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## Original Article

# Political system, civil society and institutions in Italy: The quality of democracy

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**Abstract** Italy's economy and polity are considered to be continuously in turmoil. The recent multiplication of corruption affairs, the spreading of clientelistic practices, the internal economic crisis and the decline in the country's role on the European and international stages suggest that Italy is at a political and historical turning point. For the above stated reasons, it appears relevant to re-evaluate the state and quality of Italian democracy. On the basis of a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, this study aims to analyse the recent changes in Italian polity, economy and society in order to assess whether Italy can be considered as a 'deviant case' among European countries. In this article, we present a preliminary reflection on this research question and we outline the topics of concern that will be explored in this special issue. The first part of the article highlights the transformation of Italian democracy over the years with an emphasis on the persisting inconsistency between institutions and civil society. The second part of this article addresses the problem of the current political and economic crisis and the erosion of the democratic quality of Italian political and institutional settings. The third section addresses the question of whether Italy, in a comparative perspective, can be considered alternatively a 'backward' country in terms of democratic development, a political and institutional laboratory of future trends, an anomaly compared to other European democracies or, finally, a specific variation of common trends already characterizing other European democracies.

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## Introduction

Italy's economy and polity are considered to be continuously in turmoil. The corruption affairs of the mid-nineties, the recent multiplication of judicial inquiries and trials in which politicians and elected officials are implicated, the spreading of clientelistic practices, the internal economic crisis and the decline in the country's role on the European and international stages combine to suggest that Italy is at a political and historical turning point. For the above stated reasons, it appears relevant to re-evaluate the state and quality of Italian democracy. Thus, the main question that arises here is how can we assess the current state of Italian democracy in terms of institutions, of political organisations and actors, of economic policies and models, as well as of public policies and integration in supranational processes? On the basis of a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, this study aims to analyse the recent changes in Italian polity, economy and society in order to assess whether Italy can be considered as a 'deviant case' among European countries, or it represents a precursor of future tendencies already spreading across Europe.

In this article, we present a preliminary reflection on this research question and we outline the topics of concern that will be explored in this special issue. The first part of the article highlights the transformation of Italian democracy over the years with an emphasis on the persisting inconsistency between institutions and civil society. In fact, the constant presence of a narrative of 'crisis' within the public and academic debate is linked to the development of the gap between state institutions and society and to the political attempts to bridge this gap.

This notion of a gap or inconsistency or distance between state institutions and Italian civil society is thus central to our analysis and to the main arguments that are developed in this study. This notion of a 'gap' is based on three different elements: first, it means that there is a significant lack of responsiveness of political institutions to popular demands (Diamond and Morlino, 2005; Almagisti, 2008b; Mammone and Veltri, 2010; Cassese, 2011). In particular, this lack of responsiveness interacts with other, more complex phenomena characterising Italian society, such as the high levels of distrust in political institutions and actors (particularly parties), the negative attitudes of citizens towards a very complex, often confusing and largely derogative legislation, the widespread belief that public administration is ineffective, that the judiciary is arbitrary, and the perception of endemic corruption in civil service and state institutions in general (Cassese, 1998; Sabetti, 2002; Della Porta and Vannucci, 2007; Cento Bull, 2010).

Second, this notion encompasses the weakness of political accountability mechanisms for Italian citizens and voters to control the decisions and performances of representative political institutions (Ceccanti and Vassallo, 2004; Sartori, 2006; Newell, 2010). Third, this notion concerns the weakness of representation processes within Italian political institutions: with regard to the



political elites at large, parties maintain their traditional position of gatekeepers and party government evolves into an inefficient ‘particracy’ and a political class barely representative, both in substantive and descriptive terms, of the Italian electorate (Recchi and Verzichelli, 2003; Verzichelli, 2006; Carboni, 2007).

