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# The Italian General Election of 2006 and the Social Construction of Reality

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## Introduction

The general election of 2006 was the closest fought contest since the party-system upheavals of the early 1990s. However, what was most striking about the outcome was less the sheer narrowness of the centre left's victory (in terms of votes in the Chamber, in terms seats in the Senate) than the way in which the result so roundly confounded expectations. Narrow victories are possibly less unusual than is realised.<sup>1</sup> Nor is it unheard of that the party that loses in terms of votes nevertheless wins in terms of seats.<sup>2</sup> No, what was undoubtedly more depressing for centre-left supporters as, in the afternoon and evening of 10 April, they watched the results come in was the awareness that what had initially seemed like a certain victory (with exit polls amply confirming the poll results of previous weeks) was instead an outcome that would be uncertain until almost the last of the votes had been counted.

The most likely explanations for the large divergence between the poll

predictions and the votes actually cast will presumably be offered by polling experts in the coming days and weeks. Here we pursue somewhat more modest goals, offering some reflections on the causes of the outcome itself and on its significance for the general thrust of Italian politics. Our point of departure is the thought that the outcome of any parliamentary election anywhere can be conceived as the product of three interrelated sets of variables: the configuration of party and candidate line-ups among which voters are called upon to choose in the first place; the social, political and other factors impinging upon voters' choices between these alternative configurations; the nature of the electoral system. The impact of the electoral system is both direct – in terms of the way in which it translates a given distribution of votes into a given distribution of parliamentary seats – and indirect – through its impact on perceptions of its *likely* effects and thus its impact on parties' decisions about the line-ups to offer, and on voters' decisions about the choice to make between such line ups.

With this in mind, the remainder of this paper is divided into four main sections. In the section following we offer some reflections on what it was, in the run-up to the election, that resulted in voters being presented with a choice that was essentially one between the parties of one or the other of two heterogeneous coalitions whose votes would be translated into seats by means of an electoral system that, against advice, I insist on calling a 'mixed system'.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> The Israeli Knesset contest of 1981 saw Menachem Begin's Likud party beat Labour by just 10,405 votes or 0.5 percent of the total. The United States presidential contest in 2000 was decided by just 537 votes in the state of Florida. The German federal election in 2005 saw the CDU/CSU emerge ahead of the SPD by just 1 per cent of the vote.

<sup>2</sup> If this is what happened in the case of the 2006 Italian Senate contest, then the outcome was one to be placed alongside one US presidential outcome (that of 2000) and two British general election outcomes (those of 1951 and February 1974) since the war.

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<sup>3</sup> The reason for my insistence is that it seems to me that the system is mixed in the sense that it is

section after describes those features of the campaign that seem to us most relevant for an understanding of the election outcome. The subsequent section considers the outcome itself in terms of vote and seat distributions, the penultimate section the election aftermath. The final section concludes.

### The run-up

One of the most striking – and, as we shall see, significant – features of the 2006 outcome was the sharp decline in the support for ‘third forces’, unattached to either of the two coalitions. If in 2001 support for these forces (Lista Bonino, Italia dei Valori, Movimento Sociale – Fiamma Tricolore (MSFT), others) amounted to some 10 percent, in 2006 it was less than 1 percent: see Table 1. The proximate cause was a decline in third-force candidacies in the first place, a development that was strongly encouraged by the electoral law with its higher thresholds for non-aligned than for aligned forces, and its provision that the votes of all parties – not just the votes of those eligible to receive seats – were to count in determining allocation of the majority premium. In the case of the centre left, however, it was a development that had begun much earlier, in the immediate aftermath of the previous general election.

This was because in 2001 it was widely believed that the centre left had lost because it had been divided, and especially because it had failed to reach stand-down agreements with Di Pietro’s Italia dei Valori and, in the Senate election, with Rifondazione Comunista (RC). There must be at least a degree of uncertainty about this interpretation since it is based on rather strong assumptions about the summability of the votes of RC and Di Pietro on the one

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majoritarian and proportional in equal measure. With *one and the same* vote, the voter makes a choice *both* of coalition (where the coalition with most votes wins an automatic majority of seats) *and* of party (to which seats are allotted in proportion to its vote).

hand and those of the rest of the centre left on the other. Nevertheless, the belief that these divisions had cost the centre left the election was sufficiently powerful to set in motion, in the years leading up to 2006, a coming together of forces that was somewhat paradoxical – paradoxical because if, on the one hand, the process represented a growing unity of intents, on the other hand each addition or merger only served to reduce cohesion by rendering the coalition ever larger and more heterogeneous. There were four stages to the process.

First, driven by the relative success of their joint list in 2001, the Margherita parties attempted merger in March 2002. However, if the Democrats had hoped that the new formation would be a first step towards the creation of a unitary political actor able to impose its sovereignty on the coalition, the Udeur refused to join at all and it soon became clear that the organisation was divided internally between those who saw themselves as secular, left-of-centre reformists committed to a bi-polar future for Italian party politics, and those who hankered after the idea of a party able to hold power by exploiting its location in the centre of the political spectrum, much as the Christian Democrats had done for so many years.

Second, the emergence, in 2004, of the Federation – the agreement for closer cooperation between the Democratici di Sinistra (Left Democrats: DS), Margherita, Socialists (SDI) and the Repubblicani Europei that took shape after the European Parliament elections – induced Rifondazione Comunista to seek membership of the centre left coalition, probably as the consequence of a realisation that it faced a real risk of isolation and a loss of influence in the event that the Federation succeeded in drawing more radical forces, such as the Verdi (Greens) and the Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (Party of Italian Communists, PdCI)

