Senate contest.

If this analysis is correct, then it becomes a problem to explain why the coalitions that have taken shape for the 2008 elections are so very different from those that were formed for the vote held just two years ago. Tables 1 and 2 show how radically the nature of the electoral supply to be offered to voters on 13 and 14 April will differ from the supply offered two years ago.² What stands out from the tables is that while there has been a reduction in the number of lists of about a half, the number of separate coalitions has gone up from two to six, each of the two main coalitions of 2006 having split into one larger and two smaller components: the coalition led by Veltroni, plus the Sinistra Arcobaleno (SA) and the Partito Socialista, on the left; and the coalition led by Berlusconi, plus the Unione di Centro and La Destra, on the right. This appears strange based on what appeared to be politicians' assumptions about voter behaviour and what therefore constituted winning alliance strategies – assumptions which would enjoin unity at all costs.

In a similar vein it poses problems for those who would argue for a strong impact of electoral systems on the shape of party systems. Here, the argument was that the electoral system, by making parties aware that there were none of the political costs of splitting and fragmentation normally associated with plurality systems, would have just this effect; in fact, it was said, the system had been designed in 2005 precisely in order to make life difficult for the centre left in this respect in the event that it won in 2006: parties needed to keep high the profile of their separate identities in order to retain the loyalty of their core supporters and did not have to worry if at any given time this brought splits or conflict with coalition partners since they could count on being courted in the process of coalition formation at the subsequent election. Yet this is precisely what has *not* happened, Mastella serving as the emblematic example here; while in the meantime there has, overlaying or alongside any process of fragmentation of parties, been a clear trend in the opposite direction: the Partito Democratico (PD) is the obvious example of this, but so are the Popolo della libertà (PDL) and the SA. These appear to be more than mere alliances of convenience designed for one election insofar as they were conceived well before it became clear that early elections would take place and they are apparently envisaged, in the eyes of their sponsors, as the, at least potential, precursors of a formal amalgamation process.

There is a third reason why an understanding of coalition formation in the run up to 2008 can be deemed to be important. Any explanation of an election outcome, to be

² Tables are presented from page 16 on.

convincing, must account satisfactorily for the three factors necessarily responsible for it: that is, it must account for the distribution of voters' choices; it must account for the way in which the electoral system has converted the distribution of choices into a given distribution of seats, and it must account for the configuration of parties and line-ups among which the voters have been called upon to choose in the first place. In the case of 2008, this configuration is such that, thanks to the electoral system, there is a distinct possibility that in the election's aftermath Italy will find itself in the historically unprecedented position of having something closely resembling single-party government. For these three reasons, then, in what remains of this paper we will explore, first, the processes of amalgamation to which we have referred and then the process by which, in the month of February 2008, the new formations so created came together in electoral coalitions. We begin with the PD, whose formation was initiated first.

The Partito Democratico

Surveying the Italian political scene in the months leading up to the last election, I cited a recent editorial by Eugenio Scalfari (2006) who had made the point that by virtue of its very existence, every organisation has its own ethos whose integrity its members seek to preserve as the price of the organisation's continued existence.

But the continued existence of an organisation means precisely the continued existence of the issues that divide it from other organisations, so that, if we look at the recent past, we find that examples of successful mergers of different parties are rare in the extreme...In Italy, the physical presence of the Vatican, and therefore its political influence, place enormous obstacles in the way of the merger of a party whose roots lie in the Catholic tradition with one whose roots lie in the communist tradition (Newell, 2006a: 7).

Since then, the merger has taken place; so the task is to explain why, despite the apparently poor prognostications, this is so. Here I can merely list the elements that appear to contribute to an explanation.

First, there was widespread awareness of the need for a large party that would play, within the centre left, that same role of 'coalition maker' that Berlusconi and Forza Italia were able to play on the centre right – that is to dictate, by virtue of their relative size, the terms on which negotiations within the coalition take place and therefore to impose a minimum of discipline on allies. Needs, of course, are not causes; however, needs recognised are; and there had been several well-known efforts in the direction of such a party going back at least to Prodi's call for a single list of the Ulivo parties for the European Parliament elections of 2004. Second, therefore, due account must be taken of factors of path dependency that will have made it more rewarding or less costly for political actors to persist with such efforts than to embark upon another path. One of these factors – third – will presumably have been support for the project built up, by politicians' pronouncements, among ordinary supporters of the centre left. Many of these were, seemingly, negatively attached to the coalition's parties while being positively

