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**Has 2008 been a watershed?
The significance of the election for Italian domestic politics**

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Has 2008 been a watershed? The significance of the election for Italian domestic politics

JAMES L. NEWELL

Introduction

There is no doubt that the outcome of the 2008 election was dramatic. The centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi won with 46.3 percent of the vote, putting him almost ten percent in front of his nearest rival, Walter Veltroni, whose centre-left coalition took 37.5 percent. There was a striking reduction, in the parliamentary arena at least, in party-system fragmentation: the actual number of groups in the Chamber of Deputies declined to six from the fourteen in existence at the end of the previous legislature, the effective number of groups,¹ from 6.04 to 3.11. Finally, the election brought a strengthening of the ‘radical wings’ (Mannheimer, 2008a) in each of the two main coalitions with the Lega Nord (Northern League, LN) first and Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values, IdV) second, registering striking advances – from 4.5 to 8.1 and 2.2 to 4.3 percent respectively.

Especially because of the first two of these three features, there was a widespread feeling in the immediate aftermath that what had just taken place had brought to a culmination that process of political change initiated with the birth of the Second Republic in the 1990s, and thus that it represented a genuine watershed. This feeling, I want to argue, was fed by four specific expectations to which the above-mentioned features gave rise – that is, four specific expectations about how the nature of Italian politics would be affected by the outcome. One of these was that there would probably be a significant improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of government policy making; a second, and very much related one, that we would see the emergence of a more clearly Westminster style of opposition than had been characteristic of the Italian parliament in the past. Third, it was expected that the outcome might give rise to an appreciable increase in levels of protest activity in the political system, and lastly, that it would mark the final conclusion to the so-called never-ending transition in Italian politics.

In the remainder of this paper I shall seek the answers to two questions: first, ‘How were these expectations created by the nature of the election outcome and its immediate consequences?’; second, ‘Looking back at the election almost a year after it took place, to what extent do these expectations retain conviction, assuming, indeed, that they were appropriate in the first place?’ I shall explore these issues in the first two of the following sections. Then, in the final section, I shall use the answers to try to draw some conclusions about the significance of the 2008 election for Italian domestic politics generally.

¹ Calculated, using the Laasko and Taagepera (1979) formula, as $N = 1 / \sum p_i^2$, where N is the number of groups and p_i is the fraction of seats of the *i*th group.

The election outcome and the resulting expectations

The expectation that there would be an improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of policy making was rooted in the fact that the incoming government took office following the demise of an especially fragmented and litigious coalition and looked set to be the strongest in the history of the Italian republic. As a consequence of the decline in party-system fragmentation, the Government was for the first time staffed by just two groups – the Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom, PdL) and the LN – one of whose leaders was also the Prime Minister. This was unusual from the perspective of the post-war period as a whole. Traditionally, in Italy, party leaders and their senior colleagues had tended to remain outside government, delegating ministerial tasks instead to less powerful party figures. The advantage of this from the parties' point of view had been that it had allowed them to keep Cabinet and Prime Minister in a state of relative weakness, with Cabinet Ministers owing their positions essentially to agreements between party secretaries who would often decide policy away from the arena of Cabinet altogether within the framework of periodic 'majority summits'. If, as Cotta (1996) argues, this distance between parties and government made it difficult for the former to benefit from the fund of authority and legitimacy that goes with the assumption of public office, the reverse side of this coin was that it made it easier for parties to decline responsibility for, and avoid the electoral consequences of, unpopular policies.

The other major consequence was that prime ministers tended to be little more than mediators, possessing none of the resources for the imposition of discipline that come with the power to hire and fire enjoyed by British prime ministers, for example. This had begun to change with the advent of the so-called Second Republic as a result of the additional authority enjoyed by prime ministerial incumbents. They no longer stood at the head of coalitions whose composition was decided only after the vote was known. Rather, they led coalitions that had presented themselves to the electorate as such. Hence, their incumbency was now directly legitimated by the outcome of elections themselves.

In 2001, this circumstance meant that Berlusconi was much better placed than any of his predecessors to act as a genuinely authoritative government leader, exerting influence on, and effectively co-ordinating, the policies of his government. In this he was assisted by the unassailable power he was able to exercise over his own party – essentially his own personal creation and without any factions to speak of – ensuring him complete freedom of manoeuvre with his cabinet colleagues and considerable powers of leverage over his parliamentary followers. And he was assisted too by his success in including the main party leaders in his cabinet – thus binding the prospects of his coalition partners individually much more closely than had been normal to the success or otherwise of the Government as a whole, in the process strengthening the hand of the executive *vis-à-vis* Parliament.

