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New Parties, New Media: Italy and the Internet

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1. Introduction

What effects is the internet having - or better, likely to have - on the intensity of inter-party competition? An answer to this question really requires an answer to two more specific questions, namely, 'To what degree is party competition on the net more intense as compared to the party competition that takes place in the more established arenas provided by the traditional media of communications?' and 'To what degree is party competition expanding onto the net?' On the assumption that an answer to the second question is best attempted after growing access has had a chance to reveal the full significance of the net as an arena of competition, this piece focuses on the first question (though we shall also offer *some* evidence relating to the second).

Though differing in their details, the broad conclusions of research carried out by Margolis (1998) and by Gibson and Ward (1997; 1998) suggest that the impact of the net is, and is likely to be, much smaller than popularly assumed. Yet we know that the impact of an independent variable often depends on the value of a third variable or 'interaction term' and it seems plausible to assume that the precise effects of the new technology will depend on the institutional and political contexts in which it is embedded. This naturally leads one to ask whether the conclusions that have been reached on the basis of research carried out in the Anglo-Saxon democracies hold up elsewhere. In the case of Italy, we have reason to think that this might not be the case.

The remainder of the paper is divided into five sections. The section following considers the theoretical and empirical context within which the present research is located while in the third section we provide background material on recent developments in the Italian party-political landscape. Section four describes our data and methodology; section five our findings; section six our conclusions.

2. Theoretical and empirical background

Ward and Gibson (1998) and others have highlighted at least four novel features of the internet as compared with the traditional communications technologies, namely: (1) a greater volume of information transmitted at (2) faster speed from (3) a wider range of information sources in a context of decentralised media ownership and of (4) the potential for interactivity and user control. These features give rise to the expectation of a significant impact of the new technology on party competition. For example, the greater volume of information that can be transmitted allows the targeting of specific groups of voters through narrow-casting - and if this might be expected to lead to heightened levels of competitiveness between the major parties as they vie with each other in their appeals to specific, key groups, the decentralisation of information control might be thought to provide an opportunity for minor parties to reach voters on a more equal footing: since the World Wide Web (WWW) gives everyone with a little technical know-how the means to present their wares to the world, so the barriers to attracting attention faced by the minor parties in the traditional media are overcome in the case of the net.

Empirical work in a number of countries has cast doubt on the expectation of heightened competitiveness, however. For the United States, Margolis *at al.* (1997) found that the costs involved in establishing and maintaining web sites, especially those of a more sophisticated kind, meant that the dominance of the large established parties in the traditional media was simply replicated on the WWW. In effect, what had happened was that just as commercial interests dominate the traditional media, so they had come to shape the evolution of the web - with the result that the major parties, (as the organisations best placed to maintain customised sites and to employ the services of the web professionals), by-and-large had the larger and more attractive web presence. This confirmed the so-called 'normalisation hypothesis': the expectation that as the net develops, the economic, political and social relations expressed by and through it come increasingly to resemble those of society at large. Margolis (1998) employed a range of indicators of the *relative prominence* of parties on the web and of the *relative sophistication* of their web sites. He found that the Republicans and Democrats had a larger number of first-level listings in Yahoo than other parties; their sites had a larger number of links from other sites, and their sites had a larger number of pages than the minor parties. Their sites were also more sophisticated: they had more graphics and were more likely to have things like search engines, 'chat rooms' and active graphics than were the sites of minor parties.

These findings were broadly replicated in the UK case.¹ There too the major parties had the largest numbers of links from other sites and, by-and-large, the largest numbers of pages on their sites. To a less unambiguous degree, the major parties' sites were also the more sophisticated. For example, both the Labour and Conservative parties' sites had search engines - but on the other hand, neither had active graphics as did some of the minor parties' sites, nor did they have 'chat rooms' unlike some of the minor parties (Margolis, 1998). Indeed Gibson and Ward (1998: 22) on the basis of their research went as far as to suggest that, '[d]espite the Margolis group's gloomy prediction ... the smaller parties are indeed holding their own in terms of their Web sites' appeal'

This, naturally, gives rise to the question of what it might be *about* the two polities, American and British, that explains the contrasting findings² - a question that can only be answered with any confidence on the basis of even more extensive cross-national research aimed at establishing the *conditions under which* expansion of the internet will lead to heightened inter-party competitiveness. This piece seeks to make a modest contribution to that endeavour by exploring the situation in Italy - a country whose political and institutional setting clearly contrasts quite radically with that of the aforementioned countries. My assumption is that significant differences in the parties' web presence and activities are likely to be found in the Italian case as compared to the British and American and that it is the differing institutional and political context that will explain this.

3. The Italian setting

The period of rapid growth and development of information and communications technologies (ICTs) has broadly coincided, in the Italian case, with a period of radical transformation of the entire party system itself. Between the end of World War Two and 1989, the cornerstone of Italian party politics had been the *conventio ad excludendum* or the agreement between the Christian Democrats (DC) and the parties in their orbit³ to exclude permanently from office the major party of opposition, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) because of its presumed anti-system nature. The fact that the other party of opposition was the Italian Social Movement (MSI) - a neo-fascist party and therefore one unable to work

¹ And see also Voerman (1998) on the Dutch case and Löfgren (1998) on Scandinavia.

² If contrasting they are: the methods used by Margolis and by Gibson and Ward do not overlap entirely.

³ These were: the *Partito Socialista Italiano* ('Italian Socialist Party', PSI); the *Partito Socialdemocratico Italiano* ('Italian Social Democratic Party', PSDI); the *Partito Repubblicano Italiano* ('Italian Republican Party'); the *Partito Liberale Italiano* ('Italian Liberal Party', PLI).

with the PCI in united opposition to the DC - meant that the latter was 'condemned' permanently to office as the mainstay of every possible governing coalition until its demise in 1992-3. Since 1989, when the collapse of the Berlin Wall led the PCI to transform itself into a non-communist party with a new name - the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) - the party system has been undergoing a lengthy process of decomposition and recomposition which most analysts would regard as not yet complete.

The most immediate consequence of the PCI's transformation was considerable internal turmoil leading to the emergence of a not insignificantly sized rival to its left - *Rifondazione Comunista* ('Communist Refoundation, RC) - made up principally of those PCI-die-hards who would not accept the change. If this created difficulties for the PDS, the turmoil also caused considerable difficulties for the DC and the other traditional parties of government a significant proportion of whose support had always rested on the appeal to anti-communism. Now that the principal party of the left had put communism so firmly behind it, the way was paved for the emergence and growth of new parties able to detach voters from their habitual loyalties to a set of governing parties which had so obviously abused their supporters' trust through their policy ineffectiveness and tolerance of widespread corruption but which were no longer able to rely on the traditional efficacy of anti-communism as a means of mobilising support. In the short term, the most significant of the new parties were the *Lega Nord* ('Northern League', LN) and the *Rete* ('Network').