attached to the coalition itself and they seemed to provide proof positive of their significance in the overwhelming support they gave in the 2005 primaries to Romano Prodi (whose own special project the PD clearly was) and in the 2006 elections when the Chamber Ulivo list (at 31.3%) had a clear advantage over the lists of its constituent parties (at 27.7%) for the Senate. Fourth, the size of the ideological obstacles in the way of merger between ex-communist and Catholic activists may have been reduced by a political context in which abnegation of Communism on the one side had made room for adherence to a rather indistinct and eclectic set of reformist values – shared on the other side by the heirs to a political outlook – that of the left of the old DC – that already had a tradition of seeking accommodation with the Communists (Berselli, 2007: 45). Finally, it may be that the power of potential losers from the project within the two main founding parties will have been neutralised by the steps taken (through the October 2007 primaries) to give those without any prior involvement with either party the opportunity to be involved in the foundation process on the same terms as those with such involvement.

The popolo della libertà

On the centre right, emergence of the PDL was likewise very much bound up with the immediate- and longer-term tensions within the coalition. Like the centre left, the Casa delle libertà too was an alliance whose constituent parties were very diverse in terms of their ideologies, sizes, geographical strongholds and the interests they sought to represent (Diamanti and Lello, 2005: 9). Brought together under the leadership of Silvio Berlusconi, they were able to remain united as long as the entrepreneur's personal popularity was essential for their collective success and as long as his party did well. Otherwise, the parties were united by little more than opposition to the centre left, and whenever Berlusconi's popularity had shown signs of weakening, they had been encouraged to break ranks. They were aware that the political costs were not high – that voters are unwilling to switch between the two main *coalitions*, but increasingly willing to shift among the parties *within* the coalition with which they identified (Natale, 2002) – a tendency significantly encouraged by the electoral law. For another thing, therefore, the parties have been encouraged to keep in sharp relief, the profile of their separate identities: Representing conflicting socio-political interests, they have been under pressure to shore up support among their core supporters. Finally, having embraced the 'personalisation' of politics, they have multiplied the tensions within and between themselves by transforming what were once contests between *parties* into face-offs between *individual leaders* (Diamanti and Lello, 2005: 10-12). It was against this background that Berlusconi announced, in the so-called running-board speech of 18 November, that Forza Italia would merge with a new formation to be called the Popolo della libertà.

The announcement was made in the immediate aftermath of the Government's success in getting its finance law approved by the Senate, something that had heightened tensions within the centre right by disconfirming Berlusconi's public prediction that it would bring about the government's fall. For this reason, the entrepreneur's

announcement appeared to contain the implicit invitation to his allies to either put up or shut up, and to warn them that if they turned their back definitively on him they risked complete marginalisation; for a similarly named party that would unite the forces of the centre right had been discussed at least since 2005, and was a proposal with the capacity to divide the allies (while attracting the immediate adherence of the coalition's micro-formations).³

La Sinistra Arcobaleno

The emergence of this formation was a direct consequence of the formation of the PD, whose emergence provoked the break away, from the Democratici di Sinistra (DS), of the Sinistra Democratica. Since it saw in the merger of the DS and the Margherita the simultaneous disappearance – uniquely in Europe – of Italy's main party of socialism and the left, the Sinistra Democratica had as the fundamental objective giving life to it in the first place, the unification of the parties of the Italian left in a single organisation. Its view of the significance of the PD's appearance is one that was presumably also shared by Communist Refoundation (RC) which, as the largest of the groupings to the left of the PD would presumably also have seen in the SA an opportunity to establish for itself a position of leadership over the Italian left as a whole. The PdCI and the Greens, which had already come together for the purposes of the 2006 election, would presumably have seen in the new formation an opportunity to escape the consequences of any new electoral law that might penalise smaller groupings running independently.

The status of the new organisation appears ambiguous: the declaration of intents adopted at the Assembly of the Left on 8 and 9 December seems to point to a formation that is less than a new party but more than an electoral list; for it refers to the construction of a new entity 'of the left and of environmentalists' whose organisation is to be 'unitary' and 'pluralistic', but also 'federal' – thus perhaps implying that it might amount to less than the total confluence of its constituent entities.⁴ Moreover, its cohesion has also at times been threatened by debate over the electoral law. On the one hand, in face of the possibility that the Constitutional Court would in January give the green light to campaigners' requests for a referendum on the matter, it seemed for a time that

³ Within AN, Gianfranco Fini was in favour of the single party, which would eliminate the risk of his own party being once again ostracised on the far right, and increase his chances of obtaining the leadership of the coalition as a whole once Berlusconi retired. But the proposal was disapproved of by the right of AN, and contributed to the decision of the high profile Francesco Storace, earlier in the year, to abandon AN, something for which Berlusconi was, as a consequence, held responsible. Within the UDC, the proposal was viewed favourably by Carlo Giovanardi and his faction but opposed by most of the remainder of the party – the encouraging election result in 2006 having reinforced the position of those arguing for a heightening of the distinction between the party's own positions and those of the rest of the coalition.

