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Evaluating the Significance of the 1994 General Election in Italy: Watershed or Continuity?

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Evaluating the Significance of the 1994 General Election in Italy: Watershed or Continuity?

JAMES L. NEWELL & MARTIN J. BULL

Abstract. The Italian general election of 1994 is widely viewed as a watershed, this as a result of four elements of novelty apparent at the time: a new voting system; a seeming electoral revolution; collapse of the pre-existing party system and the demise of the old political class following a major anti-corruption drive. By examining the political effects of each element, an assessment is made of the extent to which 1994 really *did* represent a fundamental break and of the extent to which, on the other hand, recent Italian politics show significant elements of continuity. The new voting system had few of the effects hoped for; an analysis of individual-level voting shifts reveals that most voters behaved much as one would have expected them to given the range of alternatives they were presented with; despite the collapse of the old party system, a new one is far from having taken root; it is by no means clear that the demise of the old political *class* has led to the elimination of political *corruption* as a salient feature of public life. The real significance of the 1994 election is that it has led Italy to a form of political stalemate.

INTRODUCTION

Recent developments in Italian politics are frequently referred to as constituting a 'revolution' or the birth of a 'second republic' with the general election of March 1994 being seen as especially significant in this respect. Now that the longer-term impact of that election can be gauged, it is pertinent to evaluate whether the election represented a watershed in Italian politics, or whether (and if so how and why), it can be more accurately viewed as merely one event in a process of change whose outcome is still uncertain. The former view rests on four elements of novelty that were apparent at the time. First, the election was conducted on the basis of a new electoral system which, it was thought, would usher in a new era of alternation in Italian government. Second, it marked an explosion onto the political stage of completely new formations, a confirmation of the strength of formations of recent origin, or else a dramatic growth of formations whose presumed 'anti-system' nature had previously confined them to a 'political ghetto' (and so seemed to mark an 'electoral revolution'). Third, as a consequence of this, the election confirmed the meltdown of the old party system which had seen the Christian Democrats at its centre as the mainstay of every governing coalition since the war. And finally, this in its turn meant that the election witnessed the demise of an old political class whose power had to a significant degree rested on clientelism, itself a major source of corruption.

Only eight months later, however, most people were having to reassess their view, as the Berlusconi government which took office in the wake of the elections appeared to be no more than a transient product of Italy's continuing political turmoil. The formation and longevity of the Berlusconi government marked it out as no different from the rest of Italy's post-war administrations; in terms of style and achievements, it bore striking resemblances to DC-dominated coalitions of the past; and the collapse of the government in December

1994 led to the formation of the second 'technocratic government' (under Berlusconi's ex-Treasury minister, Lamberto Dini) in two years. There could be no greater testimony, therefore, to the continued failure of party government in Italy, and no greater confirmation that the 1994 elections did not represent a watershed, but merely one more event in an uncertain process of change.

The aim in this article is to subject the four elements of novelty mentioned above to detailed scrutiny in order to show how and why they are not, as commonly perceived, the indicators of a fundamental break with the past. By including in this analysis a consideration of events since the election, an attempt is made to establish the alternative view that a correct understanding of recent Italian politics requires seeing the election as no more than a link in an evolutionary process of change that began as far back as the late 1980s, if not before. First, however, it is necessary to describe the sequence of events leading up to 1994 - this in order to explain how the interpretation of the election as a 'watershed' arose in the first place.

ITALIAN POLITICS UNTIL 1994

Italian democracy in the postwar period was fundamentally shaped by the Cold War which led the DC and the parties in its orbit to agree to exclude permanently from office the second largest party, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), perceived to be an 'anti-system party'. As a result, the governing parties knew that whatever their policy failures they would remain in power and successive governments were characterized by 'immobilism' in key policy areas while squabbling over minor issues became an effective substitute for fighting over government programmes. Governing-party rivalry meant unstable governments (there were over fifty between 1948 and 1992) together with a politicisation of the state apparatus (a

phenomenon known as '*partitocrazia*') as the governing parties engaged in a 'sharing out' (*lotizzazione*) of ministerial and administrative posts according to the bargaining power of each. As a consequence of all of this, the Italian polity was characterized by a profound and increasing alienation of the citizenry from the governing class - as could be seen from the mid-seventies on in terms of declining voter turnout, growing fragmentation and increasing aggregate volatility.¹

