

Italian politics since the election of 2008: Reflections of a British political scientist

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No assessment of the current 'state of play' of Italian politics can get very far without reflection on the significance, just over a year later, of the general election of 2008. This is because so much changed, and at the time seemed likely to change, as a consequence of it. The outcome (if not the campaign) was sensational for at least three reasons. Most obviously, there was the landslide victory for Silvio Berlusconi, making him one of Europe's most successful politicians of recent decades. Second, there was, in spectacular contrast to 2006, an unprecedented concentration of votes and seats on a number of actors such as to bring electoral and party fragmentation to levels well comparable with those elsewhere in Europe. Third, there was the absence from Parliament, for the first time since the War, of any parties representing the socialist or communist traditions.

These three features gave rise to a corresponding number of expectations about how the nature of Italian politics might change as a result. One was that there might be a significant improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of government policy making and the emergence of a more clearly 'Westminster style' of interaction between government and opposition. A second was that there might be a final conclusion to the so-called never-ending transition in Italian politics. A third was that there might be an increase in the level of protest activity. Let us begin by considering, using data for the initial months of the new legislature, how much credence can be given to these expectations.

The first expectation was rooted in the unprecedented strength of the incoming government, staffed by just two groups, one of whose leaders – unusually from the perspective of the post-war period as a whole – was Prime Minister. This prime minister was, moreover, one who led a coalition assembled *prior* to the election and whose position was therefore directly legitimised by the outcome itself. Again, this was relatively unusual from a long-term perspective. Finally, the incoming prime minister was one who exercised unassailable power over his own party – essentially his own personal creation and without any factions to speak of. Together, these three features ensured that, unlike the 'mediator prime ministers' of the First Republic, the new occupant of Palazzo Chigi would be an authoritative leader enjoying more or less complete freedom of manoeuvre with his cabinet colleagues and considerable powers of leverage over his parliamentary followers. Of course much of this had been true of the 2001 outcome as well – but then Berlusconi's power had declined over time as he had sought to come to terms with the difficulties of retaining a popular following while also managing the inevitable tensions that arose in a coalition of four parties. Now the coalition consisted of just two parties one of which was much larger than the other.

Meanwhile, a similar process of simplification among the ranks of the non-governing parties as well, and the consequent emergence of a 'shadow cabinet' drawn from the largest of these parties, sustained an expectation that the legislature would see more straightforward patterns of interaction between more cohesive majority and minority coalitions than had been the case in the past. Politics since the war had of course always been based on the assumption that at any given moment certain parties

were part of the governing coalition and the remainder part of the ‘opposition’. However, in a context of high fragmentation, the legislative behaviour of the parliamentary groups had often belied such simple conceptualisations with most proposals that made it on to the statute book doing so thanks to ample majorities drawn from across the governing/opposition divide.

One of the ways in which we can test the validity of the expectation of greater efficiency and effectiveness in policy making is in terms of the success rate of government bills, that is, in terms of the proportion of government-sponsored legislative proposals which, once introduced, then actually make it to the statute book. Of course the measure is vulnerable to the law of anticipated reactions and can tell us little about the efficiency and effectiveness of policy in substantive terms. However, with these caveats, the measure ought to be quite revealing. Primary responsibility for initiating public policy lies with national governments. Therefore, their ability to ‘get their way’ would seem to be a necessary pre-requisite for efficiency and effectiveness in the policy-making process as a whole.

In the initial months, the current government’s success rate does not seem to have stood out especially as compared to earlier legislatures: at the end of February it had secured approval for 68.6 percent of its proposals for a post-war average of 73.7 percent. Arguably, the comparison is unfair: at any point in the initial stages of a legislature a proportion of government bills destined to be approved, will still be under consideration. But the picture changes little when we compare the period since the start of the *current* legislature with the *corresponding* period following the start of the *preceding* legislature: during that period, the success rate was 64.3 percent, even though the government in office at that time was litigious and its parliamentary support base, in the Senate at least, fragile.¹

