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**Electoral Behaviour and Political Change:
Recent Italian Elections in their Postwar Context**

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Introduction

Recent developments in Italian politics have been widely hailed as marking an 'Italian revolution' or the birth of a 'second republic' with the general elections of 1992 and 1994 being seen as especially significant in this regard. While the extent or at least the pace of change presumed to be going on in other areas of the political system is open to doubt,¹ there is no doubt that the change that has taken place in the traditional party system can be correctly referred to as a 'transformation',² a 'meltdown'³ or a 'remaking'.⁴ The object of this paper is to analyze the part that has been played in this process by electoral change, an issue which finds its point in the widespread but erroneous assumption that the latter is a necessary and sufficient condition for change in the party superstructures of political systems. Logically speaking, the connections between electoral change and party system change are far from simple and straightforward, as is shown below. Empirically speaking, analysis of the Italian case may at least contribute to the development of hypotheses concerning the actual connections between the two.

The material that follows is divided into three sections. First we trace the main political developments which led from Italy's established party system to its final demise in the general election of March 1994. Second, we discuss some of the possible logical connections that may subsist between electoral change and party-system change. Third, we attempt to pinpoint the part played by electoral change in party-system change in the Italian case.

The transformation of the Italian party system

The basic features of the Italian party system as it emerged after World War Two were fundamentally shaped by the Cold War which led the Christian Democrats (DC) and the smaller parties in their orbit to agree to exclude permanently from office the second largest party, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), because of its presumed anti-system nature. The result was a party system characterized by the continuity in office of the Christian Democrats as the mainstay of every governing coalition between 1945 and 1993, the confining of the PCI to the role of permanent opposition party, and the absence of one of liberal democracy's hallmarks: alternation in office.

These party-system features gave the Italian polity three characteristic traits. First, since the governing parties knew that whatever their policy failures they would remain in power, successive governments were characterized by 'immobilism' in key policy areas such as health, welfare, education, development of the South and reform of the state, and squabbling over minor issues became an effective substitute for fighting over government programs. Second, governing-party rivalry meant unstable governments (over fifty between 1948 and 1992) together with a politicisation of the state apparatus (a situation popularly referred to as *partitocrazia*) and the establishment of patron-client relations with large sectors of the electorate - a significant source of corruption especially in the South - as the governing parties engaged in a 'sharing out' (*lotizzazione*) of ministerial and administrative posts according to the bargaining power of each.

Third, as a consequence of all of this, the Italian polity was characterized by a profound alienation of the citizenry from the governing class: surveys carried out by the Eurobarometer consistently find Italians to be far less satisfied with 'the way democracy works' in their country than the citizens of any other country in the European Union.

The collapse of the Berlin Wall at the end of 1989 undermined one of the most fundamental assumptions upon which the party system had been built: 'the ineligibility of the PCI for government'.⁵ For if the cornerstone of this ineligibility had been the party's presumed commitment to socialist revolution, the disintegration of communism in the East brought to a head the growing conflict between the internal and external pressures operating upon the party⁶ with the result that Occhetto, PCI leader, was led to propose a transformation of the party into a non-communist party with a new name, the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS).

However, apparent resolution of the communist question undermined the DC's own role within the party system: significant numbers of its supporters no longer felt compelled to vote for the party as the main bulwark against communism⁷ and instead felt free to express their dissatisfaction with the old governing class by voting for new parties and especially (in the north) for the *Lega Nord*. Taking advantage of the 'tax backlash' that had developed as the costs of the welfare state became harder to sustain through the recession, the *Lega* argued that a corrupt, party-dominated bureaucracy in far-away Rome sought to appropriate the resources of the North in order to maintain its own power in the underdeveloped South, and that therefore a set of federalist arrangements were needed as these - by limiting the functions of the state to external defence, internal security, the administration of justice and the provision of only the most indispensable of public goods - would remove from the central authorities all those functions which allowed them to tax the North without giving anything in return. Bringing an increase in its share of the northern Italian vote from 2.6 to 17.3%, the general election of 1992 provided compelling confirmation that the *Lega* was a force to be reckoned with.

Neither significant change in the character of existing actors, nor the emergence and growth of new actors within a party system, are by any means unusual phenomena; however. Party system transformation, a much rarer phenomenon, implies that new parties replace old parties as the principal actors, and/or that there is permanent change in the pattern of interaction between the parties in a system. These conditions were fulfilled as the result of a major anti-corruption drive (known as *Mani pulite* or 'Clean hands') launched by Italian magistrates in February 1992, and by a change in 'the laws governing party system reproduction'⁸ which took place in 1993.

Mani pulite (which brought to light a massive network of 'mutually beneficial linkages' between the political parties and powerful economic groups in the public and private sectors) appears to have been the consequence of a desire on the part of magistrates to step up their crusade against political corruption together with an increased willingness on the part of entrepreneurs to cooperate in judicial investigations. In other words, because resolution of the communist question had subverted whatever ideological justifications there had been for being lenient towards the more dubious clientele practices of the governing class, so magistrates became keener to use the considerable powers that their position gives them to pursue the

powerful in corruption cases.¹⁰ Likewise, faced with the increasing costs of corruption,¹¹ the end of communism led big business to conclude, for the first time in 45 years, that it 'could foster a major crisis in the political system without risking its own survival'.¹² Whatever the truth of the matter, the results of *Mani pulite* were a veritable implosion of all of the traditional governing parties (the DC and the Socialists (PSI) above all, but also the Social Democrats (PSDI), Liberals (PLI) and Republicans (PRI)) during the course of 1992 and 1993 as the investigations claimed ever more senior party figures and as membership and votes (as registered in local elections and opinion polls) collapsed.