**Table 1**  
**Chamber of Deputies Election Results 2001 and 2006**

<i>Proportional vote 2001</i>		<i>Vote 2006</i>				
<b>Parties and alliances</b>	<b>Vote (%)</b>	<b>Parties and alliances</b>	<b>Vote (no.)</b>	<b>Vote (%)</b>	<b>Vote (%)*</b>	<b>Seats (no.)</b>
		<i>Unione</i>				
Rif. Com.	5.0	Rif. Com.	2,229,604	5.8	5.6	41
PdCI	1.7	PdCI	884,912	2.3	2.3	16
DS	16.6	L'Ulivo	11,928,362	31.2	30.4	220
Margherita	14.5					
Girasole	2.2	Verdi	783,944	2.1	2.0	15
Lista Bonino	2.2	La rosa nel pugno	991,049	2.6	2.5	18
Italia dei Valori	3.9	Italia dei Valori	877,159	2.3	2.2	16
		Udeur	534,553	1.4	1.4	10
		Svp	182,703	0.5	0.5	4
		Other Unione parties	590,533	1.5	1.5	0
		Total	19,002,819	49.7		340
		<i>Foreign constituency</i>				
		Unione	422,330		1.1	6
		Italia dei Valori	27,432		0.1	1
		Udeur	9,692		0.0	
Total	<b>46.1</b>	Total (National plus foreign const.)	19,462,273		<b>49.6</b>	347
		<i>Casa delle libertà</i>				
CCD-CDU	3.2	UDC	2,582,233	6.8	6.6	39
Forza Italia	29.5	Forza Italia	9,045,384	23.7	23.1	137
National Alliance	12.0	National Alliance	4,706,654	12.3	12.0	71
New PSI	1.0	DC-New PSI	285,744	0.7	0.7	4
Northern League	3.9	Northern League	1,749,632	4.6	4.5	26
MSFT	0.4	MSFT	231,743	0.6	0.6	0
		Other Cdl parties	380,914	1.0	1.0	0
		Total	18,982,304	49.7		277
		<i>Foreign constituency</i>				
		Forza Italia	202,407		0.5	3
		Per Italia nel mondo – Tremaglia	73,289		0.2	1
		UDC	65,794		0.2	
		Lega Nord	20,227		0.1	
		Other Cdl parties	8,235		0.0	
Total	<b>50.0</b>	Total (National plus foreign const.)	19,352,256		<b>48.5</b>	281
		<i>Others</i>				
		Autonomie Liberté Democratie (Valle d'Aosta) <sup>+</sup>	34,167	0.1	0.1	1
		Vallée d'Aoste <sup>+</sup>	24,118	0.1	0.1	
		Forza Italia-AN (Valle d'Aosta) <sup>+</sup>	13,372	0.0	0.0	0
Others	3.9	Others	173,263	0.5	0.4	
		Others (foreign const.)	146,008		0.4	1
Total	100	National total	38,230,043	100.1	97.5	618
		Foreign const. total	975,414		2.5	12
		Overall total	39,205,457		100	630

\* The percentages in this column are based on the overall total of votes cast, i.e. including the foreign constituency

<sup>+</sup> These parties were linked to the two main coalitions: Autonomie Liberté Democratie and Vallée d'Aoste were associated with the Unione, and Forza Italia-AN with the Cdl. They are listed separately because votes cast in the single-member Valle d'Aosta constituency are not included in the totals used to determine allocation of the majority premium.

**Table 2**  
**Senate Election Results 2001 and 2006**

<i>Vote 2001</i>				<i>Vote 2006</i>		
<b>Parties and alliances</b>	<b>Vote (%)</b>	<b>Parties and alliances</b>	<b>Vote (number)</b>	<b>Vote (%)</b>	<b>Vote (%)*</b>	<b>Seats (no.)</b>
		<i>Unione</i>				
Rif. Com.	5.0	Rif. Com.	2,518,624	7.2	7.1	27
L'Ulivo	38.7	Insieme con l'Unione (PdCI and Verdi)	1,423,226	4.1	4.0	11
SVP-L'Ulivo	0.5	DS	5,977,313	17.2	16.7	62
		Margherita	3,664,622	10.5	10.3	39
Pannella-Bonino	2.0	La rosa nel pugno	851,875	2.4	2.4	0
Italia dei Valori	3.4	Italia dei Valori	986,046	2.8	2.8	4
		Udeur	476,938	1.4	1.3	3
		L'Unione-SVP	198,153	0.6	0.6	3
		SVP	117,500	0.3	0.3	2
		Other Unione parties	927,640	2.7	2.6	3
		Total	17,141,937	49.2		154
		<i>Foreign constituency</i>				
		Unione	387,145		1.1	4
		Italia dei Valori	26,134		0.1	
		Udeur	13,265		0.0	
Total	<b>49.6</b>	Total (National plus foreign const.)	17,568,481		<b>49.3</b>	158
		<i>Casa delle libertà</i>				
Casa delle libertà	42.5	UDC	2,311,448	6.6	6.5	21
		Forza Italia	8,201,688	23.6	23.0	78
		National Alliance	4,234,693	12.2	11.9	41
		Forza Italia-AN	11,505	0.0	0.0	0
		DC-New PSI	190,724	0.5	0.5	0
		Northern League	1,531,939	4.4	4.3	13
Fiamma Tricolore	1.0	MSFT	219,707	0.6	0.6	0
		Other Cdl parties	658,050	1.9	1.8	2
		Total	17,359,754	49.8		155
		<i>Foreign constituency</i>				
		Forza Italia	185,438		0.5	1
		Per Italia nel mondo – Tremaglia	63,474		0.2	
		UDC	57,200		0.2	
		Lega Nord	18,455		0.1	
		Other Cdl parties	8,433		0.0	
Total	<b>43.5</b>	Total (National plus foreign const.)	17,692,754		<b>49.6</b>	156
		<i>Others</i>				
Others	6.9	Others	307,344	1.0	0.9	0
		Others (foreign const.)	120,389		0.3	1
		National Total	34,809,035	100	97.6	309
		Foreign const. Total	879,933		2.5	6
Total	100.0	Overall total	35,688,968		100.1	315

*Note:* \* The percentages in this column are based on the overall total of votes cast, i.e. including the foreign constituency

into its orbit. The problem was that if for most of the rest of the centre left elections are above all about winning government power – so that policies are to be judged primarily in terms of the degree to which they make this possible – for RC elections are above all a means, but not the only means, of exerting political pressure to defend the poor and the vulnerable. Therefore, there are significant limits on the compromises RC is prepared to make for the sake of coalition unity.

Third, while the even more rapid decision of Italia dei Valori to seek alliance with the centre left was a decision that made ‘ideological’ sense – its central mission being to combat illegality and less-than-impartial application of the law, its natural home was in a coalition that questioned Berlusconi’s right to govern on similar grounds – the decision cannot have been unrelated to the ‘opportunist’ consideration that independence in 2001 had resulted in failure to elect a single deputy. And its presence was a potential source of disunity within the coalition if for no other reason than the fact that it was an additional party with its own goals and values: parties everywhere are entities for which alliance with other parties has instrumental but not intrinsic value – while unity and cohesion are public goods necessarily exposed to the collective action problem.

