

IPALMO



Institute for the Relations between Italy and the Countries of Africa, Latin America, Middle and Far East

**BUILDING CAPACITIES OF PARLIAMENTARY INSTITUTIONS AND
PROMOTING CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES
AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

Pilot Phase

IRAQ – JORDAN – LEBANON

[The Representative Function of the Italian Parliament and its
Relations with Constituencies](#)

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The Representative Function of the Italian Parliament and its Relations with Constituencies

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INTRODUCTION

The present session of the POGAR-IPALMO project aims at offering a qualitative assessment report on the nature and the various dimensions of the representative function of the Italian Parliament. Instead of studying the electoral rules and procedures (this topic deserves a separate analysis¹), the emphasis has been put on the following issues:

1. The nature of representation (the extent to which MPs respond to concerns and requests forwarded by individuals, the liberal principle of national representation versus the role played by the parties, the phenomenon of transfughism, MPs' motivations);
2. The players in parliamentary life (characteristics of the different party systems, political profile of the parties, role played by the parliamentary groups, function of the permanent committees);
3. Issues covered by requests and concerns that are forwarded by citizens and adopted by MPs (issues that most interest electors, reforms adopted, incorporation of citizens' requests in the legislative process);
4. Challenges and opportunities (anti-politics and information technology).

The Italian democracy has often been depicted as a 'democracy without government' [Allum 1973 and Cassese 1981] and this has made the role of the legislature even more crucial in the basic functioning of democracy. But is the Italian Parliament representative enough?

¹ The choice about the best electoral system depends on the preferences of two dimensions: representativeness and governability. [Ottone, S., Ponzano, F., Ricciuti, R. 2007]

CHAPTER 1 – THE NATURE OF REPRESENTATION

There is a consensus on considering a parliamentary deputy as someone who has been elected and not as someone who receives instructions from the electors. But which among the contrasting loyalties of MPs is the most important one? The one towards the party? Is it correct to give up personal conviction and the representation of electors' interests in the name of party efficiency? Is it true that MPs tend to represent personal interests, party interests or the very specific interests of well-organized electors without listening to the voices of the constituency and the entire nation? What are the motivations of MPs? Money?

As for the question of what MPs' main task is, Burke's answer is: to be in synchrony with the electors and with public opinion. According to Sieyès their duty is to act as a single collective entity and to represent the nation and not the electors [Sieyès 1993]. Kelsen as well stresses that since the MP is not "constrained by the law to satisfy the desire of the constituent", he/she as a definition does not represent the elector [Kelsen 1966].

Considering parliament simply as one of the several organs of the state, like the government or the tribunal, Schumpeter claims that the idea according to which people delegate their powers and their representation to the parliament is without sense [Schumpeter 1964]. If for Kelsen the problem seemed to be resolvable thanks to the parties, which create horizontal and vertical links among shared interests and opinions guaranteeing some sort of balance among politically weak and strong subjects, for Schumpeter there is no remedy. According to him, democracy is little more than an illusion and parties do not serve much.

The Phenomenon of Transfugism in Italy: Who Do MPs Represent?

One of the phenomena that clearly indicates the critical side of the Italian political and constitutional system is parliamentary transfugism: the shift in the course of the legislature of MPs from a parliamentary group or party to another.

It is not a recent phenomenon. In the past however the ideological ties and the sense of loyalty were so strong that the MPs' decisions to abandon their groups were rare events and meant in most cases a 'political suicide'. Dissent existed within a group but it could be manifested through secret voting.

Transfugism has assumed huge dimensions both quantitatively (the number of MPs involved) and qualitatively (effects on the political arena and the stability of the executive branch) in the recent legislatures. There are several causes. Some of them are political: change in the party orientation (MPs could say in these cases: "it is not me but the party that changed its mind"), breakup of a party or end

of a coalition, priority given to electors' interests and not to those of the party (MPs could explain this way: "I think that I will better represent the interests of those who elected me to this party"), crumbling of political order in the first part of the 90s and the slow consolidation of the current political order, etc. Others are subjective and concern the personality, the political culture and the sense of responsibility of MPs towards the party: political career aspirations (reelection, new position in the public sphere), personal disagreement with the party on material and economic benefits, etc. Juridical rules also play an important role.

In the X. Legislature, 7% of MPs changed parliamentary group (1.5 changes/month); in the XI, 4% of MPs (2 changes/month); in the XII, 18% of MPs (10.6 changes/month); in the XIII, 23% (7.5 changes/month) and in the XIV, 2% (0.8 change/month) of MPs². But are the Italian electors and the MPs satisfied with the consequences of the traditional constitutional principles of national representation like the prohibition of peremptory mandate?

Out of 100 citizens interviewed in a survey, 26 answered that politicians should make decisions on the basis of their knowledge and only after checking electors' feedback, while 71 said that they should gather information on citizens' preferences and then act in accordance. Politicians however think the opposite way: 51 of them said that they should decide on their own, while 46 would first ask the voters [LAPS 2007]. To test the opinions of the two coalitions' electors and politicians see Table 1.

² Verzichelli, L. *Il sistema politico italiano 2006-2007 (3) Crisi e transizione nell'Italia degli anni '90. Dalla Repubblica dei partiti all'alternanza bipolare*, www.gips.unisi.it/circafile_download/158

Table 1. – Politicians’ strategy

	Electors of centre left	Electors of centre right ³	Politicians of centre left	Politicians of centre right
Politicians should make decisions on the basis of their knowledge and only after checking electors’ feedback	27	26	47	56
Politicians should gather information on citizens’ preferences and then act in accordance	70	72	48	44
Does not know	3	1	5	0
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Laps (2007)

Initiatives connected strictly to one’s own constituency indicate either the aspiration of the deputy to be re-elected or a major ‘responsibility’ towards one’s electors. In theory, MPs should legislate without constraints posed by their constituencies. But what happens in Italy? The notion of constituency service – MPs’ commitment to the problems and concerns of constituents - in our country is less relevant than in the US Congress or in the British Parliament.

Territorial issues however do matter. In the ‘First Republic’ the large diffusion of the preference vote was an indicator of the salience of territorial consensus. The territorial linkage of MPs varies from one party to another, from one region to another. The importance of the local preference vote was a key to establishing strategic links between national leaders able to deliver the required policy outputs and the local leaders who could mobilize the preferences of the voters.

The introduction of the mixed-plurality system did partially change the relationship between representatives and voters, between national and local politicians. A number of MPs tried to organize the relationship with voters (establishing a local office and promoting civic associations with the aim of keeping the voters united), but the adoption of the new proportional system is proof that these constituency-oriented representatives were very limited in number or in their political weight.

³ Error in the original version (total 99 not 100)

Today, MPs elected in constituencies of the centre and northwest do not attribute special interest to their constituencies while those of the northeast, south and the isles present respectively 7, 2 and 3 % more drafts that interest their constituencies. If one is elected in a constituency different from his/her place of residency or birth (13 and 23% of MPs), the attention given to the constituency is less relevant [Gagliarducci, Nannicini, Naticchion 2006]⁴.

In the modern pluralist democracies, the relationship between electors and MPs, which constitutes the heart of political representation, depends first of all on the capacity of parties to mediate between society and state. But what prevails in political representation: MPs' total autonomy or their relationship with the electors? What is the effect of political parties' mediation on this relationship? Is it correct to consider an MP as a bus driver who should not be contacted by passengers (electors) who have bought their tickets (voted) even if he decides to change route or destination or to abandon the vehicle [Curreri 2004, 24]? In a democratic system based on popular sovereignty, what value do the traditional liberal principles of national representation (for example the prohibition of peremptory mandate foreseen by Art. 67 of the Constitution) have? Is the phenomenon of parliamentary mobility consistent with the political representation, the role of parties and finally with democracy? Does MPs excessive autonomy risk transforming into the cause of the denial of political representation?

On the one hand, there is no doubt that MPs can represent the general interest of the nation and the entire collectivity only if they free themselves from the specific instructions that originate from the electors and the party. On the other hand, the major part of the electors consider the swing of an MP from a parliamentary group or from a coalition to another as deceiving their will and interests.