Of course over time, Berlusconi's power had diminished as he and his allies had had to come to terms with governing and the difficulties of retaining a popular following that this inevitably entails. He remained the head of a coalition the tensions among whose

four parties he could manage only by negotiation, not by dictatorship. What in 2008 reinforced the strength of the incoming prime minister and government, even beyond the initial strength of those that had taken office in 2001, was the even greater margin of victory this time round and the fact that the new executive was composed of just two parties, one of which was very much larger than the other. It came as little or no surprise to anyone, then, that the process by which the government was formed was very quick by post-war Italian standards. The Constitution vests the task of appointing the Prime Minister in the President of the Republic; and if appointments prior to the party-system upheavals of the early 1990s had often required lengthy discussions and negotiations with the political parties, in the present case there was never any doubt about the identity of the person to whom the appointment would go. The President is also responsible for appointing members of the Government on the advice of the Prime Minister-designate once he (they have all been male so far) has succeeded in reaching agreement with the relevant parties; yet famously, Berlusconi is said to have gone in to the customary post-election meeting with the President with the list of ministers already prepared. The number of days separating the date of the election and the date the new government formally assumed office was thus the shortest in the history of the Republic: 24, for a post-war average of 46.

The second expectation prompted by the election was the likely emergence in Parliament of rather more clear-cut governing and opposition roles. As the country is a parliamentary democracy, politics since the war had of course always been based on the assumption that at any given moment certain parties were part of the governing coalition and the remainder part of the 'opposition'. However, in a context of high fragmentation, the legislative behaviour of the parliamentary groups had often belied such simple conceptualisations. Most proposals that made it on to the statute book did so thanks to ample majorities drawn from across the governing/opposition divide (Capano and Giuliani, 2001; Newell, 2006); and there was no formal recognition in Parliament's standing orders of *an* official opposition. Now we had not only a governing majority staffed by just two groups, but a similar simplification among the ranks of the non-governing parties as well and the consequent emergence of a 'shadow cabinet' drawn from the largest of these parties. Although the body has no *formal, institutional* recognition and excludes the Radicals and IdV, it allows the work of each cabinet minister to be shadowed by a politician able, for the first time, to act as a spokesperson for the vast majority of those who are not part of the governing coalition. It was therefore reasonable to anticipate, all else equal, that the legislature would be marked by rather more straightforward patterns of interaction between more cohesive majority and minority coalitions.

The third expectation – that the election might give rise to a growth in the volume of protest activity – was prompted by a consequence of the outcome that was part and parcel of the reduction in party-system fragmentation, namely, the exclusion from Parliament, for the first time since the war, of any representatives of the socialist or communist left. This result had, of course, been sought by Veltroni when he had taken the decision to contest the election almost without allies: seeing this as a means of bringing about a radical simplification of the party system, Veltroni had hoped that it would free

him from the need to compete ‘by fielding the broadest coalition possible regardless of its actual capacity to govern the country’ (Veltroni, 2007: 20). But though the parties of the Sinistra l’Arcobaleno (Rainbow Left, SA) were indeed expelled from Parliament – because their supporters failed to ensure that they surmounted the four percent-threshold – this did not mean that such supporters suddenly ceased to exist as a significant body of opinion in the country. So, unless the parties that *had* won seats could themselves represent the concerns of these voters, it was reasonable to anticipate the risk that frustrations would be expressed through non-institutional, potentially destabilising channels – such as the occasionally violent protests that took place in the autumn in streets and universities against the Government’s education reforms.

Protest activity represents a channel of influence to which groups are obliged to have recourse when they cannot influence policy through institutional channels such as parties – which compete for public office partly by offering to represent the concerns of the groups’ supporters. Arguably, the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) needed to take seriously the task of representing supporters of the radical left once the latter had been expelled from Parliament since, as Diamanti (2008) has pointed out, the party attracts larger numbers of votes than it does of people who, when asked, say they feel close to it. In other words, significant proportions who vote for the party in fact feel closer to other parties – and in the case of the parties of the Left, they amount to 22 percent of the PD’s voters. Unfortunately, the PD did not look well placed to take on the task of representing supporters of the radical left given Veltroni’s decision to abandon an ‘anti-Berlusconi’ style of opposition – that is, questioning the legitimacy of the entrepreneur’s incumbency – which was precisely what, among other things, radical-left supporters appeared most to want (Diamanti, 2008). To add force to the expectation of a rise in protest was the fact that the 2008 election took place against the background of a seeming rise in protest activity in general,² something that appeared to be linked to broader cultural changes bringing with them a growth in levels of civic engagement which, in the context of the incumbency of a prime minister of Berlusconi’s ilk ‘inevitably carried connotations of opposition to conventional politics and to the status quo’ (Newell, 2009a).