Finally, in November 2005, the formation of ‘la Rosa nel pugno’, bringing together the SDI and the Radicals, drew into the orbit of the Unione a party that had previously found it difficult to coalesce with either of the two main coalitions as its emphasis on individual responsibility – meaning a strongly libertarian stand on civil rights issues combined with firmly liberal positions in matters economic – gave it an uncertain location on the left-right spectrum. This was an ideological profile that had the potential to bring the new formation into conflict with the DS on economic issues, and the even greater potential to bring it into conflict with the Margherita on religion-related issues. Secularisation notwithstand-

ing, the number and significance of such issues has grown, not diminished, in recent years as scientific progress has brought to the fore new problems on which the Church has wanted to take a position (Rémond, 1999: 36). The proportion of regular Churchgoers among supporters of the Margherita is larger than among voters generally – meaning that it cannot afford to stray too far from conservative positions on issues on which the Rosa nel pugno takes diametrically opposed stances; for, as well as winning over *new* voters, it must retain the support of *existing* voters if it is to grow. Hence the potential for conflict between the two entities is significant.

Ideological heterogeneity on the centre left was mirrored to some degree on the centre right. True, three of the coalition’s four largest components – Forza Italia (FI), Alleanza Nazionale (AN) and the Northern League – have been reasonably united in representing different shades of the ideological profile to which Mastropaolo (2005) refers by using the label ‘new right’. This is an ideology that involves an attachment to social and cultural conformity, the conventional family, Christianity (as a cultural identity rather than a set of precepts), the nation (an invented one – ‘Padania’ – in the case of the League), free markets and welfare chauvinism. The profile is an advantage to the coalition; for it provides the basis for a profitable ‘division of labour’ between the parties. With its most strident and crude expressions being delegated to the League and the other two offering more ‘respectable’ versions, all three parties are able to maintain reasonably distinct profiles. The problem is that at the same time, the ideology can bring the parties into conflict. In the case of the League, for instance, welfare chauvinism is also often directed against southerners, and that is, against precisely that part of the electorate in which AN, and also the Union of Christian Democrats and Center Democrats (UDC), find their strongholds.

However, the greatest difficulty for the centre right, in government after 2001,

was Berlusconi's leadership. On the one hand, the extraordinary degree to which FI depends for its image, its finances and its organisation on its leader makes it difficult to imagine the party continuing to have a meaningful existence after Berlusconi leaves the political scene; and this has always reinforced the aspirations of AN and the UDC to capture leadership of the coalition for themselves given that they might, perhaps, expect to capture parts of the entrepreneur's party in the process. On the other hand, while Berlusconi was in an extraordinarily powerful position immediately after the 2001 election (which he could claim had been won largely thanks to him) the sheer weight of campaign emphasis on his supposedly extraordinary personal qualities subsequently became a distinct liability – leaving few alternative means of retaining voter loyalty when economic difficulties began tarnishing the leader's image. For these two reasons, Berlusconi's capacity to impose discipline on his coalition declined as time went by – and especially after the 2004 European elections with their revelation that, if a government in difficulties was going to have to pay an electoral price, then it would be paid by FI rather than its allies and that they rather than the opposition parties would be the principal beneficiaries.<sup>4</sup>

It was in this context that towards the end of 2005, the centre-right parties reached agreement on a new electoral law, which appeared to offer them at least three specific advantages. First, by allowing each of the parties to compete in relative independence, each with its own prime ministerial candidate, it considerably reduced the likely significance of Berlusconi's personal popularity for the prospects of his allies and those of the coalition as a whole. As the 2005 regional

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<sup>4</sup> FI's vote declined from the 29.5 percent it had won in 2001 to 21.0 percent while both the UDC and the League saw their vote shares rise (to 5.0 and 5.9 percent respectively). Meanwhile, the parties of the centre left made only modest gains to take 46.1 percent in 2004.

elections appeared to confirm,<sup>5</sup> had the parties been obliged – as they would have been had the 1993 electoral law remained in force – to line up behind single candidates representing the coalition as a whole, then they might have suffered badly; for in such a situation voters dissatisfied with Berlusconi and FI would have had no means of giving expression to their dissatisfaction other than by action (abstention or voting for the centre left) also damaging to the entrepreneur's allies. Second, therefore, the new law held out the prospect of considerably reducing the leadership issue as a source of friction and instability within the centre right. Third, the results of the two previous general elections suggested that in the proportional arena the centre right's constituent parties had a collective reach that extended beyond the pool of voters prepared to support their candidates in the plurality arena.<sup>6</sup> This therefore provided an additional argument in favour of the new law.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The elections were a disaster for the Casa delle libertà insofar as the coalition: emerged the loser in 12 of the 14 regions where voting took place; took 12,220,858 votes (43.9 percent) to the centre left's 14,632,412 (52.6 percent), and lost control of six of the eight regions it had won in 2000.

<sup>6</sup> That is, in 1996, the centre right won 40.3 percent of the vote in the plurality arena, but 42.1 percent (not including the vote won by the Northern League) in the proportional arena – while in 2001, when it took 45.5 percent in the plurality arena and 49.7 percent in the proportional arena, the difference was even larger.

<sup>7</sup> Space does not permit going into the technical details of the new law, but in essence, for elections to the Chamber of Deputies, parties present lists of candidates in each of 26 multi-member constituencies, voters being required to make a single choice among the lists with which they are presented. Parties can either field lists independently or as part of a coalition with other parties. Seats are distributed between the parties proportionally except that to be eligible to participate in such distribution, parties must obtain 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

## The campaign

The centre right went into the campaign with a lacklustre record to defend and it was this above all that appeared to underpin confidence in predictions of a comfortable

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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. If an initial proportional distribution of seats results in the largest party or coalition receiving less than 340 seats, then it is assigned as many seats as are necessary to bring it up to that figure, this so-called *premio di maggioranza* (or majority premium) thus ensuring, for the party or coalition concerned, an overall majority in the 630 seat Chamber. The remaining seats are distributed proportionally among the other parties and coalitions. Given the fragmentation of the Italian party system, the effect of the law is, on the one hand, to encourage parties to field their lists as coalitions rather than independently while removing the pressure upon them to unite behind candidates representing the coalition as a whole; and on the other hand, to combine, for the voters, the choice of party and coalition into a single choice, while allowing them to support a coalition without having to cast a vote for a candidate drawn from a party other than their most preferred party.