⁴ The declaration of intents was seen as the beginning rather than the end point of the drawing together of its four signatories, as a proposal subsequently to be opened out to wider debate. PdCI leader, Oliviero Diliberto, was apparently opposed to the idea of a single logo for the new formation, and placed the accent on the notion of a federation; while Sinistra Democratica leader, Fabio Mussi, and leader of the Greens, Pecoraro Scanio, said they were in favour of a single logo and perhaps even of a party (Fusani, 2007).

Rifondazione Comunista might reach agreement with the PD, Forza Italia and the UDC on a reform based on the so-called *bozza Bianco*,⁵ the draft reform prepared under the direction of Enzo Bianco, chair of the Senate's Constitutional Affairs Commission. The remaining parties were much less enthusiastic and even hostile, prepared – if such action was necessary to block reform disadvantageous to them – to threaten the future of the SA.⁶ This then begs the question of why it was that despite these tensions in January, the four components were nevertheless able to agree, in February, to field a single list for the general election. Answering this question involves turning a spotlight on the forces that drove coalition formation generally that month.

Coalition formation in February

The first, and the decisive, move was made by Walter Veltroni when he declared that at the next election the PD would run alone, whatever the electoral law. A possibility to which he had alluded for the first time several months previously,⁷ it probably contributed to the Prodi government's fall since it in effect said to the coalition's smaller components that they could not count on their larger governing partner to assure them representation in a future parliament – thus leaving them, once the Constitutional Court had given the go-ahead for the referendum, with a simple choice: either to allow the Government to continue and risk, in the spring, a referendum outcome unfavourable to them, or else to attempt to avert this risk by bringing the Government down. The centrist components which in fact toppled the Government were those whose placement on the political spectrum made it likely that if they could not, in the ensuing elections, find allies in their 'own' coalition, then they could assure their survival by passing over to the other side.

The logic underlying the seemingly irrational confirmation by Veltroni, on 5 February, that his party would not seek allies, was explained by Giovanni Sartori when, in the course of an edition of the TV programme, *Annozero*, broadcast on 7 February, he

⁵ This envisaged a law based on the principle that 50% of the Chamber seats would be distributed in single-member constituencies, 50% proportionally, in 32 multi-member constituencies, with a 5% national vote threshold or 7% in at least five regions. The voter would cast a single vote, which would be used to determine assignment of both the single-member and the proportional seats. In the case of the Senate, candidates would be elected, within each region, through single member constituencies with candidates not so elected being eligible to participate in the distribution of additional seats assigned to the region. These seats would be distributed proportionally among those candidates achieving at least 5% of the vote in the region concerned. It was thought that this might just also bring on board the UDEUR which would thus obtain protection for its regional base in Campania where it took 5.2% in the Senate contest in 2006 (Fusani, 2008).

⁶ In January, Oliviero Diliberto said, 'The Bianco draft cannot be improved; it is un-presentable. If we agreed on everything, we would be in the same party. But the Sinistra Arcobaleno was born in order to protect the interests of the workers; on the electoral law everyone will come to their own conclusions' (Scarchilli, 2008).

⁷ In the preface to a book called *La nuova stagione* (Rizzoli) and then in an article published in *la Repubblica* on 24 August. See Veltroni (2008).

described the decision as ‘courageous’ (*valorosa*). On the one hand, fighting the elections on the basis of the coalition that had presented itself in 2006, and therefore, having to defend a government that despite everything was deeply unpopular, was not a winning proposition.⁸ On the other hand, an independent stance would give Veltroni bargaining power that Prodi never had, enabling him to offer to the micro-formations, an arrangement that would be confined to places on *his* lists and on *his* terms, failing which these formations might risk electoral annihilation. Three further related considerations may have played a role in the decision. First, by far and away the most probable outcome was that Berlusconi would win. On that basis, running alone had the advantage that, since the thresholds are higher for non-aligned than for aligned lists,⁹ the seats not assigned to the winning coalition would have to be shared with fewer lists (Floridaia, 2008).¹⁰ Second, Veltroni’s strategists might have made the point that though unlikely, victory nevertheless remained a *possibility* and perhaps a greater possibility if, through an independent stance, he was able to present the PD as something new, rather than a re-edition of the past. Third, they might also have suggested that an independent stance would in any case most likely squeeze the vote of rivals, especially on the left, whose supporters would be forced to decide between a vote for their *most* preferred choice and a *voto utile* for the formation most likely to defeat the prospect of their *least* preferred outcome.¹¹

As Antonio Floridaia (2008) has pointed out, the initial move by Veltroni, then set off, in the days following his announcement, a sequence of actions and reactions on the part of the other main political actors that showed how the construction of the electoral offer for 2008 could be explained as a game of strategic interdependence given the framework of constraints imposed by the electoral system.