The period between 1989 and 1992 saw a sudden increase in the pace of change in Italian politics, this as a result of the combined impact of the end of the communist question, the stagnation of the parties of government at a time of growing social and economic tensions, and the emergence of new movements for change. First, the collapse of the Berlin Wall led Achille Occhetto, PCI leader, to propose a transformation of the party into a non-communist party with a new name, the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS). This provoked a major party split and a sharp contraction of the party's electoral base, something which in its turn provoked a crisis of the DC; for, with ex-communists in such obvious disarray, significant numbers of DC supporters no longer felt compelled to vote for the party as the main bulwark against communism, and instead felt free to express their dissatisfaction with the 'immobilism' of Italian politics by voting for new 'party-movements', especially (in the north) the *Lega Nord*.² Second, the plight of the governing parties was then compounded by their belief that, since resolution of the communist question was accompanied by a major crisis of the Communist Party itself, coming to terms with it might not prove necessary at all - so that, instead of engaging in any kind of political renewal they preferred to maintain their stranglehold on change at a time when growing recession together with further moves towards European integration (especially the terms of the Maastricht Treaty) were placing pressure on the ruling parties to tackle the large and growing budget deficits by means of

cuts in public expenditure - which, however, stood to undermine the clientelistic basis of their support, especially in the South. Third, the combination of these factors led to the emergence of the new 'party-movements' referred to, together with a referenda movement which aimed at achieving political change by means of strategic use of the referendum device.³

As a result of these conjunctural factors, the 1992 election saw the share of the vote of the three largest parties (DC, PDS, Socialists (PSI)) decline from 75.2% to 59.4% and the loss by the four parties of government (the DC, PSDI (Social Democrats), PLI (Liberals) and PSI) of the overall majority of votes (although not of seats) they had enjoyed in 1987, something that was interpreted by many as a vote of no-confidence in the outgoing coalition.⁴ This prompted a governmental crisis and a general climate conducive to further change. Consequently, the period between 1992 and the general election of 1994 witnessed change in three further areas, something which appeared to mark the final passing of the old model of Italian politics.

First, the magistrates stepped up the major anti-corruption drive which they had initiated in February 1992. This 'Clean Hands' (*Mani pulite*) operation exposed a system of massive kickbacks operated by the traditional parties through their control of public works contracts and other schemes. Second, the campaign to achieve institutional reform via referendum intensified. There was a veritable surge of petitions to gather the required half a million signatures for a wide variety of proposals⁵, the most significant of which was one which aimed to strike a blow at the heart of *partitocrazia* by means of a change in the electoral law for the Senate. Held in April 1993, the results of this and seven other referenda were a resounding endorsement of the groundswell of opinion for change.⁶ A new electoral system was perceived as fundamental to promoting alternation in power, and the reform achieved

to the Senate obliged parliament to pass similar legislation for the Chamber of Deputies.

Third, the party system underwent rapid decomposition and apparent recomposition. Replaced by a non-party based government in April 1993, the traditional ruling parties began to cede control over the state administrative machinery. At the same time, the issues of institutional reform and corruption began to divide and decimate them. Barely twelve months after the 1992 elections, the DC was registering under 20% of the vote in local elections and by the 1994 elections it had split into three groups: the *Partito popolare italiano* (PPI), the *Centro cristiano democratici* (CCD), and the *Cristiano sociali* (C-S). Similarly, within a year of the 1992 elections the PSI had removed its long-standing leader, Bettino Craxi, and by the 1994 elections it too had fragmented into three groups: a relaunched PSI, *Rinascita socialista* (RS) and the *Federazione democratica socialista* (FDS). This meltdown of the post-war party system led to the emergence of new umbrella-type organisations - such as *Alleanza democratica* (AD) - designed to catch the fallout from the implosion of the old formations, and with the parties under pressure from the new electoral system to find allies in order to obtain representation in the new parliament, in the period between the Summer of 1993 and 1994 the party system reshaped itself into three broad alliances: of the left, of the centre and of the right (see below).

It was hardly surprising, then, that many should have believed that a 'revolution' was underway before their very eyes: the contours of the party system were indeed undergoing rapid change. Added to which was the nature of government in 1992 and 1993: the governments of Giuliano Amato (1992-93) and Carlo Azeglio Ciampi (1993-94) were both self-styled transition governments. Amato's was seen as the final government of the old republic. Significantly, on resigning in the wake of the referenda of April 1993, he announced the 'death of a regime', and said he was making way for a 'transitional

government' which would lay the foundations for a 'Second Republic' through electoral reform of the Chamber of Deputies. The reform was subsequently carried through by Ciampi - who limited the programme of his government of 'technocrats' specifically to the passage of electoral reform and of a new budget - with a return to party government fully expected once he had completed his tasks and fresh elections could take place. One could therefore forgive observers for assuming that the 1994 elections and the election of a right-wing government marked the culmination of a revolutionary period of change. Yet the *pace* of change should not be confused with the real *depth* of change. The rapid sequence of events at the *elite* level masked several continuities with the past which were to become apparent after the elections, and which confirmed that real change in a political system is not to be measured simply by new faces in a legislature bearing new party labels. This introduces the four elements of change which are commonly perceived to be the indicators of a fundamental break with the past.