The second part of this article addresses the problem of the current political and economic crisis and the erosion of the democratic quality of Italian political and institutional settings, with particular attention being paid to the progressive reduction in the level of accountability of institutions. The third section addresses the question of whether Italy, in a comparative perspective, can be considered alternatively a ‘backward’ country in terms of democratic development, a political and institutional laboratory of future trends, an anomaly compared to other European democracies or, finally, a specific variation of common trends already characterising other European democracies.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Transformations and the Recurring Crises of Italian Democracy**

The Italian nation-state was formed significantly later than other comparable western European countries. Moreover, this process of formation was more rapid and more sudden than in other countries. This peculiar (and yet incomplete) process of state formation is often identified as a crucial key for understanding the nature and functioning of the contemporary Italian political system (Pasquino, 1985). The fact that the Italian territory was only unified in 1861 (and Veneto and Lazio were annexed in 1866–1870, while Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Trentino-Alto Adige were incorporated in 1919) has had significant consequences on Italian institutions and the political community. For instance, the absence of a common and diffuse feeling of national belonging and the difficulties in constructing a common political identity for the entire country have been associated with the incomplete process of formation of the Italian nation-state (Bull and Newell, 2005; Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007).

The narratives of the ‘incompleteness’ of Italian democracy (Craveri, 2002) as well as the idea of a perpetual transition have dominated the debate on the Italian democratic system since the end of the Second World War. This observation is paradoxical for two distinct reasons: first, the concept of crisis *per se* concerns a temporary phenomenon, but in the Italian case it refers instead to a constant phenomenon developing over a long period of time. From a long-term perspective, the current debate on the incomplete Italian transition and the crisis of the political regime is not entirely original; on the contrary, it is the confirmation of an element that has been present throughout the history of the Republic (Bull and Rhodes, 1997; Lazar, 2006).

Second, despite the different perceptions of the crisis and the ongoing debate on these issues, scholars are unanimous in stressing the ability of the

Italian political system to maintain stability over time (Allum, 1974; Graziano and Tarrow, 1979; LaPalombara, 1987; Allum and Newell, 2003; Bull and Rhodes, 2007). However, in order to address the issue of Italian political stability, we consider that the framework for analysis must go beyond current events. We adopt Bull and Rhodes' argument that, in the Italian case, the analysis of political change focused only on short-term factors and the day-to-day political life, [is] bound to be reductive and incomplete' (Bull and Rhodes, 1997, p. 2).<sup>2</sup> We have chosen to develop here an exploration of the major explanatory factors of the 'incompleteness' of Italian democracy, which is based mainly on long-term factors. We thus offer an explanation from this particular perspective.

The processes that have characterised the transformation of Italian democracy over the years have been different. Historically, the first process dealt with the economic, political, social and cultural transformations that characterised the fifties and sixties in the twentieth century and with the lack of policy initiatives taken to manage these phenomena. The great changes in economic relations and in civil society's values did not receive an adequate response from political actors and institutions. On the contrary, all of the major attempts to manage the modernisation of Italian society, such as those implemented by the centre-left governments of the early sixties, eventually failed. These public policy and structural reform projects tried to boost societal and political modernisation through institutional reform processes aimed at adapting political institutions, at improving the representation mechanism, and at introducing new 'common values of citizenship' (Crainz, 2003) for the shared project of modernising the country based on democratic rules.

The second wave of attempted reform processes concerns the efforts made in the seventies to unlock the stalemate of the Italian political system, which was paralysed by the contrast between the Christian-Democrats (DC) and the Communists (PCI), the latter being unable to participate in government for structural reasons (namely the Cold War). The 'stalemate' of the Italian political system refers in fact to the lack of alternation between governments, the existence of a 'permanent' governing party (DC), and the never-ending series of institutional and bureaucratic reforms put forward by various national governments but never completely implemented or achieved (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007).

The (at least partially) failed 'modernisation' of the Italian political system has also often been linked to the dominant role of religion, on the one hand, and the relative absence of social capital, on the other hand, within Italian politics (Banfield, 1967; Putnam *et al*, 1993; Bull and Newell, 2005; Cartocci, 2007). From one perspective, the dominant role of religion within Italian society and politics can be considered as one of the main explanatory factors for the failed modernisation of the Italian political system in the sense that religion still



occupies a fundamental position in contemporary Italy, even though it does not shape political behaviour, socialisation and participation as clearly as it did in pre-modern and modern times. Nevertheless, the relative relevance of religious issues in determining political behaviour and political life in general is generally accepted as a fundamental feature of Italian politics during the First Republic period (Donovann, 2000; Ginsborg, 2003; Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Diamanti, 2009).