Change in 'the laws governing party system reproduction', namely a new electoral law, was forced by a variety of cross-party organizations which aimed to break the stranglehold of the traditional parties on Italian political life by means of strategic use of the referendum device. Even though Italian referenda may only be used to strike down existing laws and not to make new ones, referendum campaigners realized that if issues and questions were framed carefully enough it was possible to achieve 'self-implementing' reforms which would place political pressure on parliament to carry through further legislative change. The success of the referendum of 1991, which limited the exercise of preference voting, sparked off a veritable surge of petitions to gather the required half-million signatures on a wide range of issues - including a proposal to abolish the so-called '65 per cent' clause in elections for the Senate which would have the effect of introducing the single-member, simple plurality system for three-quarters of the Senate seats. The positive outcome of the referendum (held in April 1993) placed parliament under immediate pressure to amend the law governing elections to the Chamber of Deputies because the two houses have co-equal legislative powers. The new electoral system, then, replaces the old party-list system of proportional representation with a variation of the so-called 'additional member system': three quarters of the members of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies are elected by the single-member, simple-plurality method, the remaining quarter of the seats being distributed proportionally. A four per cent threshold is a further feature of the new law.¹³ This, it was believed, would have a reductive effect on the number of parties in the legislature while the large plurality element of the new system would make it imperative for the parties to form electoral coalitions and to agree on common platforms - something that would enhance the likelihood of responsible party government since it would allow voters to give a mandate to a given coalition of parties (unlike the old system which allowed both coalition formulae and programs to be worked out on the basis of relative party strengths after the votes had been counted). This in its turn would make alternation in government more likely precisely because it would allow voters periodically to renew the governing parties' mandate or to transfer it to the opposition parties.

The result of the new electoral law's parliamentary passage was that as corruption investigations both divided and decimated the ruling parties and as new umbrella-type organizations - organizations designed to catch the fallout from the implosion of the old formations - emerged, a complex process of inter-party negotiations led to the forging of three electoral coalitions: of the center, of the left and of the right. The center coalition, called the 'Pact for Italy', was an axis between two organizations which were direct products of the collapse of the DC: the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (PPI) and the *Patto Segni* (PS). The coalition of the left, called the

'Progressive Alliance' consisted of eight partners: the PDS, *Rifondazione comunista* (RC), the Network, the Greens, the rump of the PSI and three new formations: *Alleanza Democratica*, *Rinascita Socialista*, *Cristiano Sociali*. (Only *Alleanza Democratica* of the new formations fielded separate slates of candidates for the proportionally distributed seats). The coalition of the right, called the 'Freedom Alliance', consisted of: a new formation, *Forza Italia* (FI), launched by the media magnate, Silvio Berlusconi, as a means of bringing together the forces of the right; the *Lega*, with whom Berlusconi had stand-down arrangements in the north; *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) as the neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* had decided to call itself and with which Berlusconi had stand-down arrangements in the South (where the pact became commonly known as the 'Alliance for Good Government'); three other minor formations. The results achieved by the three coalitions as well as the individual parties in the general election held at the end of March 1994 are shown in table 1.

Electoral change and party system change

Before examining the role of electoral change in this process of party-system change, it will be worthwhile spending some time discussing the logic of the relationship between the two.

From round about the mid 1970s, students of elections and parties in Western Europe noted a number of unusual changes in the relative strengths of parties in various countries (the large increase in support for the Liberals in Britain in 1974 or the sudden forceful appearance of the Progress Party in Denmark in 1973 being just two examples) and from this were frequently led to speculate that voters were becoming more volatile, less strongly partisan and so forth (something that seemed especially plausible in the light of the pace of economic and social change since the war). And so, as Ivor Crewe¹⁴ points out, the literature on parties and elections came frequently to be based on a model which linked electoral change to party system change seeing the latter, at least implicitly, as the necessary and invariable consequence of the former. But it is easy to show that electoral change need not lead to party system change and conversely that party system change may take place in the (relative or complete) absence of electoral change.

Such a demonstration is partly a matter of how the terms 'electoral change' and 'party system change' may be defined. If a party system can be said to remain unchanged when the number and relative strengths of its component parties remain the same, then the familiar distinction between gross and net vote switches directs our attention to the fact that quite considerable electoral change could leave the existing party superstructure intact. It is in principle perfectly possible (though perhaps unlikely in practice) that such a situation existed in Italy during the period prior to 1976 when stability in the relative strengths of parties was a matter of widespread comment: gross change need not be reflected in any net change when vote-switching is self-cancelling. Gross switches will only lead to a change in the party superstructure *if* there are a lot of switches *and* they run strongly one way. Conversely, the fact that party-system change has been unusually large is not a warrant for inferring that the amount of gross change has increased. Indeed, of the six logically possible statements that it is possible to make about the

relationship between gross change and net change only two of these are in any sense determinate as the following schema shows:

If gross change is:	...then net change:
zero	is zero
> zero	is indeterminate
larger in time period T1 than in time period T2	may or may not be larger in period T1 than in T2

If net change is:	...then gross change:
zero	is indeterminate
> zero	is > zero
larger in time period T1 than in time period T2	may or may not be larger in period T1 than in T2