Arrangements for the Senate are essentially the same, but with the importance differences that: (1) seats are assigned to regions (in accordance with their populations) rather than to constituencies; (2) seat distribution (including assignment of the *premio di maggioranza*) takes place region by region (that is, seat assignment depends on parties' and coalitions' regional, not their national totals); (3) the *premio* in each region consists in the number of seats, awarded to the largest coalition or party, that is necessary to bring it up to 55 per cent of the seats assigned to the region; (4) in order to be eligible to participate in the distribution of seats, parties have to have attracted, if running independently or as part of a coalition whose combined regional vote total turns out to be less than 20 percent, at least eight percent of the valid votes cast in the region concerned. If it is running as part of a coalition whose combined vote is above 20 percent, then it must have attracted at least three percent of the region's valid vote total.

centre-left victory;<sup>8</sup> for if Berlusconi had won in 2001 on the basis of his personal charisma and therefore of considerably heightened expectations of what he would be able to achieve, then economic stagnation and the consequent difficulties for the government in delivering on its promises (especially in the area of taxes) had created a level of public disillusionment and a degree of pessimism that appeared particularly deep seated: as polls constantly testified, the gap between expectations and reality fed perceptions of the state of the economy and standards of living that were sometimes much worse than official data suggested (Guarnieri and Newell, 2005).

Under these circumstances, the apparent decision of Berlusconi, from the start of the campaign, to do all he could to ensure that he remained at the centre of media attention and to ensure that the election acquired the significance of a referendum for or against himself might seem puzzling. In fact there is a very reasonable explanation for it. In the first place, the strategy was in one sense unavoidable given that FI is a party that lacks a clear ideological profile while having an image that is heavily bound up with the personality and qualities of its leader. This meant that in the face of evidence that the 'man of action' capable of 'getting things done' had not got things done, Berlusconi was left with little alternative but simply to

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<sup>8</sup> Since 1990, Italy's economic performance has been well below that of earlier decades and nothing that the government did changed this. Between 2000 and 2005 the economy grew at an average rate of 1.1 percent and in 2005 the rate of growth was almost zero. Having taken office confidently predicting that it would reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio from 110.5 percent in 2000 to 98.0 percent in 2004, in 2005 the government faced a level of public debt that still stood at 106.5. In that year, with Italy's budget deficit standing at 4.3 percent, the European Commission decided to recommend application of the Excessive Deficit Procedure, giving the government until 2007 to bring the percentage to below the 3 percent ceiling required by the Stability and Growth Pact.

deny the evidence, claiming that perceptions of economic stagnation were false impressions put about by 'the usual' commentators working for the left-wing press. Precisely this, however, enabled Berlusconi to turn a necessity into a distinct virtue; for, by insisting on the image of a leader hampered and unjustly attacked from all sides (from the left-wing press to communist inspired judges and occasionally his own allies), the entrepreneur was able to avoid fighting the campaign on his government's record and to assume, instead, the appearance of an *opposition* leader whose dynamic qualities could still deliver much once freed, through reforms introduced in a second term, from the institutional and other shackles of his left-wing tormentors. This in turn enabled him, in the final stages of the campaign, to wrong-foot the centre left.

Prior to that, the *Unione* had had good reasons to be optimistic. In the first place, the primary elections held on 16 October – an experiment successfully repeated in Sicily in December and in Milan at the end of January – had done much to reduce the power of accusations that the centre left was necessarily unreliable because it lacked a leader with a party able to impose discipline on the coalition. By demonstrating the sheer weight of the popular support Prodi was able to mobilise the elections considerably raised his stature, and considerably strengthened, at least in the short term, the project for coalition unity that he represents. Second, the centre left had then gone on to publish a 281-page election manifesto which, while the object of some ridicule for its length, was presented as a coalition-wide agreement the very detail of which offered assurances that a centre-left government could remain united. Third, one or two slips notwithstanding, the parties of the *Unione* did manage to sing from the same hymn sheet most of the time. Particularly noticeable in this regard was the stance adopted by RC whose position furthest to the left on the political spectrum naturally fed expectations that the greatest challenges to coalition unity would come

from this quarter. The unusual 'moderation' of the party's public pronouncements almost certainly had to do with a conscious or unconscious decision to bow to the logic of centripetal competition in light of an awareness that, if the *Unione* were to win the elections, then the implications of the new electoral law were such that the party could expect to quadruple its parliamentary representation and to be indispensable to the maintenance of a centre-left majority. Finally, if the enforced resignation of two government ministers<sup>9</sup> combined with the histrionic quality of the prime minister's pronouncements to feed the impression of a government increasingly desperate and lacking in credibility, then this enabled the centre left the more effectively to convey the image of a coalition led by a man whose quiet competence offered the opportunity of 'a new start' – '*L'Italia riparte*' was one of the principal campaign slogans – after the economic 'disasters' of the previous five years.

Unfortunately for the centre left, the fiscal aspects of the new start it was proposing allowed centre-right spokespersons to push it into a corner and keep it on the defensive for the last ten days of the campaign – thus reinforcing the impression of a reversal of governing and opposition roles, with the centre left, not the centre right, being forced to account for its policy choices. The problem was essentially two-fold. On the one hand, the centre left's manifesto proposed the reintroduction of inheritance tax for 'large estates' – but without saying what 'large estates' were.

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<sup>9</sup> In February, the Minister for Institutional Reform, the Northern League's Roberto Calderoli, was forced to resign after appearing on television sporting a tee-shirt showing an anti-Islamic cartoon, an incident that provoked violent protests outside the Italian consulate in Bengasi leaving eleven people dead. Less than a month later, in March, the Minister of Health, Francesco Storace, resigned, following suggestions that he may have been involved in spying and hacking activities designed to damage his opponents in the regional election the year before.