Finally, the outcome gave rise to the initial expectation that it would bring to an end the so-called never-ending Italian transition – that process of institutional and constitutional overhaul that had been given a significant boost, if not set in motion, by the political upheavals of the early 1990s. The transition was referred to as ‘never-ending’ because the conditions that underpinned convictions of the necessity for institutional change – namely party-system fragmentation (and thus the cohesion of governing majorities and the legislature’s capacity for efficient and effective policy making) – were precisely those that made it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve that change. Already with the failure of the Bi-cameral Commission for Constitutional Reform under Massimo D’Alema in 1997, it was clear that party-system fragmentation had turned large numbers of parties into partisan veto players (Tsebeliss, 2002) all wanting change, but changes

² For example, according to Censis, (2005: 13) the number of street demonstrations of various kinds rose from 3,576 in 2000, to 7,022 in 2004.

going in contrasting directions so that a majority in favour of any given set of changes became impossible to construct.

Now, with the 2008 election, all that appeared to change. The situation in the election's immediate aftermath was one in which the main parties of government and opposition shared over 70 per cent of the vote and 78 per cent of the seats between them;³ so provided they could agree among themselves, they had many more votes than required by the Constitution to enable them to bring in change with the certainty that it would not be vulnerable to repeal.⁴ In the second place, during the election campaign, the two major contenders had apparently abandoned a style of competition – reciprocal denials of the claims of the other to legitimacy – that had hitherto contributed significantly to rendering institutional reform intractable. In the third place, both Berlusconi and Veltroni had clear incentives to reach, with the other, the necessary agreement on reform: successful reform arguably offered the opportunity of a place in Italian political history as the fathers of a new constitutional settlement, something that seemed likely to be especially attractive to the aging Berlusconi, reputed to want to crown his career at the end of his term as Prime Minister with election to the Presidency.

In sum, there was a feeling in the immediate aftermath of 2008 that what had happened would very likely come to signify the start of a new era in Italian politics – one of improved governance, Westminster politics, sharpened conflict, institutional overhaul. Ten months after the contest, we now ask, 'Were these expectations reasonable and if so to what extent do they remain so?'

The election outcome ten months on

One of the ways in which we can test the validity of the first expectation – greater efficiency and effectiveness of policy making – is in terms of the success rate of government bills, that is, in terms of the proportion of government-sponsored legislative proposals which, once introduced, then actually make it to the statute book. Of course the measure is vulnerable to the law of anticipated reactions and can tell us little about the efficiency and effectiveness of policy in substantive terms. However, with these caveats, the measure ought to be quite revealing. Primary responsibility for initiating public policy lies with national governments. Therefore, their ability to 'get their way' would seem to

³ Proportions higher than ever previously achieved since the war and well in line with the corresponding proportions for the other large European democracies.

⁴ Article 138 of the Italian Constitution stipulates that amendments to it require each chamber of Parliament to vote in favour on two occasions separated by an interval of not less than three months; that those in favour must on the second occasion be a majority of the chambers' members (not just of those voting); that citizens may subject the amendments to a referendum where, on the second occasion, they have been passed with the support of less than two thirds of the members of one or both chambers. This means that if a new constitutional settlement is to come in the present legislature, then it will have to be legislated for by the PD and the PdL working together. No other combination provides the two thirds required to avoid the risk of a repeat of the 2006 experience (Bull, 2007) when constitutional reform passed in opposition to the centre left provoked a referendum, which the centre right lost by a margin of almost two to one.

be a necessary pre-requisite for efficiency and effectiveness in the policy-making process as a whole.

Table 1 shows that the current government's success rate does not stand out especially as compared to success rates in earlier legislatures: to date it has secured approval for 68.6 percent of its proposals for a post-war average of 73.7 percent. Arguably, the comparison is unfair: at any point in the initial stages of a legislature a proportion of government bills destined to be approved, will still be under consideration. But the picture changes little when we compare the period since the start of the current legislature with the corresponding period following the start of the preceding legislature: during that period, the success rate was 64.3 percent, even though the government in office at that time was litigious and its parliamentary support base, in the Senate at least, fragile.

Whatever the reality, *perceptions* of an improvement in the quality of government policy-making appear to have persisted. When in August 2008, the American magazine, *Newsweek*, published an article praising Berlusconi for having, as it put it, 'brought order to chaotic Italy' (Barigazzi, 2008) it reflected a public mood whose endurance is captured by the data shown in Figure 1. While at the start of Berlusconi's mandate 53 percent had 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in him as Prime Minister, eight months on the proportion was 55 percent. The proportion expressing 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in the Government as a whole has remained more or less stable at around a half. Now compare these with the proportions expressing confidence in Prodi and his government over the first eight months of *their* mandates. From Figure 2 we can see that though they start out from proportions actually higher than those marking the start of the current prime minister and government, the proportions then fall away rapidly to levels much lower than those enjoyed by the current incumbents.