The LN was a 'political entrepreneur' (Biorcio, 1997) combining populism and ethno-regionalism and owed its initial growth to the combination of disillusion with the governing parties and a deepening of the age-old disparities between North and South: taking advantage of the 'tax backlash' that developed as pressure grew to cut the large and growing budget deficits which the established parties nevertheless relied upon to maintain clientelistic practices in the South, the LN was able to mobilise support around the demand for autonomy for the richer North which, in the event that the League achieved its aims, would thereby be freed of its obligations to finance the corrupt and clientelistic activities of the parties while getting few effective public services in return (Newell, 1994). The *Rete* was an anti-*Mafia* movement that emerged from within the DC itself as the corrosive effects of clientelism on social solidarity began to manifest themselves in growing levels of violent crime based on the activities of the *Mafia* (Sicily), *Ndrangheta* (Calabria) and *Camorra* (Naples). Reflecting an eclectic mixture of Catholic, leftist and libertarian values, its principal purpose was to expose, and to campaign against, the influence of organised crime in public life.

Meanwhile, the end of the so-called 'communist threat' provoked change in the party system in another way: judicial investigations into political corruption

which exploded as the *Tangentopoli* ('Bribe City') scandal in 1992 were undoubtedly stimulated, in part, by the investigating magistrates' awareness that for the first time in 45 years, they could expose the misdeeds of the governing class without running the risk that in so doing they would enhance the likelihood of the Communists coming to power. The sheer scale of the corruption that was uncovered led to the eventual implosion of all the traditional parties of government. For the investigations eliminated major sources of funding by disrupting the illegal system of party financing associated with corruption. Organisationally, they fatally undermined the membership bases of the parties while creating divisions and splits among party leaders who sought desperately to find a way out of the crisis. Electorally, they led to unprecedented losses of voting support.

A third source of party-system change was the referendum movement which, since the late eighties, had been seeking to use the provision in the Italian constitution whereby proposals to strike down existing laws can be made the subject of referenda when backed by the signatures of half-a-million citizens. Spearheaded by the dissident Christian Democrat, Mario Segni, the movement sought change in the electoral system away from proportionality. This, it was hoped, would help to dislodge the governing class and end its abuses of power by making more likely the winning of absolute majorities by single political formations and thus, alternation in government. In April 1993, at the height of the *Tangentopoli* investigations, the movement won a resounding victory in a referendum whose effect was to introduce the single-member simple-plurality system for the distribution of three quarters of the seats in both houses of Parliament.

The referendum victory and the passage of new electoral legislation pointed to an early dissolution of Parliament and fresh elections; for by this time the *Tangentopoli* investigations had caught as many as a third of parliamentarians in their nets and thus thoroughly delegitimised the sitting legislature. The period between April 1993 and March 1994 when the elections eventually took place was therefore characterised by frenzied activity on the part of political forces old and new: on the part of the old to do whatever seemed necessary to minimise the electoral damage of *Tangentopoli*; on the part of both old and new to find allies through stand-down arrangements in the new single-member constituencies. By the beginning of 1994, the DC had split into four groups: Segni's Pact for National Renewal; the left-leaning Social Christians (C-S); a more conservative grouping, the Centre Christian Democrats (CCD); and the largest component, the Italian Popular Party (PPI). The PSI broke up into three groups; *Rinascita Socialista* ('Socialist Renewal', RS); the PSI (i.e. with the same name as the old party but a new symbol); and followers of the disgraced ex-leader, Bettino

Craxi, who eventually ended up in the embrace of the right-wing Freedom Alliance (see below). In the meantime, new umbrella-type organisations emerged to catch the fall-out from the implosion of the older formations. The most important of these were the Democratic Alliance (AD), the National Alliance (AN) and *Forza Italia* (FI). AD was launched in the Spring of 1993 and was designed to bring together all the progressive forces of the centre-left while refusing entry to parties as 'apparatuses' in their existing form. AN, on the other hand was formed in January 1994 with the decisive backing of the MSI which sought, thereby, to overcome its pariah status. *Forza Italia* was formed at the beginning of 1994 by the media magnate, Silvio Berlusconi, as a means of bringing together the forces of the right. Concentrating all its efforts on projecting itself as a modern organisation in which voters could have confidence as a force for political renewal, it deliberately avoided the mass-party format, presenting a 'party model' that was totally original: the *partito azienda* or 'business party'.

This varied constellation of forces eventually came together as three electoral alliances for the 1994 elections: the so-called 'Freedom Alliance' (which brought together FI, AN, LN the CCD and surviving Liberals in the *Unione di Centro* (UdC)); the centre-placed 'Pact for Italy' (bringing together Segni's Pact for National Renewal and the PPI); and finally, the 'Progressive Alliance', which consisted of eight formations: the PDS, PSI, RS, AD, RC, C-S, the *Rete* and the Greens.

Although the election was won by the 'Freedom Alliance' which thus went on to form a government under Silvio Berlusconi, this fact did not prevent further rapid evolution of the party system. For one thing, if the election had produced a clear winner, it was not the victory of a single formation, and Berlusconi's government in fact fell in December when the LN abandoned it. For another thing, the poor showing of the Pact for Italy confirmed that the attempt to field candidates lying in between powerful opponents to the left and to the right was, in a single-member, simple plurality context, likely to be an unproductive exercise. Not surprisingly therefore, the Pact broke up and in March 1995 the PPI split into two formations corresponding to the division of opinion in the party about whether it should seek to ally itself with the forces of the left or the right: those advocating the latter course joined the 'Freedom Alliance' as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU); those advocating the former retained the name PPI and joined the forces of the centre-left. In the meantime, the MSI had decided to consolidate its electoral gains through a repudiation of its fascist heritage and its complete dissolution into AN: this provoked the rightward split of the *Fiamma Tricolore* (Tricoloured Flame) consisting of those who would not accept this change. Finally, the centre-left underwent further evolution as the forces of the

defeated Progressive Alliance sought to reorganise themselves. This reorganisation resulted in the eventual formation of a new centre-left alliance, the Olive-Tree coalition under the leadership of the progressive ex-Christian Democrat, Romano Prodi.

In its final shape, the *Ulivo* was made up of four component parts, three of which contained within them several separate elements (see Figure 1). The largest component was the PDS-European left, consisting of the PDS and six tiny parties which were close to the PDS but unwilling to be completely absorbed by it: the *laburisti* (Labour), the United Communists (the product of a split in RC), C-S, the Social Democrats, *Unità riformista* (Reformist Unity) and the anti-Mafia *Rete*. The second component was based around the PPI and was known as the *Popolari*. In addition to the PPI, there was the Prodi Group, the *Unione Democratica* ('Democratic Union', UD) and the *Südtiroler Volkspartei* ('South Tyrolean People's Party'). The UD, moreover, was an alliance in itself, bringing together members of the old PLI, PSI and PRI. The third component was the *Lista Dini* ('Dini List'), which was made up of a small group based around the man who took over as prime minister from Berlusconi, Lamberto Dini, and whose formation was called *Rinnovamento Italiano*, ('Italian Renewal'); the *Socialisti Italiani* ('Italian Socialists' SI), official heirs of the PSI, and led by Enrico Boselli; the *Pattisti* (led by Mario Segni), and the Italian Democratic Movement (led by Sergio Berlinguer). The final component consisted of the Greens. RC was not included in the coalition, but stand-down arrangements were reached for the 1996 elections which gave RC a clear run at 27 seats in the Chamber and 17 in the Senate in return for not putting up candidates against the *Ulivo* in other constituencies.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Dini had succeeded Berlusconi as Prime Minister at the head of a non-party government of technocrats and he resigned in December 1995 having largely fulfilled the terms of his initial mandate. The failure of an attempt to form another non-party government led to the dissolution of Parliament and the calling of fresh elections for 21 April. Superficially at least, the victory of the *Ulivo* at these elections (see Table 1) appeared to herald the final transformation of Italian party politics: after years of 'blocked democracy' in which the centre had been 'condemned to office' by the illegitimacy of the left and the right poles, a new electoral system appeared to have ushered in an era of centripetal competition within a bipolar logic, and alternation in office appeared at last to have taken place (Newell, 1996). Nevertheless, the constellation of parties has continued to change. Since 1996, the most significant developments have been: the merger of