Even if 'electoral change' is taken to mean net rather than gross vote switches, it may still not lead to party-system change over the long term: there is 'no logical tie between fluctuations and trends in the vote for a party'.¹⁵ Therefore, heightened net vote switches may well leave the party superstructure less stable, while at the same time leaving it intact. Conversely, the configuration of parties in a party system may change quite independently of net changes - as appears to happen in the Netherlands 'where an almost pure form of proportional representation encourages disaffected party factions to break away and gives the smallest parties every incentive to contest elections'.¹⁶ In such cases, where mergers and schisms are taking place between one election and the next (with voters not being given the *opportunity* to vote for the same party on two occasions) it would be more correct to speak of party-system change itself being the *cause* of vote switching rather than the consequence of it. In sum, therefore, electoral change understood as gross or net vote switching does not guarantee party-system change and its absence does not preclude it. Electoral change will only be associated with party-system change when there is a permanent net shift, or a cumulative series of net shifts, of support in favor of new or existing parties at the expense of others.

However, what analysts often have in mind in seeking to link the notions of electoral and party-system change are changes in the *bases* of electoral choice and the inferences that may be drawn from these for the profile of the party system. An example of this is the suggestion that the almost unbroken decline in the British Labour Party's vote since the early 1950s can be explained in terms of a decline in the size of the manual working class together with a decline

in the propensity of the remaining members of the class to support the party. Here we have a shift in the line of division of a social cleavage together with (it is presumed) a decline in the level of its intensity. Yet the example only serves to highlight three further problems in the analysis of the link between electoral and party-system change. One is that parties can *adapt* to change. That is to say, they can react to a decline in the *size(s)* of their principal support group(s) by seeking (compensating) support elsewhere. And they can react to a *declining propensity* of members of their principal support group(s) to vote in the desired manner by appropriate changes in the nature of their appeals. Second, parties can to some degree themselves manipulate the bases of electoral choice. Through acts of social engineering when in government they can, to a degree, themselves alter the relative sizes of the social categories most inclined to support them (this was, for example, very much the case with the British Conservatives and their policies of council-house sales and wider share-ownership during the 1980s). Finally, where the cleavage in question is of an ideological nature (and all cleavages that form the basis for electoral choice are in a sense ideological in so far as people must in *some* measure be aware of them if they are to have any impact) then one has to face the fact that parties themselves help to define what cleavages exist, which are of greater and lesser importance etc.

Parties create public opinion as much as they express it; they form it rather than distort it; there is dialogue rather than echo. Without parties there would be only vague, instinctive, varying tendencies dependent on character, education, habit, social position and so on. The Marxist theory itself which treats opinion as a reflection of social class holds that all classes are class conscious; but class-consciousness does not exist unless a party exists to awaken and develop it.¹⁷

So it is difficult to see the sense in which party-system change is to be regarded as the product of electoral change rather than party systems themselves determining the conditions of their own preservation or modification.

We are now in a position to attempt to pinpoint the precise role of electoral change in the transformation of the Italian party system.

Electoral change and the Italian party system

Party-system transformation (a change in the identities of the principal actors and/or a change in the pattern of interactions between actors) is likely, unless it is something that takes place very slowly, to be preceded by a period of heightened instability in the old party superstructure: a period of heightened fluctuations in the distribution of party support. Such was true of the Italian case. The fluctuations cannot be taken as indicators of any weakening of the attachments of voters to the established parties because of the impossibility of making inferences about gross change from net change. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that 'in practice roughly parallel movement is the usual pattern'¹⁸ and this seems particularly likely in Italy where we know from other evidence that the period of heightened fluctuation was accompanied by a marked decline

in the salience of the social cleavages (religion, ideology and the associated 'red' and 'white' subcultures) that had anchored voters to the traditional parties, particularly the DC and the PCI.¹⁹ The most commonly used measure of net fluctuation ('aggregate volatility' as it is more usually called) sometimes known as Pedersen's index²⁰ is calculated as half the absolute sum of the differences in the percentage of the vote received by each individual party between successive pairs of elections. Although not without its drawbacks,²¹ in the absence of a convincing alternative, it is the measure used here. Table 2 shows volatility scores for each pair of elections held between 1948 and 1994. Some of these figures must be treated with caution. The 1992/94 figure, for example, is largely an artefact of the change in the structure of opportunities that took place between these two elections. From a purely statistical point of view the measured level of volatility was almost bound to change simply as a consequence of the change in the options available. Similarly suspect is the unusually high figure for 1948/53 which could be interpreted as 'the result of the adjustment of the party system to the new political situation created by the fall of fascism and the postwar settlement'.²² Even if we exclude these outliers, however, the contrast between the period up to 1976 and the period afterwards is clear: average volatility between 1953/58 and 1972/76 was 5.8; between 1976/79 and 1987/92 it was 9.1.

However, as stated before, heightened fluctuation may well leave the party superstructure intact: fluctuation is not the same thing as trend and no consequences for party-system change can be predicted from it. For such change to occur there must be a permanent net shift or a cumulative series of shifts away from established parties. Such shifts can be measured in terms of fragmentation. Prior to the early nineties when the changes in the party system became clearly visible, fragmentation was rather insignificant as it affected only the margins of the party system. In 1972 the three largest parties (DC, PCI, PSI) had between them obtained 75.5% of the valid votes cast - a proportion that was almost identical 15 years later at the 1987 election, at 75.2%. It was only with the 'earthquake election' of 1992²³ that the three parties' combined total fell significantly - to 59.4%. Taking into account the support received by the fourth largest party, the MSI, does not alter this picture: 84.2% is the combined total for the four largest parties in 1972, 81.1% in 1987, 64.8% in 1992. There does, therefore, appear to have been a rather sudden discontinuity in the distribution of voting support such as to suggest a primary role for electoral change in the breakdown of the established party system.