ELEMENT ONE: ELECTORAL REFORM, PARTY COMPETITION, GOVERNMENT ALTERNATION & STABILITY

The first element concerns the likely impact of the new Italian electoral system which was launched in the Summer of 1993. The new system is a variation of the so-called 'additional member system', in so far as it provides for the election of three quarters of the members of the parliament by the single-member, simple-plurality method, the remaining quarter of the seats being distributed proportionally. A four percent threshold is a further feature of the new law.⁷

The referendum campaigners had optimistic expectations about this new system, believing that it would achieve greater governmental stability, responsible party government

and alternation in power. Greater governmental stability would be partly a consequence of the reductive effect on the number of parties in the legislature which, it was assumed, would result from the four percent threshold. 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 programmes 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.

In the furore and excitement following the electoral victory of Berlusconi, it was assumed that these expectations had been realised when, in fact, almost none of them were. Electoral coalitions, it is true, did emerge. As noted above, inter-party negotiations led to the forging of three electoral coalitions. These were: the 'Pact for Italy', (comprising the PPI and the *Patto Segni* (PS)) in the centre; the 'Progressive Alliance' (PDS, *Rifondazione Comunista*, the Network, the Greens, the rump of the PSI, AD, *Rinascita Socialista* (another remnant of the PSI), C-S) on the left; and the 'Freedom Alliance'/'Alliance for Good Government' (Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia!* (FI), the *Lega*, *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN), CCD and two other minor formations) on the right. However, it was almost universally acknowledged, even by the parties themselves, that these were more alliances of convenience than 'a meeting of minds around common programmes' and the divisions, even among parties belonging to the same alliance, were notorious. In short, the alliances were the product of the search for an election-winning formula with little regard for the possibilities and problems of forming a coherent governing coalition.

Nor was there a reduction in the number of parties. On the contrary, a large number of the minor formations present in the new parliament achieved representation precisely *because* they managed to find electoral allies, and this heightened fragmentation made its own contribution to governmental in-fighting - as became clear in the election's immediate aftermath when negotiations for the formation of the new *Lega*-FI-AN coalition began. The new government lasted until 22 December and is widely acknowledged to have been the most quarrelsome, the most lacking in cohesion, in Italy's recent history.

Several factors were responsible for this instability: the much-discussed 'conflict of interests' involved in Berlusconi's position as Prime Minister and as owner of the largest private media empire in Italy; the judiciary's decision in the autumn to place Berlusconi under official investigation for alleged bribes paid by his holding company, Fininvest, to finance police; the controversial nature of some of the government's proposed legislation (e.g. the abolition of preventative custody for bribery and corruption suspects); fundamental policy differences between the three governing parties.

Berlusconi's continuing antagonism towards the *Mani pulite* magistrates led the opposition parties to reverse their initial acceptance of the government and to revert to their traditional stance. That is, rather than granting Berlusconi governing legitimacy (implied in Occhetto's remark in the election's immediate aftermath that the government should be 'allowed to govern'), they now viewed the government as a threat to democracy and its removal as of paramount importance. This happened as a result of *Lega* leader Bossi's decision to withdraw from the coalition on 22 December leaving the government without a parliamentary majority. This left Italian president Oscar Luigi Scalfaro with a dilemma. The parties proved to be so divided that no alternative coalition could be found. Early elections, on the other hand, were not a real alternative: in a system in which coalitions are as brittle

as those in Italy, it has, for obvious reasons, become a convention of the Constitution that presidents avoid premature elections if at all possible.⁸ Moreover, early elections would have left the country without a government for several months and, in all likelihood, would have produced a similar constellation of party strengths. In this situation, echoing his appointment of ex-Governor of the Bank of Italy, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, in April 1993, Scalfaro called on Berlusconi's ex-Treasury Minister, Lamberto Dini, to form a government of technicians.

The new government committed itself to a limited programme of economic and institutional reform (including a supplementary budget for 1995 and changes in regional electoral laws) and said that it would relinquish office once it had succeeded in passing its programme. The government was, from the outset, essentially a minority government resting on shifting majorities since in the relevant vote of confidence, on 25 January 1995, it received the support of only 302 of the 630 deputies (i.e. PDS, PPI and the *Lega Nord*), but was able to take office owing to the willingness of FI, AN and allies (with 270 deputies between them) to abstain. By the Autumn of 1995, the Dini government had achieved three of its four objectives. The government's performance - particularly when paralleled with the impressive performance of Ciampi's 1992-93 government of technicians⁹ - highlights the glaring and continuing inability of Italian parties to form coherent governments. So the new electoral system has failed to deliver either enhanced stability or responsible party government.