The second move in order of time, then, came from the parties of the SA, whose initial reaction was, predictably, one of division. On the one hand, Rifondazione was prepared to run independently, believing, on the basis of its past performances that it could surmount the thresholds whether these were the lower ones for coalesced parties or the higher ones applying to independent formations. On the other hand, the remaining parties were not in this fortunate position; and not unnaturally, the Greens and the Sinistra Democratica, in particular, pushed hard for an understanding with Veltroni (*la*

⁸ As opinion polls confirmed. See, for example, Gualerzi (2008).

⁹ For Chamber elections, lists must attract at least 4 percent of the national total of valid votes cast if they are running independently or as part of a coalition whose combined total turns out to be less than ten per cent. If they are part of a coalition whose combined total is ten percent or more, then they must obtain at least 2 percent of the national valid vote total or be the coalition’s largest formation below this figure. In the Senate, the corresponding percentages, calculated at regional level, are eight, twenty and three respectively.

¹⁰ It might also put the likelihood of a Berlusconi victory at considerable risk in the Senate: here, much would depend on the regions in which the only two formations capable of exceeding eight per cent other than the main two, actually succeeded in doing so: see Manheimer (2008: 12).

¹¹ At least in the Chamber. For the Senate contest, the situation would vary, depending on the region of residence of the voter concerned. See the final section of the present paper.

Repubblica, 2008: 6). In the end, however, divorce between Veltroni and SA leader, Fausto Bertinotti, was consensual (Meli, 2008: 8). In the first place, both needed to mark a break with the experience of the Unione coalition – Bertinotti in order to escape the dilemma the experience had necessarily created for his party in attempting to be *di lotta e di governo* (Albertazzi, McDonnell and Newell, 2007). In the second place, that decision, once it had been taken, automatically gave RC enormous power vis-à-vis its allies, over whom it could establish hegemony: like the PD, it too could, because of the electoral-law thresholds, now reject a coalition, insisting instead on a single list which would, of course, be drawn up on its terms.

Even more dramatic were the consequences of Veltroni's initial move for the centre right. Here it swiftly became apparent to Berlusconi's advisors that if Veltroni was going to fight the election as the leader of a new formation, one turning its back on 'the idea that what counts is...to beat the opposing line-up by fielding the broadest coalition possible regardless of its cohesion and actual capacity to govern the country' (Veltroni, 2007), then the entrepreneur could hardly counter this by himself cobbling together a coalition of several lists. The question then was, what coalition *was* to be constructed and on what basis? It was a question whose answer reflects the same logic as that at work elsewhere in the party system. In the first place, once fresh elections had been announced, the belief that the probable winner would be Berlusconi quickly put the entrepreneur back in the driving seat of his part of the political spectrum, the recent tensions with his allies being quickly forgotten. In the second place, the PDL had already been launched as the prospective new unified party of the centre right. In effect, these two elements put Berlusconi in a rather similar position vis-à-vis his own potential allies as the one in which Veltroni found himself vis-à-vis his allies. Fini was more-than-willing to countenance the idea of a single list fielded under the name 'Popolo della libertà' *as long as* he could be satisfied that it really was the prelude to a new unified party – whose leadership he, of all potential contenders, would be the best placed to assume after Berlusconi. Bossi was in a different position, less vulnerable to the threat of re-isolation on the far right and with a reservoir of support whose geographical distribution was highly concentrated. With the power, therefore, to split the centre-right vote in the north perhaps delivering the Senate to the PD if the contest were close, he was able to obtain a coalition agreement declining the invitation to renounce his party's separate identity within a single list. Third, the micro-formations on the other hand – those such as Dini's Liberal Democratici, Rotondi's DC and so on – were in no position to resist this and quickly fell into line (Buzzanca, 2008: 2).¹² That left the UDC and la Destra, which were