The phenomenon of parliamentary transfugism shows the serious consequences that a certain perception of free parliamentary mandate can cause on representativeness and on political responsibility (not to mention the consequences on the capacity of the executive branch to govern). Different measures have been introduced in other European democratic systems to face challenges posed by transfugism and hence to protect political harmony between electors and representatives: those of conventional nature (resignation of "deserter MP" as a must of constitutional correctness) and those of juridical nature that foresee the loss of mandate (due to electors' initiative – recall, or in case of resignation or expulsion from the party). In Italy as well, MPs should rethink the principles of political representation in order to adopt them to the goals and general interests that are foreseen by the Constitution and to the new challenges of democracy in the XXI century.

In modern democracies, the liberty of mandate of an MP is considered a fundamental right even if the role played by parties as tools through which citizens exercise their sovereignty in a permanent way is not questioned. MPs represent the whole nation and not those who elected them, hence they cannot support ties in their mandate.

⁴ The legislatures analysed by the authors are the following ones: XII (1994-96), XIII (1996-2001) XIV (2001-06).

In Italy however, there is a contrast between the constitutional perception of the prohibition of peremptory mandate and the interests of the parties which in order to carry out their policies tend to transform the parliamentary mandate in party mandate using parliamentary groups as instruments that transmit their will in the parliament. In other words, the Italian political system foresees two principles which are incompatible with each other: on the one hand, it acknowledges the role played by the party associations through which citizens determine the national policy (Art. 49 of the Constitution); on the other hand, it maintains the prohibition of peremptory mandate (Art. 67).

While apparently the prohibition of peremptory mandate remained unchanged in Italy as time passed, in reality it adapted itself to the new requests and circumstances and assumed diverse meanings in function of the different forms of state and the theories on political representation that were connected to them.

In the liberal state (from 1861 until 1922), the prohibition of peremptory mandate referred to a parliamentary context which was not familiar with the party mediation and in which MPs were in direct contact with their electors (because of a restrained right to vote). The possibility to pursue their interests and not the general interest was guaranteed to them. Today the prohibition of peremptory mandate has a different meaning and it has more to do with the parties than with the electors and the interest groups. Its function consists of permitting MPs to vote and express themselves also in contrast with the directives of the party, impeding that the relationship between the party and the MP assume juridical relevance or that it be reflected on the position of the MP.

The birth of political mass parties and the introduction of universal suffrage indicate the shift from a liberal mono-class state, based on national or state sovereignty, to a democratic multi-class state, based on the principle of popular sovereignty. Finding themselves between representatives and electors and guided by a common political vision, parties transform the meaning of these two terms and the relationship that exists between them.

On the one hand, electors who vote on the basis of different visions of general interests that are elaborated by the parties do not interact individually with the MPs; rather they let them decide what is better for all. In a certain sense, electors have to "think politically", harmonize and transcend their own specific interests with the general interests of the whole community (as they are synthesized by the parties). On the other hand, MPs, besides interpreting and representing without restraints the will of the nation (something ineffable), also have to pursue the vision of the general interests of the party in which they were elected candidates.

Hence in our country we pass from the liberal parliamentary representation to the democratic one in which MPs are responsible to electors and to the party for their activities. Parties have succeeded in creating on the social level that synthesis of demands and interests which in the liberal era was achieved through the parliamentary discussion of MPs.

This way the individual representation has become a collective one in the sense that the elector is represented not only and not that much by the MP, but first of all by the party of which the MP is member and for which the elector voted. Electors do not vote for a candidate independently of his/her party (personal vote) or for a party because it candidates a certain person (candidate-oriented vote) but for that party (party-oriented vote) whose political program they prefer. That way there is no direct relation between electors and MPs without considering the political parties, so as there is no relationship between electors and political parties without considering MPs. There is a *continuum* among electors, MPs and parties. Hence the way a party represents electors who voted for its candidate so as MPs represent electors who voted for their party (and not only the party that was voted for by electors).

When voting for a candidate, electors do not only designate a person for a parliamentary position so that he can decide freely on their behalf, rather they express their consent on the political program of the party of the candidate so that he/she may put it into practice.

Though the Italian Constitution foresees contemporarily the liberal principle of national representation and the fundamental role played by parties in the democracy, it does not mean that MPs should interpret and freely represent the ineffable will of the nation due to their 'superior capacity'. Instead, they are elected to pursue the partial vision of the general interests of the party in which they were elected candidates and to do so they have to liberate themselves from the specific interests of electors, but not from those of the parties that synthesize and express general interests.

Continuing to demand the complete liberty of mandate of MPs in regards to electors and the party means remaining anchored to the liberal vision of representation, which is unacceptable in the modern *Parteienstaat*.

[MPs' Motivations](#)

The majority of Italian electors interviewed in a survey sustain that young people decide to join a party in order to build their careers and only every fifth person thinks that the reason is to contribute to the collective good. On the other hand, politicians are more optimistic and most of them are convinced that the goal is to contribute to the collective good or to feel part of a group, while only a few think that it has to do with career [LAPS 2007]. To examine the opinions of the two coalitions' electors and politicians see Table 2.

Table 2. - The reasons why a young man/woman would join a political party

	Electors of centre-left coalition	Electors of centre- right coalition	Politicians of centre -left coalition	Politicians of centre -right coalition ⁵
To build career	50	49	13	18
To feel part of a group	19	21	34	44
To contribute to the collective good	26	19	46	33
Does not know	5	11	7	4
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Laps (2007)

To decide whether MPs in Italy are more willing to follow personal interests or to maximize the collective good, the number of legislative proposals and the change in MPs' parliamentary allowance could be useful indicators as well. Out of 1,867 deputies of the previous three legislatures, MPs younger than 40 years old presented 19% more legislative proposals in each legislative session, while those older than 60 presented 33% less. Considering the type of previous occupation, professional politicians presented 19% less drafts, entrepreneurs 12% less, lawyers and magistrates 17% more (probably due to their better competence in legislative techniques) than the average [Gagliarducci, Nannicini, Naticchion 2006].

With regards to the level of salaries (See Table 3.) during the XIII. and XIV. Legislatures, medium gross income increased by an average 69% (by 165% for employees and by 151% for teachers) but significantly also in the case of professionals (151%) and entrepreneurs (77%). Since conflicts of interest cannot be excluded, transparency should be further increased (by raising awareness of MPs' activities and of the increase of their salaries) in order to enhance the quality of selection and the control of MPs by electors [Ibidem].

⁵ Error in the original version (total 99 not 100)

Table 3. - The mechanism of salaries

Profession	XIII. and XIV. Legislatures Average increase of salary (%)
Lawyer	50,8
High position in PA	62,5
High managerial position	65,6
High political position	102,4
Journalist	77,0
Employee	165,1
Entrepreneur	76,7
Teacher	150,5
Free professionals	150,6
Magistrate	51,8
Doctor	65,8
University professor or researcher	25,9
Member of trade union	173,1
Total	69,3

Source: Gagliarducci, S., Nannicini, T., Naticchion, P. (2006)

According to the authors of the most successful best seller in Italy, *La Casta*, Italian politicians constitute a Caste that “has invaded the whole Italian society (...) setting for itself less and less the objective of pursuing the common good and of good government so that it can chase the goal of feeding itself” [Rizzo and Stella 2007, 7]. As Table 4. shows MPs today earn almost eight times as much as their colleagues did after the Second World War (even though the price of bread, calculating always in 2006 euros, has changed only slightly).

Table 4. – Change in MPs' parliamentary allowance from 1948 until today

	Total parliamentary allowance/ month	Cost of 1kg bread
1948-49	1.964	1.76
1953-54	3.440	1.76
1958-59	3.818	1.54
1963-64	4.868	1.45
1966	7.002	1.41
1973	6.190	1.38
1978	4.879	1.43
1981	7.187	1.61
1986	7.756	1.53
1991	13.484	1.56
1996	12.755	2.25
2001	13.810	2.69
2006	15.706	2.86

Source: Rizzo and Stella (2007)

The last electoral reform according to Ilvo Diamanti “has fed even more the party factionalism, by reducing a big part of the parties in oligarchies of power.” [Ivi., 7] According to him, the parties of today are worse than those of the ‘First Republic’ because “with some exceptions they do not live a democratic life. They do not promote participation. They are oligarchies. Personal parties. Without society and territory. Having fun in TV saloons.” [Ivi., 17]. We can conclude confirming the affirmation of the founder of the journal “La Repubblica”, Eugenio Scalfari, according to whom the political class in Italy is like a “rotten mirror” which instead of reassuming the society, crumbles it even more.