Spini's *laburisti*, Carniti's C-S, Crucianelli's United Communists and Bogi's left Republicans with the PDS to form a new democratic Socialist party, the *Democratici di Sinistra*, or 'Left Democrats' (DS). This took place in February 1998. March 1998 saw the birth of the *Unione Democratica per la Repubblica* around the ex-Christian Democratic president, Francesco Cossiga, and whose purpose appeared to be to attempt to rebuild the fortunes of the centre-right and to isolate the left by acting as a 'pole of attraction' for 'moderate' forces within the *Ulivo*. Finally, early May saw the coming together of three successor parties to the PSI - namely, Boselli's, SI, Schietroma's Social Democrats, and Intini's Socialist Party (SP). They formed the *Socialisti Democratici Italiani* ('Italian Democratic Socialists', SDI), aiming to reunite the heirs of the PSI within a single organisation of a weight sufficient to be able to engage profitably with D'Alema's DS.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

4. Data and methodology

Two types of data were gathered about parties' web sites in Italy. One was designed to measure the relative sophistication of their sites and was gathered using the web-site survey form developed by Gibson and Ward (1998) for their research into UK political parties and the internet. The form allows one to record the presence/absence of such features as e-mail contacts with local parties and MPs, search engines, electoral statistics and so forth, as well as to note any unusual features of sites such as the availability of audio-visual information. The second type of data was designed to provide information about the size and prominence of web sites and was gathered, following the suggestions of Margolis (1998), by making use of statistics given by Alexa PPC (<http://www.Alexa.com>), statistics which cover such matters as numbers of links into sites, number of pages making up sites and so forth. The web-site survey form was completed for twenty Italian parties between April and October 1998. The Alexa data were gathered in October 1998. My assumption is that if the web really does provide an arena where competition is more intense among Italian parties than among parties elsewhere, or more intense than the competition among Italian parties in other arenas, then these facts, if facts they are, will be reflected in the sophistication, size and prominence of Italian parties' sites relative to each other.

5. Hypotheses and findings

The above sketch of the recent evolution of the Italian party system gives rise to a number of expectations about the nature of the parties' web presence and activities. As our account suggests, the judicial typhoon which overtook the

previously established parties in the nineties and the heightened alienation and cynicism this has generated has created a context in which the connotations of novelty and political renewal have been at a premium. In such circumstances one would reasonably expect the parties to engage in a more intense exploitation of the capabilities of the internet than in other countries. Exploiting the internet to the full is one means – admittedly, not the most important, perhaps, but one means nevertheless – of trying to ensure that these connotations attach to one's own party.

Table 2 provides some (though hardly conclusive) evidence in support of the hypothesis. The table was drawn up in such a way as to allow direct comparison with the data provided by Gibson and Ward (1998) for UK parties. From our table we see that of the twenty Italian parties surveyed, eight (i.e. 40%) had moving icons; all had graphics; 65% had links to other sites, and 45% had pages targeted at specific groups (such as women, youth etc.) The corresponding percentages for Gibson and Ward's 28 UK parties are: 39%, 86%, 57% and 32%

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

As our account of the changes in Italian party politics also suggests, and as figures 2 and 3 confirm, there has been a considerable degree of fragmentation of the party system. For example, at the 1996 election, the three largest parties accounted for just 57% of the total votes cast – as compared to 75% at the election held almost a decade earlier. Meanwhile, the number of parties sending representatives to the Chamber of Deputies rose from 14 in 1987 to 24 in 1996. In a context such as the Italian, with a larger number of more evenly matched parties than in politics such as the American or British, there is likely to be a greater degree of similarity between parties in the sophistication of their web sites, this because the provision of a given feature (e.g. the provision of e-mail contacts) by some parties gives rise to the expectation that all parties will provide it. In other words, since the largest parties exercise less dominance in Italy than the largest parties in other politics, the remaining smaller parties have more to gain (more to lose) by providing (failing to provide) given web facilities than their fellow smaller parties have to gain (lose) in politics dominated by such giants as the Labour and Conservative parties, for example.

FIGURES 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE

Table 3 provides information designed to shed light on this issue. As the table shows, the five largest parties (which between them accounted for some three-quarters of the votes cast in 1996) have an average of 6.2 of the eight

features listed (namely, moving icons, graphics, links to other sites, pages targeted at specific groups, a search engine, sound or video, an on-line application form, an on-line petition). The sites of the remaining fifteen parties (between them accounting for about the remaining quarter of the votes cast in 1996) had an average of 2.8 features apiece, or about half the number of features offered by the sites of the largest parties. However, it should not be forgotten that the web site of the LN, a relatively small party with 10% of the vote, was much more sophisticated than the site offered by AN, a party half as large again; and one of the most sophisticated sites was the one offered by the *Lista Pannella* - a tiny party which failed to win any Chamber-of-Deputies seats at all in the 1996 election. Uniquely, this site provided a forum allowing visitors to post messages and articles - even ones critical of the party - as well as to respond to previously placed messages.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

But perhaps the clearest indication of the importance of political and institutional context in mediating the effects of the new technology is provided when one considers the differences within the category of the smaller parties. These fall into two reasonably distinct groups: on the one hand, there is the group of pro-system parties whose sites offer an average of 2.2 of the eight features; and on the other hand, a group of what one might call 'new-politics' and 'anti-system' parties whose sites offer an average of 3.6 features, i.e. almost twice as many. The sites of the parties belonging to the first of these groups tend to be very simple, with a high proportion of pages 'under construction' and clearly 'top-down' in conception. The sites of the parties belonging to the second group, by contrast, reveal much more than a desire to use the web as an additional means of disseminating information: rather, these parties seem genuinely concerned to exploit the specificities of the technology for definite political purposes. A good example of this was provided by the *Patto* whose site clearly reflected the fact that it had become a party of notables which wanted to act as a spearhead for its leader Segni's demand for constitutional change through the establishment of a Constituent Assembly: its site provided leaflets, petitions and other material for the user to download and print off for local campaigning activity in support of this demand.

But perhaps the most ingenious example of this type of approach was given by the *Lista Pannella* web site: its 'cyberdemocracy' page invites the user to sign a number of fully drafted Bills which it intends to present to the Italian parliament. In doing so it is taking advantage of the provision in the Italian constitution whereby proposed laws can be presented to Parliament not only by

parliamentarians, but also by groups of citizens when the proposed laws in question are backed by 50,000 signatures. Indeed it is interesting to note that close on half of *all* the party sites surveyed provided some kind of on-line petition and it would be useful to have comparative data on this feature from other countries - for it may reflect the further institutional peculiarity of Italy mentioned above, namely, that referenda can be requested to strike down existing laws when backed by the names of at least half a million citizens. Such referenda (of which there have been 21 since the first one held in 1974) have been especially numerous in recent years so it is not unreasonable to think that they may become an institutional vehicle which allows the more radical visions of the future impact of ICTs on the conduct of democratic politics to become a reality.