¹² Mastella, having contributed decisively to the fall of the Prodi government, claimed in March that with the benefit of hindsight he would think ten times over before doing something similar again (Zuccolini, 2008: 11) – not surprisingly: in the political situation that emerged following the Government's fall, his bargaining power collapsed. As negotiations with Berlusconi became increasingly difficult, he was abandoned by his followers and his party rapidly disintegrated. Mastella being unable to find a home for himself or his few remaining followers anywhere, it was claimed that he was betrayed by a Berlusconi who had promised him a number of places in his lists and then reneged on the promise in the face of polls suggesting that it would lose him votes (Milella, 2008: 9). In the end, therefore, Mastella was forced to acknowledge complete defeat, announcing that neither he nor his party would contest the election at all. Mastella's must, surely, count as one of the most spectacular and picturesque of political miscalculations in the history of post-war Italian politics

in a rather different position to the one occupied by the micro-formations in that they were more than just 'virtual' or 'personal' parties, and had identities and genuine political traditions to defend. Faced with the choice between the threat of liquidation or defence of their autonomy, albeit in unfavourable circumstances, they chose the latter (Di Caro, 2008: 2).

Finally, it remains to account for Veltroni's decision somewhat to blur the clarity of his decision to 'run alone', by agreeing to accommodate the Radicals within the PD's lists and to agree to a coalition arrangement with di Pietro's Italia dei Valori (IdV). Antonio Floridia (2008) of the Tuscan Electoral Observatory argues that in the case of IdV, the decision was dictated by a close examination of opinion polls and previous election results which suggested that di Pietro's party might be decisive with regard to the outcome for the Senate contest in a number of regions, and that it could be expected to bring with it the support of those voters driven above all else by the anti-political sentiments widespread in the Italian electorate (Vecchi, 2008: 13). The terms of the agreement were that in exchange for the freedom to contest the elections beneath his own symbol, di Pietro would in the aftermath agree to the end of a separate existence for his party, leading his followers into a single parliamentary group with the PD. In the case of the Radicals, the reasoning was, by contrast, that while their involvement might lead to the loss of Catholic votes, it would also reassure voters with left-wing sympathies that the new PD would not concede too much to those in the party whose sympathies are, by contrast, strongly driven by religious values and who therefore take strongly conservative positions on ethical and civil liberties issues. The terms of the agreement with them were that in exchange for the loss of visibility implied by the absence of a coalition agreement, and a PD veto over those to be fielded, nine good places would be found for their candidates within the lists to be presented by the PD, with the high-profile Emma Bonino to head the list in Piemonte.

Conclusions and implications

In this paper we have tried to make sense of the process of coalition formation as it unfolded in the weeks leading up to the 2 March deadline for depositing electoral symbols at the Ministry of the Interior. That is, we have tried to explain the process by deciphering the reasons for it – putting ourselves in the position of the actors whose behaviour we are trying to explain so that their actions appear appropriate, or in other words, appear as actions that we can imagine ourselves performing were we in their position (Winch, 1958).

Our methodological and normative commitment to this approach leads us to hope that once the election has been held commentators will resist that temptation to be wise after the event that many failed to resist in the immediate aftermath of 2006. Then, the unexpected narrowness of the centre left's victory was – for example – explained as the result of a campaign by Prodi that, in contrast to Berlusconi's fiery populism, was both 'dull' and 'affected' (Berselli, 2006). The problem with this judgement is that it is contaminated by knowledge of the outcome – which thus gives undue credibility to what

is in reality no more than conjecture: *at the time*, the histrionic quality of Berlusconi's pronouncements fed the impression (I would venture to suggest) not of an effective campaign, but of a government increasingly desperate and lacking in credibility. No doubt, had the margin of Prodi's victory been ever so slightly greater 'it would' – as we wrote at the time – 'have been said that [he had achieved victory] because while Berlusconi's frantic populism failed to convince voters disillusioned by the absent miracle, Prodi's campaign was sober and highly effective in appealing to competence etc.' (Newell, 2006b: 22).¹³ So, with an eye on the results of the last poll to be published before the 'blackout' on the publication of poll findings comes into force for the last two weeks of the 2008 campaign, our hope is that Veltroni and Bertinotti will escape public criticism if the distribution of the Chamber vote reflects the poll (showing 39% for the PD, 6% for the SA and 45% for the PDL)¹⁴ and gives the majority premium to Berlusconi.