To my mind, there is a very simple explanation for the difference. It is that the 2008 election marked the advent of a government and prime minister which, if they still have much to do to demonstrate improved *actual* performance (given the short time they have been in office) they have, through their approvals ratings, confirmed that, as incumbents much stronger than their predecessors, they are *much* better placed than the latter to create the *impression* of good governing performance. This is because, precisely due to the relative compactness of the governing majority, they are much better placed to engage in that permanent campaigning – using support mobilisation as a key resource for governing, while using governing as an instrument to build and sustain support – that is essential for survival in mediated democracies.

Prodi was handicapped in this respect because, having to manage a coalition composed of large numbers of parties each driven by the 2005 electoral law⁵ to keep

⁵ As its authors had intended: by stipulating that all votes – even those of parties remaining below the (low) thresholds for the assignment to them of seats – count for the purposes of assignment to the coalition of the premium, the 2005 electoral law had removed almost all the political costs that might otherwise have been associated with voting for a minor formation belonging to one of the two major coalitions (Florida, 2008). Vote-seeking parties, if they are to maximize their support, are obliged 'to compete for media

salient its own distinctiveness, he was never able effectively to use communication as a tool in the battle to control the political agenda. What happened, therefore, was that litigiousness became equated – quite erroneously – with policy-making ineffectiveness with the result that the Government found itself caught in a vicious circle. That is, in terms of policy, the Government actually had quite a *creditable* record – as a number of authors (e.g. Paolucci and Newell, 2008; Walston, 2008; Capriati, 2009; Fois, 2009) have shown; but it was able to do little to counteract the tendency of the media, in their constant search for the newsworthy, to highlight feuds and divisions and so frame the government as ‘catastrophic’ (Roncarolo and Belluati, 2008). In doing so, willingly or otherwise, the media necessarily gave credence to the opposition’s portrayal of the Government – so fuelling the downward trajectory in its poll ratings, shortly after it took office. And the more the Government was *portrayed* as litigious and ineffective, the more litigious and unstable it *actually* became as the parties, first, argued about how to retrieve the position and then came to be driven by a logic of *si salvi chi può*. It seems possible, then, that 2008 may come misleadingly to be seen as marking the start of a significant improvement in government performance, because impressions of that performance get compared with misleading accounts of the past.

Turning, then, to the second of the expectations created by the election outcome, we can say at once that government compactness has found no reflection in the behaviour of the opposition – either inside Parliament or outside it. The parliamentary situation – and the degree to which the period since the vote has actually seen the emergence of that more nearly Westminster-style of opposition initially expected – can be conveniently portrayed by asking the questions posed by Russo and Verzichelli (2009). That is: if we have seen the emergence of a ‘shadow cabinet’ capable of speaking for the vast majority of parliamentarians belonging to the opposition, to what extent are shadow ministers actually challenging their opponents in public? Second: To what extent are the opposition parties operating in alliance with each other?

Seven months after the start of the legislature five of the eighteen shadow cabinet ministers (not including Veltroni himself) who were parliamentarians had not made use of any of the procedures by which deputies and senators can ask questions of ministers. The remaining thirteen had presented 29 questions for written reply, 11 questions for oral reply, 14 questions for reply in committee and only 2 interpellations. Moreover, this activity, such as it was, was heavily concentrated: 22 of the questions for written reply, for example, had been asked just by shadow environment minister, Ermete Realacci. IdV was more active than the PD, its parliamentarians asking 18 percent of the total number of questions put by the three opposition groups though it numbered only 10.3 percent of the groups’ parliamentarians – while PD parliamentarians, counting for 80.2 percent, put 70.0 percent of the questions.

exposure and communication space...[But] attracting media attention requires provocation, division and confrontation’ (Paolucci and Newell, 2008: 289). It was no wonder, then, that the Prodi government found it so difficult to control the flow of information in its communications with citizens and thus keep control of the political agenda. Nor is it any wonder that it ended up with a reputation for ineffectiveness and became so bitterly unpopular. The Berlusconi government, with its coalition of two, and a cabinet in which the Prime Minister’s own party has an absolute majority, has none of these difficulties.

A sample of 321 of the 2,220 questions put by the opposition parties confirmed that coordination between them was sporadic, only 27 questions (less than 10 percent) having been asked by parliamentarians of one group with the support of any of the other opposition groups. As Russo and Verzichelli (2009) point out, 'Competition rather than cooperation seems to be the key to understanding relations among the three opposition parties in the initial months of the legislature'.

