

The Italian party system between change and stabilisation on new basis

Alessandro Chiaramonte and Vincenzo Emanuele

29 May 2014¹

The Italian party system since few years has entered into a state of fast deinstitutionalization² (Chiaramonte and Emanuele, 2014) characterised by the dealignment between parties and voters and thus by a high volatility of voting behaviour (and of nonvoting). Striking evidence for this was provided at the 2013 general elections. The Five Stars Movement (M5S) has outnumbered the mainstream parties collecting eight million and a half new voters. We have received further confirms for this trend at the 2014 European elections, which are undoubtedly deeply affected by domestic political dynamics, although they are clearly not general elections.

After the crushing electoral result of 2013, it could have been expected a consolidation of the electoral results or a return to the previous *status quo*. The first hypothesis would have foreshadowed a sort of “re-institutionalisation” of the party system on different basis with respect to the past and therefore far from the typical bipolar structure of the Second Republic. The second hypothesis would have instead characterised the 2013 results as a sporadic, as a kind of temporary deviation from an established political track. None of the two hypotheses hold at the empirical test even taking into account the different stakes, the different turnout levels, and the different electoral system between the European and the national elections. In fact, the electoral strength of the main political parties has been newly and profoundly affected although it did not reverse to the pre-2013 *status quo* condition. The M5S has indeed seen its

¹ This article was originally published in Italian on the CISE website. It appears in English for the first time in this book.

² See Huntington (1968) on the concept of deinstitutionalization. For a specific reference to deinstitutionalization of party systems, see Casal Bertoa (2014).

electoral support slightly reduced, but collecting 21% of the votes, it has reaffirmed its considerable role in the Italian party system. The centre right has managed to preserve about the same share of votes obtained the previous year, although divided and lacking a common political perspective, especially because of the criteria of proportional representation in the European electoral system. The Democratic Party (PD) has considerably increased its electoral support both in absolute terms (2.5 million votes more) and in percentage terms (+15.4%). Therefore, it was able to overcome the 40% threshold previously achieved only by three political parties in the national elections (Christian Democracy in 1948, 1953, and 1958). Conversely, Mr. Monti's European Choice has fallen below the 1% starting from the 10% registered at the last 2013 general elections.

A set of indicators will be employed to emphasise the features of the new party system and to measure the extent of the change compared to the past. The first element to be considered is clearly the index of volatility, measuring the net aggregate change in the votes between two successive elections (Pedersen, 1979; Bartolini, 1986). This index can be measured by summing the percentage differences of the vote shares obtained by political parties between one election and the following one. Volatility is thus a measure of stability (and instability) of a political system. In the last 20 years, the value of the index of volatility has followed a swaying pattern, reaching for two times in critical elections³ impressive values (1994 and 2013), to decrease in the central phase (1996–2008) of restructuring of the party system it has emerged after 1994. Table 1 shows the values for the index of total volatility computed from the comparison of the 2013 national elections and the 2014 European ones and then between the latter and the 2009 European elections. The value of net aggregate change that is produced by comparing the two European elections is extraordinary high (35.2) reproducing the record value registered between the 2008 and the 2013 general elections.⁴ Between 2009 and 2014, our system has changed considerably for at least three reasons: the appearance of the M5S, the process of fragmentation involving the Italian right and specifically the People Freedom's Party (PDL), and the opposite process of concentration of the votes on the PD (with the disappearance of the IDV). The most significant evidence is provided by the volatility index from the comparison between 2013 and 2014: in only one year, the change in volatility has been 18.2%. This value would be deemed explosive in other political systems. Compared to the “electoral earthquake” (Chiaramonte and De Sio, 2014) produced one year

³ On the concept of “critical elections,” see Key (1955).