This throws a spotlight on our third conclusion and that is, that our 'findings' provide little comfort for either of the two perspectives with which we started, namely, the one according to which coalition formation is driven by an assumption on the part of politicians that voters almost invariably follow where parties lead – were it so our reconstruction would make no sense – and that electoral systems have a strong influence on the process. Obviously, (actors' understanding of the effects of) the electoral system does play a part. But the nature of the electoral system is neither a necessary, nor a sufficient condition for any given strategic choice or set of strategic choices: it is not a necessary condition because these choices changed dramatically between 2006 and 2008 even though the electoral system remained unchanged; while the clear importance, to the change choices, of the PD's emergence, of the circumstances of its emergence and of all the strategic implications that flowed there-from suggest that it is probably not a sufficient condition either. Florida's (2008) attempt to add to electoral-system characteristics others that will together constitute a sufficient condition is interesting. He argues that the Italian electoral system will lead to coalitions reflecting the principle of maximum inclusivity provided that two further conditions are met: (1) that the principal political actors around which the two coalitions are formed assume that the outcome is uncertain; (2) that the principal actors act in accordance with an immediate-term logic. When, by contrast, the outcome is deemed to be a foregone conclusion, then the actor facing defeat is concerned less with the game currently being played than with the benefits that might be derived in the future; and she faces the opposite incentive: the

¹³ We take a similar view of the widely held thesis of a Berlusconi *rimonta* in the closing stages of the 2006 campaign: a thesis that too arises from the gap between the expectations based on the centre left's pre-vote poll lead and the smallness of the distance between the two coalitions in terms of actual votes, it is faced with four challenges: 1) when compared not with poll results but the results of the two previous general elections the actual distance between the two coalitions is much less surprising; 2) if the pre-vote polls accurately reflected a centre-left lead that was then eroded, it remains to be explained why exit polls, on the two days of the vote, predicted a very similar lead; 3) the vote for Berlusconi's own party declined from 29.4% in 2001 to 23.7%: a record loss; 4) the 24,755 votes separating the two coalitions in the Chamber domestic, majority-premium, arena was arguably due, not to a comeback, but to the electoral law and the consequent breadth of the two coalitions – which virtually eliminated 'third-force' candidacies and meant that votes for such forces would effectively be wasted votes in any case.

¹⁴ For details see Biorcio and Bodignon (2008).

incentive to create the smallest viable coalition in order to have to divide the seats due to the opposition among the smallest number of lists.

This prompts two comments. First, we are sceptical of the implicit claim of ‘rational-choice institutionalism’ (of which this purports to be an example) to offer an alternative to the interpretive approach we have argued for: it is in reality itself a form of interpretation insofar as it unavoidably relies for its very intelligibility on assumptions about actors’ *reasons*. Second, then, the example given is problematic even accepting its own epistemological assumptions: uncertainty is a variable; so, depending on how much uncertainty there is, it by no means follows that the principle of maximum inclusivity is necessarily the best strategy: this is – precisely – uncertain. What we can say is that as far as the two largest actors, both above the vote thresholds are concerned, to run in coalition with a third force will be the best strategy if it is ‘reasonable’ to suppose that that force’s support is likely to be large to enable it to cross the threshold and to determine to which of the first two forces the majority premium will accrue. On the other hand, if there is a third force capable of surmounting the threshold but not of determining allocation of the majority premium, then it may make more sense to run separately – for then it will share in the distribution of seats due to the opposition parties, to the disadvantage of the largest of these. Therefore, in Tuscany, for example, for the Senate race the actual coalition structure makes more sense from the point of view of the PD than did the one that took shape in 2006: the point is that the PD can be reasonably certain of winning the majority premium there, on its own, anyway and so needs to be concerned with what happens to the seats accruing to its competitors. Here it needs to hope for the best result possible for the SA in order to reduce as much as possible the chances of Berlusconi obtaining a Senate seat majority nationally. In Tuscany, then, the best strategy for the voter of the left, concerned to defeat Berlusconi, will be to vote for the PD in the Chamber race and the SA in the Senate race. Elsewhere, for example in Abruzzo (see below and Table 3), the SA splits the vote, so that here, the same voter is better off casting his/her vote for the PD in both elections.

Where we do find ourselves in agreement with Floridaia’s analysis is where he likens the process of coalition formation to Gulliver and the Lilliputians, the large parties wriggling free of the ties and laces by which the smaller parties, through the exercise of blackmail power given to them by the electoral law, had previously bound them. From this perspective, we think that coalition formation in 2008 tends to make our case for an interpretive approach in a different way; for what it illustrates is that parties, just like ordinary people, only have blackmail power as long as those they are attempting to blackmail accept the presuppositions upon which the attempted exercise of that power is based. As soon as they reject these, the power vanishes, whatever the electoral law. Hence the importance, for explanatory purposes, of attempting to understand *their* point of view. In the present context this means that we have to take seriously Veltroni’s own view, cited earlier, of the PD’s *raison d’être*.