Of course the extent to which such a scenario comes to pass will depend on the pace and the nature of change in the significance of the web as an arena for political activity - something which in its turn will be closely related to the numbers and characteristics of users. Estimates of the number of people on line in Italy in the first half of 1998 ranged from 1.2 to 4.1 % of the population - figures which compare with estimates of between 2.0 and 9.0 % for the UK, for example (http://www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online/europe.html): see Figure 4. The 'typical' Italian Web user appears to be a male aged between 26 and 35, with a secondary-school education but not a degree, one who is most likely to be a white-collar employee or self-employed professional rather than a manager or blue-collar worker.⁴ The audience to which the parties can appeal via the Web thus appears as yet to have a rather restricted profile, not to mention a rather limited overall size, even as compared to other European countries. If this is surprising given the usually rather high rates of ownership of high-technology consumer durables among Italians, it may reflect what are probably very high telephone costs in Italy as compared to many other European countries (<http://www.nua.ie/>).

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Notwithstanding this, numbers of web users appear to be rising rapidly - one estimate put the numbers of respondents saying they had used the internet at least once at over 5,200,000 in the Spring of 1998 - up from 1,300,000 a year earlier (<http://www.alchera.it>) - and it seems reasonable to think that when it comes to finding *novel* ways of exploiting the Web for political purposes, citizens of the country that numbers Machiavelli and Gramsci among its illustrious

⁴ See the research carried out by Giovanni Montana, some of the results of which are reported at: <http://www.infostat.mediatel.it/profilo.htm>

political thinkers are likely to be among the first to do so. A recent example of this came to light as I was perusing the web pages of 'Nua Internet Surveys' (<http://www.nua.ie/>) while carrying out the research for this piece:

Oct 27 1998: The profile of the Internet in Italy was raised last week as protesters mounted a Web demonstration to express their dissatisfaction with the increase in local telephone rates. Telecom Italia had announced plans to increase local telephone charges. The protesters repeatedly downloaded information from the Telecom Italia web site, rendering it impossible for other users to access the site. The stunt had the desired effect, attracting the attention of the national media in Italy.

Yet such stories in many ways beg the question: if the Margolis 'normalisation hypothesis' applies as much to Italy as it seems to do for some other countries, then stunts such as this may merely reflect a more general inability for minority groups - in the present case, parties - to gain prominence on the web as compared to larger rivals. A look at the first-level listings to party web-sites in Yahoo, Agora and Dada, however, suggested a situation of substantial equality. In the case of Yahoo (Figure 5), for instance, no party has more than three sites listed and indeed quite unknown parties (e.g. *Federazione Monarchica Italiana*) are often listed before some of the largest (e.g. *Partito Democratico della Sinistra*). Agora (Figure 6), places the better known parties in a box near the top of the screen, but these are all given the same prominence regardless of size. Dada (Figure 7), lists all parties alphabetically.

FIGURES 5, 6 AND 7 ABOUT HERE

However, such listings may provide a misleading indicator of the relative prominence of parties insofar as we do not know how many people actually use these indices. It could be that most people come across party sites while browsing for something else, rather than using an index specifically to look for them. In this case, the number of links to party sites is likely to provide a rather better measure of prominence (Margolis, 1998). To obtain such a measure, we used the Alexa statistics to draw up Table 4. The figures in the first column do show that the larger parties have among the larger numbers of links leading to them from other sites (over 300 apiece and almost 2,000 in the case of the NL), yet there does not appear to be much in the way of an association between size and number of links *overall*: the CDU, for example, a tiny party, has three times the number of links leading to it as AN and RC, both larger parties. As a check on this impression, we calculated the correlation coefficient, r , between numbers of links and party size measured in terms of number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies.

Doing so resulted in a value for r of 0.4 - suggesting that no more than 16% of the variance in numbers of links to parties' web sites could be explained by the sizes of those parties. An even more striking picture emerged when we instead measured prominence in terms of numbers of pages (column 2 of Table 4) and compared this with party size: doing so resulted in a correlation that was for all practical purposes zero ($r = -0.0057$). Finally, on the principle that the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the most robust measure of prominence might be thought to be given by the amount of web traffic parties' sites were able to attract. Unfortunately, the measure used by Alexa is unable to discriminate successfully between the parties, perhaps because the categories it uses are too broad: all but one were classed as attracting 'Moderate Traffic'. Still, it is interesting to note that the one party that attracted more than this was RC, a 'far left' party with only 8.6% of the vote (Table 1).

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Conclusions

Hypotheses about the egalitarian implications of the web, do then find some support in the Italian case, whereas the normalisation hypothesis, predicting a reflection, on the web, of the distribution of power between parties apparent in other arenas, finds little evidence to back it. We have found evidence to support the suggestion that in Italy, party competition on the web, measured in terms of both the relative sophistication and the relative prominence of parties' web sites, *is* more intense than elsewhere. This seems at least in part to be explicable in terms of the specificities of the Italian political and institutional context, especially the fallout from the collapse of the old party system and the constitutional arrangements providing for citizen involvement in referenda and legislative initiatives - each of which perhaps encourage relatively minor parties to be more active on the web than they might otherwise be expected to be. So it is interesting to ponder on the implications of the findings for that brand of speculative thinking which is concerned to theorise about the system-level implications of the new technology. At an impressionistic level, a walk through the centre of any of the major Italian cities with their mushrooming 'cyber caffés' will itself suggest much. If, with Mulgan (1994: 18), we should expect 'a shift towards electronic forms of decision-making' with 'a greater mix of formal representative structures and direct democracy, through referenda and polls', then there is a fair chance that Italy will be one of the first countries to display such trends.

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Table 1. Chamber of Deputies and Senate Elections, 1996