⁴ On this point, see Chiaramonte and Emanuele (2013, 99).

ago, the most significant change involved the expansion of the PD and the simultaneous shrinkage of the centre political pole. In fact, the high value of the index of block volatility (15.7%) shows that almost the whole change in the vote shares depends on the shifts between blocks rather than among parties within them. CISE has performed an analysis of electoral flows in various cities confirming that the two processes are in fact connected: Renzi managed to acquire the electorate previously supporting Mario Monti without losing the support from the left (Tsipras, Greens, and Idv hold the same amount of votes obtained by Left and Freedom and Civic Revolution in 2013, namely, remaining in a marginal political position) and thus bringing the PD towards the centre of the political system. The PD is now a centre-left party that can potentially dominate the system (although it might be too early to advance such an interpretation). To be safe, its two oppositions (Grillo and Berlusconi) cannot find a common ground, and even within the right wing, it looks quite unlikely the aggregation of the various political areas (Northern League, Brothers of Italy, *Forza Italia*, and the NCD-UdC).

A further indicator signals the level of “de-structuring” beyond the extremely high values of electoral volatility. This is represented by the rate of innovation in political parties, measuring the vote shares obtained by new political parties, or electoral lists associated with symbols and denominations not available for the previous elections. This second aspect relates to the volatility on the political supply side, and it is quite commonly observable in the Italian case. The instability in the system is thus produced by this volatility of the supply joint with the volatility of the demand side (voters’ electoral choices). In 2014, the vote share for “new” political parties has been 31.4% higher than in 2013 while the increase compared to 2009 reaches even the 52.5%, especially due to the contribute of the M5S. In other words, political parties older than five years collect less than the half of total votes.

If the volatility index and the rate of political innovation confirm the historical change, other indicators show a reversal in the trend with respect to the recent past. The unprecedented success of the PD brings back the index of bipolarism to the values registered in 2009 (62%), following the plunge to 51% in 2013. More than six out of 10 votes flowed to the two major parties, a value that is comparable to those observed for the other European democracies. Conversely political fragmentation, a historical malaise afflicting the Italian party system, results quite moderate. The effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979) provides us a synthetic measure of the number of parties in the electoral arena. The indicator is particularly effective to provide a count of the political parties while taking into account their electoral strength. For instance, in a perfect two-party system and the two lists obtaining both 50% of the votes, the index would assume value 2. In 2014, the index equalled 4, with a sharp decrease with respect to the 5.3 reported in 2013 (and much

Table 1 – Indicators of the party system: comparing 2009, 2013, and 2014 elections

Indicators of party system		
Total volatility	2014-2013	18.2
	2014-2009	35.2
Block volatility	2014-2013	15.7
Rate of political innovation	2014-2013	31.4
	2014-2009	52.5
Index of two-party system	2009	62.4
	2013	51.0
	2014	62.0
Effective number of electoral parties (ENEP)	2009	4.5
	2013	5.3
	2014	4.0
Number of lists with at least 1% vote share	2009	9.0
	2013	10.0
	2014	7.0
Index of vote nationalisation (sPSNS)	2009	0.829
	2013	0.859
	2014	0.868

Source: Authors' elaboration on official data.

smaller than the record value of 7.6 reached in 1994). Contemporaneously, the number of electorally relevant lists (> 1%) decreases to 7, with respect to the 9 presented in 2009 and the 10 in 2013.

The last indicator that has been taken into account to analyse the characteristics of the Italian party system is the level of territorial homogeneity in the political support for the various parties. The aim is to understand whether political parties are able to represent the interests and the preferences of voters throughout the nation or rather if their action tends to be constrained within smaller territorial units, thus favouring a geographically differentiated electoral competition.