CHAPTER 2 – THE PLAYERS IN PARLIAMENTARY LIFE

Party System

The presence of the strongest communist party of Western Europe in a permanent opposition role, the permanence of the Christian Democratic Party in a government position for more than 45 years, the weakness of the Socialist parties, the fragmentation of the party system, the high level of ideological distance between its extreme forces, the penetration of parties in society and economy, etc. are some of the interesting features that make the study of the Italian party system particularly intriguing.

The following different political systems have characterized our country since its foundation:

1. Period of restricted suffrage (1861-1913) – parties were like loosely connected cliques of notables, only the Socialist Party (founded in 1892) functioned as a mass party;
2. Period of extension of suffrage 1919-1922 – establishment of proportional system, emergence of the 2nd mass party (Christian Democratic *Partito Popolare*) plus several weakly organized notable parties and independent personalities;
3. Democratic interruption (fascist parenthesis);
4. *Partitocrazia* (1945-1992)⁶ – ‘polarized multipartism’⁷: with the existence of two anti-system parties (*Partito Comunista* and *Movimento Sociale Italiano*) and the presence of three poles (left, centre, right) the governing coalitions were always formed around the centre pole and opposition was bilateral. The competition was centrifugal rather than centripetal, the democratic centre was under pressure and the opposition – with no chance of access to government – was irresponsible⁸;
5. ‘Second Republic’ (after 1994⁹) – three poles: left (post-communist party), centre pole (post-Christian Democratic party, new party of Segni), right pole (*Forza Italia*, the *Lega*, *Alleanza Nazionale*, CCD)¹⁰.

⁶ The ‘First Republic’ can be divided into two phases: 1953-76 (growing concentration of the votes on the two main parties: Christian Democratic Party and Italian Communist Party) and 1976-92 (decreasing role of the two parties).

⁷ Expression of Giovanni Sartori

⁸ Cleavage lines: communism-anticommunism, clerical-anticlerical plus territorial variations (Christian Democratic Democracy was popular in Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli, part of Piedmont and in Abruzzo, Sicily, Puglia, Basilicata; Italian Communist Party in red regions of Emilia, Tuscany and Umbria).

⁹ In less than two years after (1992-1994) the main actors of the ‘First Republic’ either disappeared or underwent deep transformations. The death of the Christian Democratic Party paved the way for the Northern League and hence for the fracture between centre and periphery. The birth of *Forza Italia* meant that some social groups decided to enter directly into the political arena instead of delegating their representation to others.

¹⁰ Mr. Berlusconi’s victory meant the first defeat of the centre.

The slow structural change in the Italian party system in the 'Second Republic' saw the transformation of the *Progressisti* and of the *Polo Libertà* respectively into the *Unione* and the *Casa delle Libertà* (See Table 5). Anti-system parties ceased to exist but the fragmentation of the Italian party system remained high (higher than in the 'First Republic'): in the 2006 elections (organised on the basis of the new electoral law which was adopted in 2005 and foresaw a proportional system) 12 lists received seats and 13 groups entered the Parliament.

In order to summarise the main characteristics of the current political system, we can make the following (incomplete) list: predominance of the bipolar shape: two large alliances compete against each other at the elections (the centre can not succeed electorally), high level of fragmentation and relative weakness of the two large parties (they never ran alone in the majoritarian competition).

However, in the analysis of the current political system, two levels have to be considered separately: the level of parties and that of the coalitions. While on the level of parties, the fragmentation increased, on the level of coalitions, the political landscape remained strong and the choice of the Italian citizens became significantly simplified. Coalitions' lives even today continue to be hard because of the internal tensions regarding the question of leadership and the definition of the program platforms (both coalitions are formed by parties with very different ideological traditions).

Table 5. – The slow transformation of the party system (1994-2006)

1994	1996	2001	2006
Progressisti (RC-PDS-V-RETE-SI-AD)	RC+Ulivo (PDS-V-PPI-SI-RI)	RC Ulivo (PDCI-DS-V-SDI-M)	Unione (RC-PDCI-DS-V-ICV-M-RNP-UDEUR)
Patto per l'Italia (PPI-PS)	LN	IDV DE Bonino	
Polo Libertà (FI-LN-CCD) Polo Buongoverno (FI-CCD-AN)	Polo Libertà (FI-CCD-CDU-AN) MSI/FT	Casa delle Libertà (FI-LN-UDC-AN)	Casa delle Libertà (FI-CCD-CDU-AN-NPSI-PRI-MSFT-AS)

Source: Verzichelli L. (2006)¹¹

Today the two opposing coalitions - the ruling left-of-centre *Unione* and the right-of-centre *Casa delle Libertà* are led respectively by Mr. Prodi and Mr. Berlusconi.

The left-of-centre *Unione*, which won the April 2006 election, is comprised of about ten parties: those that were part of the *Ulivo* alliance (created by Mr. Prodi in February 1995 to combine moderate leftist and centrist forces¹²), and the far-left *Partito della rifondazione comunista* (PRC), which caused the collapse of the centre-left *Ulivo* government (winner of the 1996 general election) in 1998. In April

¹¹ Verzichelli L. (2006), *Sistema Politico Italiano 2006-2007(3), Crisi e transizione nell'Italia degli anni '90. Dalla Repubblica dei partiti alla alternanza bipolare*, www.gips.unisi.it/circa/p/file_download/158

¹² It included the DS, the *Partito popolare italiano* (PPI—now part of DL), the Greens, and several smaller groups.

Formattato: Francese (Francia)

2006, when the *Democratici di sinistra* (DS) and *Democrazia è libertà* (DL) formed a joint *Ulivo* list for the Chamber of Deputies, but ran separately for the Senate, the *Unione* defeated the *Casa* coalition.

The DL has a reformist, centrist wing faction in favor of privatization and liberalization, and a smaller, traditionally minded group that opposes the reduction of the role of the state in the economy. The reformist faction prevailed in November 2001 and Piero Fassino took the position of Walter Veltroni as head of the party. The DL (known as the *Margherita* - Daisy), currently led by Mr. Rutelli, was formed by four centrist parties as an electoral sub-alliance of the *Ulivo* ahead of the May 2001 election. Its largest constituent party was the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (PPI), which had its origins in the disbanded *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC).

Partito della rifondazione comunista (PRC) was created by the far-left minority of the former Communist Party in 1990. It captured 5.8% of the vote in the 2006 election, and its then leader, Fausto Bertinotti, was elected speaker of the Chamber of Deputies (the new party leader is Franco Giordano). *Partito dei comunisti italiani* (PDCI) founded by Armando Cossutta (and led by Oliviero Diliberto since 2000), consists of a splinter group of the PRC that opposed the PRC's decision to withdraw support from the Prodi government in October 1998. *I Verdi* (The Greens), under the leadership of Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio since 2001, have shifted further to the left. In the April 2006 general election, the party ran separately for the Chamber of Deputies and formed an alliance with the hard-left PDCI for the Senate.

Casa delle libertà (The Casa) was an alliance (*Polo delle libertà*) created by Mr. Berlusconi in January 1994 to contest the general election held in that year. Its core components are *Forza Italia* (by far the largest party both in the coalition and in the parliament); *Alleanza nazionale* (AN); the *Lega Nord*; and the *Unione democratico-cristiana e di centro* (UDC).

Forza Italia (formed by Mr. Berlusconi in 1994) rapidly became one of Italy's two biggest parties. It won 29.5% in the 2001 election, as a result of the growing popularity of Mr. Berlusconi and the strengthening of its organisational structure. Mr. Berlusconi's group, Fininvest, controls three national television channels and a major advertising agency.

Alleanza nazionale (AN) led by Mr. Fini, is the successor party of the neo-fascist *Movimento sociale italiano* (MSI). It has succeeded in benefiting from the vacuum created by the decline of Christian democracy, marginalizing extreme elements and in becoming a moderate party of the right. While the party officially renounced its statist heritage and supports market economy and privatization, illiberal tendencies still remain. *Lega Nord* (led by Mr. Bossi) originated from regional movements which had been formed to protest against political corruption and the channeling of tax revenue from the wealthy, industrialized north of the country to the underdeveloped south. Shifting towards the far right on issues such as immigration and becoming increasingly eurosceptic, it renounced the goal of secession in favor of devolution of greater powers to the regions. After forming an alliance with the other parties of the

Casa in early 2000, in June 2006 it suffered a major setback from the rejection of its devolution. *Unione democratico-cristiana e di centro* (UDC) was formed in April 2002 by three small parties that place Roman Catholic values at the centre of their program. They claim to be the true heir of the disbanded and discredited *Democrazia Cristiana*. The UDC has been led by Lorenzo Cesa since the end of 2005, but the main figure in the party is Pierferdinando Casini, who was speaker of the Chamber of Deputies in the last parliament.