Evidence of the emergence of a ‘Westminster’ style of politics is also thin. This can be seen when we ask about the extent to which, in the new legislature, shadow ministers actually challenged their opponents in public – by means of asking parliamentary questions as so on – and cooperated with the other opposition parties in so doing. Seven months after the start of the legislature five of the eighteen shadow cabinet ministers (not including Walter Veltroni himself) who were parliamentarians had not made use of any of the procedures by which deputies and senators can ask questions of ministers. The remaining thirteen had presented 29 questions for written reply, 11 questions for oral reply, 14 questions for reply in committee and only 2 interpellations. Moreover, 22 of the questions for written reply had been asked by just one shadow minister, Ermete Realacci. A sample of 321 of the 2,220 questions put by the opposition parties confirmed that coordination between them was sporadic, only 27 questions (less than 10 percent) having been asked by parliamentarians of one group with the support of any of the other opposition groups.²

What, then, of the expectation of an end to the ‘transition’ – that process of institutional and constitutional overhaul that had been given a significant boost by the political upheavals of the early 1990s? Prior to 2008, party-system fragmentation had made an end to the process seem impossible by turning large numbers of parties into

¹ Own elaboration based on data available at www.senato.it

² Author’s elaboration of official data drawn from www.parlamento.it

'partisan veto players' all wanting change, but changes going in contrasting directions so that a majority in favour of any *given* set of changes became impossible to construct. After 2008, the two largest parties had many more votes than required by the Constitution to enable them, if they could agree among themselves, to introduce change with the certainty that it would not be vulnerable to repeal as had happened in 2006. And the nature of the election campaign suggested that they *might* agree: each had apparently abandoned a style of competition – reciprocal denials of the claims of the other to legitimacy – that had hitherto helped to render institutional reform intractable.

That the agreement never materialised has to be put down to Berlusconi's conflict of interests which shot to the top of the political agenda in the election's immediate aftermath, revealing that there were inherent tensions between dialogue on constitutional reform, and the requirements of effective opposition. On the one hand, the notably restrained nature of Veltroni's response to the lodo Alfano and to legislation to circumvent a European Court judgment that television frequencies occupied by Retequattro should be ceded to Europa 7 was insufficient to prevent Berlusconi, in July, casting doubt on the prospects of dialogue and accusing the Partito Democratico (PD) 'of having brought into Parliament extremist and punitive fringes'.³ On the other hand, the PD leader's attempts to keep hopes of such dialogue alive were unable to satisfy radical critics who argued that the effect would be to prevent the opposition from keeping the Government accountable; and they were undermined also by opinion polls suggesting that while a majority of those who had voted for the centre left in April judged the opposition to be conducting itself in a balanced way, significant minorities felt that it was too docile.⁴

Finally, the expectation that the election might give rise to a growth in the volume of protest activity was based on awareness that

- though the radical left parties of the Sinistra l'Arcobaleno (SA) had been expelled from *Parliament*, their supporters remained a not insignificant body of opinion in the *country*;
- the 2008 election took place against the background of a seeming rise in protest activity in general (e.g. according to Censis,⁵ the number of street demonstrations of various kinds rose from 3,576 in 2000, to 7,022 in 2004);
- the PD did not look well placed to take on the task of offering, for supporters of the radical left, an alternative institutional channel for the representation of their concerns, given Veltroni's decision to abandon an 'anti-Berlusconi' style of opposition.

The expectation that, under these circumstances, frustrations would be expressed through non-institutional, potentially destabilising channels seemed to find initial confirmation in the occasionally violent demonstrations that took place in the autumn in streets and universities against the Government's education reforms. But