From another perspective, the structural lack of civic resources within Italian society is at the base of the 'familist-parochial-localist' paradigm that has characterised Italian political culture since the early 1960s (Putnam *et al.*, 1993). These traditional traits of Italian political culture, together with a very weak feeling of national identity in civic terms, entail constantly high levels of political distrust and discontent and are considered as the main explanatory factors, at social level, of the diffuse tolerance towards the generalised corruption (Davigo and Mannozi, 2007), but also of the widespread feeling of social isolation and political alienation (Almond and Verba, 1989; Segatti, 2006). The latter points can be thus considered as general indicators of a failed process of modernisation of Italian politics, but also – at the same time – the main factors triggering political change in the given, specific political contexts of crisis (Morlino and Tarchi, 1996; Mutti, 2000).

In a historical context characterised by strong tensions and possible authoritarian involutions (Pasquino, 1985), the *compromesso storico* (historical compromise) between the two mass parties (the DC and PCI) aimed at overcoming the political crisis of the sixties by gradually opening access to government to the communists. This political co-operation process eventually failed in 1978 because of the assassination of Aldo Moro (President of the DC) and the consequent withdrawal from this project by the Christian-Democrats. The third wave of structural reform processes took place during the eighties and ended with the transformation of the Italian party system in the early nineties. The Italian Socialist Party (PSI) led by Bettino Craxi was the main political actor of this period. Once the previous attempts of convergence between the DC and PCI failed, the Communist Party returned to opposition and the PSI formed an alliance with the Christian-Democrats to form the new government. The PSI sought for a way out of the political stalemate (resulting from the constant presence in office of the DC) through its stable participation in coalition governments, and by pursuing the long-term project of replacing the PCI as the main electoral alternative to the Christian-Democrats. An actual alternation in power between the two major parties became possible.

However, this project failed because the new electoral coalition established by DC and PSI, instead of favouring a possible alternation in government, permanently blocked the political system, making an alternation impossible by ruling out the possibility of the left opposition replacing the DC in government.

This triggered the penetration of the State by the political parties. For more than 50 years, the Italian political system has been blocked both in terms of alternation in power, mainly because of the position of DC as a 'permanent' governing party and, to a lesser extent, because of the temporary nature of the various political institutions' reforms passed over the years (electoral system reforms, bureaucracy reforms, decentralisation reforms, type of government reforms and so on). Several reforms of political institutions have been passed, cancelled and then re-proposed in a slightly different sauce, while the political community is still calling today for the adoption of clear and effective measures such as a more balanced electoral law, the elimination of perfect bicameralism, a simpler process for the adoption of budget law, a more flexible, transparent and effective public administration and the reform of parliamentary regulations (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007).

In particular, several scholars consider the lack of alternation in government as the main weakness of the 'old regime' (Pasquino, 2006). Coalition formation dynamics were founded, from the end of the nineteenth century to 1993, on the *conventio ad excludendum* that permanently excluded the PCI from office and put the DC permanently in office by constructing coalitions with the smaller parties of the centre, namely the Liberals, the Republicans and the Social Democrats and, from 1963 onwards, with both these smaller parties and the PSI (Bull and Newell, 2005, p. 39). The 'permanent' coalition between the DC and the PSI (slightly varied by the addition of other smaller parties as junior coalition partners) blocked the political system for more than 40 years, in the sense that the coalition between the two parties made an alliance between the PSI and the PCI impossible. Therefore, it ruled out the alternation in power by excluding the possibility of the left opposition replacing the DC in the government.

This peculiar political context, by guaranteeing only to few political actors (PSI and DC) the stable monopoly of access to state resources and government personnel (Calise, 1994), by incentivising the shift of political negotiations from government and parliamentary institutions towards party structures and by increasing the spoil system, triggered the rise of *particracy* (Deschouwer *et al*, 1996). The development of *particracy* within the Italian political system entailed the substantial enhancement of corruption and clientelism practices, and a huge increase in the public debt and inefficiency of the state (Cotta and Iernia, 1996). Consequently, what happened at the beginning of the nineties was 'a conjunctural expression of a much deeper seismic shift' (Bull and Rhodes, 2007, p. 658). Contextual factors, such as the end of communism and the economic crisis combined with structural factors, namely the advancement of globalisation and European integration, the increase of corruption and administrative inefficiency, the lack of legitimacy of political institutions and the consequent democratic deficit, caused a radical transformation of the



political system (Salvadori, 2001). These contextual and structural factors were enhanced and integrated by the action of specific actors such as new political parties like the Northern League and 'La Rete' (The Network) and the judiciary (Waters, 1994).