The almost inevitable consequence was that interpretations of what these amounted to differed as between the coalition's spokespersons thus fuelling uncertainty about how far down the scale the tax might extend. On the other hand, the centre left proposed to harmonise the tax rates on financial activities by introducing a uniform rate of 20 percent, which would not, however, apply to state bonds already in circulation. Although this apparently left no room for ambiguity, the centre right was able to claim that since the *Unione* also wanted to reduce by five percent the gap between net salaries and employers' labour costs (the so-called *cuneo fiscale*), the centre left would inevitably be obliged to attack the interests of small savers despite its protestations to the contrary. Finally, at the end of the concluding television debate, when nearness of the vote meant that his allies were in no position publicly to question policy improvisations, Berlusconi made sure that the high tax label thoroughly stuck to his opponents by suddenly announcing his intention of abolishing ICI (*Imposta comunale sugli immobili*), the local property tax, in the event that he was victorious. In the immediate aftermath of the vote, among the hypotheses advanced to account for the unexpected narrowness of the centre left's victory, one of the most widely circulating was the suggestion that through the tax issue above all, Berlusconi was able, in the final days of the campaign, successfully to mobilise, in the centre right's favour, voters that would otherwise have abstained (Augias, 2005; Diamanti, 2005).

### The vote

From a purely descriptive point of view, the most salient features of the election outcome were the following.

Turnout: This rose from 81.4 percent in 2001 to 83.6 in 2006. Widely interpreted as an indicator of the way in which the bitterness of the competition had aroused an unusually high level of interest, the increase also appeared to give credence to claims made by the centre right that it would be

favoured by an increased turnout. However, as the Istituto Cattaneo (2006) pointed out, in 2006 the electorate used to make the calculation did not include those entered in the Register of Italians Resident Abroad – who as a result of the passage of law no. 459/2001 were for the first time given the option of voting in a new, overseas constituency. When the electors making up this constituency are built into the calculation the turnout falls to 81.8 percent (AGIPolitiche2006: 2006).

Distribution of the vote between coalitions: In the case of the Chamber, the 20,515 votes<sup>10</sup> separating the *Unione* from the *Casa delle libertà* (Cdl) gave the former the majority premium and, with its deputies elected in the overseas constituency, a majority of 64. In the case of the Senate, the *Unione* was behind the Cdl by 217,817 votes and 1 seat in the national arena. When the overseas constituency was added, the *Unione* remained behind by 124,273 votes, but by taking four of the six overseas seats, it ended up with a majority of 2. There was very little change in the proportion of the vote won by each of the two coalitions as compared to 2001.<sup>11</sup> The most noteworthy changes were, rather, ones that took place

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<sup>10</sup> The final difference between the two coalitions, confirmed by the Court of Cassation, came to 24,755 votes. The difference between this, and our figure, is to be explained partly by the fact that ours does not take account of the votes cast for candidates in Valle d'Aosta (which, however, does not count for the purposes of award of the majority premium) or of the 2,131 contested, and therefore initially unallocated, votes.

<sup>11</sup> In the case of the Chamber, for example, when to the centre-left's earlier vote is added that of parties (RC, Lista Bonino, Italia dei Valori) that ran independently in 2001 but as part of the coalition in 2006, and when that total (46.1 percent) is compared with the 2006 total (49.7 percent) the difference is only 3.6 percent. In the case of the Cdl, when from its earlier vote is subtracted that of the MSFT, which ran independently in 2001 but as part of the coalition in 2006, and when that total (49.6 percent) is compared with the 2006 total (49.7 percent) the difference is almost non-existent.

within each coalition in terms of changes in the distribution of the vote between parties. Of these changes, the ones that stand out most are the improved performance of RC, especially in the Senate, and the disappointing performance of the DS which, against expectations, won only 17.2 percent of the vote in the Senate contest. Comparisons were also made in the immediate aftermath between the combined performance of the DS and the Margherita in the Senate contest (27.7 percent) and the performance of their joint, Ulivo, list in the Chamber contest (31.2 percent) to draw the conclusion that the Ulivo had a capacity to attract votes that was greater than the sum of the capacities of its individual components. If true, then comparison with the combined performance of the DS and the Margherita in the 2001 Chamber contest (31.1 percent) suggests that the difference is easily overstated. On the centre right, the 5.8 percent drop in support for FI combined with an improvement of a very similar amount (4.6 percent) in the support for Berlusconi's three principal allies (especially the UDC) to suggest an image of disappointed FI supporters defecting to other centre-right parties.

The geographical distribution of the vote in broad terms reflected established patterns and saw the Cdl prevail in the North, and the Unione in the central 'Red Belt' regions, with neither coalition clearly on top in the South and islands (Figures 1 and 2). What struck commentators most was the clear victory, against expectations, of the centre left in the overseas constituency,<sup>12</sup> combined with its failure to hang on to regions it had captured from the Cdl in the regional elections a year earlier. Of these,<sup>13</sup> Liguria, Abruzzo and Calabria returned comfortable Unione majorities in both chambers, while Puglia returned a comfortable Cdl majority

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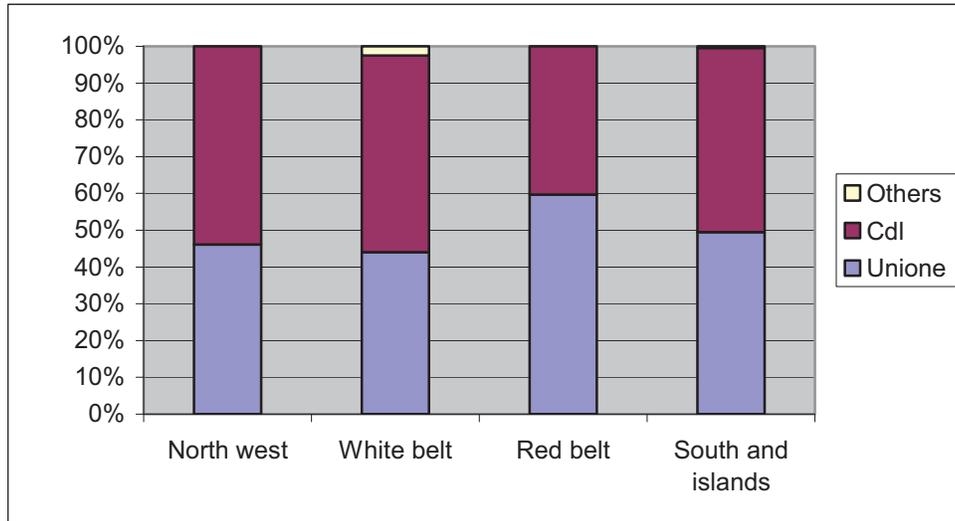
<sup>12</sup> The centre left had an approximate 10 percent vote lead in both the Chamber and the Senate.