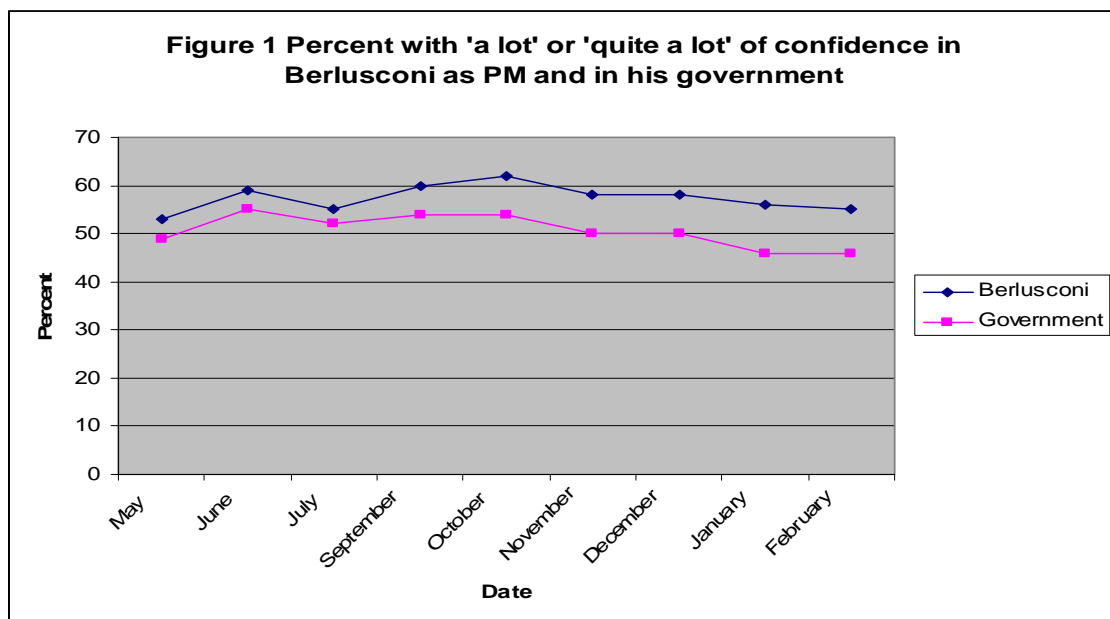
³ A. Montanari, 'Riforme, scontro tra Berlusconi e Pd Veltroni: No al dialogo se c'è l'immunità', *la Repubblica*, 19 July 2008, p.7.

⁴ R. Mannheimer, R. 'Il Pd delude il 40% dei suoi: troppo remissivo' , *Corriere della Sera*, 15 June 2008, p.11.

⁵ 39° Rapporto annuale sulla situazione sociale del paese, <http://www.censis.it/>

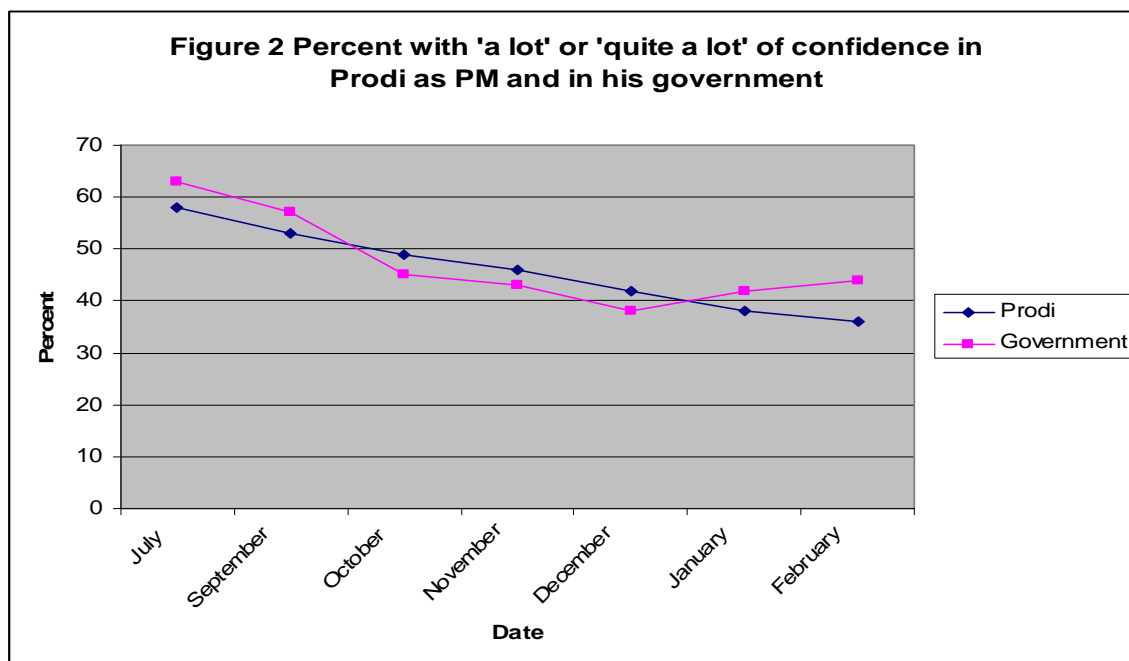
the protests rapidly died a death: the biggest single set of demonstrations took place on 30 October when the trade unions brought school and university staff out on strike and there were protest marches in several cities, with the one in Rome involving a million people according to the organisers. After this date the number of protests declined in size and frequency and the proposals that had given rise to them passed into law on 29 October as far as the schools were concerned and on 8 January as far as the universities were concerned.