To evaluate this aspect, it is useful to make reference to the concept of nationalisation of the vote. This element can be defined as the degree of homogeneity characterising the electoral support for political parties across different geographical units. It can be measured through the standardised Party System Nationalization Score (sPSNS) developed by Bochsler (2010). The index ranges between 0 and 1. Higher values represent a situation of greater territorial homogeneity of vote choices. At the bottom of Table 1 have been

reported the values of the index for 2009, 2013, and 2014. It can be acknowledged a clear trend of homogenisation of electoral support. In 2009, the Italian party system appeared particularly regionalised, especially due to the presence of the Northern League, contributing to the decrease of the territorial homogeneity of the index with its 10.2% of vote share. In 2013, the sPSNS increases especially for the effect of the M5S, emerging as a big national party receiving electoral support nationwide. Its nationalisation value is extremely high (0.912) while the main local party—the Northern League—fall to 4.1% of the votes. Notwithstanding the fact that the *Forza Italia* (0.877 vs. 0.916 reported by the PDL in 2009) and the M5S (0.895) are especially capitalising on Southern votes, the index has further increased for the present elections. The reasons underlying this pattern are essentially two. In the first place, the PD exhibits an extraordinary degree of territorial homogeneity. This is particularly true if we consider that the main party of the left has traditionally concentrated its electoral support in the area formerly known as the Red Belt while it was particularly weak in the other areas of the country (particularly in Sicily and the North-East). The 0.919 value reported by the PD (with respect to the 0.878 registered five years ago) has only two precedents in the Second Republic (*Forza Italia* and the post-Christian Democratic Party *La Margherita* in 2001). The second reason explaining the high level of nationalisation of the European vote is the decreasing local character of the electoral support for the Northern League. The main Italian regionalist party has in fact presented its electoral lists in all the Italian electoral districts, reporting a moderate success also outside of its traditional Northern areas (2.1% in the Center and 1% in the Southern Islands). The party led by Matteo Salvini is characterised by a value of 0.524, markedly greater to the 0.403 in 2013.

In conclusion, the 2014 European elections provide us contrasting evidence about the rugged path undertaken by the Italian party system in the last years. On the one hand, a reducing fragmentation and an increasing nationalisation lead us to the consideration that a further deinstitutionalisation of the party system linked to the atomisation of its constitutive elements and the centrifugal territorialisation of the electoral support seems unlikely. On the other, the enduring volatility in voting behaviours leads us to exclude the hypothesis of a (incipient) reinstitutionalisation. The process of change undertaken by the party system is thus still ongoing and in a state that does not allow to foresee its outcome.

References

- Bartolini, S. (1986). La volatilità elettorale. *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, vol. 16, pp. 363–400.

- Bochsler, D. (2010). Measuring party nationalisation: A new Gini-based indicator that corrects for the number of units. *Electoral Studies*, vol. 29, pp. 155–168.
- Caramani, D. (2004). *The nationalization of politics: the formation of National electorates and party systems in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- CasalBértoa, F. (2014). Party systems and cleavage structures revisited: A sociological explanation of party system institutionalization in East Central Europe. *Party Politics*, vol. 20, pp. 16–36.
- Chiaramonte, A., and De Sio, L. (eds.). *Terremoto elettorale. Le elezioni politiche 2013*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Chiaramonte, A., and Emanuele, V. (2014). *Bipolarismo Addio? Il Sistema Partitico tra Cambiamento e De-Istituzionalizzazione*, in A. Chiaramonte and L. De Sio (eds.), *Terremoto elettorale. Le elezioni politiche 2013*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Emanuele, V. (2013). *Vote (de)-nationalization and party system change in Italy (1948–2013)*, paper presented at the RISP Workshop *Politics and policies in times of economic crisis*, Siena, 14 June 2013.
- Huntington, S. (1968). *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Key, V. O. (1955). A Theory of Critical Elections. *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 17, p. 3–18.
- Laakso, M., and Taagepera, R. (1979). “Effective” Number of Parties: A Measure with Application to West Europe. *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 12, pp. 3–27.
- Pedersen, M.N. (1979). The Dynamics of European Party Systems: Changing Patterns of Electoral Volatility. *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 7, pp. 1–26.
- Sikk, A. (2005). How unstable? Volatility and the genuinely new parties in Eastern Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 44, pp. 391–412.