The fourth and last wave of structural reform processes concern the more recent and repeated attempt to bridge the gap between institutions and society through the transformation of Italian democracy from a consensual to a majoritarian model (Lijphart, 1999). In the mid-nineties, when the so-called 'Second Republic' was created, the political and international contexts were radically different to those of the 'First Republic' (which, as explained *supra*, collapsed in 1993–1994). New political parties were emerging (*Forza Italia*, *Lega Nord*, PDS), the electoral system was radically different and mainly majoritarian, and Italy was even more integrated within the European Union and for this reason was bounded by stronger external constraints. However, at the end of the nineties, within Italian society a new wave of diffuse feeling of distrust and discontent emerged, which was mainly because of the persistent distance between institutions and the changing economic, social and political context of the country.

The political elites' answer to this social request for political change was characterised, on the one hand, by the – still ongoing nowadays – attempt to reform the central and peripheral institutions of the state. These reform projects were mainly implemented by the centre-left governments at the end of the nineties, in particular through the reform of the fifth section of the Constitution. This section regulates the centre-periphery political and institutional relations and the reform changed it by enhancing competence devolution and policy decentralisation. Similar attempts were also put forward by the centre-right governments in 2001–2006 and in 2008–2013 with the various projects of 'federalist reforms' adopted and then only partially implemented. However, these reforms were clearly incomplete and in many cases were aborted, such as for instance the reform of the Constitution that was rejected by voters in the 2006 referendum. The result was what Bull and Rhodes (2007, p. 668) defined as 'institutional layering'. Italy's political system experienced a stratification of incomplete, inconsistent and contradictory institutional reforms.

On the other hand, the absence of effective institutional reforms led also to the emergence of political processes dominated by informal majoritarian practices, mainly as a result of the political role of Silvio Berlusconi. By this we mean that although the impact on the structure of the Italian political system of the majoritarian electoral reform adopted in 1993 is certainly relevant, nevertheless the system is still far from a majoritarian model. A model of majoritarian democracy of the Westminster type is built on efficient government formation, high levels of transparency and accountability as well as on a model of checks and balances constraining the legislature and the



executive (Schmidt, 2002, p. 147). On the contrary, in Italy we can see that the institutional reforms aimed at strengthening the majoritarian quality of political institutions have managed to introduce alternation in government, but have failed on almost all other accounts (Pasquino, 2006).

What has actually been introduced is a set of informal mechanisms vaguely resembling the majoritarian model but perpetuating, overall, most of the original consensual dynamics of the Italian political system and very often only paying lip service to bi-polar majoritarian mechanisms. Besides the actual development of pre-electoral coalitions, only informal majoritarian practices (but not real majoritarian political mechanisms) have been established such as for instance the pre-eminence of the role of the Prime Minister among other members of the cabinet (who seems thus to have at least informally lost his previous position of *primus inter pares*), the widespread use of the confidence vote to compact the parliamentary majority and the tight control of the parliamentary agenda by the government.

Nevertheless, all these informal practices introduced within Italian political institutions during the last 18 years are tightly linked to the political role of Silvio Berlusconi. Mr Berlusconi, through his 'personal' party and media empire, further marginalised the role of parliament in favour of the executive, and when in power, further concentrated political control over the media, strengthened informal negotiation practices and strongly pushed for the formation of a bi-polar party system without really trying to simplify and structure the Italian party system through effective institutional engineering. It is worth noting here that, although comparatively the Italian parliament has long been regarded as exceptionally strong *vis-à-vis*, the executive and numerous authors have argued that the quality of Italian democracy would be improved precisely if the executive were strengthened, the strengthening of the executive at the expense of the parliament has produced some perverse effects that undermine the quality of accountability of Italian political institutions. During Berlusconi's era, the executive experienced an exaggerated expansion of its normative powers (Musella, 2011) and controlled quite tightly the parliamentary agenda: for instance, in the XV legislature over 86 per cent of the legislation passed was initiated by the government (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007, p. 172; Grilli di Cortona, 2007; Morlino, 2007). These unintended consequences are mainly because of the specific political context and the peculiar political role of Berlusconi.

However, the 'imitation' of a majoritarian democracy without a real political and institutional transformation, which for example could have linked citizens' electoral choices with actual and targeted public policies, failed again to solve the historical problem of the gap between institutions and society. On the contrary, this relationship and the whole quality of Italian democracy has further deteriorated in the last two decades, causing inefficiency in the





functioning of institutions, disaffection on the part of citizens and encouraging an increased personalisation of politics and populist practices (Calise, 2006).