<sup>13</sup> In April 2005, the Unione captured Piemonte, Liguria, Abruzzo, Lazio, Puglia and Calabria, previously governed by the centre right.

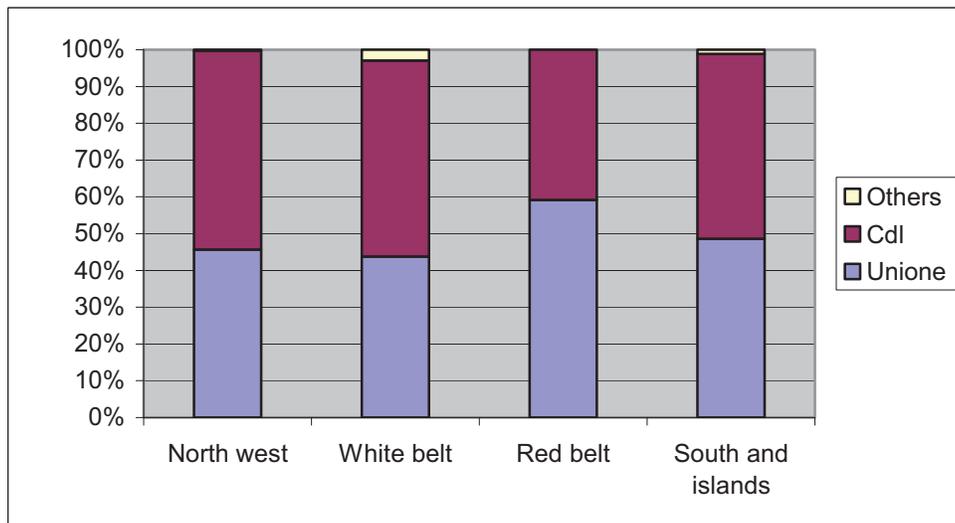
(again, in both chambers). What must have been especially disappointing for centre-left leaders were the outcomes in Piemonte and Lazio where, in the Senate contest, the majority premium in each case went to a Cdl that was ahead by just 1.0 and 1.1 percent of the vote respectively.

How are these data to be interpreted and what clues do they give us as to an explanation for the election outcome? Given what we said at the beginning of the paper about the three sets of variables in terms of which election outcomes can be understood, one is initially tempted, in the present case, to give particular emphasis to the specific configurations of party line-ups with which voters were presented in different parts of the country and to attribute a large role to 'chance' factors. Specifically: much was made in the immediate aftermath of Progetto Nord-Est, a small non-aligned party whose 92,000 votes would have been sufficient to deliver the majority premium to the Cdl in the Chamber. However, such reasoning also works the other way around: had Alternativa Sociale and Gianfranco Rotondi's Democrazia Cristiana remained independent of the rest of the centre right in Piemonte and Lazio, as they had been at the 2005 regional elections, then the Unione might just have repeated its wafer-thin victories in those regions – in which case it would have taken the majority premium in both cases and had the more comfortable majority of 14 rather than 2 in the Senate. The problem with such intellectual games is that they are counterfactual – for example, in the absence of any additional information, it makes as much sense to deny the significance of the votes won by Progetto Nord-Est arguing that at least some of its supporters might have defected had it been aligned with the Cdl – and there is no limit to them: had the Cdl not included the MSFT, for example, its vote might have been smaller; but one might equally suggest that it would have been larger had the coalition decided to shun a party as extreme as the MSFT.

**Figure 1**  
Vote by Geographical Area, Chamber, 2006



**Figure 2**  
Vote by Geographical Area, Senate, 2006



*Note:* 'North west' = Piemonte, Liguria, Lombardia  
 'White belt' = Trentino Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia  
 'Red belt' = Emilia Romagna, Toscana, Marche, Umbria  
 'South and islands' = Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, Sicilia, Sardegna.

Unfortunately, we are not much better placed if, from the party line-ups we shift our attention to the second of the sets of variables in terms of which we said election outcomes could be understood, namely, the social, political and other factors impinging on voters' choices. For example, among these factors one clearly has to include the effects of the parties' campaigns. In the immediate aftermath much was therefore also made of the presumed shortcomings of the centre left's campaign to explain why it had failed to achieve the decisive victory so many were expecting. It was said, for example, that while Berlusconi 'imposed his frantic populism with the aim of dislodging every voter "disillusioned" by the absent miracle', the centre-left's campaign was 'now dull, now affected'; that while Berlusconi's messages were 'all inspired by individual wealth, houses, cars, mobile phones', Prodi 'condemned the elimination of the primary surplus, an entity impossible to grasp'; that while Berlusconi 'was highly effective in describing and promising private satisfactions', Prodi responded 'by appealing to competence, having recourse to the need to unite a country divided by five-years of centre-right government' (Berselli, 2006: 32-8). The problem with this is that it is pure conjecture: had Prodi achieved his convincing victory, then it would have been said that he had done so 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 governing competence.

Unfortunately, until good survey data becomes available, answers to 'why' questions about the outcome cannot be much more than more or less well informed speculation based on the little evidence that is available. I offer the following interpretation. In the first place, we need to ask the right question. That is, the question should not be, 'Why did the centre left fail to do as well as expected/the centre right do better than expected?' as this assumes that the pre-election poll results, which appear to have been at variance with reality, can

instead be taken as an accurate benchmark against which to measure performance, shifting the focus and burden of explanation away from the technical problems associated with polling to supposed anomalies in the objective behaviour of parties and/or voters. That there has long been reason to be doubtful of the polling evidence would have been clear prior to the election had observers reflected on the fact that the discrepancy between the coalitions' poll ratings and their actual performance is not new but long-standing. For example, with just one exception, the opinion poll reports on the site, 'Il termometro politico', at <http://brunik.altervista.org/index.html> put the centre left ahead by some five percent throughout the year 2004. The one exception was the report giving the actual results of the European Parliament election, where the distribution of the vote between the centre left and the centre right (46.1 percent to 45.4 percent) was similar to and every bit as close as the result for the 2006 election.<sup>14</sup>