Finally, with regard to the question of alternation, the view that this was achieved depends very much on one's interpretation of the nature of 'Berlusconism'. Certainly, if the parties of the left had won the elections, alternation would have occurred since the left was largely composed of parties that had existed in opposition throughout the life of the Republic. Yet, since the main party which won the elections and became the cornerstone of the new

government (namely, FI) was a new party, and the parties of the left remained in opposition, one has to analyze carefully the nature of FI and from where its support came to establish possible continuities with the governing parties of the past. This will be done when element three is analysed below.

The above arguments could be qualified by the view that the effects of the new electoral system were hardly likely to make themselves felt overnight and that a reduction in the number of parties, increasing stability and the other postulated effects of the new system will only make themselves felt with time. But aside from the obvious rejoinder that such a suggestion is virtually untestable (how much time is required?), if it is true, then it simply adds weight to the basic position that is being taken here, that a fundamental change in party government did not occur in 1994.

More importantly, there are reasons to be skeptical that the new electoral system will *ever* produce the effects attributed to it. Ever since the debate aroused by the so-called 'Duverger laws' concerning the influence of electoral systems on the number of parties,¹⁰ there has existed a virtual consensus within the political science profession that no invariant political effects of electoral systems can be identified. In other words, any effects will be highly contingent and heavily influenced by the political traditions of the countries in which they operate. The belief that the new electoral system in Italy increases the likelihood of alternation can be viewed as particularly naive. Alternation depends entirely on the distribution of voters' preferences among parties. The electoral system has nothing to do with it. In Great Britain, notwithstanding the wholly majoritarian character of its electoral system, there has been no alternation in office, and the left has been out of power for close on two decades. In France, despite the introduction of majoritarian voting procedures with the inauguration of the Fifth Republic in 1958, there was, in effect, no alternation in power

for another 22 years. The expectation of a reduction in the number of parties can be viewed as likewise naive because this is an effect which depends on the geographical concentration or dispersion of party support. This is not to argue that the political changes hoped for by the supporters of the new electoral system will not be realized: they may be. But the new electoral system is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for their achievement.

ELEMENT TWO: AN ELECTORAL REVOLUTION?

The *prima facie* evidence that an electoral revolution had occurred was considerable. First, FI emerged as the largest party just three months after its leader, Silvio Berlusconi, had decided to enter politics apparently to save the nation from communism. Second, the *Lega*'s result suggested that it was likely to be something more than just a 'flash' party. Finally, AN's vote represented a two and a half-fold increase, something which shifted its position from sixth to third-largest party in Italy. This impressive result could not be dismissed as simply due to the 'free run' the party was given in most of the district seats in the south through its alliance with FI.¹¹ (See table 1).

Table 1. The Chamber of Deputies Elections of 1992 and 1994 (630 seats)

	1992			1994				District vote
	Votes (m)	%	Seats	List vote 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	PPI 4.3	11.1	29		Pact for
				PS 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	AN 5.2	13.5	23		Alliance for
								Good Govt. 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	-	-	-		

Note: 'List vote' refers to the votes cast (at constituency level) for the 155 proportionally distributed seats. 'District vote' refers to the votes cast for the remaining 475 seats distributed according to the plurality formula. The 'Freedom Alliance' (*Polo della libertà*) and the 'Alliance for Good Government' (*Polo del buon governo*) were the two names given to the electoral pact between FI, the *Lega*, the AN, and a number of small parties (see text). In essence, the pact involved 'stand-down' arrangements between FI and AN in the southern regions (where it was known as the 'Alliance for Good Government'), and 'stand-down' arrangements between FI and the *Lega* in the northern regions (where it was known as the 'Freedom Alliance').

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

Yet, if in aggregate the result suggested that something akin to an electoral earthquake had taken place, individual-level vote flows were considerably less dramatic; for 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 2 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.¹²

Table 2. Electoral flows 1992 - 1994

Vote March 1994	Vote April 1992			
	DC %	PDS %	Lega %	PSI %
Greens	2.3	3.9	1.9	3.8
<i>Lega</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
PS	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.

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 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 as explained below) or else, additionally, in terms of organization and personnel (the PPI, PS).

The behaviour of ex-PSI voters too, supports the general theme of continuity in electoral behaviour; for, the distribution of their votes was remarkably consistent with what was already known about the attitudes of PSI voters. Recent research¹³ 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: first, those (between 30 and 40% of the total) with sympathies towards the *Lega* and the traditional 'lay parties' of the centre; second, those (between 25 and 35%) animated by progressive ideals; and third, (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 2. 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 2 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.¹⁴ 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.

It can be argued, therefore, that in the 1994 election voters behaved largely as one would have expected them to. What was distinctive about the election was that the configuration of parties among which voters were expected to choose was different - not that there was an electoral revolution. 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 which 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.

ELEMENT THREE: THE RIGHT - HOW NEW AND HOW PERMANENT?