Chamber

	Votes		Proportional	Segment	Seats		Proportional	Segment	Total	
	Majoritarian	Segment			Majoritarian	Segment			No.	%
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<i>PDS-Sin. Eur.</i>			7,897,044	21.1						
PDS					124	26.1	24	15.5	148	23.5
<i>Com. Unitari</i>					6	1.3	2	1.3	8	1.3
<i>Cristiani Soc.</i>					4	0.8	0	0.0	4	0.6
<i>Laburisti</i>					6	1.3	0	0.0	6	1.0
<i>La Rete</i>					5	1.1			5	0.8
<i>P. Sardo d'Az.</i>			37,974	0.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<i>Verdi</i>			937,684	2.5	15	3.2	0	0.0	15	2.4
Pop.-SVP-PRI-UD-Prodi			2,555,082	6.8						
PPI					58	12.2	3	1.9	61	9.7
UD					5	1.1	1	0.6	6	1.0
PRI					2	0.4	0	0.0	2	0.3
<i>L. Dini-Rinnov. Ital.</i>			1,627,191	4.3						
<i>Lista Dini</i>					8	1.7	2	1.3	10	1.6
<i>Patto Segni</i>					6	1.3	2	1.3	8	1.3
<i>Socialisti Ital.</i>					3	0.6	4	2.6	7	1.1
<i>MID</i>					1	0.2	0	0.0	1	0.2
<i>Ulivo Indep.</i>					4	0.8	0	0.0	4	0.6
<i>Ulivo Total</i>	15,762,460	42.3	13,054,975	34.8	247	52.0	38	24.5	285	45.2
<i>Progressisti 1996</i>	982,248	2.6	3,215,960	8.6	15	3.2	20	12.9	35	5.6
<i>Rif. Com.</i>	17,996	0.0			0	0.0			0	0.0
<i>Ulivo + Rif.</i>										
<i>Com. Total</i>	16,762,704	44.9	16,270,935	43.4	262	55.2	58	37.4	320	50.8
<i>CCD-CDU</i>			2,190,019	5.8						
CCD					13	2.7	6	3.9	19	3.0
CDU					5	1.1	6	3.9	11	1.7
<i>Forza Italia</i>			7,715,342	20.6						
<i>Forza Italia</i>					81	17.1	37	23.9	118	18.7
<i>Fed. Liberali</i>					4	0.8	0	0.0	4	0.6
<i>Part. Fed.</i>					1	0.2	0	0.0	1	0.2
<i>All. Nazionale</i>			5,875,391	15.7	65	13.7	28	18.1	93	14.8
<i>Polo per le Libertà Total</i>	15,027,275	40.3	15,780,752	42.1	169	35.6	77	49.7	246	39.0

Table 1. Chamber of Deputies and Senate Elections, 1996 (continued)

Chamber	Votes		Proportional		Seats		Proportional		Total	
	Majoritarian	%	Segment	%	Majoritarian	%	Segment	%	No.	%
	Segment		No.		Segment		No.			
	No.		No.		No.		No.		No.	
<i>L. Pannella-Sgarbi (LP)</i>	74,314	0.2	701,033	1.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<i>Polo + LP Total</i>	15,101,589	40.5	16,481,785	44.0	169	35.6	77	49.7	246	39.0
<i>Lega</i>	4,038,511	10.8	3,777,786	10.1	39	8.2	20	12.9	59	9.4
<i>SVP</i>	156,973	0.4			3	0.6	0	0.0	3	0.5
<i>Lega d'Az Mer.</i>	82,279	0.2	72,152	0.1	1	0.2	0	0.0	1	0.2
<i>PVA</i>	37,428	0.1			1	0.2			1	0.2
<i>MSFT</i>	633,385	1.7	338,721	0.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<i>Others</i>	491,264	1.3	553,586	1.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	37,304,133	100	37,494,965	100	475	100	155	100	630	100
Senate										
	Votes				Seats		Proportional		Total	
	No.	%			Uninominal		No.	%	No.	%
					No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<i>PDS</i>					77	33.2	11	13.3	88	27.9
<i>Comunisti Unitari</i>					0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<i>Cristiani Sociali</i>					3	1.3	0	0.0	3	1.0
<i>Laburisti</i>					2	0.9	1	1.2	3	1.0
<i>La Rete</i>					1	0.4	0	0.0	1	0.3
<i>Lega Autonomista Veneta</i>					1	0.4	0	0.0	1	0.3
<i>Partito Sardo d'Azione</i>					1	0.4	0	0.0	1	0.3
<i>Verdi</i>					14	6.0	0	0.0	14	4.4
<i>PPI</i>					22	9.5	5	6.0	27	8.6
<i>Unione Democratica</i>					1	0.4	0	0.0	1	0.3
<i>PRI</i>					0	0.0	2	2.4	2	0.6
<i>Lista Dini</i>					3	1.3	1	1.2	4	1.3
<i>Socialisti Italiani</i>					4	1.7	1	1.2	5	1.6
<i>Patto Segni</i>					1	0.4	0	0.0	1	0.3
<i>MID</i>					1	0.4	0	0.0	1	0.3
<i>Ulivo Independents</i>					2	0.9	2	2.4	4	1.3
Ulivo Total	13,448,392	41.2			133	57.3	23	27.7	156	49.5

Table 1. Chamber of Deputies and Senate Elections, 1996 (continued)

Senate

<i>Progressisti 1996</i>	940,980	2.9	11	4.7	0	0.0	11	3.5
<i>Rif. Comunista</i>	5,682	0.0	0	0.0	-	-	0	0.0
<i>Ulivo + Rif. Com.</i>								
Total	14,395,054	44.1	144	62.1	23	27.7	167	53.0
<i>CCD</i>			8	3.4	7	8.4	15	4.8
<i>CDU</i>			7	3.0	3	3.6	10	3.2
<i>Forza Italia</i>			23	9.9	24	28.9	47	14.9
<i>Federalisti Liberali</i>			0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<i>Partito Federalista</i>			1	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.3
<i>Alleanza Nazionale</i>			28	12.1	15	18.1	43	13.7
<i>Polo per le Libertà</i>								
Total	12,187,498	37.3	67	28.9	49	59.0	116	36.8
<i>Lista Pannella-Sgarbi (LP)</i>	511,689	1.6	0	0.0	1	1.2	1	0.3
<i>Polo+LP Total</i>	12,699,187	38.9	67	28.9	50	60.2	117	37.1
<i>Lega</i>	3,394,527	10.4	18	7.8	9	10.8	27	8.6
<i>L'Abete-SVP-PATT</i>	178,415	0.5	2	0.9	0	0.0	2	0.6
<i>Pour Vallée d'Aoste</i>	29,536	0.1	1	0.4	-	-	1	0.3
<i>MSFT</i>	748,759	2.3	0	0.0	1	1.2	1	0.3
<i>Others</i>	1,191,117	3.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	32,636,595	100	232	100	83	100	315	100

Source: Chiaramonte, 1997, pp.41-1, Tables 2.4 and 2.5.

Table 2 Design of Italian parties' web sites

Party	Moving icons	Graphics	Links to other sites	Targeted pages (youth etc.)
Fiamma	X	X		X
AN	X	X	X	
FI	X	X	X	X
Liberali	X	X		
Lega	X	X	X	X
CCD		X		X
CDU		X	X	
Dini		X	X	
Patto		X		
PPI	X	X	X	
PRI		X		
UV	X	X	X	
Laburisti		X	X	
SDI		X		X
Pannella	X	X	X	
Verdi		X	X	X
DS		X	X	X
Rete		X		
C. Unitari		X	X	X
RC		X	X	X
Totals	8 (40%)	20 (100%)	13 (65%)	9 (45%)

Table 3 Sophistication of Italian parties' web sites

Party	Moving icons	Graphics	Links	Targetted pages	Search engine	Sound or video	On-line app. form	On-line petition
-------	-----------------	----------	-------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------	----------------------	---------------------

Larger parties:

DS		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
FI	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
AN	X	X	X		X			X
Lega	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
RC		X	X	X				

Smaller parties:

'New politics'/'anti-system' parties:

Fiamma	X	X		X				X
Patto		X					X	X
Pannella	X	X	X		X	X		X
Verdi		X	X	X	X			
Rete		X						
C. Unitari		X	X	X				X