The Italian party system is living a period of significant changes. The poor individual performances of the DL and DS in April 2006 elections have pushed the two parties towards the idea of creating a single centre-left party before the 2009 European Parliament elections in order to reduce fragmentation and strengthen the moderate reformist faction vis-à-vis the hard left. Events accelerated after the May 2007 local elections and in October 2007 when anyone willing to pay a euro could take part at the primaries (3.5 million Italians did) of the *Partito democratico*. Promising a “new season”, a “new force” with a “new language”, Mr. Veltroni won 76% of the votes.

The centre-right leader, who according to Angelo Panebianco is “the most mysterious man of the Italian politics” [Panebianco 2007,1], did not waste time and on November 18th in a Milan piazza, where his followers were collecting signatures for a petition calling for the ouster of Romano Prodi's centre-left government, declared that he was creating a new party, the *Partito del Popolo della Libertà* with the objective of building a ‘common house’ and not a condominium. As a survey undertaken by Unicab for “Panorama” shows, 69.2% of centre-right (CR) electors and 10.4% of centre-left (CL) electors appreciate the idea [Sechi 2007,45]. While 45.1% of CR electors (and 47.1 of CL electors) think that the new party's main policies should concern citizens' safety and legality, 40.5% of CR electors (26.1% of CL) believe that reducing taxes should be the priority and only 14.4% (26.8 of CL) consider the institutional reforms as an important issue to deal with.

As Mr. Berlusconi declared in an interview, the new party has to be a grassroots movement because “it has to belong to the people without the filters of old politics. Because it will be a popular party in the furrow of democracy and liberty in Europe” [Belpietro 2007,55]. “It was necessary,” explains the leader, “that somebody would leave the palace of politics and get in synchrony with the people in order to give breath and hope in a democracy that is caged by the old oligarchies. (...) the Second Republic ... is dying a prisoner of the bipolarism of the paralyzing veto of microparties' forced alliances (...). In 1994, *Forza Italia* was a response to a democratic emergency, today the *Partito del popolo della libertà* is an answer for those who can't help it any more... If we turn over the pyramid of power saying that first comes citizens' power and then that of those who represent them, it is not an attack against democracy. But its reinforcement” [Ivi.,57]. “The new party,” concludes Berlusconi, “will achieve its goal if it brings into politics new players that come from the world of work, professions, education and entrepreneurship [Ivi.,60].

Meanwhile "The Economist" suspects that "Mr. Berlusconi, once a political outsider himself, plans to fight the next election as representative of a new "anti-politics". That would not be easy if he were linked to old school, professional politicians such as Gianfranco Fini of the National Alliance or Pier Ferdinando Casini, a Christian Democrat."¹³

As Piero Ostellino affirmed, both Veltroni and Berlusconi have decided to get rid of their "war coalition" and to create alliances after the elections on the basis of commonly agreed objectives in order to avoid becoming the victims of the small parties [Ostellino 2007,1]. Hence it is logical that the interests of the two big parties coincide and that they are not compatible with those of the small ones. But will the creation of the two new parties and its consequences mean the end of bipolarism (as Berlusconi affirmed)? According to Giovanni Sartori, bipolarism is a typical characteristic of the European democracies independently of their electoral systems. If the majority system ends in Italy, bipolarism can still remain. It would only mean the end of the "erroneous bipolarism" [Sartori 2007A,1].

Parliamentary Groups

The real players in parliamentary activities inside the Italian Parliament are the parliamentary groups which in most cases, but not always, are equivalent with political parties. They have a stable structure and a group discipline. It is their prerogative to designate parliamentary committee members and set the parliamentary agenda.

Considering their historical origins, parliamentary groups appeared earlier than the parties. In the liberal Italian state, groups were created spontaneously by people who pursued the same political goals. The boundaries in the groups were soft and the distinction among them was vague. In fact they were more similar to sorts of coalitions of interests than to proper political tendencies. Because of the inadequate cohesion among their members and the lack of ideological differentiation among groups, 'transformism' became a permanent phenomenon.

In the first period of statehood, the parliamentary groups were not necessary for the functioning of the assembly. They operated without being stable or having the possibility to impose discipline on their members. The principles of the liberal state were based on the complete independence of the MPs (See chapter 1).

The problem of regulating political groups was raised only after the enlargement of suffrage and the adoption of a proportional electoral system. This moment in fact can be considered as the breaking point between the classical liberal state and the party state. Parliamentary groups were created for the first time officially after the 1919 elections, which brought groups to the Parliament with very diverse

¹³ *Subtle Silvio strikes again, Silvio Berlusconi's makes big plans for a new party*, "The Economist" print edition, 22 November 2007, http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story_id=10193508

ideologies (often incompatible among each other) and which induced the reform of the institutional system and the birth of permanent committees. Hence groups became not only permanent in the two houses but also essential tools of parliamentary activities. After the fascist parenthesis, the 1949 regulation confirmed the role of parliamentary groups (described in the 1920-22 laws) and those of 1971 extended and specified their prerogatives. Parliamentary groups became bonds between the parties and the parliament.

Every MP has to join a parliamentary group which has to have at least 20 members in the Chamber of Deputies and 10 in the Senate. There are mixed parliamentary groups in both houses (where members come from different parties and political movements). The mixed parliamentary groups appeared after the introduction of the majority system and the crisis of the traditional parties. Having extremely heterogenic political forces inside, they have assumed significant dimensions in the recent legislatures. Despite the fact that parliamentary groups should be created in the beginning of the legislature, it happens also during the legislature that some groups cease to operate while others are created. For the number of parliamentary groups in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate see Table 6.

Table 6. - Number of parliamentary groups in the parliament in the different legislatures

	Chamber of Deputies	Senate
I (1948)	8	8
II (1953)	8	8
III (1958)	9	5
IV (1963)	7	7
V (1968)	9	8
VI (1972)	8	9
VII (1976)	10	7
VIII (1979)	10	8
IX (1983)	11	9
X (1987)	12	9
XI (1992)	13	8
XII (1994)	8	10
XIII (1996)	9	11
XIV (2001)	8	9
XV (2006)	8	8

All groups have to nominate a president, one or more vice-presidents, one or more secretary generals in the Senate and a directive board in the Chamber of Deputies. Groups are provided with offices and facilities which are necessary for their functioning (at the expense of the Parliament).

The Constitution refers to parliamentary groups in two occasions (Articles 72 and 82) in an indirect way, making their fundamental role clear in the formation of parliamentary committees. In order to analyze their function (they can nominate the members of the committees and adopt draft

laws), it is necessary to be familiar with the parliamentary regulation, the internal rules of the groups, the statute of the respective parties and the constitutional conventions.

While the speaker of a group can make compelling declarations for the group, the president of the group has even more significant prerogatives: he/she is a part of the 'conference of the parliamentary group leaders'. This 'forum' was an innovation introduced by the 1971 reform of the standing orders where one government representative had the same weight as any other. He/she was given the power of agenda setting and had to work on the basis of unanimity rules. Other important functions are guaranteed to the presidents of groups by the constitutional conventions: together with the secretary generals and the presidents of the parties, they are consulted by the Head of State in cases of government crisis. In these occasions, they are in charge of expressing the position of their groups on the solution of the crisis.

Parliamentary groups have a discipline: members have to respect the rules and vote according to the indication of the group (except in those cases where the group guarantees liberty of vote). Members have to present to the presidents all the acts of their single parliamentary initiatives and pay a fee. The violation of party discipline entails sanctions. However, the exclusion from the group does not mean losing mandate but only a change of group or entrance in a mixed one. For the composition of parliamentary groups see Table 7.