The emergence of a new and powerful right-wing politics is the most fundamental aspect of the apparent change in the party system. However, if one looks at its three main constituent elements one finds that, besides the right as a whole being far from united or coherent, the long-term prospects of each of them are open to question. Moreover, the claim to 'newness' of the most important party must be qualified by a number of similarities with the party it has effectively replaced (the DC). These points all raise questions about how much significance should be attributed to the decomposition of the party system.

Forza Italia: New Party or New DC?

One can identify four similarities between FI and the former DC. First, a central theme in *Forza Italia!* appeals is the need to prevent the left from taking power at all costs, and in order to stress the functional equivalence with the old DC, Silvio Berlusconi describes himself and his organisation as the champions of anti-communism. It may not be a coincidence, but rather the result of a subliminally-oriented strategy, that the *Forza Italia!* name was a 1987 DC electoral slogan.¹⁵

Second, it was not surprising, therefore, that at the general election, polling data suggested on the one hand, that FI had a higher proportion of 1992 Christian Democrats among its supporters than did the other major parties; and on the other hand, that movers from the DC were more likely to choose FI than were movers from most of the other 1992 contestants (see table 2). Like the old DC, FI relative to other parties had higher proportions of women and practicing Catholics among its electorate. Commentators also noted that FI's electorate, like that of the DC, was particularly heterogeneous in terms of its other social-background characteristics. So although the analogy must not be pushed too far, it is

possible to argue that FI has to a large extent taken over the electoral space once occupied by the DC and that this reflects the success of Berlusconi's movement in responding, through its principal campaign themes (anti-communism, reduced taxes, a million new jobs) to the demands of those anchored to the traditional values of family, market and church - something which bears testimony to FI's having also occupied the DC's political space.

Third, as the mainstay of the governing coalition until the end of the year, FI's role seemed strikingly similar to that played by the DC in coalitions of the past. As in the past, the lowest common denominator among the coalition partners was hostility to the forces of the left. The two 'wings' of the coalition (represented by Bossi on the one hand and Fini on the other) were split on two fundamental issues vital to their own identities: the unity and integrity of the nation-state, and levels of state intervention in society and in the economy. The centrality of FI to the coalition lay in the fact that it could agree with AN on the first issue and with the *Lega* on the second.

Finally, Berlusconi himself is no stranger to *partitocrazia* and its ways¹⁶ and once in office he became involved in a number of high-profile initiatives which, at least in terms of their outward appearances, brought to mind the old DC's desire to colonise the multifarious branches to the state.¹⁷ As leader of FI, Berlusconi, like a *capo corrente* (faction leader) within the old DC, exercises control of a personalized and charismatic type over his organisation.

Yet, if there is a clear dissimilarity between FI and the DC it may be in the former's staying power when contrasted with the latter's fifty-year electoral and political dominance, for the future of FI is by no means secure. Most observers agree that crucial to the March success of this formation had been Berlusconi's assiduous exploitation of the electronic media made possible by virtue of his ownership of Italy's three largest private television stations.

But if it is appropriate to regard Berlusconi as a 'political entrepreneur' attracting votes by means of astute marketing strategies, it is unlikely that such strategies will, on their own at least, prove as effective in any future contests; for, the most important reason why they were so successful in 1994 was that FI effectively had no past - which meant that voters were unable to judge it on the basis of any retrospective evaluations. Now, however, FI does have a past so that its prospects will depend not only on campaign resources and the skills of its image makers but also, and perhaps more so, on its policy performance - and on that score Berlusconi's government had to endure moments of intense and widespread criticism, as already noted above. In addition, FI suffers from the problem that it essentially lacks any identity that is separate from that of its leader, something that was widely suggested as an explanation for its poor showing at the local elections held at the end of November 1994.¹⁸ Since the party and its leader were so closely linked, both organizationally and in terms of image, when Silvio Berlusconi was not himself perceived to be in the running, FI's vote - so it was argued - would collapse (as had already been suggested by the results of regional elections held in June in Sicily and Sardinia).¹⁹ It does not seem an unreasonable conjecture that, in the long term, FI's survival as an autonomous entity is unlikely unless it can find more solid and enduring bases on which to attract and secure its supporters than the appeal of a single leader, Silvio Berlusconi.

The Lega: Uncertain Support, Uncertain Identity

The *Lega*'s position in the future party system is highly uncertain. Indeed, since its break with the Berlusconi government in late 1994 (which led to the latter's fall) and the split in its ranks it is difficult to place it precisely on the political spectrum. The *Lega*'s problems

after the election stemmed essentially from its 'bitter embrace' with FI. Although the election saw a considerable increase in the number of seats won by the *Lega*, it was apparent that there had been a considerable flow of votes from it to FI (table 2). On the one hand, Bossi benefitted from his alliance with Berlusconi (without which, given the degree of overlap in the nature of the two parties' appeals - novelty, opposition to *partitocrazia*, neo-liberalism, political renewal - he risked political annihilation); on the other hand, it was the very same alliance which explained the flow of votes itself. For, once Berlusconi had entered the fray, his agreement with the *Lega* - a new formation, untainted by association with the traditional political system - meant that these connotations were transmitted to his own movement.