If we ask why this is, then the obvious answer lies in the deep divisions among the opposition parties outside Parliament – which in their turn have to a very large degree to be seen as connected to Veltroni's fateful alliance decisions in the run-up to the election. At that time, the decision to concede a coalition arrangement to IdV had been very much an exception to the rule – a decision made in order to enable the disillusioned on the centre left and those driven by anti-political sentiments to remain within the fold of the main centre-left coalition. But, as the *Unione* had already demonstrated, decisions taken with a view to winning elections are not always the best from the viewpoint of where they leave parties afterwards; and once the election had taken place the PD now found a considerably strengthened IdV acting as a thorn in its side – the more so for the fact that, as a radical party in a much simplified party system, IdV could expect, by acting thus, to attract a level of media attention that the SA parties would now struggle to attract⁶ and that it itself had had to compete hard for as one of nine parties in the former government.

Thus, in the period since the election we have seen IdV leader, Antonio di Pietro, hard at work outflanking the PD by seeking to consolidate his image as a far more consistent and aggressive, that is, *resolute*, opponent of the incumbent government and prime minister than PD leader, Walter Veltroni, often attacking the latter for timidity in the process. From the perspective of the PD and Veltroni, on the other hand, di Pietro's colourful style of opposition is perceived as cutting little ice with ordinary voters located *beyond* the centre left's confines,⁷ and as one that assists Berlusconi; for, by allowing him to dub the opposition as a home to intolerance if not to subversion and therefore as unfit to govern; and by allowing him to demand of the PD repudiation of its ally's more strident pronouncements, it enables him, every time Di Pietro makes one of his more colourful outbursts, to embarrass the PD and drive a wedge between the opposition parties.

For two reasons, the wedge is unlikely to get smaller in the short term. On the one hand, IdV and the PD clearly fish in the same pool of voters, making them direct competitors, and all the evidence is that in this competition, Di Pietro's strategy brings

⁶ A rough indicator is given by the results of a search of the Chamber of Deputies electronic archive of newspaper articles (http://rassegna.camera.it/chiosco_new/pagweb/rasseгнаQuotidianaFrame.asp): taking articles published between 15 April and 10 October, and searching for those containing the terms 'Rifondazione', 'PdCI' or 'Verdi' produces 4,357 returns – while searching for those containing the terms 'IdV' or 'Di Pietro', produces 8,395 returns.

⁷ Voters who, it is felt, rather look to the coalition to devote greater attention to more 'material' issues having to do with the economy and social welfare.

him considerable success. Thus, to give just one example among the many, already in June of last year, while suggesting that the gap separating the centre left as a whole from Berlusconi was essentially stable, polls pointed to a significant shift within the coalition, with di Pietro's party support standing at above 7 percent (Biorcio and Bordignon, 2008: 7). On the one hand, then, Di Pietro has little incentive to desist from his current approach. On the other hand, the PD cannot refrain from taking its distance from Di Pietro because if it is to make any electoral headway whatsoever, then besides speaking successfully to radical spirits, it needs also to appeal to moderate elements located towards the centre of the political spectrum. Di Pietro's strident anti-Berlusconi rhetoric is perceived as cutting directly across this; for it makes virtually impossible any dialogue with the UDC, whose leader, Pierferdinando Casini has been explicit in saying that the PD will have to dissociate itself from Di Pietro failing which 'no strategic alliance' with his party will be possible (Di Caro, 2008: 5).

These issues and especially the PD's current electoral difficulties (revealed clearly by the regional elections in Abruzzo in December and in Sardinia in February⁸) have a direct bearing on the third expectation following the election outcome – the expectation that the radical left's expulsion from Parliament would bring a growth in protest activity. This is because, though the parties concerned have lost their positions in Parliament, they have not lost a capacity to exert influence in other ways. Most notably, for all that Veltroni sought, in 2008, to free himself from their encumbrance, the election outcome revealed that, in failing to win, the PD leader also failed to free himself from the need to court the radical left. Why? Because in failing to make any real electoral headway towards the centre of the political spectrum, and in failing either to attract radical-left supporters in numbers sufficient to put him within striking distance of Palazzo Chigi, Veltroni was left with the awareness that if he runs alone, he is always likely to be beaten by Berlusconi. This argues in favour of a return to the construction of alliances – which in turn leaves his potential allies with a certain degree of influence. This is relevant because our hypothesis is that people able to exert influence through such means are for that reason less likely than they would be otherwise to seek to exert influence through protest.