However, the distribution of voting support masks the fact that voters had in reality begun to withdraw their consent from the largest parties well before 1992 - as is shown by changes in the percentage of the *electorate* voting for the various parties. The relevant data are provided in table 3 which - in showing a decline in the percentage of the electorate obtained by the three, and four, largest parties at almost every election since 1976 - suggests a movement in the distribution of support away from these parties that was not new but long-standing. From this perspective, then, the role of electoral change is no longer primary, but secondary: a 'background' rather than a precipitating factor.

Given that the proportion of the valid vote going to the large established parties held steady, the declining proportion of the electorate received by these parties is, of course, the result of a rising

rate of abstention in the form of blank, spoiled, or unutilized ballots; and, moving from description to interpretation, we believe that this growing abstention can best be explained in terms of dissatisfaction with, and thus of protest against, the traditional governing parties.²⁴ Between 1976 and 1979, turnout fell from 93.4% to 90.6% and it has declined at every election since then to reach 86.1%. If one adds to these figures those who cast either blank or spoiled ballot papers, then one ends up with a rising trend in support for the so-called 'non-vote party' (NVP) of the proportions shown in table 4. Of course the level of NVP support does not necessarily measure a single phenomenon. Some failures to utilize the ballot will be involuntary as will some spoiled ballots. Intentional non-voting and spoiled ballots may be the expression of any one of a number of different possible motivations. In the absence of detailed evidence, only of the blank ballots does it seem reasonable to assume *a priori* that they are predominantly an expression of protest. However, as table 4 makes clear, support for the NVP has risen at almost every election over the past two decades and we have no reason to believe that the most common causes of involuntary non-voting etc. (failure to consign electoral certificates, sickness, intellectual incapacity in the case of spoiled ballots etc.) have risen concomitantly. On the contrary. If therefore growing support for the NVP is almost certainly the consequence of an increasing incidence of intended behaviors, then the suggestion that the underlying motivations can be characterized as ones of protest is supported by the observation that NVP growth was accompanied by the emergence of new formations such as the Radicals, the Greens and the *Lega*; for, if protest can be expressed by the refusal to cast a valid ballot, it can also be expressed by voting for one of the formations lying outside the traditional left-right dimension and whose opposition to the traditional parties and their activities was unambiguous.

So the recent 'revolution' in the Italian party superstructure can hardly be explained in terms of a sudden collapse in the electoral base that had sustained it: this base had, rather, been eroding over a period of almost two decades. Given that this is so, it is not surprising to find that at the general election of 1994 when the fate of the old party system was sealed, the majority of voters behaved in ways that were entirely predictable given the range of choices with which they were presented. This can be seen by referring to the figures given in table 5 and by considering in turn, the 1994 decisions of those who, in 1992, had supported either the DC, the PDS, the PSI or the *Lega* - which between them had taken two-thirds of the vote at that election.²⁵

Regarding PDS voters first of all, some three-quarters of them apparently remained loyal to their party - a proportion well within the range that political scientists would expect for a large, established, party. DC voters too showed loyalty of a kind; since, far from distributing their votes randomly upon the demise of their party, some three quarters opted for one or other of three parties (the PPI, PS, FI) all of which had direct affinities with the old DC - either in terms of their appeals (this was the case of FI which, among other things, sought during the campaign to stress its 'functional equivalence' to the old DC by means of the emphasis it placed on the notion of anti-communism) or else, additionally, in terms of organization and personnel (the PPI, PS).

The behavior of ex-PSI voters too, supports the general theme of continuity in electoral behavior; for, the distribution of their votes was remarkably consistent with what was already

known about the attitudes of PSI voters. Recent research²⁶ has suggested that, in conformity with the party's strategy of attempting to extend its electoral base in a number of different directions at once, PSI voters could be divided into three broad categories: 1) those (between 30 and 40% of the total) with sympathies towards the *Lega* and the traditional 'lay parties' of the center; 2) those (between 25 and 35%) animated by progressive ideals; and finally, (the remainder) 'exchange voters', for whom support for the PSI was a purely instrumental decision based on a calculation of the material resources and personal benefits that were likely to flow therefrom. A remarkably similar distribution emerges from the figures contained in table 5: taking switches to FI and the *Lega* to represent those in the first category and switches to the parties of the 'Progressive alliance' to represent those in the second, it would appear that roughly 43% belonged to the first category in 1994, roughly 22% to the second. It therefore appears that once disillusionment with the PSI had begun to set in, its voters kept faith with the inspirations that had led them to support the party in the first place - with the result that they ended up moving in as many directions as there were orientations underlying the decision to vote PSI to begin with.