In addition, the very poor government performance either in terms of policy efficacy, economic growth and social cohesion, or in terms of citizens' perception, has also been identified as one of the consequences of failed institutional and political reforms (Rhodes, 2008). According to these criteria, in particular performance in socio-economic and anti-corruption policy implementation, efficacy of political institution reforms, media pluralism, public opinion support for and satisfaction with political institutions, Rhodes and Bull have provided significant evidence supporting their argument that *despite the promises of the new, so-called 'Second Republic' launched in the early 1990s, Italy remains the least well-governed country in Europe* (Rhodes, 2008; Rhodes and Bull, 2008). The analysis of the reforms implemented or even just put forward by Italian political elites over the last 15 years uncovers little real progress. The *immobilismo* (that is, the stalemate of political institutions and processes) seems to still reign within the Italian political system and society (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007; Rhodes, 2008; Rhodes and Bull, 2008).

To sum up, the lack of responsiveness of the political institutions towards societal demands, which constitutes the main determinant of the above-mentioned gap between the state and Italian society, seems to have become a constant feature of Italian democracy, and the political inability to bridge this gap seems to be the reason for the constant narrative of crisis.

### **Lack of Accountability and De-Democratisation Processes**

On the basis of this historical background, we can identify a series of research questions that could be explored throughout this study. First, considering the incomplete implementation and structural failure of the different waves of institutional and systemic reforms, it might be worth evaluating the role of such patterns as a key variable in understanding the recent Italian political developments. What are the underlying trends of the Second Republic and the possible outcomes of the unfinished transition towards a new political regime? Democracy is not a static system. On the contrary, on the basis of the comparative studies on the democratisation of transitional and new regimes, on the measurement of democratic institutions' performance and quality of democracy, one can assume that the processes contributing to the consolidation of new democracies are actually the same that also improve (or deteriorate) the quality of democracy in other countries.

However, despite their empirical and theoretical contributions to the political and scholarly debate, these studies have often adopted a merely descriptive approach rather than an analytical one, aimed at identifying explanatory

factors for democratisation processes and the main reasons for institutional and political change. Therefore, a simple analysis of the different institutional, economic, political and social dimensions nowadays characterising Italian democracy is not enough for understanding the nature and evolutions of the democratic performance of the Italian political system. On the contrary, it is necessary to investigate in-depth the processes determining the change in the nature and type of democracy over time. If we assume that the central interpretative key to understanding the Italian case is the continuous search for a solution to the inconsistency between institutions and society, we must ask in which direction the Italian democracy has evolved in recent decades. To what extent has this search for an instrument to lessen the distance between institutions and society led political elites towards a solution to this problem through a process of democratisation or, on the contrary, towards an increase in the distance through a process of de-democratisation (Tilly, 2007)?

Several scholars have assessed the recent decrease in the level of responsiveness of institutions and government (Bingham Powell, 2005), the increasing dissatisfaction and lack of political trust of Italian citizens (Cartocci, 2007; Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007), the spreading of populism and anti-politics within society and politics, which is the core element of what Rosanvallon (2006) called *contre-démocratie* negative. For instance, in 2000 only 11 per cent of Italian citizens showed medium or high levels of trust in parties, whereas their levels of trust in political institutions such as government, parliament, justice and public administration were all below 25 per cent (Isernia, 2003). These polling figures on growing levels of political mistrust among citizens remained constant during the 2000s (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007), whereas the level of satisfaction with Italian democracy passed from 21.7 per cent in 1996 (Anderson, 1997) to 34 per cent in 2011 (in comparison to an EU 27 average of 52 per cent, Eurobarometer data).<sup>3</sup> The situation seems to have grown even worse more recently, with the latest polls showing figures for trust in parties remaining under 4 per cent. Trust in parliament has dropped to 9 per cent, whereas the overall trust in the Italian State has dropped to under 30 per cent (Demos & Pi survey on Italians and the State 2011).<sup>4</sup>

These elements lead us to support the second hypothesis, namely that the consistency between the State and the demands expressed by citizens is further diminished during the Second Republic. However, the question that still needs to be addressed is the following: what are the underlying causes of these changes? In his analysis of the processes of democratisation and de-democratisation, Charles Tilly (2007) highlights a central point of division between the two opposite phenomena: while the first process involves a shift towards a *broad, equal, protective, mutually binding consultation* and the participation of the largest part of civil society, on the contrary the second process takes place always in the interest of a minority and tends to widen the gap



between institutions and society. Two indicators of the relations between institutions and citizens provide an apparently paradoxical analytical framework.