'Pro-system' parties:

Liberali	X	X						
CCD		X		X				
CDU		X	X					
Dini		X	X				X	
PPI	X	X	X					
PRI		X						
UV	X	X	X					
Laburisti		X	X					
SDI		X		X				

Table 4 Prominence of Italian parties' web sites

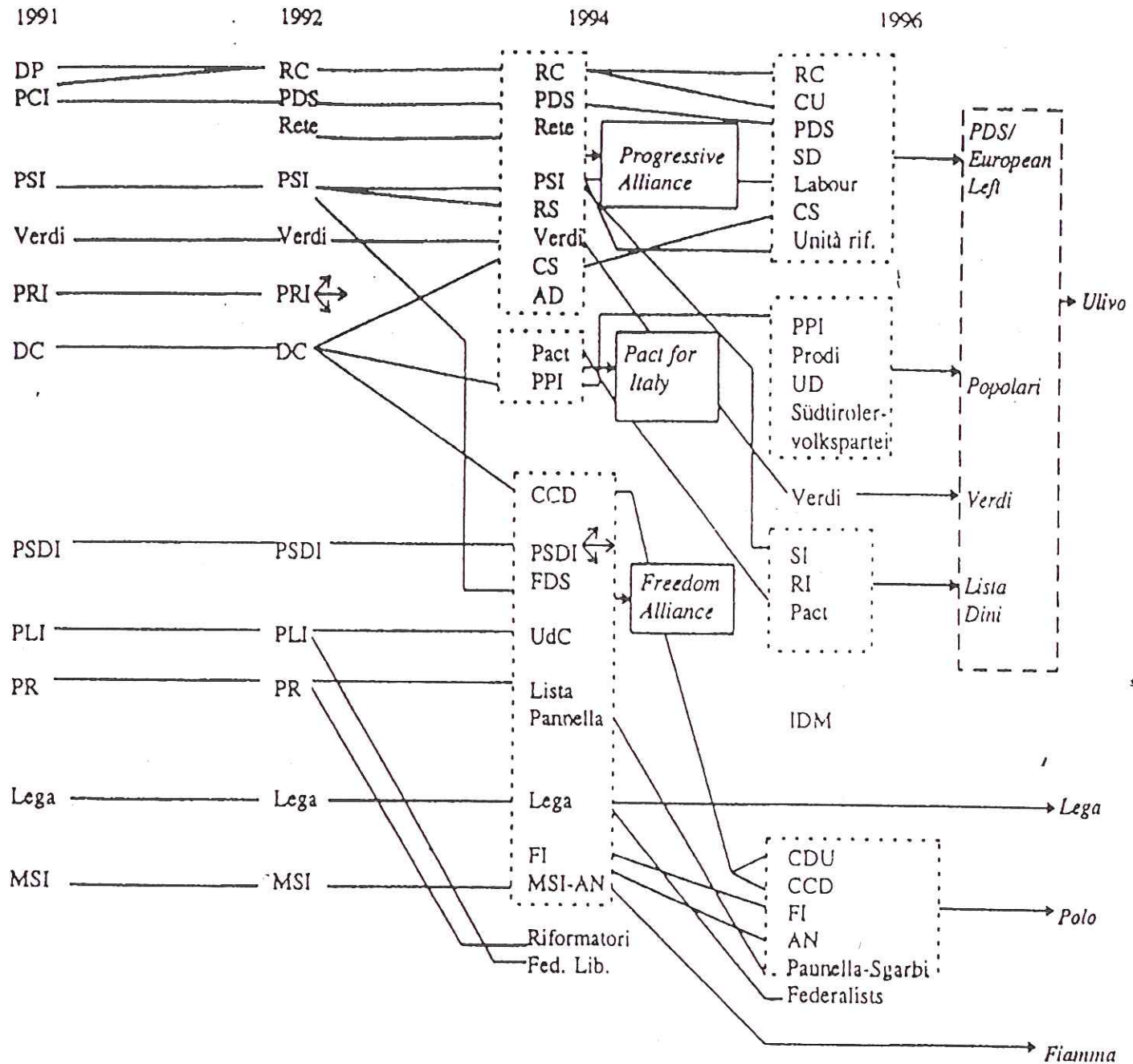
Party	Links in	Pages	Ratings
Larger parties:			
DS	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
FI	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
AN	311	70	Moderate Traffic
Lega	1,942	>1,000	Moderate Traffic
RC	338	139	Top 100,000
Smaller parties:			
<i>'New politics'/'anti-system' parties:</i>			
Fiamma	6	23	Moderate Traffic
Patto	41	37	Moderate Traffic
Pannella	327	457	Moderate Traffic
Verdi	51	266	Moderate Traffic
Rete	n.a.	n.a.	Moderate Traffic
C. Unitari	3	n.a.	Moderate Traffic
<i>'Pro-system' parties:</i>			
Liberali	n.a.	n.a.	Moderate Traffic
CCD	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
CDU	976	>1,000	Moderate Traffic
Dini	65	26	Moderate Traffic
PPI	312	44	Moderate Traffic
PRI	288	n.a.	Moderate Traffic
UV			
Laburisti	28	n.a.	Moderate Traffic
SDI	n.a.	n.a.	Moderate Traffic

Notes:

- 'Links in' = the number of different web pages that link to the particular web site
 'Pages' = the no. of web pages on the site
 'Ratings' = the amount of traffic to the site (based on hit counts recorded from various caches on the Internet backbone by all web users). Categories are 'Top 10', 'Top 1,000', 'Top 100,000', 'Moderate Traffic'

EVOLUTION OF THE MAIN PARTY ORGANISATIONS AND ALLIANCES 1991-96

FIGURE 1



Key: DP = Proletarian Democracy; PCI = Italian Communist Party; PSI = Italian Socialist Party; Verdi = Greens; PRI = Italian Republican Party; DC = Christian Democrats; PSDI = Italian Social Democratic Party; PLI = Italian Liberal Party; PR = Radical Party; Lega = Northern League; MSI = Italian Social Movement; RC = Communist Refoundation; PDS = Democratic Party of the Left; Rete = Network; CS = Social Christians; AD = Democratic Alliance; Pact = Pact for National Renewal; PPI = Italian Popular Party; CCD = Centre Christian Democrats; FDS = Democratic Socialist Federation; UdC = Union of the Centre; Lista Pannella = Pannella List; FI = Forza Italia!; AN = National Alliance; Riformatori = Reformists; Fed. Lib. = Liberal Federation; CU = United Communists; SD = Social Democrats; Unità rif. = Reformist unity; UD = Democratic Union; Südtiroler-volkspartei = South Tyrolean People's Party; SI = Italian Socialists; RI = Italian Renewal; IDM = Italian Democratic Movement; CDU = Christian Democratic Union; Fiamma = Tricoloured Flame.