Moreover, protest activity pre-supposes the presence of a person or organisation able to spearhead it, and in the election's aftermath the parties of the radical left were less than usually well-equipped to perform this function. The election outcome meant that they suffered a heavy financial setback – as the system of public funding of parties ties the amounts available directly to vote shares – which in turn meant that they suffered a significant organisational setback; for public funding largely compensates for the difficulties the parties have – as revealed, for example, by long-term membership decline

⁸ The Abruzzo election saw support for the PD decline to 19.6 percent from the 35.4 percent its constituent parties won here in the regional elections of 2005. The Sardinia election saw its support decline from the 24.1 percent won by its constituent parties in the regional election of 2004 to 21.5 percent. However, the decline from the level of support achieved at the general election – 36.2 percent – was much larger and provoked the resignation of PD leader, Walter Veltroni. Meanwhile, the parties of the radical left showed signs of recovery. In Abruzzo, the former SA parties took 6.9 percent between them (as compared to 3.2 percent at the general election and 9.8 percent in the 2005 regional elections). In Sardinia they took 9.4 percent (as compared to 3.6 percent at the general election and 6.7 percent at the 2004 regional elections).

– in maintaining themselves through their own efforts (Newell, 2009b). Added to which were the obstacles to their acting as effective protest vehicles created by the deep disagreements emerging at their election post-mortem conferences in the summer of 2008.

It is a little surprising then that as rough and ready a measure of protest activity as the number of appearances in newspaper headlines of the word *‘protesta’* and its derivations shows some increase. Using the Chamber of Deputies on-line data base of newspaper articles produced 558 matches for the period 15 April 2008 to 15 February 2009 – as compared to 380 matches for the immediately preceding ten-month period: an increase of 46 percent. 558 represents an average of 55.8 per month – which compares with an average of 28.9 per month over the preceding ten years. The measure is crude, but it invites further investigation.

Finally, the expectation that the 2008 election would result in the never-ending transition being brought to a conclusion was given an initial boost in May when, with Veltroni insisting that opposition to the government had to be ‘constructive’, Berlusconi seemed to reciprocate by insisting that the two held a meeting to initiate a dialogue that would issue in agreed-upon changes to the rules of the game (a meeting that in fact took place on 16 May, just a day after the Government received the second of its two obligatory votes of confidence in Parliament). However, shortly thereafter, the Prime minister’s conflict of interests shot to the top of the political agenda. In the process it revealed that there were inherent tensions between dialogue on constitutional reform, and the requirements of effective opposition. On the one hand, the notably restrained nature of Veltroni’s response to the issues involved⁹ was insufficient to prevent Berlusconi, in July, casting doubt on the prospects for dialogue and accusing the PD “‘of having brought into Parliament extremist and punitive fringes’” (Montanari, 2008). On the other hand, the PD leader’s attempts to keep hopes of dialogue alive were unable to satisfy radical critics who argued that the effect would be to prevent the opposition from keeping the Government accountable – as earlier attempts at cooperation had suggested would happen.¹⁰ Moreover, the attempts risked weakening the PD, as polls suggested. Thus, if in June 51 percent of those who had voted for the centre left in April judged the opposition to be conducting itself in a ‘balanced’ way, 41 percent felt that it was ‘too docile’ (Mannheimer, 2008b).

It is not very surprising, then, that the period since the election has seen nothing like the Bicameral Commission for Constitutional Reform that was established shortly

⁹ These concerned legislation to circumvent a European Court judgement that television frequencies occupied by the Prime Minister’s Retequattro should be ceded to a rival station, Europa 7, and proposals providing for the discretionary postponement of trials where charges did not involve issues of public safety – supposedly to help increase the rate of throughput of the judicial system as a whole.

¹⁰ At the time of the Bicameral Commission for Constitutional Reform in 1997, for example, when it had sought the entrepreneur’s cooperation by refraining from legislation to deal with his conflict of interests, the centre left found that in the end, Berlusconi withdrew cooperation anyway leaving constitutional reform in tatters but his media empire intact.

after the centre left took office in 1996; for similarly large obstacles in the way of cross-coalition dialogue have emerged on the centre right. These revolve around the difficulties it faces in attempting to reach, on a range of substantive issues, the agreement necessary to enable it to negotiate compactly on constitutional issues. In the first place, areas such as taxation and fiscal federalism may provide major tests since they are likely to have a significant impact on the Government's ability to deal with the economic crisis, while also being central to the appeal of the NL. The problem is that its proposals clash with the electoral requirements of other parts of the coalition, such as Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance, AN) for retention of a significant element of fiscal solidarity between richer and poorer regions. In the second place, the PdL is not yet a fully-fledged single entity; and while 27 March has been widely spoken of as the likely date of a formal merger, the operation could prove difficult: as Giuliano Urbani (2009) has perspicaciously pointed out, the example offered by the PD is not encouraging – while the current weakness of the opposition risks contaminating the coalition of government by suggesting that compactness is no longer a must but an option. As always in politics, predictions made by such high-profile spokespersons, precisely *because* of their high profile, seemed likely to be self-fulfilling.

