

A “revolutionary” election: The Italian party system is the most simplified in Europe

Luigi Di Gregorio

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The Italian party system has always been described as characterized by an excessive number of political parties. This feature is considered as one of the main causes of the poor performance of Italian democratic institutions. In a parliamentary democracy, as Italy is, parliament has the last word. If in parliament (moreover with two chambers with equal powers) there are too many parties, coalition governments are the rule (often coalitions too large and heterogeneous), and this slows down, if not paralyzes, the decision-making because of blackmail, veto players, and the like.

Several party leaders have argued for years—Berlusconi more than others—to be slowed by “small parties” and that Italian people “must learn how to vote,” favouring larger parties and not expressing their vote for minor parties. Grillo says more or less the same thing when he states his movement should get to 51% of the vote. His movement (Movimento 5 Stelle) does not want to be in coalition with any other party: it points to the majority of votes (and of seats) to have a single party government. If Grillo fails to achieve 51%, as for Berlusconi, it’s because Italians do not know how to vote unlike the voters of other established democracies: this is their thesis.

The last European elections, however, tell us that everything is changing. While Italian political leaders—but also the most part of comparative politics books—tell us that Italy should point to the reduction of the parties, possibly up to a two-party system, “as is the case in other Western countries,” in those countries, the two-party system—or even the “limited and moderate multi-party system” (Sartori, 1982)—is more and more a “distant memory” and as a result, the number of relevant political parties is growing dramatically.

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Going beyond public statements and impressions, let's analyse data of the latest European elections. How can we calculate the number of relevant parties in a political system?

A first elementary (but impressionistic) way is to take a quick look at the election results. That would make us understand that in other countries historically characterized by a few large parties, the scenario has changed completely. But we need more precise and synthetic indexes to go beyond the simple "look" at the results.

The index of fractionalization

The first index that we will use is the index of fractionalization, proposed by Douglas Rae (1971). It is a relative index that gives us a first picture of how concentrated (or fractionalized) the consensus is among the political parties competing in the elections. When the index value approaches 1, this means that the party system is highly fractionalized; when it is close to 0, the party system approximates the maximum concentration, i.e., the single-party system. The intermediate value of 0.5 is obtained in a perfect two-party system. This index measures the relative strength of parties. In other words, in a system in which there are 10 political parties, we can face different situations: one party could get 90% of the vote, or the first two parties could get 45% of the vote each, or even all 10 parties could get respectively 10% of the vote. Therefore, with the same high number of parties, we have completely different systems: single-party system, two-party system, and up to a highly fractionalized party system. This is exactly what the Rae's index measures: if the result is 0, that means we have a political party that get 100% of vote. If the result is 0.5, we have two parties with 50% of vote. If the result is 0.9, we have 10 parties with 10% of vote each. It's possible to calculate this index at electoral level, i.e., on the basis of the percentage of votes obtained by the parties, and at parliamentary level, i.e., on the basis of the percentage of seats obtained by parties after the reduction made by the electoral system.

The case of the European elections is particularly suitable to compare European party systems because all 28 EU Member States have to adopt a proportional formula. Furthermore, the disproportionality of different systems is minimum (an electoral threshold that never exceeds 5%), and therefore, the voting behaviour should tend to be similar from one country to another, favouring sincere voting rather than tactical voting.

Let's see what happens if we apply Rae's index at the results of last European elections, in Figure 1.

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Figure 1 - Index of fractionalization EU-28 MS