Table 7. – Composition of parliamentary groups

Group	In the beginning of XV. Legislature	Actual number
Alleanza nazionale	72	68
Comunisti italiani	--	17
Dca -Partito socialista-Nuovo Psi	--	6
Forza Italia	134	133
Italia dei valori	20	17
La rosa nel pugno	--	17
Lega nord Padania	23	22
Partito democratico - L'Ulivo	218	196
Popolari-Udeur	--	14
Rifondazione comunista – Sinistra europea	41	41
Sinistra democratica. Per il socialismo europeo	--	20
Udc (Unione dei democratici cristiani e dei democratici di centro)	39	38
Verdi	--	15
Misto	83	26
La destra	--	4
Minoranze linguistiche	5	5
Mpa- Movimento per l'autonomia	--	6
Repubblicani, liberali, riformatori	--	3
Socialisti per la costituente	--	3
Deputati non iscritti ad alcuna componente	8	5
Componenti non più esistenti		
Comunisti italiani	16	--
Democrazia cristiana – Partito socialista	6	--
La rosa nel pugno	18	--
Popolari - Udeur	14	--
Verdi	16	--
Totale	630	630

Source: Chamber of Deputies¹⁴

Parliamentary Committees

If the parliament in the XIX century was focused on the assembly, the contemporary model could be called the 'parliament of committees'. From Article 72 of the Constitution it becomes clear that the parliamentary committees are necessary organs of the chambers, can be permanent and have to reflect the political composition of the assembly. They have an important function in the legislative process and enjoy other significant prerogatives. There are 14 permanent committees in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate which are specialized in different subjects. There are also some committees with specific functions (inquiry etc.) but it is the first ones that play a crucial role in the legislative process.

As every MP is a member of a parliamentary group, he/she must also join at least one permanent committee. The composition of committees is renovated every second year, but their members can be reconfirmed. Members are chosen by groups, but while in the Senate a senator can join three committees when his/her group has less than 13 members, in the Chamber of Deputies no MP can join more than one committee. While in the Senate all groups are represented in all committees

¹⁴ <http://www.camera.it/organiparliamentarism/239/260/documentoxml.asp>

(hence proportionality is not always respected), in the Chamber of Deputies it can happen that small groups are scarcely represented in some important committees. In both chambers substituting members is possible.

Once gathered by the president of the assembly, the committees have to elect their presidency composed of the president, two vice-presidents and two secretary generals which, together with the representatives of the groups, set the committee's agenda. The president of the committee has important prerogatives. In the Chamber of Deputies, the committees can have permanent sub-committees in charge of studying specific issues (preparatory work for legislative activities, study and information gathering, follow-up activities once law is approved).

The peculiarities of the committee system have enhanced the polycentric character of the law-making process. The full legislative autonomy of committees is unique among democratic parliaments and foresees alternative routes for legislative items: for example the possibility of permanent committees to legislate directly without the need to bring the bill to the floor (*commissioni in sede legislativa*). Besides intervening always and necessarily in the legislative process they also have addressing and controlling functions and cognitive faculties.

CHAPTER 3 – ISSUES AND POPULAR INITIATIVES

Important Issues for the Electors

The results of several statistical surveys testify that there has been a growing distance between parliaments and electors in the great European democracies (except probably in Great Britain) in the last decades and suggest that parliaments and parties are conceived as institutions further from electors' requests and hence less responsive to those needs [Pasquino and Pelizzo 2006,87].

What are the decisions that parliaments should take in order to better represent popular will? In parliamentary systems, parliaments well represent the popular will when they are capable of choosing a government that conforms to the electors' will. The role of the legislative assembly has more to do with controlling the fate of the government than with the direct implementation of policies. The legislative assembly has the power of choosing among a limited number of possible governments, each with diverse implications in terms of policy, rather than directly selecting policy output [Laver and Shepsle 1996,57]. What concerns Italy, however, is that parliamentary majorities are not too disciplined and permit opposition to insert even significant changes in the government's legislative proposals. As Laver and Shepsle explain, this is the case when "party discipline decreases and dissident members of government parties ally with members of the opposition in order to approve legislation on some specific issues [Ivi.,40].

According to Sartori "not only do parliaments have to transmit a will but they also have to give it a form; and the form "transforms" (the will – E.S.). What parliaments have to do is not only to represent but to "act" as well. As a consequence, a parliament can have everything in order *sub specie representationis*, but function very badly, and vice versa it could not comply with the projective demands of representation, but perfectly serve electors. So it is not enough to know who enters parliament and how one can enter, but it is also necessary to observe what is being done and correlatively what is not being done and by those who are there" [Sartori 1987, 229-239].

But what happens in Italy? As Romano Prodi affirmed, it is hard "to distinguish the real issue—about which nobody ever talks, from the fictitious one which is fought over ferociously."¹⁵ It has been particularly true in the case of the debate over the draft 2008 budget of the current centre-left government.

A survey, that was undertaken in order to test electors' enthusiasm for matters concerning the international scene, the national scene and the local one [DATACONTACT 2007], shows that electors are not *very*, but only *quite* or a *little* interested. Among those who are *very* interested in one of the three

¹⁵ *Italy's budget. Too much*, The Economist print edition, 4 October 2007, http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story_id=9909367

areas, the local issues are in first place (21%), the national issues in second (17.5%) and the international ones are in third (10.8%).

As it becomes clear from another survey [ISPO 2007A], the five main issues for Italian citizens are the following ones: jobs and employment (25 %), safety of citizens (19%), healthcare system (18%), pensions (16%) and justice (12%). Considering the interests of each coalition's electors (See Table 8.) a very similar classification can be observed even though center-left electors are more concerned with the issue of jobs and occupation (32% in respect to only 24% of the centre-right).

If we consider the electors' age (See Table 9.) the results are slightly different (not surprisingly). Young Italian citizens (from 18-24) are more concerned about jobs and healthcare issues, less about pension and safety and quite interested in justice, while the most elderly electors (above 65) put pensions in the first place and justice in the last one (caused probably by many years of disillusion). Importance given to the issue of occupation is high independently of the age.

Table 8. - The five most important problems according to Italians (those who vote)

	Centre right electors (%)	Centre left electors (%)	Abstention (%)
Jobs and occupation	24	32	23
Citizens' safety	19	21	17
Healthcare	19	17	19
Pensions	15	17	17
Justice	12	10	16

Table 9. - The five most important problems according to Italians (whose age is...)

	18-24 (%)	25-34 (%)	35-44 (%)	45-54 (%)	55-64 (%)	Above 65 (%)
Jobs and occupation	25	36	23	27	23	19
Citizens' safety	19	16	21	22	15	15
Healthcare	15	18	18	20	27	17
Pensions	14	18	13	9	13	8
Justice	8	7	5	17	23	31

These results are not surprising if one considers that the employment rate in Italy remains one of the lowest in the OECD: less than 59% of people of working age have a job (compared with over

70% in the best performing OECD countries), the employment rate is only at about 46% among women (only Mexico and Turkey have lower levels) and the unemployment rate among youth aged 15 to 24 years remains very high at 21.6%; only France, Greece, Poland and the Slovak Republic do worse than Italy in this respect [OECD 2007A]. Italy ranks below the OECD average in terms of total health spending and health spending per capita [OECD 2007B], while it spends more of its national income on public pensions than all other OECD countries [OECD 2007C]. Expected future retirement benefits have been cut by pension reforms over the last decade but the outcome of the transition to the new system is uncertain.

What have recent legislatures and governments done to satisfy electors' requests? While the Italian Parliament has acknowledged the right of the cabinet to pursue its program, governments have used delegated legislation to cover the existing legislative deficit in a number of crucial policy areas (welfare, education, problems of the economy). Parliament today guarantees longer time to the executive branch to produce its delegated decrees and accepts new instruments such as 'maxi-amendments' proposed by the government in order to prevent parliamentary attacks on the articles of the bill and the 'vote of confidence on legislative items'.

However significant reforms in the areas which are of particular interest for citizens are not easy to adopt. Both coalitions are very heterogeneous and within them each part tries to defend its vested interests. Doing so they succeed in blocking reform initiatives (in the current government for example communists tend to obstruct improving Italy's competitiveness, while centrists prevent reducing the public wage bill, increasing competition in services or breaking up the privileges of professionals such as lawyers and architects). According to the famous political expert, the governments in Italy are characterized by demagoguery. And he explains why: for the classic question on what they have done for their country, Berlusconi's answer could be: nothing but liberating it from Prodi... While Prodi could say: nothing but liberating it from Berlusconi" [Sartori 2007C,1].