The fact that Bossi so obviously owed a large part of his success to the agreement with Berlusconi placed him in a weak bargaining position after the election and his more-or-less constant 'sniping' both during and after the campaign showed that he was having to work hard to maintain the *Lega*'s separate identity. It is this risk of subordination that largely explains why Bossi withdrew from the governing coalition on 22 December. As far back as 19 June, Bossi had declared that the *Lega* had to 'break away from the stifling and deadly embrace of Berlusconi'; and during the autumn he had effectively announced that the *Lega* would withdraw its support from the coalition once parliamentary passage of the 1995 budget had been secured. Bossi also calculated that fresh elections (which would almost certainly have been highly damaging to the *Lega*) were unlikely so soon after the ones in March. Yet if in provoking the fall of Berlusconi's government, Bossi regained his party's autonomy and saved its separate identity, this was achieved only at the cost of considerable internal dissention and resignations at the highest levels. Indeed, throughout the period of Berlusconi's government, Bossi had claimed that the prime minister was attempting, surreptitiously, to encourage defections within the *Lega*'s ranks.²⁰

The *Lega*'s future therefore appears to be highly uncertain. For in addition to internal disaffection, Bossi also faces the problem that now that the old political class has been removed from power, the *Lega*'s most distinctive goal, regional autonomy, would no longer appear to be a salient issue even for northerners.²¹ There is also a problem of finding suitable electoral allies, for if Bossi has just burnt his bridges with the right, an alliance with the left would seem to run up against the problem of the *Lega*'s social base and of the ideological predilections of its members and supporters.²² Overall, the *Lega* would seem to find itself in a dilemma not dissimilar to that which confronted the PSI for most of its postwar existence: that it can only escape subordination to a giant on its right at the cost of subordination to a giant on its left and vice versa.

The National Alliance: Old Wine in a New Bottle?

During the Berlusconi government, AN attempted to build on its new-found legitimacy by acting as a particularly loyal coalition partner, and in September 1994, Gianfranco Fini announced an effective repudiation of his party's fascist past through a winding up of the neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI) that was sanctioned by a concluding conference held in January. This appeared to be popular.²³ On the other hand, AN's 'power base' (like that of the MSI before it) is decisively concentrated in the South - where it made by far its most striking gains at the election - and this is probably to be explained in terms of the greater propensity of electors here to support the notion of 'big government', particularly in the form of welfare provision. The MSI/AN has always largely eschewed the neo-liberalism espoused by Bossi and Berlusconi. It may be, then, that the southern voter's traditional demand for state protection that until recently had been addressed to the DC and its governing ally the PSI - both of which were strong in the south - has, with the demise of

these parties, transferred itself, in part at least, to AN. Whether AN will be tempted to follow in these parties' footsteps, and to consolidate its support on a clientelistic basis is, for the moment, an open question; but it may be that it faces a strategic dilemma here - as did the DC and the PSI in their day - in as much as the pursuit of clientele politics in the south tends to undermine the support of voters in other regions: such voters tend to be more 'issue-oriented' and sensitive to the potentially corrupting effects of clientele politics.

In short, the new right in Italian politics has so far failed to display the coherence or likely permanence necessary in order to be certain that it will become the cornerstone of a changed party system; moreover, each successive election result testifies to the essential volatility of its aggregate support. At local elections held in fifteen of the twenty Italian regions at the end of April 1995, for example, against all prognostications both FI and AN failed to do any more than hold the position they had won in 1994. Although comparisons with the results of previous elections are made difficult by the fluidity of party line-ups (for example, a part of the PPI, which in March had split in two, ran in tandem with FI at these elections) it is significant that at 36.5%, (and *despite* the support of a goodly proportion of the PPI) the combined FI-AN share of the vote was well down on the 43.1% which they obtained in the European elections just ten months previously. The *Lega* meanwhile declined to 6.4% from the 9.1% it had won in the fifteen regions in March 1994. It may be the case, therefore, that the new right decomposes as quickly as it emerged.

ELEMENT FOUR: AN END TO CLIENTELISM AND CORRUPTION?