No, the correct question is 'Why did the centre left win?', the correct benchmark its performances at previous general elections. These show that at the elections of 1994, 1996 and 2001, the centre left trailed the centre right, in the latter case narrowly (see Table 3). This year, the centre left scored a narrow victory to take it from a position just behind the centre right in the Chamber plurality arena in 2001 (with 43.7 percent to the centre right's 45.5) to a position just ahead of it in 2006 (with 49.6 percent to 48.5). In order to furnish an explanation, we need to know where the two

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<sup>14</sup> It is for this reason (as well as the fact that opinion polls and exit polls told the same story) that, while I am reasonably persuaded by the hypothesis according to which some centre-right supporters are unable or unwilling to reveal their true sympathies (Natale, 2006), I am somewhat less persuaded by the hypothesis according to which the poll results were largely accurate and that there was a significant shift of support in favour of the centre right in the final stages of the campaign that was not publicly registered because of the ban on publishing poll findings after 24 March (Jampaglia, 2006).

coalitions' votes came from. This information is provided by data drawn from the 2001 Itanes survey and a 2006 Swg survey and shown in Table 4. The picture that emerges from the figures is that the shifts that took place in 2006 were of an entity similar to the corresponding shifts that took place in 2001, but that they took place *in the opposite direction*:

As in 2001, very few of those who had voted for one of the two coalitions at the earlier contest switched to the other and what switches there were, were largely self-cancelling – *but this time the net flow was from centre right to centre left*.

In 2001, the centre right was more successful than the centre left in winning the support of those who, at the previous contest had supported 'third forces' or been too young to vote – *but this time the centre left was more successful than the centre right*.

In 2001, the centre right was more successful than the centre left in winning the support of those who had abstained at the earlier contest and it remained more successful, *though to a lesser degree in 2006 when, unlike in 2001, it also lost more of its previous supporters to abstention than did the centre left*.

I therefore think that the most plausible explanation for the election outcome is simply that voters were disillusioned with the promise of an economic miracle that never came and that they voted against Berlusconi as a consequence. The shifts were never going to be dramatic because, if by far the largest pool of voters at any election consists of supporters of one or the other of the two coalitions, then very few *ever* switch between them, and voters who want to 'punish' Berlusconi appear to do so by switching to one of his allies: the information we have available is consistent with the suggestion that 2006 was quite in line with previous contests in this respect. It may be that Berlusconi was able to mount a partial come back as a result of the tax issue in the final stages of the campaign, but the information we have available does not throw any light on this. What the data does

tell us is that besides being more successful at retaining its existing supporters, the centre left was more successful in the relatively small pool consisting of those who had failed to support either coalition or had been too young to vote on the previous occasion. Thus a modest victory is what one would expect. And the most parsimonious explanation for it is that after the experience of five years of centre right government, voters were on balance more convinced by the offering of the centre left.

The attempts that have been made to dramatise the narrowness of the centre left's victory stem essentially from its possible consequences – but the dramatic nature of the potential consequences should not be allowed to mask the reality of what actually happened. True, the centre left has a majority of just 2 in the Senate – but it might easily have had a majority of 14 (in which case no one would have got excited) and both the 1994-96 and the 1996-2001 legislatures saw very small majorities in one or the other of the chambers. The image of a country 'split down the middle' must also be taken with a pinch of salt: the country *is* split, but the two coalitions were closely matched well *before* 2006 when the salience of the division was heightened as the result of an electoral law that significantly reduced the vote for 'third' forces by pushing these to line up on one side or the other.

### **The aftermath**

As W. I. Thomas (1923), famously remarked, 'a situation defined as real is real in its consequences', and in the immediate aftermath of the campaign the belief that the election had bequeathed a country divided into two provided the basis for a series of political skirmishes whose common denominator was a denial of the legitimacy of the centre-left's victory. In the first place, it was immediately apparent that if Berlusconi had lost the contest numerically, then he had not been defeated politically. On the contrary: the fact that he had been expected to lose by a wide margin and had instead apparently staged a dramatic

**Table 3**  
**Chamber of Deputies election results, 1994 – 2001**

<i>Majoritarian arena</i>						
	N votes	% votes	N votes	% votes	N votes	% votes
	Centre left		Centre right		Others	
1994	12,614,738	32.8	15,179,764 Polo 2,561,546 AN	39.4 6.7	8,148,110	21.1
1996	15,729,124 Ulivo 1,000,244 Prog.	42.2 2.7	15,028,275 Polo 4,038,511 League	40.3 10.8	1,508,969	4.0
2001	16,284,443	43.7	16,936,038	45.5	4,004,342	10.8
<i>Proportional arena</i>						
	Centre left		Centre right		Others	
1994	13,298,244	34.3	17,944,799	46.4	7,474,000	19.3
1996	13,017,475	34.7	19,775,087	52.7	4,696,765	12.5
2001	12,976,189	35.0	18,433,911	49.7	5,673,061	15.3

**Table 4**  
**Vote flows 1996 – 2001 (Chamber Plurality Arena) and 2001 – 2006**

Column percent	<i>Vote in 1996</i>				
<i>Vote in 2001</i>	Centre right	Centre left	Other	Abstention/ blank ballot	Too young
Centre right	84.7	9.0	40.4	29.3	34.2
Centre left	4.9	80.7	17.3	15.3	27.6
Other	1.5	1.4	28.8	1.3	4.8
Abstention/blank ballot	9.0	8.8	13.5	54.1	33.4
Column percent	<i>Vote in 2001</i>				
<i>Vote in 2006</i>	Centre right	Centre left	Other	Abstention	Too young
Centre right	77.2	7.2	32.0	26.9	34.6
Centre left	8.1	80.7	40.5	25.6	42.1
Abstention	14.4	11.8	25.4	47.3	23.3