The first indicator is participation. Italy enjoys of one of the highest levels of political participation in elections among western European countries (Norris, 2002; Raniolo, 2007; Dalton, 2008). Along with this more conventional mode of participation, in recent years citizens have increasingly exploited other opportunities to participate in political life: party primaries, referenda, popular legislative initiatives, civil society movements and so on. Given these facts, can the presence of a strong demand for participation and low levels of political trust (and high levels of dissatisfaction with governmental performance) be explained?

For instance, Eurobarometer data from December 2011<sup>5</sup> shows that the proportion of citizens who have trust in their government in Italy in 2011 is 12 per cent, which is the second lowest proportion among EU Members States after Greece (8 per cent) and is also 12 percentage points lower than the EU 27 average. Trust in the national parliament, on the other hand, reaches 14 per cent in Italy, whereas in France it is 26 per cent, in UK 24 per cent, in Germany 42 per cent, in Spain 19 per cent and in Greece 12 per cent (the lowest percentage share is registered in Romania, with 9 per cent). In terms of the overall scale of political trust, a recent study based on the 1999–2001 European Values Study poll data (Marien and Hooghe, 2011), shows that on a scale ranging from 0 (no trust) to 3 (high trust), Italy's score is 1.42, the same as Spain, Romania and Slovakia, whereas the score for France is 1.46, for UK it is 1.66 and for Finland it is 1.85 (the highest).

To answer the question of the relations between institutions and citizens, it is necessary to take into account a second indicator: the dimension of accountability (O'Donnell, 1998; Schedler, 1999; Schmitter, 2005). In general, and particularly within competitive and pluralist normative conceptions of democracy, accountability concerns the obligation of political leaders and government to answer for their political decisions and the control that their principals (namely, the voters) can exert upon their actions. Schedler (1999, p. 17) pointed out that three main factors define the concept of institutional accountability: information, justification, and punishment. Over the last two decades, Italian democracy has experienced a gradual weakening of its strengths and qualities with regard to all the dimensions outlined above, namely the main dimensions of accountability (transparency and information circulation over political choices and their consequences, justification of policies and measures adopted by the executive and mechanisms of sanction).

Although some would say that, with the advent of the Second Republic and the emergence of party system bipolarity, there might have been an increase in overall accountability of political institutions in general and of the executive in particular, we consider that the political changes triggered by actual alternation

in power and more stable government coalitions should not be overstated (Pasquino, 2006; Verzichelli, 2006; Bull and Rhodes, 2007). In particular, the parliament is still highly fragmented and dominated by the parties, thus undermining its watchdog function, and the technical (if not sometimes informal) strengthening of the powers of the Prime Minister at the expense of the checks and balances of the system do not guarantee an improvement in the executive's decision-making performance nor the creation of a viable accountability circuit going from the voters to the legislature to the executive and back (Pasquino, 2006, 2002).

The result of this process of the decline of the democratic performance of the Italian political system is that the ability of citizens to control the institutions and the government has significantly diminished over time (Almagisti, 2008a). If we apply the concept of de-democratisation, we can conclude that political parties and the government of the country have played a crucial role in this process of institutional and political failure.

First, the combination of the anomalous media and political power concentration represented by the economic and political empire of Silvio Berlusconi has in fact reduced the independence and pluralism of information. This has significantly reduced the necessary public space for assuring a well-informed public opinion, which is crucial for citizens to provide the allocation of specific responsibilities to political actors for their policy choices. Second, because of the highly fragmented political system and its high polarisation, both in competitive and ideological terms, Italian political actors have gradually refused to assume responsibility for policy choices that could negatively affect their electoral support. Consequently, the most important political decisions have been long taken only as a consequence of the emergency and extraordinary situations and often under the pressure of an external actor (for example, the economic crisis and the role of the EU). The use of the mechanism of blame-shift has become rather extensive over the years. A typical example of this behaviour is the statement of Prime Minister Berlusconi addressed to EU President Van Rompuy during a September 2011 meeting on the economic crisis: *If you decide to give such recommendation, governments would be happy to increase the age of retirement because they would be compelled to do so [by Europe]. Now they are in big trouble because if they increase the age they lose votes* (*La Repubblica*, 13 September 2011). To sum up, the government and political actors have gradually ceased to take the responsibility for political and economic decisions.