Figure 2 Valid votes (%) received by parties at the general election of 1987 (Chamber of Deputies)

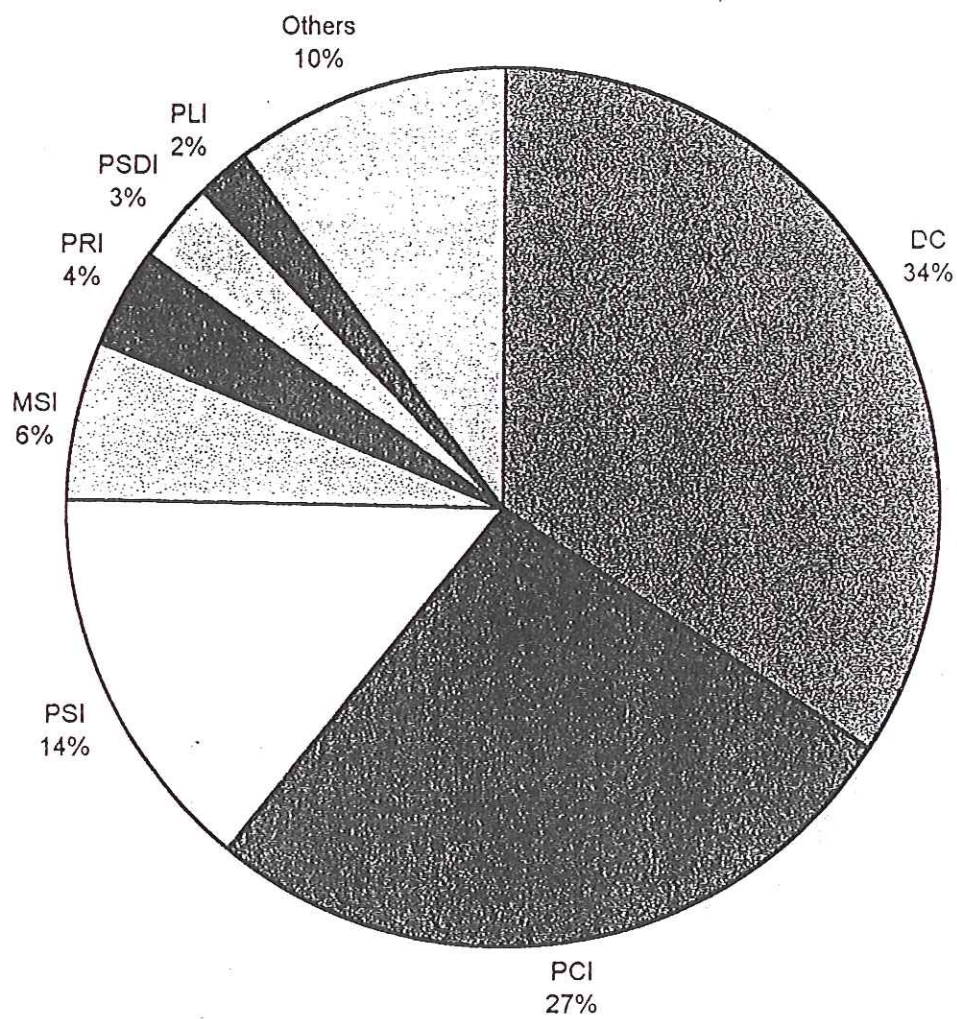


Figure 3 Valid votes (%) received by lists at the general election of 1996 (Chamber of Deputies proportional segment)