[How Can Citizens' Requests be Incorporated in the Legislative Process?](#)

The three main procedures of the legislative process are: 1. ordinary legislation, 2. 'decree laws' and 3. delegating laws. The ordinary legislation is a complex way of making laws: legislative proposals can be made by MPs, the government, the regions, the Economic and Social Council and by popular initiative. Both chambers have to examine through a committee and vote on every article and on all bills submitted either to the lower chamber or to the Senate. The *navette* process (transfer of the proposal from one chamber to another) has to be repeated until the same text is passed by a formal conclusive vote of both parliamentary branches. The other two procedures give great power to the executive branch in forcing decision making and its timing (decree law) or to control its content

(delegating laws). The final stage of the law-making process is the promulgation of a bill by the President of the Republic, followed by the publication in the official journal.

Cotta and Verzichelli have summarized the law-making activity in Italy in the following three aspects [Cotta and Verzichelli 2007,154-155]:

1. There is a recent trend to reduce the legislative overflow, which in the past made the Italian legislature the most 'productive' in Europe in terms of number of laws passed (685 in the XIV. Legislature, respect to 2,314 in the I. Legislature);
2. Cabinets tend to keep the legislative flow under control (...) the majority of their proposals accepted. (...) Bills autonomously introduced by MPs continue to play an important symbolic role for purposes of constituency service and are used to signal commitment to the defense of local and sectional interests. In fact, this type of initiative has clearly increased in number, but its success rate is now close to zero.
3. The percentage of legislation approved directly by committees has been significantly reduced (today 20% of the total number of laws) but still represents a consistent rate.

In regards to popular initiatives to influence the decision-making process, we have to mention the procedure - a tool of democracy half way between petition and referendum - in which a law can be proposed by popular initiative. The Constitution foresees that the popular initiative come from 50,000 electors (signatures have to be collected in 6 months) that it is written in articles and accompanied by a report that specifies its objectives. It can regard any matter (even constitutional ones). However, neither electors nor representatives have very much faith in this instrument even though it offers an immediate and direct way towards the manifestation of popular will and the possibility of bringing citizens closer to the institutions. It also constitutes a soft alternative to abrogative referendum (respect to which has less political and financial costs).

According to E.W. Böckenförde, the destiny of the contemporary democracy's representative function will be influenced in particular by two core elements of the contemporary constitutionalism: popular sovereignty (considering its dimension of choice of representatives by electors) and MPs responsibility towards electors. Alfonso Di Giovine adds another tool, through which sovereignty can be expressed: the referendum. The author sustains that the referendum implicates the following aspects: representation without ties in the mandate entails that popular will and the assembly's will become reasonably approximate but not identical; it is therefore possible to verify a gap between the two wills; in this case the power of setting itself against its representatives is attributed to the possessor of sovereignty; if the existence of this gap is confirmed, it is the popular will that prevails over that of parliamentary majority, re-dimensioning its claim to be converted always and anyway into law [Di Giovine 2005,124].

The majority of political experts agree on considering referendum not as a panacea that resolves the problems of the representative liberal democracy, but as its complementary and subordinated tool. Though Bobbio does not denounce those requests that are in favor of making the representative democracy more similar to the 'direct democracy', but to do so, he pinpoints the need to satisfy some specific preconditions. He does not consider neither indispensable nor possible "the participation of all the citizens in all the decisions that regard them [Bobbio 1978, 30].

Referendum can constitute either a need for those who have obtained the power of decision making due to electors' vote, or a resource for those who have lost that power. It can be an added instrument for both electors and MPs. In fact, referendum constitutes on the one hand, an occasion for citizens to participate in the decision-making process, hence to control the executive branch and function as a brake or an accelerator in order to convince governments to respond to their requests; on the other hand, a tool that can legitimize MPs' political power. This second option is what Uleri calls 'ultrademocratic way of practicing referendum voting' while the first one – when referendums are activated due to electors' request in order to control MPs' decisions and non decisions – corresponds to the 'liberal way of referendum voting' [Uleri 2007, 45-46]. While the first modality is much diffused in the modern democracies, the second one is used frequently only in some countries: Switzerland, Italy, Hungary, New Zealand and Uruguay.

The Constitution of Italy provides for only two kinds of legally binding referendums: 1. a legislative referendum, which can only be called in order to decide on whether to abrogate totally or partially an existing law (the first one held in 1974); 2. constitutional referendum, which can only be called in order to decide on whether to approve a constitutional law or amendment (the first one held in 2001)¹⁶.

A legislative referendum can be called at the request of five regional councils or 500,000 eligible Italian electors who sign an official validated petition. If the Constitutional Court approves the subject matter of the petition, the government in office has to set a date for the vote. The timing can be crucial as turnout at the polling stations may be much lower in summer months when voters take their holidays and the quorum required for the referendum to be valid may not be reached.

The result of the legislative referendum is only valid if at least a 50% + one of all eligible electors go to the polling station and cast their ballot. If this quorum is not met, the referendum is invalid and, in practice, it is a victory for the nays. The entire bureaucratic process can take more than a year and a half. Among the political parties in Italy, it is the *Partito Radicale* (Radical Party) led by Marco

¹⁶ Legislative referendums: Italian divorce referendum (1974), Italian party funding referendum (1978), Italian abortion referendum (1981), Italian referendum (1985), Italian nuclear power referendum (1987), Italian European Parliament referendum (1989), Italian hunting referendum (1990), Italian electoral law for the House of Deputies referendum (1991), Italian referendums on modifying the Senate electoral law; abolishing public financing of political parties and the abolition of certain ministries (1993), Italian referendums (1995, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2003), Italian artificial insemination referendums (2005). Constitutional referendums in 2001 and in 2006.

Pannella that is most closely associated with referendums. Despite only receiving around 2.5% of the popular vote in most national elections, the numerous referendums they have proposed over the years have often mobilized the entire Italian political spectrum in support or opposition.

Over the years, various criticisms of the legal processes that legislative referendums are subjected to have been raised with regard to the following:

- number of verified signatures required (500,000) is too high¹⁷;
- verification of signatures by the constitutional court is too strict;
- the admissibility of the subject matter of each referendum which is determined by the constitutional court is too severe;
- the quorum required is undemocratic¹⁸;
- timing of the referendums by the government in office easily can skew the quorum;
- inaccurate electoral registers skew the quorum;
- successive governments can re-introduce laws that have been abolished by the public

The first part of the 1990s present an example for a successful popular initiative due to which the parliament had no option but to follow electors' will. Since no agreement could be achieved among the political parties on the institutional reform (notwithstanding the efforts of some leading politicians such as Craxi and De Mita), a popular initiative was born in order to change the existing electoral law. Supported by the press, the referendum succeeded in mobilizing enough people to be held in 1991 (in spite of leaders' advice to "go to the beach"). It obtained a great success and paved the way for a second referendum on the central mechanisms of the electoral law. After the 1993 popular vote, parliament had to abolish the old proportional system. The electoral system was used in Italian national elections in 1996 and 2001, but the Berlusconi government in 2005 fully reinstated proportional representation under a new law.

A similar situation can be observed today. A referendum initiative has been promoted by 179 personalities to change current electoral law. Because of the weakness of the centre-left majority, but also because of the different interests of big and small parties coexisting in both alliances, the conditions for a more comprehensive reform of all rules of the electoral game are difficult to find.

A constitutional referendum can be called only when a constitutional law or constitutional amendment has been approved by both legislative chambers of the Parliament of Italy (the Italian Chamber of Deputies and Italian Senate) with a majority of less than two thirds in both or either chamber, and only at the request of one fifth of the members of either chamber, or 500,000 electors or

¹⁷ Switzerland is often cited as an example where only 50,000 signatures are required for a nationwide referendum.

¹⁸ Since 1995, no referendum has reached the necessary quorum and most major political parties have abandoned signature collecting and actively encourage abstaining. Critics call this an "attack on democracy itself".

five regional councils. The constitutional referendum is not subject to a quorum and is valid regardless of how many electors go to the polling station.

Concerning finally the gap between electors' will and representatives' action, political analyst Sergio Romano's metaphor sounds convincing: "Italy is like a pair of scissors which would function well if its two parts were coordinated by the same hand and if they worked together. In Italy however while one side (representatives – E.S.) wants to reduce debt, the other (electors – E.S.) wants to reduce the number of heads. The scissors in these conditions cannot achieve either of them" [Romano 2007].

CHAPTER 4 – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES (ANTI-POLITICS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY)

In recent years, parliaments have lost a significant part of their powers in various ways. They have fewer opportunities to take action, while the role of executives and that of supranational organizations have become stronger. Today in Italy (as elsewhere), the emergence of anti-politics constitutes a challenge to face while new technology offers an opportunity to seize for political players in strengthening their representative function. On the one hand, information technology can be used in order to create an anti-political movement (as the Grillo case has demonstrated); on the other hand, it is one of the possibilities to seize in order to create a system of representative democracy that is also more participatory.