comeback to bring his coalition within a handful of votes of victory meant that, despite the heavy losses suffered by FI, his position as leader of the centre right was strengthened. This gave the coalition the compactness required to enable Berlusconi and its other spokespersons to launch an all-out attack on the new government-in-waiting. In the first place it made a series of insinuations about presumed irregularities – eventually revealed to be without foundation – in the way the votes had been counted, suggesting that their correction would be sufficient to overturn the result in its favour. Second, and somewhat incongruously in view of the insinuation that victory belonged to it and not the centre left, it argued that the closeness of the result implied that a future government could not be legitimate unless it took the form of a grand coalition on the German model. If this was to obscure the obvious differences between the German and Italian cases (in the former, there was no single entity able to command a majority of seats, in the latter there was) it served the political purpose of keeping the centre left under pressure and presaged a future in which the new government could expect its measures to be constantly denounced as illegitimate on the grounds that it itself had the backing of only half the country. The approach was one that was in keeping with the anti-political attitudes – emphasising the importance of ‘the people’ and intolerant of established political conventions and of institutional limitations on the use of power – that many on the centre right, and especially Berlusconi himself, represent. Under this kind of pressure, two alternative responses on the part of a future centre-left government could be envisaged: either it would succumb to opposition attempts to exploit the divisions in its ranks and therefore fail to last for any length of time, or it might find that the very precariousness of its position was, paradoxically, its strength, giving it a degree of cohesion it might otherwise not have had. At the time of writing (the week following the election) it is not possible to know which of these two scenarios, or something in between, will be

closest to the truth, early indications pointing in both directions.

On the one hand, it looked as though the prospects for the talked-about merger of the DS and the Margherita in a Partito Democratico – the successor to the Federation project, which Prodi considered essential to cohesive government – had been improved by the election outcome. The reason is that the ‘added value’ of the two parties’ joint, Ulivo, list argued in favour of the view that it had been essential to the coalition’s victory in the Chamber, and suggested that it was essential to balance the coalition’s ‘extremes’: in the Chamber contest, so the reasoning went, some of RC’s voters had been prepared to reinforce Prodi and the entire coalition by voting for the Ulivo; in the Senate contest, where the Ulivo symbol had not been present, they had voted for their own party (which had done exceptionally well). Second, it looked as if many if not all of the leaders of the coalition’s parties would join the new government or assume positions close to government (as in the case of the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies for which Fausto Bertinotti was being widely tipped). In this it looked as though Prodi was imitating Berlusconi five years earlier in a move that was unusual for post-war Italy but that could be expected to increase the stability of the administration (Newell and Partridge, 2002). That is, by including the party leaders in his cabinet, Prodi would bind the prospects of any one of the parties individually closely to the success or otherwise of the government as a whole, in the process strengthening his own hand *vis-à-vis* the parties and that of the executive *vis-à-vis* Parliament.

On the other hand, there were also signs that the Partito Democratico might have considerable difficulties in taking off. If a first step towards its creation had by common consent always been recognised to lie in the creation of unified groups in the two chambers after the election, then for supporters of the project, the voices that began suggesting that Parliament’s standing orders would delay their formation had to be

considered worrying.<sup>15</sup> Similarly worrying had to be considered the suggestions of some within the DS that the project should be delayed on the grounds that far from balancing the 'extreme left' the project would increase its vote (De Marchis, 2006a: 10). And its chances of success have to be considered much less than even in any event simply because of the fundamental ideological incompatibilities of the two parties involved (the one having roots in the communist tradition, the other in Catholicism) and because of the potential losers from the project in both parties (Dilmore, 2005; Newell, 2006). Second, the new government will take office at a time of considerable economic difficulties, the pressures to reduce the budget deficit and the level of public debt bequeathed by its predecessors leaving it very little room for popular public spending measures. Some were therefore prepared to argue that the most likely scenario was that of a government diligently delivering austerity measures and thereby paving the way for defeat at the next election by a right-wing coalition once again enjoying all the conditions necessary to allow it to raise levels of public spending and reduce taxes (D'Eramo, 2006). Under pressure to accept labour-market and welfare reforms, supposedly essential to the recovery of international competitiveness, the position of RC is likely to be particularly uncomfortable, entrapped as it is between a government whose survival depends on it, and the aspirations of its working-class supporters. The party was already coming under heavy pressure from its allies, few of whom appear to have much interest in the egalitarian causes it seeks to defend, as soon as the election result was known.

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<sup>15</sup> In essence, it was suggested that a unified group would risk the loss of the coalition's majority in the Senate's commissions and a reduction in funding of €32,000 per month (De Marchis, 2006: 7).

## Conclusion

The 2006 election was a classic case of the 'social construction of reality' in the sense that the meanings political actors ascribed to the parties' and voters' behaviour – and therefore the very real consequences of the election outcome – owed less to what parties and voters *actually* did than to preconceptions of what they were *expected* to do. Quite unrealistically on the basis of previous trends, Prodi was expected to defeat Berlusconi by a large margin, so that when, sure enough, the margin instead turned out to be modest, it was the *centre left* that was deemed to have failed, *Berlusconi* the one deemed to have been the political, if not numerical, victor – with the consequence that the entrepreneur's position has been *objectively* strengthened beyond what would otherwise have been the case. The idea that the centre left lost votes because it ran an ineffective campaign is sheer conjecture, yet one whose repetition must objectively weaken it in the election's aftermath. But the most exquisite example of the social construction of reality comes with the image of a country 'split down the middle'. Little more than the straightforward, and to-be-expected consequence of an electoral law that creates very strong disincentives for 'third force' candidates, it is nevertheless an enormously powerful image. In a bipolar system it is hardly reasonable to expect voters to be split *other* than in two ways. Nor is it reasonable to suggest that a country that divides its votes in the proportions 50.1 to 49.9 is any *more* split than a country that divides 48 to 52, say (D'Eramo, 2006). The problem is that the belief is likely to have real consequences and to be particularly insidious for the new government. The 2006 election offers a very good example in support of the point that political scientists, pollsters and other observers are part of the world they seek to study, so that the idea that they can adopt a position of value neutrality and study it in a way that is without political consequences is simply false. 'Neutrality' is itself a political

position, theory construction itself a political activity. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the prospects for the new

government will be enhanced if this point is taken to heart.

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Figure 1: own elaboration of data drawn from

<http://www.repubblica.it/speciale/2006/elezioni/camera/index.html?ref=hppro>

Figure 2: own elaboration of data drawn from

<http://www.repubblica.it/speciale/2006/elezioni/senato/index.html>

Table 3: figures for vote flows 1996 – 2001 based on own elaboration of Italian National Election Study (Itanes) data available at: <http://csa.berkeley.edu:7502/cattest.html>; figures for vote flows 2001 – 2006 taken from the results of an Swg survey published in *la Repubblica*, 13 April 2006, p.13.

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