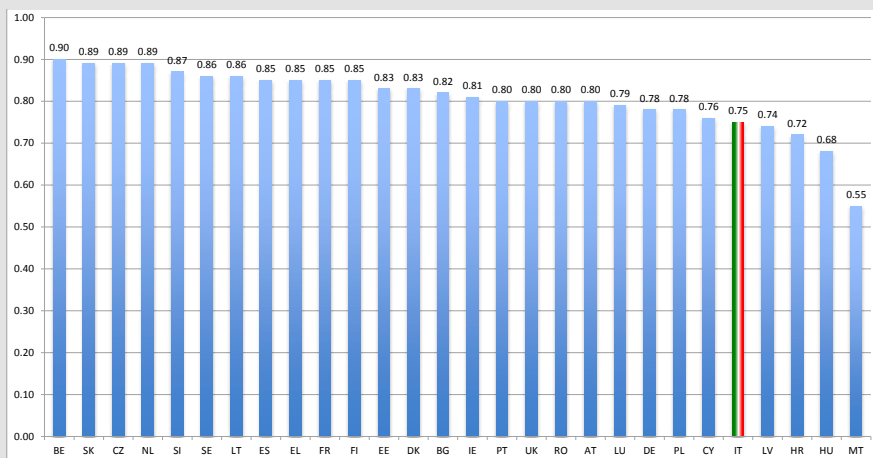
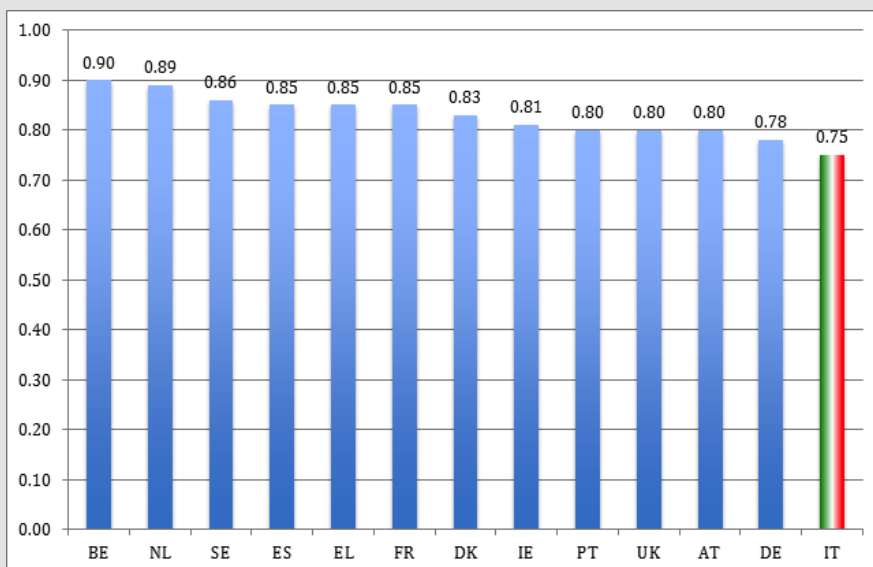


Figure 2 - Index of fractionalization EU-13 MS



As can be seen easily from the graph, Italy has the fifth less fractionalized party system among the 28 EU Member States: only Malta, Hungary, Croatia, and Latvia have party systems more concentrated (i.e., with a small number of relevant political parties) than the Italian one. Moreover, these four cases are

not usually compared to Italy. Let's see then what is the ranking when comparing Italian data with those of 12 more comparable countries, in Figure 2.

If we do not consider new (or less mature) democracies and small countries such as Malta or Luxembourg, the result is that Italy has the party system less fragmented in Europe. The one in which the relative strength among political parties is more concentrated. This outcome is somehow “revolutionary” and could make obsolete almost all comparative political systems books.

The effective number of parties

There is another, newer, and more effective index that can give us a realistic picture of Italian and European party systems. It is the “effective number of parties” (Laakso-Taagepera, 1979): an index with a good approximation guarantee, concerning the number of relevant parties in every country, again on the basis of the concentration/dispersion of the vote. Figure 3 illustrates the situation in the EU-28 scenario, and Figure 4, the one in the EU-13, reduced to the most “comparable” cases to Italian party system.

With an effective number of parties equal to 4.0, Italy for the first time has a lower number of relevant parties than UK, which has always been the emblem of two-party system, or than Austria, which was, according to Giovanni Sartori, a two-party system despite adopting a proportional representation formula. Today, Italy, which has always been the symbol of ungovernability due to an excessive number of parties, is the country with the lowest number of relevant parties, in the group of comparable EU Member States.

The index of bipartisanship

The last index we use is the index of bipartisanship, which is obtained by summing votes of the two main parties in a single election. In Figure 5 and Figure 6, we can see respectively the comparison in EU-28 Member States and in EU-13, respectively.