The visible evidence of the removal of the old political class in 1994 was striking. Only a year before the election, no less than 325 members of parliament were under investigation

by the judiciary, while ministers and ex-ministers were daily seeing their careers dashed by arrival of the *avviso di garanzia*.²⁴ Three quarters of the candidates elected in 1994 had never sat in parliament before; they were on average considerably younger than members of the outgoing parliament; and the magistrates' 'Clean hands' anti-corruption drive initiated in February 1992, is continuing in its course (though not without conflict, a fact which is in itself a significant element of continuity with the past). Finally, there seems to be little doubt that the drive against the mafia and the camorra is being pursued seriously.²⁵

Yet, it is legitimate to ask to what extent this state of affairs is likely to represent a permanent change. Specifically, two qualifications should be made to the above scenario. First, the change that has taken place is essentially a change at the level of the political superstructure whereas clientelism is a particular kind of *social relation* characteristic of given socio-economic contexts. For example, in southern Italy, which remains much poorer than the other regions and where unemployment is much higher, the decline of agriculture but the lack of any corresponding industrial development has produced a multiplicity of social groups, the precariousness of whose security of employment has produced social disaggregation and the inhibition of an awareness of common and general interests. In such circumstances, a network of particularistic relationships involving the exchange of personalized benefits 'draws sustenance from the existence of differentiated social groups competing among themselves'.²⁶ Moreover, in such settings market transactions tend to be dominated by a high level of mutual mistrust and uncertainty, and the protection which would otherwise be offered by the state as a public good, tends to be either unavailable or inefficient.²⁷ As a consequence, organized crime tends to step in to fill the gap and to produce and to sell a market-traded good: private protection.²⁸ It is possible to argue therefore that clientelism and corruption are, as it were, 'built into' the social structures of

large sectors of Italian society itself, and that the optimism of those who see fundamental change in recent political developments fail to appreciate the degree of socio-economic and cultural change that will be necessary if new patterns of behaviour are to become permanent.

Second, as a consequence of this, it is possible to argue that there is implied in the view of the optimists an exaggeratedly voluntaristic understanding of clientelism and corruption, one which sees it as a simple consequence of the malevolence of the Christian Democrats and their allies; whereas, perhaps, the relationship should be seen as running in the opposite direction - in other words, that clientelism as a (pre-existing) type of social relationship would almost inevitably come to be a particularly salient feature of Christian Democracy as a political phenomenon especially given its long hold on office. If this line of reasoning is correct, then it will take much more than a change in the electoral system and a change of government to alter the typical patterns of behaviour of the political class - changes will have to be sociopolitical:

It cannot be otherwise because, willingly or unwillingly, to a greater or lesser degree (though the difference is very important) all the principal political and social actors have been involved in the degeneration of the old system and of the First Republic. That is to say that the much lauded distinction between politics and society... cannot be sustained.²⁹

CONCLUSION

The 1994 election did not represent a fundamental break with the most characteristic features of Italian politics. True, rapid change has taken place in party labels and in personnel - but

this is a superficial sort of change to say the least. In terms of what, presumably, matters to people - that the parties should provide effective and coherent governance - and at such deeper levels as the electoral behaviour of ordinary citizens, or clientelism and corruption as social phenomena, there is precious little evidence that very much has changed. What strikes one above all about recent developments in Italian politics is how little they have involved ordinary Italians: *mani pulite*, the demise of the old political class, the emergence of new political formations have been things that Italians have witnessed through their television screens. Therefore, if there has been an 'Italian revolution' it has at most been a 'palace revolution', while life outside the palace has gone on largely undisturbed. But even if judgements about their superficiality or otherwise are suspended, the recent party-system and other changes fail to add up to a 'watershed' even in their own terms. Any analysis of the key elements suggests that the degree of change in each of them must be qualified. Specifically, two of the elements - electoral behaviour and party-system change - mask significant degrees of continuity with the past; the other two - electoral-system change and the anti-corruption drive - may not have the effects that their protagonists hope for. In the light of what has happened since the 1994 election, it would seem that the latter's real significance is in bringing Italian politics back to a form of stalemate, in the sense that it has confirmed that party government in Italy is still not viable. Arguably, Italy's political transition is still underway; yet, if so, it is sustained by a technocratic government, and whether the transition could continue under party government remains uncertain.

NOTES

1. For details of these electoral changes see James L. Newell, 'Electoral Behaviour and Political Change: Recent Italian Elections in their Postwar Context', working paper of the European Studies Research Institute, University of Salford, (forthcoming).
2. 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.
3. The referenda movement achieved its first success in 1991 with a reduction in the number of preferences offered to voters at elections (commonly seen as a method of mafia manipulation).
4. For a detailed analysis see Martin J. Bull and James L. Newell, 'Italian Politics and the 1992 Elections: From Stable Instability to Instability and Change', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 46, no. 2, (April 1993), pp.203-27.
6. Besides requiring half a million signatures and the prior approval of the Constitutional Court, referenda may only strike down existing laws and not make new ones.
5. See James L. Newell and Martin J. Bull, 'The Italian Referenda of April 1993: Real Change at Last?', *West European Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 4, October 1993.
7. See David Hine, 'The New Italian Electoral System', *Association for the Study of Modern Italy Newsletter*, No. 24, Autumn 1993, pp.27-34.
8. David Hine, *Governing Italy: The Politics of Bargained Pluralism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
9. See the analysis and judgement of Gianfranco Pasquino and Salvatore Vassallo, 'Il governo di Carlo Azeglio Ciampi', in Carol Mershon and Gianfranco Pasquino, eds., *Politica in Italia. I fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni. Edizione 94.* (Bologna: Mulino,

1994).