Anti-politics

In the *partitocrazia*, parties had significant control over the society and were the main gate-keepers in the representation of interests. Today, however, their role is different: not only have the number of parties' organizational units and their membership declined but also the qualitative importance of their activities and cultural messages for people has shrunk. Parties' capacity to mediate between society and state through elaboration of effective political synthesis has been strongly criticized. 'To survive without governing' is a frequent government strategy that has not met Italian electors' approval. According to the representatives of the *Unione* "there is an atmosphere that not even in 1992 you could breathe!" [Verderami 2007,1].

Norberto Bobbio already in 1967 put in evidence the gap between political and parliamentary class and citizens. Recently it has been the book "La Casta" of Sergio Rizzo and Gian Antonio Stella and the initiatives of the Italian actor and comic Beppe Grillo that contributed to the proliferation of debates on the emergence of populism and anti-politics in our country. Both are testimony of electors' disillusion in politics, which had already been proved by the results of several public surveys.

Nowadays, the lack of public trust regards not only the parliament and the politicians, but many other institutions as well (Catholic Church, police etc.). The populist point of view is getting stronger and stronger as it is shown by the following data: 80% of citizens agree that "no politician is as much interested in people's problems as I am"; 52% of citizens interviewed "absolutely agree" (and 22% *quite* agrees) that "Italy needs a strong man who is able to decide and resolve the problems" [Mannheimer 2007,11].

People in Italy are convinced that politicians' privileges are immense and that governments are not able to decide, govern and bring to an end what they promised in the electoral campaign. This

conviction was already strong during the Berlusconi government but it got stronger under the current Prodi government.

According to Giovanni Sartori, the entrance of Beppe Grillo into politics (at the party of *Unità* in Milan) can remind us of the fall of the Bastille, an event that became the symbol of the French revolution. Anti-politics, explains Sartori, means either leaving or entering politics (with the objective of destroying it). Grillo has not proposed to create the 32nd Italian party, rather a spontaneous movement that would help to get rid of them. The actor's intention is to sustain spontaneous civic lists (controlled by him) at the next administrative elections that would exclude party members and those with juridical precedents [Sartori 2007C,1]. In his case, *anti* means "enough" with the politicians and the parties but his strategy has no antidemocratic implications also because fascism and communism already lost their legitimacy in the West [Sartori 2007B,1].

It emerges from the result of several surveys showing that the majority of electors have little trust in politics, and in respect to the past, today they have even less [DATACONTACT 2007].

Table 10. Do you have trust in politics?

	%
A lot	3,5
Quite a lot	16,3
Little	46,8
Not at all	33,0
Does not indicate	0,5
Total	100,0

Table 11. In respect to the past, today do you have more or less trust?

	%
More	9,0
Less	58,8
The same	30,8
Does not indicate	1,5
Total	100,0

The causes of disaffection are several: 93% of the citizens answered that MPs quickly loose contact with electors, 88% think that parties are interested only in electors' votes and not in their opinions, 85% believe that sometimes politics seem so complicated that it is difficult to understand what is happening while 74% agree that people like him/her do not have any influence on government policy [LAPS 2007].

Table 12. - Disaffection in politics (% of citizens that agree a lot or quite a lot)

	Electors		Age		Education	
	Centre-left	Centre-right	Under 34	Above 35	Until the age of 13	Until the age of 18
People like him/her do not have any influence on what government does	72	75	82	71	66	78
Politics seem so complicated that it is difficult to understand what happens	80	88	85	84	87	83
MPs quickly loose contact with their electors	95	92	93	92	92	93
Parties are only interested in electors' votes and not in their opinions	85	94	87	88	88	88

According to the results of a survey on anti-politics undertaken in October 2007 [ISPO 2007B], while 40% of people are interested in politics, 59% are not interested at all. According to electors, the diffusion of the phenomenon is due to the fact that MPs do not do what they promise during the electoral campaign (38%), politicians have too many privileges (23%), the majority of politicians are dishonest (16%), the politicians are always the same (14%), and Italians always protest and accuse politicians (5%). To check the view of the two coalitions' electors see Table 13.

Table 13. – According to electors the diffusion of anti-politics is due to:

	Centre right electors (%)	Centre left electors (%)	Abstentions (%)
Politicians have too many privileges	31	23	19
Politicians do not do what they promise in electoral campaign	36	30	42
The majority of politicians are dishonest	13	22	15
Politicians are always the same	15	18	13
Italians always protest and accuse politicians	5	6	4
Other/don't know	-	1	7

Another survey [LAPS 2007] reveals that in order to bring people closer to politics, politicians' privileges should be reduced (95% of citizens agree), politicians should encourage discussion with citizens on political problems (91%), politicians in the government should be quicker in taking decisions (89%) and political language should be simplified (86%).

Meanwhile, 67% of interviewed citizens agree that citizens know the real problems of life while politicians do not and 69% think that citizens are realistic and pragmatic while politicians think in ideological schemes. On the other hand, 63% of politicians who participated in the survey think that politicians are well-informed while citizens are not (or only a little) while 54% of them believe that the politicians are aware of the problems' complexity while citizens are not. To check electors' and politicians' views, see Table 14.

Table 14. Perception of reality

Citizens	Agrees a lot or quite a lot	Agrees a lot or quite a lot	Politicians	Agrees a lot or quite a lot	Agrees a lot or quite a lot
	Centre left	Centre right		Centre left	Centre right
citizens know the real problems of life while politicians do not	65	69	politicians are informed while citizens are not (or only a little)	58	70
citizens are realistic and pragmatic while politicians think in ideological schemes	65	73	politicians are aware of the problems' complexity while citizens do not realize how things work	52	57

When studying the Italian political climate, Ilvo Diamanti has described the dichotomy of anti-politics and hyper-politics. People's enthusiasm in politics in fact is clear if one remembers that three million citizens participated at the primary elections of the Democratic Party, the National Alliance mobilized 300,000 people to protest against the government, millions of workers participated at the referendum launched by trade unions and hundreds of thousands of people signed Grillo's proposal on the "moralization of politics". Putting together these and other initiatives of this year, "we have achieved bigger numbers than those in the 60s" [Diamanti 2007] – claims the political analyst. According to him, "the representative democracies are going through a phase of changes. Lack of trust, protests, populisms. The crumbling of political participation in 1000 experiences: collective but also individual ones. Big polemic mobilization. It does not mean refusal of democracy. Hyper-politics is the other face of anti-politics. Both are signs of the frustrated demand of politics. If there was no answer explosion could occur" [Ibidem].

Citizens' low trust and interest in politics should not be underestimated because according to some experts anti-party criticisms can become very quickly criticism of the political class, then criticism of the parliament and finally, criticisms of the democracy [Pasquino 1999,27].

New Technology

What will be the fate of parliaments in the information and communication age (rich of anti-political sentiments)? Will new technologies replace representative democracy with more widespread

forms of direct democracy (creating a sort of “e-Athens” where citizens would be able to make decisions on everything)? While there are several political utopias and contrasting theories on this issue, it is commonly agreed that citizens have never before had access to as much information and knowledge of political issues as in the digital age.

Information technology gives people the opportunity to make use of the extraordinary wealth of materials, elaborate proposals, control the way power is exercised, and organize themselves in society. As Klaas G. de Vries, MP and former Interior Minister of the Netherlands, affirmed: “maybe 30, 40 or 100 years ago, a voter was someone who cast a vote every four or two years, and then left it to the representatives. But nowadays many people in the electorate are smarter than parliamentarians” [Microsoft 2006]. This is why, he said, parliaments need to go as far as possible to enable citizen participation and include the electorate in the decision-making process.

On March 3 and 4, 2007 an international conference on The Policy-Making Role of Parliaments in the Development of the Information Society was held in Rome, with the participation from delegations of 68 parliamentary assemblies. As Gherardo Casini, Executive Coordinator of Global Centre for ICT in Parliament affirmed: “promoting a conducive environment for the development of an inclusive and equitable Information Society is a very complex issue which requires the attention of public institutions, and in particular of parliaments and legislative assemblies. (...) the advent of information and communication technologies has already created a new public space, which offers unparalleled conditions for accessing and using information, managing knowledge and sharing resources among individuals and communities. This space can be perceived as a challenge for representative institutions that risk marginalization from today's interdependent societies and decreasing capacity of interaction with their own constituencies”¹⁹.