Third, the political and institutional changes described above have contributed to diminish the instruments used to effectively hold the government and political parties accountable for the choices they make. Moreover, the 2005 electoral reform further weakened the control that citizens have over representatives by concentrating control of political recruitment in the hands of party



elites (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007; D'Alimonte and Fusaro, 2008; D'Alimonte and Chiaramonte, 2010). In our opinion, this means that the capacity of parliament to hold the executive to account is diminished by these consequences of the electoral reform. This is because Italian MPs depend now even more heavily for their careers on the candidate selection decisions of their parties and on their parties' decisions with regard to the funding of election campaigns. Moreover, the connection between the dependence of individual MPs on their parties on the one hand, and the (diminished) capacity of parliament to monitor and control the government on the other is not automatic but is because of the overall context of path-dependency of the Italian transition. During Berlusconi's era, the clientelistic and patronage practices still widespread in Italian politics (Della Porta and Vannucci, 2007) and the resilient consociational features of executive–legislative relations (Morlino, 2007) exacerbated this dynamic (which could be viewed as not necessarily negative) <sup>6</sup> and made Italian representatives (for the most part) subdued to the party that elected them to the point that their watchdog function was significantly diminished.

Finally, the combination of the increasing personalisation of politics, the emergence of personal parties and the 2005 electoral reform have weakened the ability of parliament to monitor and control the activities of the executive. In particular, Italian MPs depend completely, for their political career, for the financing of electoral campaigns and especially for their selection as candidates in subsequent elections, on political parties. This has a significant and negative effect on their room for manoeuvre. Moreover, several parties, such as the Northern League and the People of Freedom, are dominated by charismatic leaders and are organised on the basis of strongly hierarchical, undemocratic structures.

On the one hand, the emergence of personal parties, such as Northern League and *Forza Italia* (later People of Freedom), their accession with power and their permanence in government during the last decade (except for the brief parenthesis of the 2006–2008 Prodi II government) has significantly transformed the dynamics of parliamentary work (Pasquino, 2007). Within these highly hierarchical parties, the charismatic leader exerts a tight control over both candidate selection procedures and the agenda setting of the parliamentary majority. On the other hand, the last electoral reform introduced a closed list of candidates in large multi-member constituencies, and this feature of the new electoral system has handed enormous power to party leaders. In most parties, the leader tightly rule political recruitment in the context of a political system not only traditionally based on party government, but also still significantly partitocratic and plagued by clientelistic and patronage practices (Pasquino, 2006). As a consequence, when personal parties have been in government during the last 10 years, the influence of party leaders over MPs' individual political career and over the functioning of parliamentary party groups has significantly weakened

their independence and their capacity to exploit the already few instruments for implementing executive accountability to the legislature.

This situation has been partially counterbalanced by the fact that if, during the last fifteen years, on the one hand, the traditional accountability control exerted by the legislature over the executive has been progressively weakened, on the other hand, this control has actually been exerted by the increasingly active role of the President of the Republic and the Constitutional Court (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007). To sum up, the last 20 years have seen several attempts and the eventual failure of the political project aimed at transforming Italy from a consensual to a majoritarian democracy towards an efficiently organised polity. Between the choices of radically transforming the model of democracy (that is extremely difficult, even comparing the Italian case with other democracies in history) or adapting the consensual model, political actors actually chose a third way: the imitation of the majoritarian democracy through the multiplication of informal majoritarian political practices within a model of consensual democracy. This decision, rather than narrowing the distance between the State and society, on the contrary has radically decreased the accountability of institutions, has strengthened the development of corruption and public administration inefficacy, and has also set up conditions for launching a political and institutional process of de-democratisation.

## **Discussion and Conclusions: The Research Questions of this Study**

The need to appraise the recent evolution of Italian democracy in order to better understand the current transition process and political turmoil is the main reason for this special issue. This seems particularly relevant at a time of probable and rapid political change, which seems to have derived from the consequences of Berlusconi's resignation in November 2011, the subsequent end of the Berlusconi IV government and the establishment of the technical government led by the former European Commissioner Mario Monti. The contributions of different scholars presented in this special issue may help to find an answer to the several questions raised above and more specifically, they will offer an insight into the topic of Italian political transition and democracy from a multidisciplinary point of view.