Even the latter figure confirms the “redemption” of Italy in the ranking of European simplified party systems. Or, maybe, it shows that European party systems are all crumbling, giving rise to proliferation of new political subjects, often with occasional leaders and with electoral programs that are attractive today, but tomorrow, who knows . . .

These data show a very fluid political context. Since the end of ideologies and consequent decline of the ideological vote—that is, the party faithful vote—we face with voters who feel free to decide “if and how to vote,”

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Figure 3 – Effective number of parties EU - 28 MS

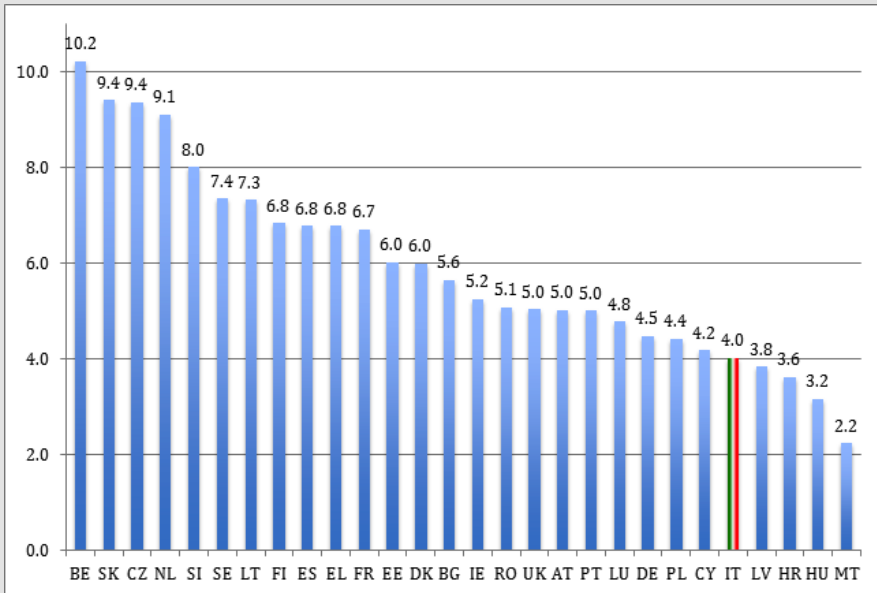


Figure 4 - Effective number of parties EU-13 MS

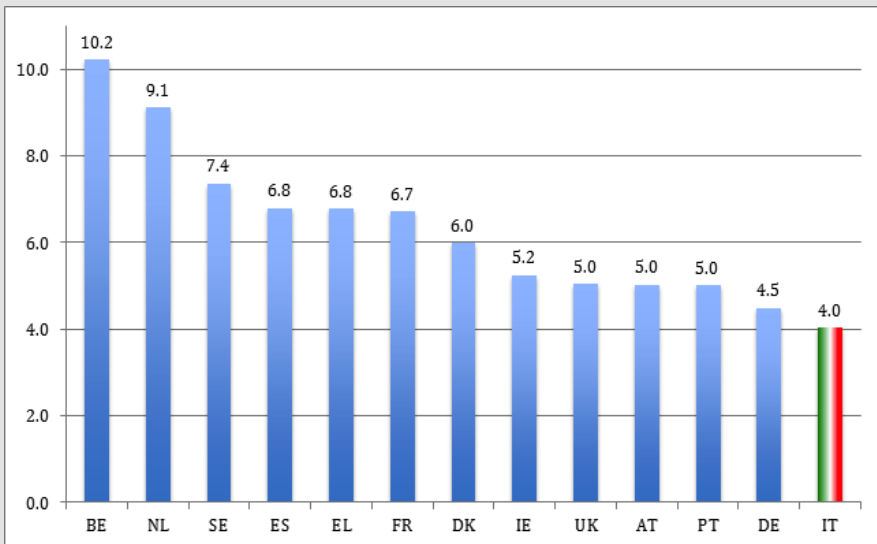


Figure 5 - Index of bipartisanship EU-28 MS

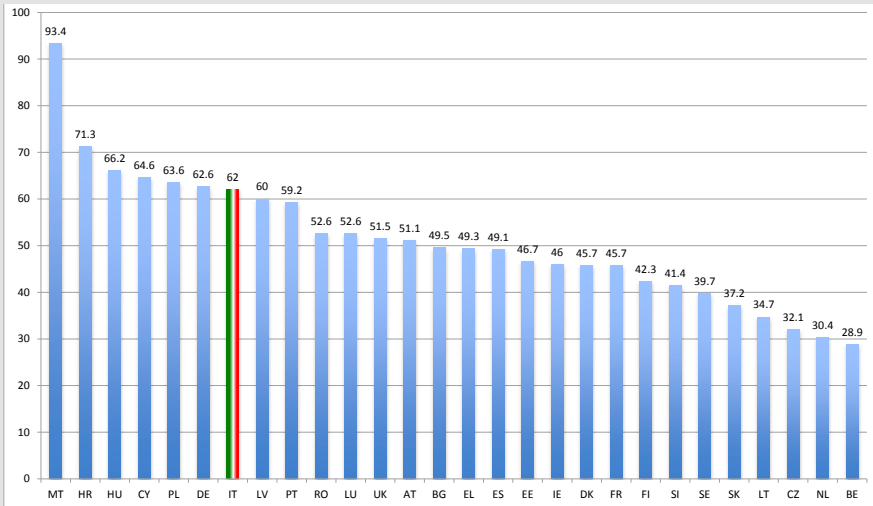
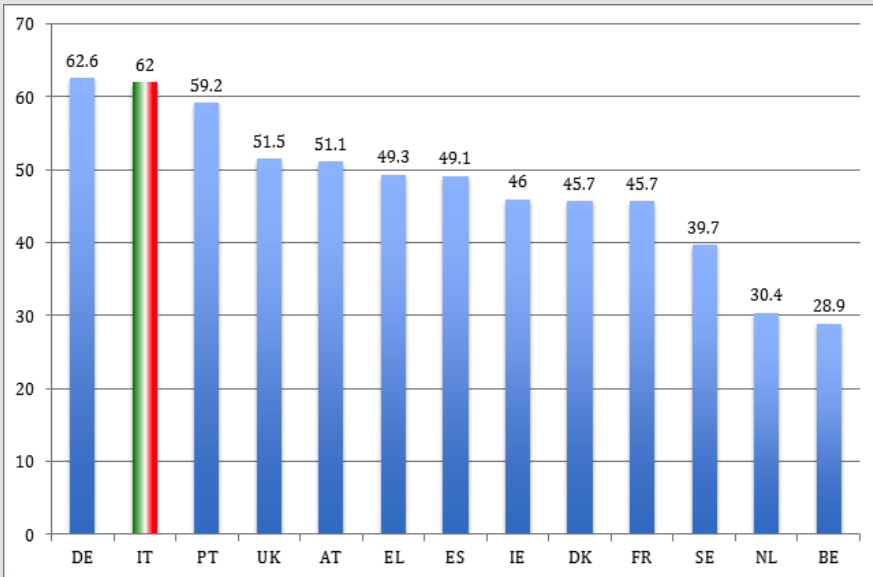


Figure 6 - Index of bipartisanship EU-13 MS



and therefore, we see highly unstable and unpredictable electoral results. This freedom to decide if and how to vote has also been one of the drivers of the progressive political disaffection that has generated steady declines of political participation in Europe.

Today’s politics is completely different from 20th century politics. The electoral volatility (i.e., the degree of changing in voting behaviour between elections) is increasing, and the voters’ loyalty to political parties looks like a distant memory. It seems that the main drivers of loyalty, which once were ideologies and social class identities, are missing whereas a generalized deinstitutionalization of political parties and a very high fluidity of electoral behaviour are increasing.

In liquid society where perceptions and emotions seem to prevail, leaders are most important than political parties, and the voters’ trust is based on pre-political “feelings” more than on ideas and organizations. In this scenario, anything can happen, even the unexpected: even that Italy will become the country closer to the two-party system in Europe.

References

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