Regarding, finally, the *Lega*, table 5 suggests that up to a third defected to FI in 1994. Again, this was quite consistent with what is known about the attitudes of *Lega* voters; for, what appears more than any other to distinguish the *Lega* voter from the supporters of other parties is the demand for greater autonomy for the regions of the north. However, what underlies this demand is not so much the feeling of territorial identity per se, as a feeling of dissatisfaction towards the traditional parties and the desire to defend specific economic interests, particularly in the matter of taxation.²⁷ Support for the *Lega* appears, therefore, to be of a somewhat instrumental, negative, kind and thus intrinsically rather fragile. Were another party to attempt to compete with it on the same or similar ideological territory, the fragility of its support would put the *Lega* in particular danger of losing votes. Yet this is precisely what happened in 1994: major planks of Berlusconi's platform were privatization of health care, local fiscal autonomy and tax reductions - all of which were also distinctive themes of the *Lega*'s campaign. In this way Berlusconi succeeded in redefining the political offering, invading an important part of the political space once occupied by the *Lega* alone.

So in 1994 voters behaved largely as one would have expected them to. Even though a party may disappear, an electorate - or, rather, an ex-electorate - remains. Therefore, what was distinctive about the 1994 outcome was not that there was an electoral revolution but that the configuration of parties among which voters were expected to choose was different. In terms of the behavior of voters, the 1994 outcome was no more or less a product of voter dissatisfaction (which, as we saw above, had already begun to make itself felt as far back as the 1970s) than the outcome two years previously had been. This was hardly surprising: electors do not, as it were, make their voting decisions 'afresh' every time; rather, they arrive at the polling booths with already formed and deeply held attitudes that are the product of the on-going influence of their social, cultural and ideological backgrounds. And it was the efficiency with which Berlusconi's organization was able to 'package' an appeal designed to respond to such attitudes that largely explains why he was so strikingly successful. This points to a final set of observations.

If the wealth of evidence and assertion that voters in industrialized liberal democracies are now less securely anchored than in the fifties and sixties to their traditional political loyalties, (this as a result of a decline in the salience of traditional social cleavages such as class, religion and so forth) - if the wealth of evidence and assertion to this effect has anything to recommend it, then our attention is drawn once more to the suggestion made above that party systems themselves determine the conditions of their own preservation or modification. In other words, the fact that social change has shaken voters out of their traditional partisan attachments with the result that more of them are 'up for grabs', means that there is a corresponding gain in the significance of the activities of parties themselves as determinants of electoral outcomes: party-system maintenance, change or transformation is no longer the *consequence* of electoral change or stasis; if anything, party superstructures become the *independent* variable, electoral behavior the *dependent* variable. In the Italian case, it is possible to point to a limited number of specific failings on the part of the traditional parties that would account quite adequately for the transformation of the country's party profile without having to seek to explain the latter in terms of the vague and implausible notion of an 'electoral revolution'.

In the case of the Christian Democrats, their demise can be attributed quite simply to their failure to adapt to the steady weakening of the three pillars on which support for them was traditionally based. Of these three pillars, one was the religious basis of support. Practicing Catholics were the main reservoir of DC support and yet secularization in the postwar period brought a decline in the size of the reservoir - in 1956, 69% of the adult population claimed to have attended mass the previous week, while in 1976 this had dropped to 37% and in 1990 it was 30% - together with a decline in the political loyalties of the faithful: in 1968, 77% of practicing Catholics voted for the Christian Democrats whereas in 1985 only 63% did so.²⁸ For a long time, the party managed to compensate for this decline through increasing reliance on the second pillar, namely the clientelistic basis of support, something that is suggested by the figures showing DC support becoming increasingly concentrated in the South where the practices of clientele politics were most strongly developed. But clientelism is an inherently fragile foundation on which to build support because it requires continuous renewal being subject to a continual process of bargaining.²⁹ Moreover, opinion surveys suggested that, because of the abuses to which it was prone, clientele politics tended to undermine support for the DC among the more issue-oriented voters in the more economically advanced Italy of the non-Southern regions. Yet the DC found it extremely difficult to extricate itself from the clientelistic web, not only because it was such an important source of support for the party, but also because clientelism relied on the party's control of the institutions of the state; and its embeddedness in the state institutions had become so complete that in many cases it was impossible to tell where the state ended and the Christian Democratic party began. By the end of the eighties, therefore, the Christian Democrats were really only left with anti-communism - their final pillar - as any sort of secure basis on which to mobilize support. So when this too was swept away with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and its concomitant developments, the party's eventual collapse can hardly be said to have been surprising.

Very similar remarks can be made about the PSI. It too witnessed an increasing concentration of its support in the regions of the South as a result of its reliance on the practices of clientelism;

and it also faced the very significant problem in attempting to consolidate a secure base of support for itself that since it lay in between two larger parties on the left-right spectrum it was always in danger of losing its distinctive identity through too close an association with one or other of them. Clientelistic practices did nothing for the efforts of its leader, from the mid-seventies on, to firm-up the party's distinctive identity in the hope of reviving the party's flagging fortunes, by projecting an image of modernity and efficiency in order to appeal 'to the professional and technical northern middle-classes who want an efficient and progressive government'.³⁰ Clientelism meant that such appeals were always of doubtful credibility. Therefore, the PSI's support, like that of the DC, was also inherently fragile. Meanwhile, the fact of being so thoroughly pervaded by the practices of political power-broking had disastrous consequences for the quality of the grassroots membership since the latter, through family and friends, was the most ready source of preference votes. This being the case, and since members had to be rewarded for their services, the motives for joining in the first place tended to be highly self-regarding - which in its turn meant that the rank-and-file tended to be highly passive. 'Certainly the PSI... never had the level of committed activism enjoyed by the communists'.³¹ Therefore, to the extent that the party lacked a membership with a sufficient degree of the *ideological* commitment necessary for maintaining the effectiveness of the party on the ground, not only its electoral support but its very existence as a free-standing organization was inherently fragile. And if, therefore, the PSI was better characterized as a party of political entrepreneurs and career politicians than as an organization mobilized by shared values, then, it was perhaps inevitable that when such entrepreneurs came to be decimated by the *Mani pulite* anti-corruption drive, so their organization came to be decimated along with them.