Conclusion

In summary, early suggestions that the 2008 election might quickly turn out to mark a fundamental change of gear in Italian politics do not, almost a year later, seem very persuasive. Though unencumbered by the fragmentation and the vastness of the ideological space covered by its predecessor, the Government is likely to find that the global financial crisis places significant obstacles in the way of major improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of policy making, however successfully it convinces the public that it is performing better. Despite the PD's emergence as a large opposition party sharing an overwhelming majority of votes and seats with the largest party of government, the opposition as a whole remains as divided as ever, Westminster-style interactions between government and opposition a prospect as remote as ever. Whether the unprecedented exclusion from Parliament of the socialist and communist left will have any particular consequences for political stability remains to be seen. And finally, the Italian transition rumbles on.

If this is to suggest what the significance of the 2008 election is *not*, what *is* its significance for Italian politics? In bringing him such a decisive victory, its significance seems to be to have confirmed the centrality of Silvio Berlusconi to the definition of political line-ups, thus confirming that the political system as a whole remains *in mezzo al guado*. On the one hand, he and his party remain the essential fulcrum around which the centre right is built and whose unity depends almost entirely on his continued popularity. On the other hand, opposition to Berlusconi is the only common denominator of the parties on the centre left – and thus the source of their weakness and division; for while the PD has sought to expand towards the centre by shelving anti-Berlusconi rhetoric, this has deprived it still further of any clear identity leaving it vulnerable to the incursions of its allies to which many of its voters feel closer in any event. In short, it

remains the case, now as it was before the election, that ‘to be on the centre right means to support Berlusconi, to be on the centre left means to oppose him’ (Urbani, 2009); and this suggests the likelihood of having to wait until the entrepreneur leaves the political scene before the longer-term future of Italian politics becomes discernible.

In the meantime the sheer magnitude of Berlusconi’s current influence carries an obvious danger, for his populism renders him intolerant of institutional and procedural restrictions on the use of power. He recently declared that a reform of the Constitution was necessary ‘because it is a law made many years ago under the influence of the end of a dictatorship and with the participation of ideologically motivated forces that looked to the Russian constitution as a model’ (www.ilpopolodellaliberta.it/notizie/arc_14979.htm). As the *Economist* (2008) has pointed out,

Given the weakness of the opposition, the president, Giorgio Napolitano, will have the difficult task of reining in the ruling coalition if it seeks to push through institutional reforms without wider consensus, as Mr Berlusconi’s previous government did with electoral reform in 2005, or to curtail the independence of the judiciary.

To the present writer, this reads like quite a stark warning.

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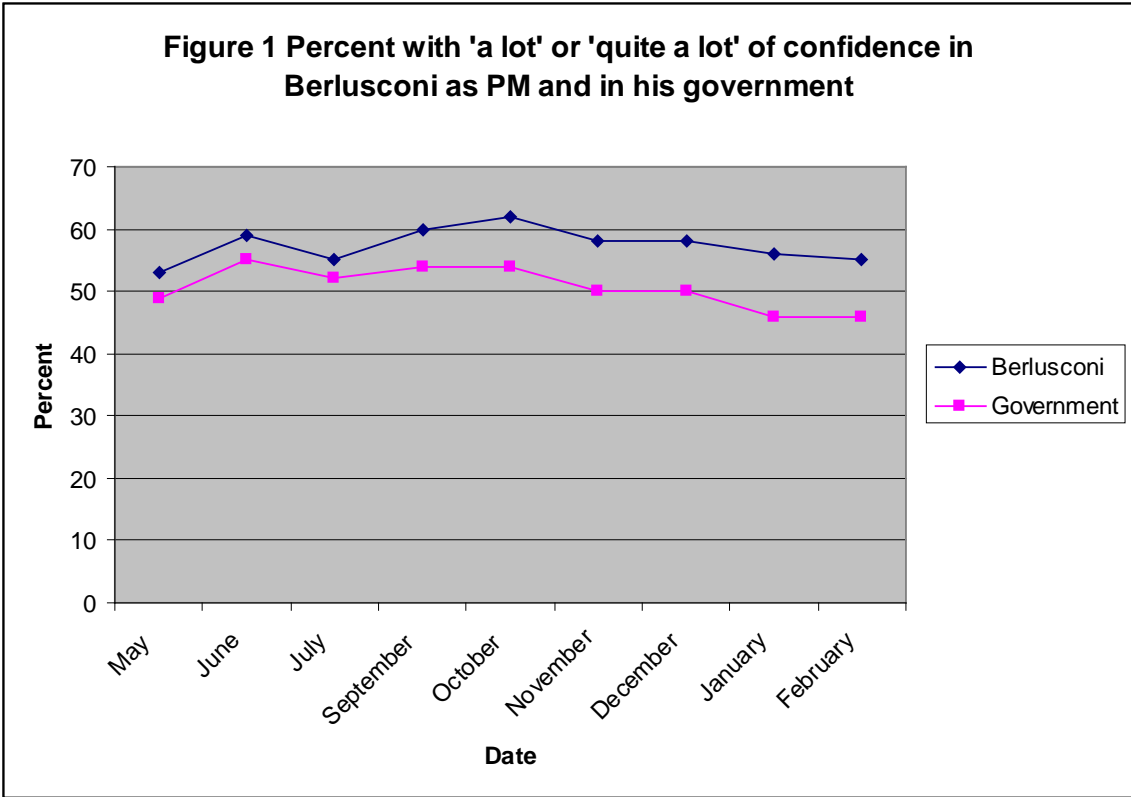
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Table 1 Success rate of government bills