10. Maurice Duverger, 'The influence of the Electoral System on Political Life', *International Social Science Bulletin*, vol. 3, no. 2, (1951), pp.314-352.
11. More importantly, it seemed that the alliance meant that Berlusconi's reassuring and moderate image was transmitted to the AN, something which made the party a realistic proposition for sections of the electorate that might otherwise have been frightened by its connections (real and imagined) with the country's fascist past.
12. Strictly speaking, table 1 does not show the current behaviour of 1992 supporters of these parties but 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.
13. 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.
14. Renato Mannheimer, 'La natura compositiva dell'elettorato leghista', in: Mannheimer and Sani (eds), op. cit., pp.119-148; Newell, op. cit.
15. Luciano Bardi, 'Party System Change and anti-Party Sentiment in Italy: Forza Italia, the Lega Nord and Other Things', paper presented at the workshop on Anti-party Sentiment of the Joint Sessions of Workshops of the ECPR, Madrid 17-22 April 1994.
16. Among other things, Berlusconi is a personal friend of ex-prime minister Bettino Craxi, sentenced to eight-and-a-half years' imprisonment in July 1994 for corruption, and who, in a famous episode in 1990, used his influence within the governing coalition to block proposed legislation unfavourable to Berlusconi's media interests.

A member of the masonic lodge P2, Berlusconi was the subject of judicial investigations from November 1994 in connection with bribes allegedly paid to government tax officials by his holding company Fininvest.

17. Of the many examples it is possible to mention, restrictions of space mean that the following will have to suffice. In early August the government was forced to withdraw the transmission of a series of 'information bulletins' on the grounds that they were a disguised form of government propaganda. In September, the appointment of new state-television programme-controllers and news editors provoked controversy because the appointees owe their jobs directly to Berlusconi. And on 20 October, fighting actually broke out in the Chamber of Deputies when Mauro Paissan, a deputy belonging to the Progressive Alliance, accused the government of using RAI's financial crisis to assert control over its affairs.
18. In elections held in some 240 communes and involving approximately 6% of the electorate, support for FI was 8.4% - as against the 21% it had won in March and the 30.6% it had obtained at the European elections in June.
19. Lucio Colletti, 'Ma le elezioni non le ha perse', *L'Espresso*, 2 December 1994, pp.54-6; Giorgio Battistini, 'Non e' per il doppio turno che il Polo perde pezzi', *La Repubblica*, 6 December 1994, p.8.
20. This claim was rendered all the more plausible by the sheer number of *Lega* deputies who owed their election precisely to the electoral alliance with FI. Defections from the *Lega* began to be noticed by the press at least as early as October (see Antonello Caporale, 'Il Carroccio perde i pezzi', *La Repubblica*, 20 October 1994, p.8.).
21. The grounds for this suggestion are that, as Mannheimer (op. cit.), Newell (op. cit.), and others have repeatedly stressed, regional autonomy was seen, both by members

and supporters of the *Lega* alike, as very much bound up with the desire to undermine the power of the *partitocrazia*, and therefore, more as a means to an end than as an end in itself.

22. Data on the ideological predilections of *Lega* members and supporters can be found in: Renato Mannheimer, 'Questions and Answers about the Northern League', in: Lieven de Winter, ed., *Non-state Wide Parties in Europe*, (Barcelona: Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials, 1994), pp.97-116, and in Mannheimer, in: Mannheimer and Sani, op. cit.
23. Fini called upon members to join AN of which the MSI was the largest component.
24. The term '*avviso di garanzia*' is difficult to translate, but it is the official notification that one is under investigation by the magistrates.
25. Gianfranco Pasquino and Carol Mershon, 'Introduzione', in Carol Mershon and Gianfranco Pasquino, eds., *Politica in Italia: i fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni*, 1994 edition, (Bologna: il Mulino, 1994), p.62.
26. Mario Caciagli, 'The Mass Clientelism Party and Conservative Politics: Christian Democracy in Southern Italy', in: Zig Layton-Henry ed., *Conservative Politics in Western Europe*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p.273.
27. Donatella della Porta and Alberto Vannucci, 'Mafia, politica e mercato negli scambi corrotti', in Mershon and Pasquino eds., op. cit., pp.211-231.
28. Diego Gambetta, *La mafia siciliana* (Torino: Einaudi, 1992).
29. Pasquino and Mershon, in: Mershon and Pasquino, op. cit., pp.66 (authors' translation).