Finally, the PCI's fate can also be explained in terms of specific failings of long standing since the party's share of the vote and of the electorate declined at every election from 1976 on. Such failings were four in number. First, the programmatic changes associated with the 'historic compromise' strategy and its aftermath provoked considerable internal dissension and it is likely that such dissension was damaging to the PCI by creating the image of a party in disarray, unsure of its precise objectives. Second, the fact of internal dissent is likely to have heightened the effect of a handicap that the party had always labored under, namely, the fundamental conflict between its identity as a Communist party and its attempt to secure legitimacy by convincing people that its commitment to liberal democracy was genuine. The problem was that almost regardless of the programmatic changes made, these could always be portrayed by opponents as mere accommodations to necessity rather than changes of principle; and the fact of internal disaffection most likely increased the credibility of such portrayals. Third, it is possible that for other voters, increasing moderation and liberalization beyond a certain point would lead to disillusionment and apathy. By making its political 'product' increasingly similar to others offered on the 'political market' the PCI was, perhaps, bound to disappoint past 'consumers' of *its* product while creating little incentive for the consumers of *other* parties' products to switch brands (especially since increasing similarity involved the implicit claim that its own, previously offered product, was defective). Fourth, although the PCI never formally entered government, from the 'historic compromise' period onwards it was allowed by the governing parties to exercise an increasing influence on policy-making through its membership of parliamentary committees. (For example, its spectacular result in 1976 brought it 'the

presidency of one of Parliament's two chambers, a proportional number of chairmanships of parliamentary committees, and the right to sit on the interparty committee that assigns these positions').³² In this way, the party became increasingly caught up in the traditional process of *lotizzazione* and in the practice of *consociativismo* - 'the practice whereby, given the overall shape of the Italian party system and the structure of opportunities set by the internal rules of procedure of the Italian Parliament, the communist opposition was able to bargain with the government majority in ways which blurred the distinction between the two'.³³ Given widespread alienation from the governing class and its practices, it is plausible, therefore, that this state of affairs will have added fuel to growing feelings of disillusionment with the party stemming from the first three sources. In the light of all of this, the outcome of the 1992 election - which saw the PDS take 16.1% of the vote as against the 26.6% won by the PCI in 1987 - is not terribly surprising. Having, abandoned, with the change of name, the last vestiges of its 'distinctiveness' the party suffered what commentators called a 'hemorrhage' of votes. In fact, what happened was that there was a moderate decline in the size of the political space once occupied by the PCI, since in 1992 the PDS and *Rifondazione* together obtained 21.7% of the vote, or 4.9% less than the PCI in 1987 - hardly a dramatic decline.

Conclusion

So in reply to the question, 'What was the role of electoral change in the recent collapse of the postwar Italian party system?', the short answer must be, 'A rather insignificant one'. More than for any other reason, the system collapsed because the basic assumption which had sustained it since the war, namely, the need to exclude the communists at all costs, lost its relevance.

Electoral change can mean at least four things: a change in the distribution of the vote and/or of the electorate between parties; vote-switching by individuals; a change in the social psychology underlying the voting choices of individuals (such as a weakening of partisan attachments); a change in the predominant political allegiances of social categories. In this paper we have argued that the first two types of change may or may not lead to party-system change and that in the Italian case, although they were present, the changes had begun to manifest themselves several years before the breakdown in the party system actually took place. They were not therefore the proximate cause of change in the party superstructure. The inferences concerning the social psychology underlying individuals' voting choices that it is possible to make from rising rates of abstention and from individual level vote-switches between 1992 and 1994 again do not suggest any sudden or unforeseeable change. Finally, we suggested that the fourth type of change was theoretically as much a consequence of the activities of the party superstructure itself as an independent cause of change in that structure and we gave some evidence that this was in fact so in the case of Italy.

To return to the point made in the opening paragraph, the relationship between electoral change and party-system change is frequently misunderstood. In particular, in the face of such a seemingly dramatic phenomenon as a complete party-system transformation, there is, perhaps, a natural tendency to assume that the latter necessarily indicates an electoral earthquake. The

purpose of this paper has been to show that this is not so. Just as the collapse of a house may be as much the result of a long period of erosion of the terrain on which it stands as of a seismic shift in that terrain, so collapse of the Italian party system has been the result, not of an 'electoral revolution', but of gradual change in the behavior of Italian voters that has been going on over a number of years.