Expectations confounded then. But if this is to suggest what the significance of the 2008 election is *not*, what *has* been its significance for Italian politics? Three things stand out. First, whatever the reality, the election outcome has created a widespread lasting *perception* of an improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of government. When in August 2008, the American magazine, *Newsweek*, published an article praising Berlusconi for having, as it put it, ‘brought order to chaotic Italy’⁶ it reflected a public mood whose endurance is captured by the data shown in Figure 1. While at the start of Berlusconi’s mandate 53 percent had ‘a lot’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in him as Prime Minister, eight months on the proportion was 55 percent. The proportion expressing ‘a lot’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the Government as a whole remained more or less stable at around a half. Now compare these with the proportions expressing confidence in Romano Prodi and his government over the first eight months of *their* mandates (Figure 2). Though they start out from proportions actually higher than those marking the start of the current prime minister and government, the proportions then fall away rapidly to levels much lower than those enjoyed by the current incumbents.



Source: IPR Marketing, www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali

⁶ J. Barigazzi, ‘Miracle in 100 days. How Berlusconi brought order to chaotic Italy and what comes next’, *Newsweek*, 9 August 2008, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/151669/output/print>



Source: IPR Marketing, www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali

Why the difference? The answer is that the relative compactness of the governing majority means Berlusconi is much better placed than his predecessor to create the *impression* of good performance by using support mobilisation as a key resource for governing, while using governing as an instrument to build and sustain support. Prodi was unable to do this because, having to manage a coalition composed of nine parties each driven by the 2005 electoral law to keep salient its own distinctiveness, he was never able effectively to use communication as a tool in the battle to control the political agenda. *Litigiousness* then became equated with *policy-making ineffectiveness* so that the Government became caught in a vicious circle, opposition portrayals of it fuelling the decline in its poll ratings. Thereby, the more it was *portrayed* as litigious and ineffective, the more litigious and unstable it *actually* became as the parties, first, argued about how to retrieve the position and then came to be driven by a logic of *si salvi chi può*.

Second, the election outcome has created a deep and prolonged crisis on the left and centre left. In the run-up to 2008, Veltroni had been driven by the thought that by contesting the election (almost) without allies he would revolutionise the fragmented party system. If he failed in his primary objective – to secure the most votes and thus win the majority premium that would give him an overall seat majority – he would, as likely ‘runner up’, secure his second: to free himself, in the future, from the need for electoral coalitions with other parties. Supporters of the parties he had refused to coalesce with would have to choose between voting for the party (his own) with the best chance of stopping Berlusconi – and voting for parties unlikely, on their own, to surmount the exclusion threshold. Yet failure to achieve his first objective ensured that Veltroni *also* failed to achieve his second: though he did attract votes from other parties’ supporters, in failing to attract enough of them to *win*, he did nothing to eliminate the need for alliances if he and his colleagues are ever to beat the centre right. Consequently, the centre left remains every bit as divided and fragmented as it has ever been.

In the first place, Antonio Di Pietro, has been hard at work seeking to consolidate his image as a far more consistent and aggressive opponent of the incumbent government and prime minister than the PD leaders, often attacking them for timidity. The latter, in turn, perceive Di Pietro's colourful focus on Berlusconi's misdemeanours as cutting little ice with ordinary voters located *beyond* the centre left's confines (who, they believe, look to the coalition to devote greater attention to the economy and social welfare). They also perceive Di Pietro's style as one that assists Berlusconi; for, by allowing him to dub the opposition as a home to intolerance; and by allowing him to demand of the PD repudiation of its ally's more strident pronouncements, it enables him, every time Di Pietro makes one of his more colourful outbursts, to embarrass the PD and drive a wedge between the opposition parties.

For two reasons, the wedge is unlikely to get smaller in the short term. On the one hand, Italia dei Valori (IdV) and the PD clearly fish in the same pool of voters. This makes the PD and IdV direct competitors, and all the evidence is that in this competition, Di Pietro's strategy brings him considerable success: he has understood that notwithstanding Veltroni's decision to abandon an 'anti-Berlusconi' style of opposition, such a style is, as the recent European elections suggest, what centre-left voters apparently *want*: thus, IdV's vote rose to 8.0 percent from the 4.4 percent he had obtained in 2008, even while, at 36.5 percent, the combined support for the parties – the PD, IdV and the Radicali – that had made up the centre left coalition last year remained virtually the same (it was 37.5 percent last year). On the other hand, the PD cannot refrain from taking its distance from Di Pietro because if it is to make any electoral headway whatsoever, then besides speaking successfully to radical spirits, it needs also to appeal to moderate elements located towards the centre of the political spectrum. A dilemma if ever there was one.