Finally, turning from causes, to the consequences of the process of coalition formation, it is interesting to consider the process’ possible impact on the outcome of the election for the Senate, surrounding which there currently appears, as compared to the

Chamber race, to be the greater degree of uncertainty. We can compare the 2006 results for the Unione and the Cdl with the results that will obtain in 2008 if the distribution of votes between the parties belonging to each coalition remains the same as the corresponding distribution in 2006. In that case we can take the resulting figures as offering a suggestion about the possible/probable impact on the outcome of the changed coalition arrangements *alone, if parties' performances are essentially the same as they were two years' earlier* (perhaps not an unreasonable assumption on the basis of what we know about Italian voters and the distribution of the vote at previous elections (Newell, 2006b; 2006c)). The data in question are shown in Table 3.¹⁵

On the basis of these assumptions, the PDL would emerge in front in the Senate but without the overall majority needed to enable it to govern comfortably. Even if it managed to bring the UDC back on board, it would remain in a numerically precarious position. Obviously, beyond a certain point, any discussion of possible future scenarios degenerates into speculation and has little intellectual value. However, two things may be suggested in closing. One is that it might be reasonable, once the result is known, to compare our 'virtual' results with the actual results to obtain a measure of how much of the change as compared to 2006 will have been due to changes in the nature of the political supply and how much to changes in the nature of the demand (though the caveats previously mentioned in this connection will continue to apply). Second, whatever the outcome, it will, almost certainly, have a very significant impact on the further evolution of the structure and dynamics of the party system. We could see something approaching single-party government – but unless proposed changes to Parliament's standing orders, advanced in the last legislature, are taken forward, we might see the re-emergence of fragmentation and a continuation of instability. Everything will depend on the specifics of seat distribution in the new parliament and on the meaning that is attached to it by those most directly involved.

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¹⁵ Those who voted for the UDEUR and for the Pensioners' Party in 2006, which were part of the Unione in 2006, are assumed to vote for the PDL in 2008. The first part of Table 3 is taken from Chiamonte (2008).

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Table 1 Coalitions, lists and component parties competing in the Chamber of Deputies elections 2006 and 2008

2006			2008		
<i>Coalitions</i>	<i>Lists</i>	<i>Component parties</i>	<i>Coalitions</i>	<i>Lists</i>	<i>Component parties</i>
l'Unione	L'Ulivo	DS	Sinistra Arcobaleno	Sinistra Arcobaleno	Communist Refoundation PdCI Greens
		Margherita Movimento Repubblicani Europei			Sinistra Democratica
	Communist Refoundation La Rosa nel pugno	Socialists	Coalition led by Walter Veltroni	Partito Democratico Italia dei Valori	Partito Democratico Radicals Italia dei Valori
	PdCI	Radicals PdCI			
	Italia dei Valori	Italia dei Valori	Partito Socialista	Partito Socialista	Partito Socialista
	Greens UDEUR Pensioners' Party SVP	Greens UDEUR Pensioners' Party SVP	Unione di Centro	UDC	UDC Rosa Bianca De Mita
Other Unione lists		Coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi	Popolo della libertà	Forza Italia	
Casa delle libertà	Forza Italia			National Alliance DC	
	National Alliance UDC Northern League-MPA			Northern League MPA	Liberaldemocratici Azione Sociale New PSI
	DC-New PSI			DC New PSI	Partito Repubblicano Italiano Pensioners' Party Northern League
	Alternativa Sociale Fiamma Tricolore Other Cdl lists		Northern League MPA		
		La Destra	La Destra	La Destra Fiamma Tricolore	
Others		Others			

Table 2 Coalitions, lists and component parties competing in the Senate elections 2006 and 2008