NOTES

1. See Martin J. Bull and James L. Newell, 'Italy Changes Course? The 1994 Elections and the Victory of the Right', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol 48, no. 1, January 1995; James L. Newell, 'The Italian General Election of 1994: Change, real or apparent?', paper presented to the Political Economy seminar of the Department of Political Science, University of Western Ontario, 9 November 1994.
2. Luciano Bardi, 'Party System Change and anti-Party Sentiment in Italy: Forza Italia, the Lega Nord and Other Things', paper presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Madrid, April 1994.
3. Bull and Newell, op.cit.
4. Mauro Calise, 'Remaking the Italian Party System: How Lijphart Got It Wrong by Saying It Right', *West European Politics*, vol. 16, no. 4, October 1993, pp. 545-560.
5. Mark Donovan, 'The 1987 General Election in Italy: Prelude to Reform?', *West European Politics*, vol. 11, no. 1, January 1988, p.127.
6. The conflict between internal and external pressures was the conflict between the party's need to maintain its 'identity' or 'Leninist heritage' as the basis of party unity and as a spur to the mobilization of party activists, and on the other hand, the need to attack this identity in order to make possible the party's alliance strategy. See Martin J. Bull, 'Whatever Happened to Italian Communism? Explaining the Dissolution of the Largest Communist Party in the West', *West European Politics*, vol. 14, no. 4, October 1991, pp.96-120.
7. As one anonymous voter put it following local elections in the autumn of 1992, 'There's no more fear of communism, so now we can vote as we like'. (V. Testa, 'Il piacere di bastonare Roma', *la Repubblica*, 1 October 1992).
8. Calise, op. cit., p.546.
9. Sarah Waters, "'Tangentopoli' and the Emergence of a New Political Order in Italy", *West European Politics*, vol. 17, no. 1, January 1994, p.170.
10. That politicians were often to be found complaining that leading anti-corruption magistrates were closet communists, using their positions for political purposes, derives from the fact that the Italian judiciary can indeed exercise enormous political influence. Unusually among constitutional democracies, judges in Italy carry out much investigative work that elsewhere is carried out by the police, and they can initiate penal proceedings not only at outside request, but also at their own discretion. The combination of these two powers means that in many cases the role of judge and prosecutor may in effect be performed by a single individual and, long before the initiation of *Mani pulite* in

February 1992, there were a number of celebrated cases of judges using these powers to pursue the powerful in corruption cases. 'Hence the source of the accusations frequently levelled against magistrates; that they are politicized, use their powers for partisan ends, choose for their initiatives the times best suited to produce maximum political damage...' The response of the parties was usually to attempt to reduce the threat of judicial initiatives against them by means of strategies of a particularistic nature such as efforts to 'establish links with individual magistrates or groups of magistrates by offering them rewards of various types... including... a seat in Parliament'. It seems that the PCI was particularly assiduous in getting magistrates elected to Parliament and, condemned as it was to a role of permanent opposition, the PCI always opposed any reduction in the wide discretionary powers of the judiciary, seeing in this state of affairs a useful stick with which to beat the Christian Democrats given the peculiar levels of venality characteristic of members of that party. (See Giuseppe di Federico, 'The crisis of the justice system and the referendum on the judiciary', in: Robert Leonardi and Piergiorgio Corbetta (eds.), *Italian Politics: A Review*, vol. 3, (London and New York: Pinter, 1989), pp.25-49, from where all the preceding quotations are taken).

11. Donatella della Porta, 'La capitale immorale: le tangenti di Milano', in: Stephen Hellman and Gianfranco Pasquino (eds.), *Politica in Italia: I fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni*, (Bologna: il Mulino, 1993), pp.219-240.
12. Calise, op. cit., p.556.
13. For a detailed description of the new system see David Hine, 'The New Italian Electoral System', *Association for the Study of Modern Italy Newsletter*, no. 24, Autumn 1993, pp.27-34.
14. 'Introduction' in: Ivor Crewe and David Denver (eds.), *Electoral Change in Western Democracies: Patterns and Sources of Electoral Volatility* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985), pp.1-22.
15. Crewe, op. cit., p.17.
16. ibid., p.19.
17. Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*, Barbara and Robert North, translators, 3rd edition, (London: Methuen, 1964), p.378.
18. Crewe, op. cit., p.10.
19. There is now a wealth of literature on the electoral effects of the decline of the Italian subcultures. For a convenient summary see: Renato Mannheimer and Giacomo Sani, *Il Mercato Elettorale: Identikit dell'elettore italiano* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1987).

20. See Mogens N. Pedersen, 'The Dynamics of European Party Systems: Changing Patterns of Electoral Volatility', *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 7, no. 1, (1979), pp.1-26.
21. See, for example, the observations contained in Ivor Crewe and David Denver, (eds), op. cit. and in Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair, *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
22. Percy Allum and Renato Mannheimer, 'Italy', in: Crewe and Denver, op cit., p.290.
23. So called because the elections produced some of the most significant changes in individual party strengths since the war. The DC fell below 30% for the first time, while the PDS lost an unprecedented two-fifths of its 1987 support declining from 26.6% to 16.1%. The PSI notably failed to make any gains from the collapse of the ex-communist vote, and the four parties of government (the DC, PSDI, PLI and PSI) lost the overall majority of votes (though not of seats) that they had enjoyed in 1987, something that was interpreted by many as a vote of no-confidence in the outgoing coalition.
24. Dissatisfaction can be of at least three kinds: dissatisfaction with specific parties, dissatisfaction with the institution of party *per se*, dissatisfaction with the rules of the political game (i.e. anti-system sentiments).
25. Strictly speaking, table 2 does not show the current behavior of 1992 supporters of these parties because, being based on the 1994 electorate, it inevitably excludes those who, in the meantime, will have left the electorate for various reasons (e.g. death). It also excludes those who said that they would not vote. What table 2 shows is the decisions of 1994 voters who supported these parties in 1992. We do not think that this significantly affects the conclusions drawn in the text, however.
26. Paolo Natale, 'C'era una volta l'elettore socialista', in: Renato Mannheimer and Giacomo Sani (eds.), *La rivoluzione elettorale: l'Italia tra la prima e la seconda repubblica*, (Milan: Anabasi, 1994), pp.149-176.
27. Renato Mannheimer, 'La natura compositiva dell'elettorato leghista', in: Mannheimer and Sani (eds.), op. cit., pp.119-148; James L. Newell, 'The Scottish National Party and the Italian Lega Nord: A lesson for their rivals?', *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 26, no. 2, (1994), pp.135-153.
28. Renato Mannheimer and Giacomo Sani, *Il mercato elettorale* op. cit., p.96.
29. Mario Caciagli, 'Erosioni e mutamenti nell'elettorato democristiano', in: Mario Caciagli and Alberto Spreafico (eds.), *Vent'anni di elezioni in Italia. 1968-1987*, (Padova: Liviana editrice, 1990), p.16.