The conference was organized by the Italian Chamber of Deputies, with the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, as a contribution to the activities of the Global Centre for Information and Communication Technologies in Parliament²⁰. Six points were chosen in order to strengthen the role of parliaments in the development of the Information Society:

1. Parliament as a political guarantor against the technocratic risks of the Information Society
2. The role of parliament as a guarantor to protect socially weaker groups
3. The role of parliament in protecting fundamental rights

¹⁹ International Conference on The Policy-Making Role of Parliaments in the Development of the Information Society, 3 – 4 March 2007, Chamber of Deputies, Rome, Italy, Preliminary Informative Session, Presentation of the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, Gherardo Casini, Executive Coordinator of Global Centre for ICT in Parliament

²⁰ The Global Centre was established as a network among parliaments, in order to: a) foster co-operation and the exchange of information on ICT issues, also with other stakeholders and facilitate linkages among all initiatives in this domain; b) enhance the active role of parliaments on policies for developing the Information Society with the participation of all the different components of the national communities represented in the parliaments; c) support the use of new technologies to strengthen the parliaments, with particular reference to emerging democracies.

4. The work of parliament to combat the risk of cultural and linguistic standardization and the marginalization of the weaker sectors of society
5. The role of parliament as an institutional guarantor
6. The role of parliament in developing international co-operation for the benefit of emerging democracies

Important investments have been made in many European countries to support the work of elected representatives through development of document management and decision-making information systems and through the transformation of back-office structures into cost-efficient and user-friendly tools.

In Hungary, the national assembly has been able to reduce paper use by a third as a result of digitalizing parliamentary processes and disseminating official documents to representatives in electronic format. In Switzerland, the federal assembly standardized data storage to enable users to work faster and more effectively by sharing and collaborating on documents. In Scotland, the website of the parliament has been improved to guarantee external provision of information and citizen interaction and participation in the political process (through verbatim reports of all debates, background analysis, and cross-party discussion forums on all major issues). The Scottish parliament also pioneered the e-petitioner system with the objective of empowering citizens to influence the political agenda.

Information and communication technology use is a priority in the organization of the work of the Italian Parliament as well. The three main uses of these technologies concern: 1. the use of ICT for the deputies; 2. the use of ICT to develop information and communications between the parliament and the general public; 3. the use of ICT for the administrative structures at the service of the parliamentary organs and the deputies.

Deputies can establish a linkage with the Chamber network from outside so that they can work from a distance in their home constituencies. Each deputy also has his/her own e-mail address on the site, to which the public can send messages and each deputy or parliamentary group can publish individual web pages on the chamber internet site.

Since 1996, the site - which is also in English, French, German, Spanish and Arabic and with versions in a format that is accessible to the disabled - covers the whole area of the institutional work of the Chamber and offers easy access to a vast amount of documents and information. The digital archive (data is also available on previous parliaments) is updated in real time²¹. All the documents discussed and voted on in the House and in the committees are also posted.

²¹ The reports of debates on the floor of the House, for example, are provisionally posted on the site almost in real time, as the deliberations proceed (every section of a parliamentary session is made available on the site about one hour afterwards); the final proceedings and most of the documents are posted at 9:00 a.m. the following day, when the proceedings are classified in the archives in printed format.

Livio Zoffoli, president of the National Centre for Informatics in Public Administration (CNIPA²²) after the publication of the annual report on the process of digital transformation of public bureaucracy in 2006 said: "the computerization of public administration has made such giant steps, that according to a recent ISTAT²³ survey, Italy is much above the European average concerning online public services."²⁴

The CNIPA has created sector specific websites in order to offer information and services on central and local public administration. On the Citizen's Website (*Portale del cittadino*), under the title "Make your voice heard! You count for us!", several surveys have been launched to test public opinion on relevant topics concerning Italians' relations with public administration (how to bring together work and family). On *Italia.gov.it*, it is possible to follow the results of the surveys through simple and immediate graphs. In one month, 1,200,000 pages are visited through more than 300,000 accesses.²⁵

In regards to accessibility, Italy can be considered as a leader country in Europe. In fact, the CNIPA has contributed to the adoption of a national normative in order to bridge the digital divide which is perceived in many countries as a best practice to follow. As Zoffoli affirmed: "we are living an extraordinary period of changes in the state administrative structures. Italy believes that new technology will contribute in radically changing the relationship between state, citizens and enterprises and it will be CNIPA's duty to assist government in this challenge of extreme economic and social value."²⁶

At the 4th EU eGovernment Conference (Lisbon, September 19-21) our country contributed to the definition of the Lisbon Declaration which is perfectly in line with the national priorities that aim at transforming public administration by increasing the quality of the services and reducing its costs. The Italian government allocated 160 million euros for the modernization of public administration which will be used for the current projects (electronic ID cards, tourism website) and for new ones (re-launching of regional technological centers).

Parliaments should find new ways of communicating (also by placing proposals on the Internet for which they seek the opinions of citizens) and strengthening democracy by enhancing the diffusion of social and political power; fostering genuine citizen participation; providing scope for freedom; reducing existing inequalities; and by disseminating knowledge as a major common good. This way the contrast between representative democracy and direct democracy might be overcome and parliamentary democracy would gain new legitimacy by putting itself forward as a permanent interlocutor of society.

²² Centro Nazionale per l'Informatica nella Pubblica Amministrazione

²³ Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (National Institute of Statistics)

²⁴ *eGov: presentata relazione CNIPA. Passi da gigante della PA, ma restano ancora alti i rischi dei sistemi informatici*
http://www.key4biz.it/News/2007/07/04/e-Government/Beatrice_Magnolfi_CNIPA_eGov.html

²⁵ PA: con 'Italia.gov.it' i cittadini a consulto su temi d'interesse pubblico
http://www.key4biz.it/News/2007/07/23/e-Government/PA_Italiagovit.html

²⁶ Ivi., *eGov: presentata relazione CNIPA. Passi da gigante della PA, ma restano ancora alti i rischi dei sistemi informatici*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Considered as a place for excellence in politics, parliaments are the target of remarkable and diffused dissatisfaction and criticism. Unsatisfied with politics, citizens criticize the parliament but this criticism usually does not (in Italy it may) transform into criticism of democracy or of its functioning.

The situation however is not alarming: 1. notwithstanding their inadequacy, parties continue to be indispensable points of reference for the political life of all democracies because they keep being the only organization able to represent constituents in the parliamentary arena; 2. in the course of history, parliaments demonstrated their ability of adaptation and even today, despite constraints, democratic parliaments do have the potential to function as mediators between citizens and the government; hence electoral connection functions (as Packerham affirmed in 1970: "these (the parliaments – E.S.) are the best of the times. These are the worst of the times").

In order to improve the situation, changing representatives' characteristics is not enough. What has to be the object of analysis is how to enhance their capacities to undertake their numerous duties with more efficiency. For this reason the task is to understand through what kind of new forms parliaments might reinforce their role of representation which is necessary for the correct exercise of their other functions. A more complex analysis is needed on the way politics are made, their mechanisms and how institutional rules function.

According to Philippe Schmitter and Alexander Trechsel, the best solution for the problems that derive from the dyscrasia between professionalization of politics and complexity of collective choices in contemporary democracies probably would consist of integrating some of the tools of the 'direct democracy' in the representative democracy [Schmitter and Trechsel 2004, 75]. Other experts however agree with Sartori, according to whom using the tools of the 'direct democracy' would impede solutions of compromise among the parts in conflict [Meaglia 2006, 240].

There is a consensus on considering the transformation of contemporary democracies as a fact. Elected parliaments – which constitute the most important pillar of every democratic regime – are destined to change as well. Therefore all parliaments have to reorganize themselves in particular for what concerns guaranteeing access to and diffusion of information in order to better represent electors' concerns and preferences.

Reform is a continuing process in all the parliaments of the established democracies and it is usually institutionalised in a specific standing committee. A lot has been done (for example in India, the number of parties in the two chambers has increased and the parliamentary procedures have been reformed, the Israeli Knesset has improved its standing with the public, the Portuguese Parliament has been involved in a programme of reforms to bring parliament closer to the people and the Italian

Parliament as well is constantly engaged in a wide-ranging reform of the constitution [Beetham, 2006]), but further steps are needed.

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