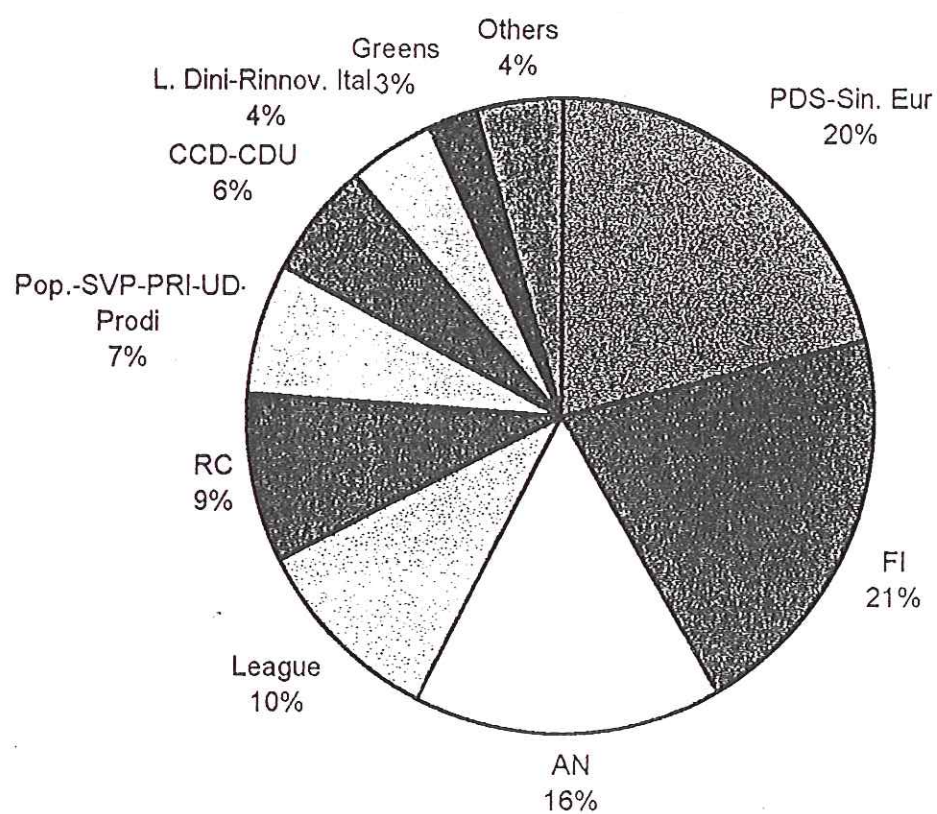


Figure 4 : Population percentages on line 1997/98

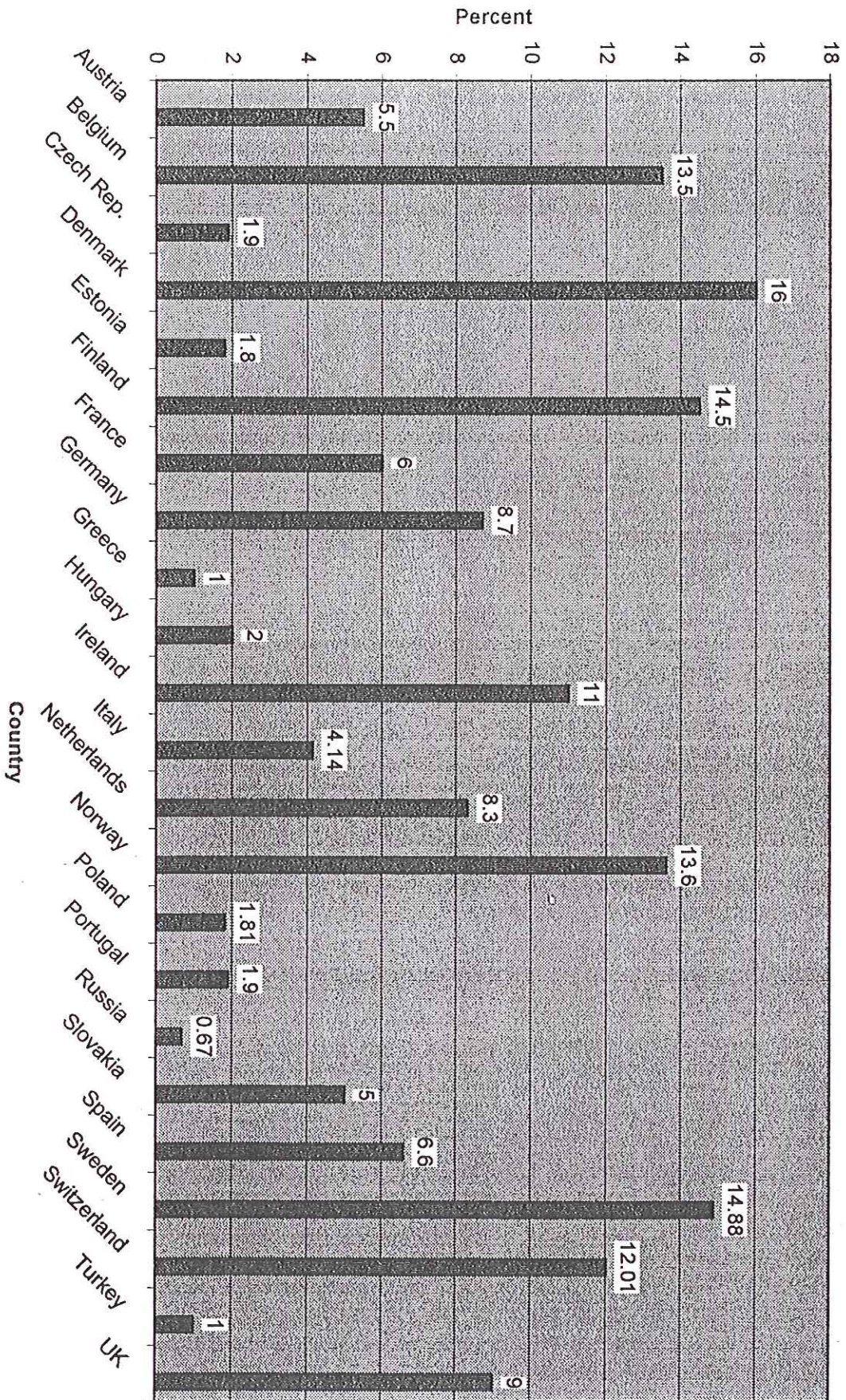


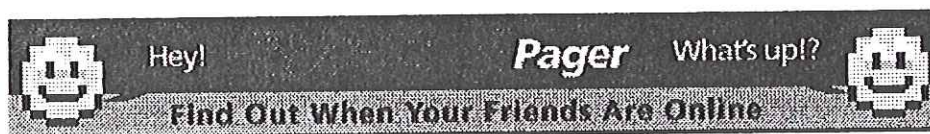
FIGURE 5

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Parties and Groups



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 - [Lega Nord \[official\]](#)
 - [P.A.S. - Partito di Azione per lo Sviluppo](#) - non e' un partito di destra, ne' di sinistra, ne' di centro, perche' la destra erra nel privilegiare l'individuo, la sinistra...
 - [Partito Democratico della Sinistra \(3\)](#)
 - [Piazza Pulita](#) - Il programma del movimento politico Piazza Pulita.
 - [Presidenzialisti, Federalisti e Riformisti](#)
 - [Riforme e Libertà](#) - political group which advocates free market politics and liberal democracy; (in Italian).
 - [Rinnovamento Italiano](#)
 - [Web Directory: Partiti Politici Italiani](#)

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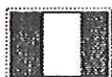


FIGURE 6

Italy (1:5 Parties)

Last updated: October 30, 1998

ORGANIZATIONS

GOVERNMENTS

ELECTIONS

MEDIA

- The Constitution

- La Costituzione

- Parliamentary elections in Italy Wilfried Derksen

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- Partiti (Virgilio)

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- Forum della Politica Dada Net

- Politèia Sito politico di Enrico Barsanti

- La destra in Italia A directory of Italian Conservative Resources on the Web

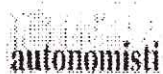


- Federalisti Liberali (Lombardia)

- Federazione dei Liberali



- Union Valdôtaine



- Autonomisti Mouvement politique valdôtain



- Comitato Rutelli



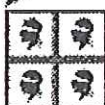
- L'Italia dei Valori Movimento politico fondato da Antonio Di Pietro



- Südtiroler Volkspartei - SVP



- Union für Südtirol



- Partito Sardo d'Azione

FIGURE 6 (CONT.)



Unione Nord Est Gruppo consiliare della Regione Veneto



Partito Umanista

• Il Partito Umanista

• Segreteria romana del Partito Umanista



Movimento Monarchico Italiano



Alleanza Nazionale Monarchica



Movimento Fascismo e Libertà



IRENET - Italia Federale (Irene Pivetti) Federal Italy



Lega Sud



Due Sicilie - Movimento per l'Autonomia delle Due Sicilie nell'Unione Europea
The Two Sicilies: The old Independent State of southern Italy



Partito dell'onestà Honesty Party

• Alleanza Dio e Popolo Partito Etico Politico (Alliance God and the People)



Libera Roma



Cattolici Padani Famiglia e Società

• Destra Riformista



Back to Europe



UNITA' DI MISURA

Un cronografo per il popolo di Internet



FIGURE 7

WeB oN

D@d@



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- partiti politici italiani

siti di politica italiana



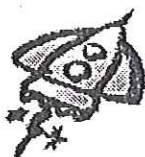
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Ministeri della Repubblica Italiana
I siti ufficiali di Camera e Senato
Dal Ministero degli Interni i risultati elettorali in diretta
La Costituzione Italiana!
Di Pietro si - Di Pietro no

CENTRO
INTERNAZIONALE
CONGRESSI
FIRENZE

partiti italiani



Alleanza Nazionale
Alleanza Nazionale Toscana
Centro Cristiano Democratico
Comintrnet
Comunisti Unitari
Cristiani Democratici Uniti
Destra riformista
 - Federazione dei Circoli Presidenzialisti, Federalisti e Riformisti
Destra riformista
 - Circolo Daniele Manin - Venezia Centro.
Federazione Laburista
Federazione dei Liberali
Forza Italia
Club Forza Italia Mino da Fiesole
Gruppo Parlamentare Progressisti-Federativo della Camera
Il Partito dell'Onestà
La Rete



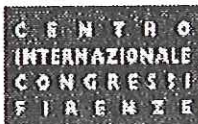
dove ti

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dEstino

!?

FIGURE 7 (CONT.)

Lega NordLega Nord PiemonteLega Nord BergamoMovimento d'Azione Giustizia e LibertàMovimento dei Democratici e dei Socialisti per la Sinistra Riformista- Circolo Mitterand di PalermoPannella-RiformatoriPartito Democratico della SinistraPartito Democratico della Sinistra di Pontassieve (Fi)PDS - Unione Comunale di Settimo TorinesePartito UmanistaPRI - AvezzanoPopolariRadical PartyRifondazione ComunistaRifondazione Comunista di Pianura (Napoli)Riforme e LibertàRinnovamento ItalianoRomAutonomiaSocialisti ItalianiL'Ulivodove tiUnion für SüdtirolpOrt@ildEstino!?

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