30. David Hine, 'The Italian Socialist Party under Craxi: Surviving but not Reviving', in: Peter Lange and Sidney Tarrow (eds.), *Italy in Transition: Conflict and Consensus*, (London: Frank Cass, 1980), p.142.
31. David Hine, 'The Italian Socialist Party', in: Tom Gallagher and Allan M. Williams (eds.), *Southern European socialism: Parties, elections and the challenge of government*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p.114.
32. Stephen Hellman, 'The Longest Campaign: Communist Party Strategy and the Elections of 1976', in: Howard R. Penniman (ed.), *Italy at the Polls: The Parliamentary Elections of 1976*, (Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1977), p.155.
33. Martin J. Bull and James L. Newell, op cit. For further details on this point see: David Hine, *Governing Italy: The Politics of Bargained Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), chs. 3 and 6.

Table 1

The Chamber of Deputies Elections of 1992 and 1994 (630 seats)

	1992			1994			District Vote	Seats
	Votes (m)	%	Seats	Votes (m)	%	Seats		
PDS	6.3	16.1	107	7.9	20.4	38	Progressives	164
RC	2.2	5.6	35	2.3	6.0	11		
PSI	5.3	13.6	92	0.8	2.2	-		
Greens	1.1	2.8	16	1.0	2.7	-		
AD	-	-	-	0.5	1.2	-		
Network	0.7	1.9	12	0.7	1.9	-		
DC	11.6	29.7	206	4.3	11.1	29	Pact for	
			PPI	1.8	4.6	13	Italy	4
FI	-	-	-	8.1	21.0	30	Freedom	
Lega	3.4	8.7	55	3.2	8.4	11	Alliance	164
MSI	2.1	5.4	34	5.2	13.5	23	Alliance for	
			AN				Good Govnt.	138
Pannella	0.5	1.2	7	1.4	3.5	-	Pannella	
Others	1.7	5.1	6	1.4	3.5	-	Others	4
PRI	1.7	4.4	27	-	-	-		
PLI	1.1	2.8	17	-	-	-		
PSDI	1.0	2.7	16	-	-	-		

Source: calculated from figures published in *La Repubblica*, 8 April 1992; 30 March 1994.

Table 2

Volatility scores for successive pairs of elections held between 1948 and 1994

Election pair	Volatility score
1948/53	13.3
1953/58	4.5
1958/63	7.9
1963/68	3.4
1968/72	4.9
1972/76	8.2
1976/79	5.3
1979/83	8.5
1983/87	8.4
1987/92	14.2
1992/94	36.2

Source: Luciano Bardi, 'Party System Change and anti-Party Sentiment in Italy: Forza Italia, the Lega Nord and Other Things', paper presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Madrid 17-22 April 1994, table 1.

Table 3

*Combined percentages of the electorate voting for the DC, PCI, PSI;
and for the DC, PCI, PSI, MSI, 1976-1992*

	1976	1979	1983	1987	1992
DC, PCI, PSI	75.2%	68.2	62.2	63.5	49.1
DC, PCI, PSI, MSI	80.8	72.8	67.9	68.5	53.6

Source: Figures for 1976 to 1987 calculated from Mario Caciagli and Alberto Spreafico (eds.), *Vent'anni di elezioni in Italia 1968-1987*, (Padova: Liviana editrice, 1990), table 5, p.382; figures for 1992 calculated from Stephen Hellman and Gianfranco Pasquino (eds.), *Politica in Italia: i fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni, Edizione 96.*, (Bologna: il Mulino, 1993), table B3, p.299.

Table 4

Absentions and blank or spoiled ballot papers 1976-1994 (%)

	1976	1979	1983	1987	1992	1994
Abstainers	6.6	9.4	11.0	11.1	12.7	13.9
Blank or spoiled ballots	2.6	3.7	5.2	4.4	4.7	6.1
Total support for 'non-vote party'	9.2	13.1	16.2	15.5	17.4	20.1

Table 5*Electoral flows 1992 - 1994***Vote April 1992**

Vote March 1994	DC %	PDS %	Lega %	PSI %
Greens	2.3	3.9	1.9	3.8
<i>Lega Nord</i>	4.0	1.9	54.9	8.2
AD	2.0	2.3	0.5	3.0
PPI	26.5	0.6	1.1	3.1
PDS	3.9	75.3	3.2	12.1
Network	0.9	1.3	0.4	1.8
FI	32.8	7.3	28.0	35.0
<i>Patto Segni</i>	14.2	0.6	1.5	6.1
AN	9.2	1.4	5.8	10.2
RC	0.5	4.0	0.6	1.2
<i>Lista Pannella/others</i>	3.7	1.4	2.1	15.5
	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>

Source: data supplied by *Directa*, Srl, Milan.