2006			2008				
<i>Coalitions</i>	<i>Lists</i>	<i>Component parties</i>	<i>Coalitions</i>	<i>Lists</i>	<i>Component parties</i>		
l'Unione	DS	DS	Sinistra Arcobaleno	Sinistra Arcobaleno	Communist Refoundation PdCI Greens		
	Margherita Movimento Repubblicani Europei Communist Refoundation La Rosa nel pugno	Margherita Movimento Repubblicani Europei			Sinistra Democratica		
		Socialists			Coalition led by Walter Veltroni	Partito Democratico	Partito Democratico
		Radicals PdCI				Italia dei Valori	Radicals Italia dei Valori
		Greens Partito dei Socialisti (Craxi) Italia dei Valori					
		Greens UDEUR Pensioners' Party SVP			Partito Socialista	Partito Socialista	Partito Socialista
		Greens UDEUR Pensioners' Party SVP			Unione di Centro	UDC	UDC Rosa Bianca De Mita
		Greens UDEUR Pensioners' Party SVP			Coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi	Popolo della libertà	Forza Italia National Alliance DC
		Other Unione lists					Liberaldemocratici Azione Sociale New PSI
		Other Unione lists					Partito Repubblicano Italiano Pensioners' Party Northern League
Casa delle libertà	Forza Italia						
	National Alliance UDC Northern League- MPA	Northern League MPA					
	DC-New PSI	DC New PSI		Northern League MPA	MPA		
	Alternativa Sociale Fiamma Tricolore Casa delle Libertà Other Cdl lists		La Destra	La Destra	La Destra Fiamma Tricolore		
Others		Others					

Table 3 Actual and 'virtual' results for coalitions by region, Senate 2006-2008

2006 actual results

Regions	% of votes			No. of seats		
	UNIONE	CDL	Others	UNIONE	CDL	Others
Piemonte	49.5	50.5	0.0	9	13	0
Valle d'Aosta	45.6	22.4	32.0	1	0	0
Lombardia	42.6	56.9	0.4	20	27	0
Trentino-Alto Adige	62.7	33.1	4.2	5	2	0
Veneto	39.5	57.1	3.4	10	14	0
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	44.4	54.8	0.7	3	4	0
Liguria	53.3	46.7	0.0	5	3	0
Emilia Romagna	59.4	40.6	0.0	12	9	0
Toscana	61.3	38.7	0.0	11	7	0
Umbria	57.2	42.8	0.0	4	3	0
Marche	54.4	45.6	0.0	5	3	0
Lazio	49.1	50.2	0.6	12	15	0
Abruzzo	53.2	46.8	0.0	4	3	0
Molise	50.5	49.5	0.0	1	1	0
Campania	49.6	49.1	1.3	17	13	0
Puglia	47.9	51.9	0.2	9	12	0
Basilicata	60.4	39.2	0.5	4	3	0
Calabria	56.8	42.6	0.7	6	4	0
Sicilia	40.5	57.8	1.7	11	15	0
Sardegna	50.9	45.3	3.8	5	4	0
Foreign constituency	48.5	37.8	13.7	4	1	1
TOTAL	49.2	49.6	1.3	158	156	1

2008 'virtual' results

Regions	Votes %					No of seats				
	PD/IdV	PDL/LN	SA	UDC	Others	PD/IdV	PDL/LN	SA	UDC	Others
Piemonte	34.6	44.4	12.5	6.6	1.9	7	12	3	0	0
Valle d'Aosta	44.2	19.2	-	3.1	33.5	1	0	0	0	0
Lombardia	27.2	51.5	11.7	5.9	3.7	15	26	6	0	0
Trentino-Alto Adige	34.5	30.5	-	-	35.0	3	2	0	0	2
Veneto	28.3	49.3	8.7	7.9	5.8	8	13	3	0	0
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	32.4	48.3	10.0	7.0	2.3	2	4	1	0	0
Liguria	37.8	42.0	13.2	6.0	1.0	2	5	1	0	0
Emilia Romagna	45.0	35.1	13.0	5.8	1.1	12	7	2	0	0
Toscana	43.6	32.5	16.0	6.0	1.9	10	5	3	0	0
Umbria	41.2	36.2	14.8	6.6	1.2	4	2	1	0	0
Marche	40.0	37.2	12.9	8.1	1.8	5	2	1	0	0
Lazio	33.8	43.2	13.0	7.1	2.9	9	15	3	0	0
Abruzzo	38.4	41.2	10.9	7.2	2.3	2	4	1	0	0
Molise	42.1	48.3	7.6	-	2.0	1	1	0	0	0
Campania	32.7	48.1	10.4	5.3	3.5	10	17	3	0	0
Puglia	33.1	44.9	9.4	8.1	4.5	6	12	2	1	0
Basilicata	41.6	37.9	11.3	5.8	3.4	4	2	1	0	0
Calabria	31.8	43.1	11.3	7.2	6.6	3	6	1	0	0
Sicilia	29.1	49.7	7.8	9.6	3.6	9	14	0	3	0
Sardegna	35.2	39.6	12.6	7.8	4.8	3	5	1	0	0
Foreign constituency	47.1	24.5	-	6.4	22.0	4	1	0	0	1
TOTAL						120	155	33	4	3