The special issue begins with a historical contribution by Donald Sassoon addressing the problem of the Italian 'anomaly'. As has been previously pointed out (Pasquino, 1985; Sartori, 1993), a longitudinal approach is essential for understanding the different historical transformations of Italian democracy. Although the traditional analyses of the so-called 'anomalies' of democratic regimes have often focused on the Italian political system, underlining the fragmentation of the party system, the lack of alternation in power and the



government's chronic instability, the author moves away from this path focusing instead the analysis of democratic performance on two phenomena characterising Italian democracy: the presence of a strong system of organised crime and the backwardness of the economic structures. The subsequent article by Mario Telò addresses the evolution of Italian democracy in the context of European integration. The article underlines the ambivalence of European ideology and positions within the different Italian governments, and the continuous shift of Italian executives between pro-European approaches and openly Eurosceptic positions. The weight of the European Union in national politics, as well as the discrepancies between the pro-European discourse of Italian political elites and the actual (rather poor) implementation of EU policies by national, regional and local levels of government will be taken into account.

Moreover, Marc Lazar in his article returns to the concept of 'anomaly', although this time in the context of a comparative analysis. The author considers a number of indicators of change in Italian democracy, such as the rise of political disaffection, the personalisation and 'presidentialisation' of Italian politics and the privatisation of political institutions and of political competition, and through a comparison with the quality of democracy in France, the article concludes that Italy can be considered as a specific case of a more general transformation trend of democracy in western Europe. In the next contribution, Leonardo Morlino addresses the evolution of the model of the Italian democracy within the transition from the First to the Second Republic. The article identifies and evaluates the constitutive features of Italian democracy during the Second Republic and present a series of explanatory factors for understanding the limited nature of the political change brought on by the regime transition during the nineties. The article argues in fact that this transition has not substantially changed the consensual model of democracy characterising the Italian polity since the sixties.

Finally, Vivien Schmidt analyses the political implications of the Italian economic model. By adopting a comparative perspective, the author explores the characteristics of the Italian economy in relation to the different models of European capitalism. The author also evaluates the main consequences of the strong role of the state in the economy on Italy's economic performance, as well as the relationship between the effectiveness of political institutions and the effectiveness of public policies.

Probably, the most important feature of this special issue is the effort to mobilise different disciplines such as political science, economics, history and sociology, in order to provide, on the one hand, a rigorous and comprehensive overview of the quality of the Italian democracy. This evaluation explores the main features, singularities and evolutionary trajectories of the Italian democratic system by constantly developing the analysis within the European



context and within a comparative perspective. On the other hand, this overview of the quality of Italian democracy also provides a detailed study of some specific issues that have recently characterised contemporary Italian public debate: governmental performance; the attempts to reform the constitutional order; the relationship between the executive and legislative; and the Italian model of political economy.

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## Notes

- 1 That said, in principle, contemporary Italy could be all these things at the same time. For example, if all Western European countries are moving backwards in terms of quality of democracy, in some sense, then any one of them could be both a 'backward' country and a 'laboratory of future trends'. In any case, for reasons of simplicity and for the sake of a simpler central argument for this article, at least for the moment we consider the alternative evaluations of Italian democracy as being mutually exclusive.
- 2 It is clear, however, that this type of explanation would inevitably be like any other explanation (including those based on long-term factors or on a combination of short- and long-term factors), namely, an explanation from a given point of view.
- 3 Standard EuroBarometer 76.3, released in December 2011 and accessible at this address: [ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76\\_first\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76_first_en.pdf) (accessed on 18 June 2012).
- 4 The entire report on the 2011 survey was published in January 2012 and can be accessed here: [www.demos.it/rapporto.php](http://www.demos.it/rapporto.php), 'The dissatisfied society: The roots of political change in Italy' (website accessed on 17 June 2012).
- 5 Standard EuroBarometer 76.3, released in December 2011 and accessible at this address: [ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76\\_first\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76_first_en.pdf) (accessed 18 June 2012).
- 6 For instance, in the United Kingdom, MPs are at least as heavily dependent on their parties, and yet the United Kingdom is often held up as an example of a parliament that performs very well in terms of holding the executive to account.

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