Meanwhile, the parties of the radical left seem to have been embroiled in almost continuous conflict over questions of strategy ever since, in the election's immediate aftermath, the failure of the SA forced them to re-consider its future. What has stood out about this conflict is that all to a degree have preached the virtues of 'left unity' – but they have been divided within and among themselves about the form and the substance of that unity. Such conflicts often surprise – and no more so than in the aftermath of the recent European election when divisions apparently caused both the Rifondazione e Comunisti Italiani list, under Paolo Ferrero, and Sinistra e Libertà, under Nichi Vendola, to fail to surmount the four percent threshold (while suggesting that, with a combined total of 6.5 percent, their dramatic losses the previous year had been temporary, not permanent).

Yet surprise is misplaced; for it is not obvious that unity must necessarily bring an overall growth in support for the parties in question. This depends on whether unity can attract *additional* voters beyond those *already* supporting the parties concerned; and it also depends on whether *these* voters will transfer their support to the united entity (which they may resist doing if they are strongly attached to their existing party but dislike the one(s) with which their party unites). They may be especially resistant where the process of unity creates internal conflict over what the identity of the united entity should be. The PD could certainly not be said to have avoided such conflict – so how much less reasonable was it to expect it of parties like those of the radical left, whose actions are much more heavily constrained by the attachment to normative principles of various kinds?

When this is appreciated, then it becomes possible to view the conflict between Vendola and Ferrero with *understanding* rather than incredulity. In the months leading up to their split, Vendola was driven by the view that advance for the left required the attempt to create a new united and pluralistic organisation, believing that it could find an interested audience among pressure-group activists, in the trade unions and among the new social movements. Ferrero's position on the other hand was that inherent in Vendola's position was a danger of the liquidation of the party – whose organisational reinforcement was on the contrary necessary if one were to avoid the twin danger of left unity being deprived of specific horizons, and the risk of conflict among the potential constituent parties over what the nature of the new organisation was to be. It would be entirely inappropriate to dismiss either view, a priori, as foolish.

Finally, the third significant consequence of 2008 is inextricably bound up with the first two and is equally obvious. It is confirmation of Berlusconi's hegemonic position in Italian politics – a position only slightly dented – perhaps by the Noemi Letizia affair? – in the European election, which saw his party take 35.3 percent of the vote, somewhat below the average of 40.2 percent attributed to him by opinion polls from the end of February.⁷ On the one hand, he is the fulcrum around which the centre right is built and whose unity depends almost entirely on his continued popularity. On the other hand, opposition to him is the only common denominator of the parties on the centre left – and thus the source of their weakness and division; for while the PD has sought to expand towards the centre by shelving anti-Berlusconi rhetoric, this has deprived it still further of any clear identity leaving it vulnerable to the incursions of its allies to which many of its voters feel closer in any event.⁸ In short, it remains the case, now as it was before the election, that 'to be on the centre right means to support Berlusconi, to be on the centre left means to oppose him';⁹ and this suggests the likelihood of having to wait until the entrepreneur leaves the political scene before the longer-term future of Italian politics becomes discernible.

In the meantime the sheer magnitude of Berlusconi's current influence carries an obvious danger, for his populism renders him intolerant of institutional and procedural restrictions on the use of power. He recently declared that a reform of the Constitution was necessary because it was introduced thanks to the support of 'ideologically motivated forces that looked to the Russian constitution as a model'.¹⁰ Meanwhile, he has complained about the Prime Minister's powers and the number of parliamentarians, calling for a popular legislative initiative to engineer change in these areas. To the present writer, these could read like stark warnings.

⁷ [http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elezioni_europee_del_2009_\(Italia\)](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elezioni_europee_del_2009_(Italia))

⁸ I. Diamanti, 'Il "non luogo dei democratici" *la Repubblica*, 21 December 2008.

⁹ G. Urbani, Interview with Aldo Cazzullo, 'Urbani: il progetto del «nuovo» Pdl? La debolezza delPd ci contagia', *Corriere della Sera*, 15 January 2009, p.6.

¹⁰ www.ilpopolodellaliberta.it/notizie/arc_14979.htm