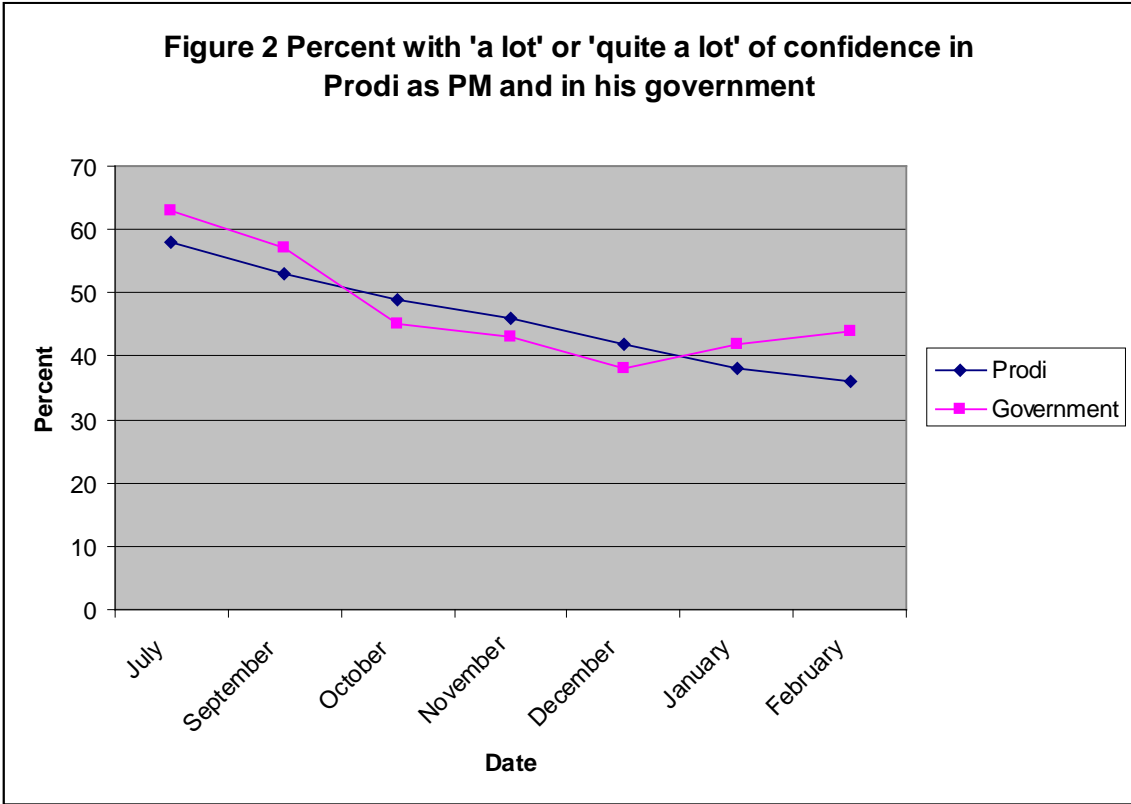
Legislature		Presented to the chamber	Number approved	Proportion approved (as % of number presented)
1948-1953	I	2,199	1,996	92.8
1953-1958	II	1,564	1,439	92.0
1958-1963	III	1,484	1,340	90.3
1963-1968	IV	1,442	1,259	87.3
1968-1972	V	831	663	79.8
1972-1976	VI	1,133	941	83.1
1976-1979	VII	831	644	77.5
1979-1983	VIII	1,242	861	69.3
1983-1987	IX	1,175	769	65.4
1987-1992	X	1,369	922	67.3
1992-1994	XI	653	292	44.7
1994-1996	XII	819	318	38.8
1996-2001	XIII	1,222	695	56.9
2001-2006	XIV	1,471	1,284	87.2
2006-2008	XV	423	331	78.2
2008 -	XVI*	175	120	68.6

* Situation as at 19 February 2009.

Source: legislatures I to XII: della Sala (1998, table 4.4a); legislatures XIII to XVI, own elaboration based on data available at www.senato.it



Source: IPR Marketing, www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali



Source: IPR Marketing, www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali