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**FROM POLARIZED PLURALISM TO MODERATE PLURALISM:
SARTORI'S MODEL AND THE ITALIAN TRANSITION**

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, Italy has entered a political transition that has been extensively discussed in the national and international literature.¹ As a matter of course, this transition is very different from those experienced by the postcommunist countries and - as rightly stressed by Pasquino (1994) - cannot be easily compared to other historical European antecedents. Even the French case, which Pasquino considers the best reference point, does not really perform well for several reasons. For instance, both the Fourth and the Fifth Republics were classical cases of polarized pluralism (Sartori 1982: 256-262), whereas this label is no longer applicable to Italy, and precisely for this (or at least also for this) the transition has set in. Moreover, it is well known that Gaullist reforms modified the main French political institutions, but left untouched the administrative subsystem and the (centralized) state structure -that is, two important components of the actual Italian crisis. Finally, this crisis is also intertwined with the decline of the welfare state and, as such, puts into question the borders between the economical and political order, together with the related roles of the main organized interests. Thus, beyond the institutional-political and the administrative dimensions, other changes are in order to an extent that was unknown (France), or altogether different (postcommunist countries), elsewhere.

These remarks plainly do not deny that the party system's change, the institutional renewal and the turnover of political personnel "bear a lot of resemblances to problems tackled in the French case" (Pasquino 1994: 3). But - first - it is to be seen *how many* resemblances are left once the aforementioned (and other) differences are discounted; and - second - it may be questioned *whether* resemblances and differences can be correctly compared between systems that

¹ Besides the works quoted later, see Calvi and Vannucci (1995), Diamanti and Mannheimer (1994), and Ignazi and Katz (1995).

have accomplished their transitions and systems that are actually experiencing them. Usually, indeed, when one quotes France (or Germany, or Britain), a comparison is proposed among *consolidated* cases, on the one hand, and more or less fluid *trends*, on the other, given general agreement that the Italian transition is "difficult and confused" (D'Alimonte and Bartolini 1995: 466), "ambiguous and full of unknown terms" (Ceccanti and Fabbrini 1995: 281) dominated by uncertainty (Morlino 1995) and - to say it extensively - complex, long, undetermined and reversible (Pasquino 1995).

Though I do not share these views in full, they correctly suggest that comparisons and inferences should be drawn very cautiously. And a cautious strategy, in my opinion, should put the analysis of the transition within a solid theoretical framework -that is, in the context of the models already put forward to explain the Italian political system and, possibly, the direction and the stage of its present evolution. As other approaches do, this kind of inquiry asks where the Italian polity comes from, why, and to what extent it has really changed, and what the change might bring. In contrast to those who answer by analogy with other transitions or already consolidated cases, however, to choose a model as a reference point is a strong incentive to the inquiry's discipline and to rigorous reasoning. Indeed, if they are well founded and adequately articulated, models may provide a systematic and theoretically justified guideline that is by definition absent from the too many "narrative" accounts of the transition. And - second - to use a model means to set a *parameter* -that is, to acquire the indispensable fixed term that makes sense of any judgement about the direction and level of change. In the next paragraph, then, I will specify this parameter, while later on it will be applied to the case at hand.

Models of democracy

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Political transitions are more or less complex processes of change from a previous, more or less consolidated, state to the next, whose point of arrival cannot be easily foreseen. Through a transition, indeed, continuities with, and innovations from, the past typically coexist and their mixture is by definition variable, the variation often fast, and its directions ambiguous or contradictory. Thus, it is understandable that the observer be tempted to shelter himself in the uncertainty, or simply to end up with saying that "much of the stake is in the decision, or non-decision, the party leaders will be able to make" (Morlino 1995: 23). Obviously enough, however, the elites themselves are conditioned by structural constraints and opportunities, or, to say it again, by continuities with, and innovations from, the previous state of the system. Thus, this state, or - better - its conceptualizations through the relevant theoretical models and the accompanying evidence, are - as a rule - the obligatory parameters to which the transition processes must be related, or, at least, from which their analysis should be started.

Even such a reasonable remark, however, is rarely applied with the needed care and, for instance, even the (few) serious works on the Italian case usually refer only *en passant* to the models proposed for the analysis of the so called First Republic. At best, these models are recalled to "locate" the case, or - in Sartori's words - "for charting, mapping purposes". But though this usage is legitimate and highly informative, to stop here means to amputate the models' *explanatory* and *predictive* power, that is, to give up the opportunity to read them as a sequence of logically connected and empirically more or less relevant causes and consequences (Sartori 1976: 287-290), thus barring precisely a disciplined, correct understanding of the many or few constraints (or opportunities) that the conceptualization of a system's *state* implies for (or excludes from) its present and, possibly, future *processes* of change. No wonder, then, if approximation and confusion are the

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results usually stemming from undervaluation, or misunderstanding, of a given causal model, of its variables, and of their relationships and implications. As we shall see, however, confusion is sometimes the by-product of the different (and not clearly spelled out) definitions and variables stressed by different authors, who refer to conflicting models that make a significant difference for the final assessment of the course and the foreseeable outcome of the transition. Even more so, it is worth making an effort at conceptual clarification by an extensive discussion of Figure 1.

Figure 1. *The Analytical Framework*

<i>Indicator Number of parties</i>	<i>Variables 1. Segmentation 2. Ideology</i>	<i>Classification</i>	<i>Typology</i>	<i>Variable properties</i>	<i>Alternative possibilities</i>
3-5	- Ideological distance or Segmentation	Limited pluralism	Moderate pluralism	Moderate politics Bipolar structure Centripetal competition	Limited but polarized pluralism

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More- than-five	+	Extreme pluralism	Polarized pluralism	Multipolar structure Centrifugal competition	Extreme but moderate pluralism
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Source: Adapted from Sartori (1976: 288-289)

The figure presents, with some modifications, Sartori's typology of party systems, together with "the relevant information it conveys with respect to the political system as a whole" (1976: 286-289). As is well known, both the typology and its related properties are a standard reference point for the political science literature and, in particular, for the Italian case, historically one of the main examples of polarized pluralism. But it should by now be clear that the focus of this paragraph is not so much on the empirical case as on what the framework exactly explains and predicts, with what concepts, according to what causal sequences and with what conclusions about the states and, possibly, the dynamics of democratic regimes. In the figure, the sequence is opened by an indicator of systemic fragmentation, namely the number of parties criterion. Parties, in turn, are sorted out by Sartori's famous counting rules (coalition and blackmail potential), but what has usually been missed is that their correct use is subordinated to two *conditions of applicability*. *The first condition* is that the calculus of fragmentation should include only "real" parties, not the "mere _labels_", loose coalitions of notables that often change at each election and tend to dissolve from one election to another" (Sartori 1976: 283, 349). Parties, in other words, are considered only if they are "structured", that is, consolidated organizations, and can, as such be clearly distinguished from a situation of "atomization". Moreover, these parties should pass the second condition: in order to make up a "system", with peculiar properties, they should interact in the same competitive space; whereas their relevance is nil if they isolate themselves into

different dimensions, take "safe" support from an identified electorate, but, being unable to expand beyond it, remain in an "out of running position", that is, out of the competitive game played by the other actors.²

As we shall see, the implications of these specifications for the diagnosis of the Italian transition are very significant, both directly and indirectly. Indeed, they will directly allow us to assess the party system's format more precisely than before; and, as a consequence, we will be in a better position to understand its "mechanical predispositions", or the functional attributes that determine how the system "works". I say "as a consequence" because the number is a powerful (though by no means infallible) indicator of such predispositions, first of all *ideological distance* (Figure 1, column 2). This point, cogently argued by Sartori and empirically supported by several sources,³ should not need additional comments. But since its application and implications have been often misunderstood or challenged it is worth recalling it extensively for the sake of analytical clarity.

In the classical formulation, "the assumption supported by the evidence is that the existence of several relevant parties is correlated with a more extended space of competition". This implies that "various systems display different overall linear distances", and the latter conveniently express in one-dimensional spatial terms "the otherwise acknowledged differences between homogeneous and heterogeneous (or fragmented) political cultures, or between consensual and conflictual societies... non polarized and polarized systems". In principle, these distinctions may be recorded on several dimensions and, as a rule, there is

² Sartori (1976: 339-342, 348-349). These parties, in other words, are relevant in terms of the system's "domains of identification", but irrelevant in its "dimension of competition". This Sartorian distinction is at the heart of Bartolini and Mair's secular research on electoral instability (1990), and will be discussed in greater detail below.

³ Sartori (1976: 283-293), Sani and Sartori (1978), Bartolini and Mair (1990: chap. 8).

polarization whenever the actors occupying the spatial extremes "are so far removed as to be two poles apart". But party fragmentation is especially important in that it usually signals a state of polarization on the left-right dimension, that is, the presence of two "antisystem" poles, or poles that put in question the legitimacy of the democratic system itself; and this is not only the historically dominant dimension in the Western world but is also the only one whose polarization is of decisive consequence for electoral competition and the overall performance of a polity.⁴

Before the consequences, however, we must discuss a controversy surrounding Sartori's argument, and presenting it potentially with alternative explanations and predictions. This controversy concerns the structure of the competitive space, that is not universally considered "elastic" (that is, of variable length), nor necessarily one-dimensional. On the contrary, some regard the concept of elasticity as irrelevant, assume that political spaces may be either one- or multidimensional, and stress that this is precisely the crucial difference between "working" or "non-working" systems.

In D'Alimonte's words, indeed, "competitive" and "efficient" democracies presuppose a linear space and the "vote's elasticity of critical minorities"; accordingly, both competition and efficiency are ruled out when two or more dimensions are politically salient and the electors order them "lexicographically"; and the latter is what would occur in polarized systems, that is, the very same systems that Sartori associates instead with a "stretched" space. Thus, these approaches differ on the *explanans* and, as a result, on the ordering of empirical cases: so much so, that D'Alimonte puts together Italy, Austria, Belgium, Holland and Switzerland, because all share two or more lexicographically structured dimensions; whereas the assumption of linearity and space elasticity keeps the

⁴ Sartori (1976: 135, 343, 349).

first country apart, because of a much greater ideological distance. And since different distances are supposedly related to the number of parties, it goes without saying that the whole controversy comes down precisely to the following question: whether the number counts (Sartori), or does not (as implied by D'Alimonte's grouping of countries of all conceivable formats in the same class).

Once this choice is made, however, many others follow, more or less automatically: indeed, if format is irrelevant, it does not make sense to assess it correctly, that is, by applying Sartori's counting rules; *a fortiori*, it does not make sense to circumscribe the domain within which to count by distinguishing the "real" (structured) parties from the atomized fringes; and it is clearly inadmissible to consider only the parties "competing along one and the same dimension" (Sartori: 1976, 349), because the focus of D'Alimonte's model is precisely on the interaction *among* dimensions and, thus, on all parties that may be able to activate at least one of them.

In short, the controversy is wide-ranging and, of course, its significance does not change whether the two models are applied to consolidated cases or to systems under transition: indeed, writing with Bartolini on the current tendencies of the Italian party system, D'Alimonte (1995: 431-443) deals extensively with its format after the 1994 elections, but avoids discriminating between relevant and irrelevant parties. Moreover, he does not discuss at all the case of the Lega Nord, with its peculiar position wavering between the left-right space and a solitary "alienation" on the center-periphery cleavage; and, of course, his account of the new competitive dynamics of the system assumes as a reference point the multidimensional model and the historical lexicographic preferences of the electorate. What results is a technically sophisticated and highly informative treatment that reflects, however, theoretical premises that inevitably condition the choice of the relevant variables, their operationalization, and the accompanying explanations and predictions. Since this section concerns precisely the model to be

used, then, it is obvious to ask whether that choice and those explanations are well-founded -that is, whether they can bear the comparison with the one-dimensional model. The answer - I believe - is, for several reasons, a clear no.⁵

The first reason is the comparatively superior status of the hypothesis of an "elastic" linear space, strongly supported as it is by logical arguments and empirical proofs.⁶ If this were not enough, another remark may be made about the two models' *parsimony*: indeed, two or more dimensions, lexicographically ordered or not, amount to a complex of assumptions less "economical" than one dimension only, and might be a better alternative if they did explain more and better. But - third - this is not so, because both models aim in the end to explain and predict the performance (stability and efficiency) of democratic regimes; and I have already recalled that D'Alimonte puts Italy together with Holland and other *segmented* countries, thus confusing not only systems' formats, but also very different political performances.⁷

The one-dimensional model, on the other hand, uses the numerical criterion alone (or, if needed, in conjunction with ideological distance) to assign Italy (of the seventies) to polarized pluralism and the highly segmented (but less, or non polarized) countries to moderate pluralism. Accordingly, Figure 1 records the two types in column 4 and immediately thereafter specifies their main mechanical predispositions, whose importance here is crucial: indeed, the overcoming of polarization and access to the moderate pluralism cell are the two yardsticks against which the literature has usually assessed the Italian transition and currently discusses its present stage and future prospects. But, once again, the assessment and the discussions do not really abide by the logic of the model from

⁵ The following arguments are discussed at greater length in Pappalardo (1989: 210-215).

⁶ See note 3.

⁷ Lijphart (1968, 1968a).

which they borrow essential concepts, and follow, intentionally or not, different or contrasting tracks. A good example is provided by the notion of competition, that surely subsumes critical differences between party systems' types, and, *a fortiori*, for the transition from one to the other. In Sartori's view, the concepts to be taken account of are really two (the direction of competition and competitiveness), a distinction whose merits are not readily recognized.⁸ Explicitly or implicitly, indeed, D'Alimonte and Bartolini (1995) reject this distinction, limiting their analysis to systemic competitiveness. In so doing, however, they make a choice that needs to be commented upon extensively, because its implications are truly wide-ranging.

In order to grasp these implications, I will start by recalling that, for Sartori (1976: 218-220, 293), "competitiveness is a particular state of the game...to be measured in outcome, on the basis of its effectiveness". In other words, "only the returns demonstrate to what extent a given system is competitive", but if, and which meaning, whatever conclusion on this respect might have cannot be established by the "crude operationalism" of one (or more) measures of competitiveness. This meaning can only be assessed through the direction of competition, whose analysis is of decisive importance for several reasons.

The first reason is of general methodological interest -that is, it arises from the well known Sartorian strategy founded on the priority of qualitative over quantitative analysis, of discontinuous over continuous treatment of the concepts (1976: 293-299). If adapted to our specific problem, indeed, this strategy suggests that a continuous variable (competitiveness) is not by itself appropriate to grasp discontinuous properties eventually imputed to polarized or moderate pluralism. And since the direction of competition is effectively stipulated discontinuous (that is, centrifugal or centripetal) in the two types, a theoretically informed framework

⁸ The distinction discussed here should not be confused with that dealt with by D'Alimonte in another work (1989), which is irrelevant for the present purposes.

should take notice of such a stipulation carefully. Otherwise, Sartori warns, the risk is "crude operationalism", that is, something that usually tends to "flatten" (qualitative differences) and, thus, to information losses or distortions; but, more than that, the "flattening effect" may be compounded with a "postdiction effect", meaning a loss of discriminatory, explanatory and predictive power at once.

These traps, indeed, are incurred by D'Alimonte and Bartolini, as they try to evaluate Italy's transition to a more competitive type of party system. However, since they choose to reduce the "structure of competition" to its measures (volatility, margins of victory, "summability" of party coalitions' voters), their analysis inevitably overlooks the "jumps", or the thresholds, that characterize the logic of classification and, thus, the types and their properties.⁹ What is left, then, are mere quantitative differences, whose precision is paid for with the recalled loss of discriminating power. Once measurement (that is, competitiveness) is the criterion, indeed, which borderline might constrain its logic of the "more or less"? And when will any continuous indicator mark the switch from a non-competitive (polarized) system to a competitive (non-polarized) one? When - it is answered - "the mobile electorate will be decisive not only for the distribution of seats among the parties, but also for the attribution of the majority between coalitions directly competing for governmental power" (D'Alimonte and Bartolini 1995: 453-454).

The crucial term "decisive", in turn, is defined by the "size", or - for D'Alimonte - also by the spatial position of the mobile voters;¹⁰ and this implies an elementary question and a disarming answer. The question is: "How many electors _make the difference_?" Or, in other words, "How many should the available voters be in order to be considered *decisive*?" The answer is: "*A priori*, it cannot be

⁹ D'Alimonte and Bartolini (1995) and Bartolini and D'Alimonte (1995). Anyway, the authors' measures are important, and will be discussed in the next section.

¹⁰ D'Alimonte (1989: 315). For Bartolini (1995: 22), instead, the topic of spatial positioning is to be left to empirical research.

established" (D'Alimonte 1989: 315), it depends from the returns (as in Sartori's view), or, since "decisive" is the "attribution of the majority", from the effective occurrence of alternation in power.

So, the conclusion arrived at is unequivocally postdictive, that is, contingent on actual observation, or the actual elections' results.¹¹ The related loss of perspective, then, does not need any additional remark and reinforces the doubt that quantitative rigor is the best yardstick by which to evaluate the transition processes. But to concentrate on competitiveness, rather than the direction of competition, implies other shortcomings, to some extent recognized by the very same authors I am criticizing. The first shortcoming is that many of the measures actually available are questionable, or questionably used (Bartolini 1986, 1995); in second place, the precision of any single measure is replaced by uncertainty or by ambiguities as soon as *several* measures enter the field, each giving different, or even contrasting, results.¹² Finally, the crucial question is that the relevance of the whole debate on competition is contingent upon the difference it makes for democratic "efficiency", that is, for the responsiveness of the incumbents towards their electors (Sartori 1977, D'Alimonte 1978); and from this point of view, competitiveness is totally unhelpful, either because "its systemic consequences are not at all clear" (Sartori 1976: 293), and because the maximization of the couple

¹¹ In a later work, Bartolini (1995: 20-22) recognizes this problem and leaves the notion of "decisiveness of elections" in favour of a measure of competitiveness (or "vulnerability") more independent from actual returns and the alternation in power. Though much more sophisticated, however, his solution is not fully satisfying and does not answer the other objections in the text. In particular, being based on the ratio between margin of victory in a given election and the average volatility in the previous ones, the measure expresses only a part of total "availability" in the system, as readily recognized by Bartolini himself (1995: 9-12). In other words, since "exact [that is, quantifiable] information" on availability is not supplied, Bartolini chooses to underestimate it, whereas what I am pursuing here is the Sartorian strategy of putting "quantitative developments *within* the guidelines established by the qualitative... science" (1976, 299): precisely with the aim of minimizing underestimates.

¹² A case in point is Melchionda (1995), whose measures of competitiveness in Italy are very different from those of Bartolini and D'Alimonte. On this point, see below.

competitiveness/responsiveness may translate into more and more inefficient policy outputs, or into political chaos, or even the crisis and the breakdown of democratic regimes.

The latter point, already mentioned by Sartori (1976: 219) and, more deceitfully, admitted by D'Alimonte (1989: 316-318), is strongly stressed by Bartolini and other scholars¹³ and carries obvious implications. In all likelihood, competitiveness alone provides only a distorted and partial compass for classifying, or reclassifying, political systems. Moreover, the compass is highly unstable, in that it may point nearly anywhere, to variable and contrasting properties and systemic differences, or simply "fail to produce any detectable difference either in the behavior of politicians or in the governmental outputs" (Sartori 1976: 293). For descriptive purposes, then, the notion proves virtually useless as a central, explanatory variable. Accordingly, it can be, at most, one of many indicators of the Italian transition, but where this transition comes from, and where it may be going, can be said only by placing whatever measure within a full-fledged theoretical model and systematically referring to it in order to establish the measures' meaning and, possibly, the criteria for their correct application.

Thus, the analysis returns to where it came from, that is, to the mechanical predispositions of the two types of party system listed in Figure 1. These predispositions, in fact, synthesize a more complex causal sequence, composed of five crucial steps. In the moderate pluralism case, the sequence starts with the ideological space signalled by three to five parties, that is, a "short" space, "not including sizable extremized sectors of opinion". Parties, as a result, form spatially

¹³ Bartolini (1995: 22-26). On the very high levels of volatility scored by continental democracies on the verge of collapse, and by France through the transition from the Fourth to the Fifth Republic, see Bartolini and Mair (1990: app. 2). The inverse relationship between competitiveness and economic efficiency is another indicator of democratic crisis signalled, among others, by Comiskey (1993).

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"close" poles, or poles composed by actors who recognize the legitimacy of the system and abide by its rules. In these conditions, "the space is defined simply by its ends - left and right", and competition accordingly tends to assume a bipolar configuration, or - in rational choice terms - to be in equilibrium for two, and no more than two, competing blocks. Given two poles only, on the other hand, no stake does exist besides the in-between electorate, which is in turn available, or floating, because no "third party" can hold it back; and, of course, this is why the direction of competition will be only, or predominantly, centripetal, as recalled in the previous discussion.

A spectacular situation occurs in polarized pluralism: as we know, indeed, a space "stretched" by more than five parties signals in this case a maximal ideological distance between the extremes, making them two "poles apart" containing antisystem, or "delegitimizing", parties. As a consequence, "a third point of reference - the *central point*, becomes not only a highly visible point, but also a *pole* endowed with strong leverage", because it is now "perceived...as the *safe* position, the position that best secures the survival of the existing democracy". As such, this pole keeps the moderate electorate "physically occupied", so that it "no longer is the floating electorate *par excellence*: Indeed, it turns out to be a highly stable electorate...Hence, the system is now tripolar or, eventually, multipolar"; and since the moderates are occupied by the center party(ies) and untransferable to the extremes, competition will take a strongly centrifugal, rather than centripetal, course (Sartori 1976: 347-351).

The direction of competition, in turn, is the model's central variable, "the one element that surely is of decisive consequence on the overall performance of a polity"(Sartori 1976: 293), or, better, the element that allows us to discriminate between "manageable" and "unmanageable", stable and unstable, efficient or inefficient, democracies. In other words, this term succeeds where competitiveness fails and precisely such a performance grants it the status of a *condition of*

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functionality of the latter. So, before asking *how much*, one should ask *which* (centripetal or centrifugal?) competition. And since direction depends on the previously mentioned causal sequence, the answer must be looked for by reverting to it.

Though well known, indeed, the sequence has been too easily discounted, or used far from systematically. Thus, several of its aspects - some of them of special theoretical and empirical relevance - have been kept in the shade, or plainly misunderstood. Let us take, to begin with, the aspect most explicitly stressed in the model, that is, the relationship between the last and the first step of the causal sequence: competition and the extension of the ideological space. Undoubtedly, this relationship is at the core of the whole reasoning, because, whatever else it explains and predicts, it comes out of the assumption that "the secret of centripetal competition", or of centrifugal pulls, "resides in the linear distance of the abscissa", that is, in the length of the left-right continuum (Sartori: 1976, 347). It follows - quite obviously - that the direction of competition is primarily conditioned by the state of polarization, as assessed through a plurality of indicators: both at mass level (support for the regime, distribution of spatial self-placements, and distances between the extremes); and at elite level (belief systems of politicians, party programs and parliamentary behavior, political messages conveyed by the media).

On these indicators, however, the recent literature has been surprisingly silent, or at best very superficial. And while silence may be justified for the information about the elites (difficult collection, difficult interpretation, and simply unavailable in systematic form), mass data are well in supply and only wait for adequate treatment. In the next section, then, I will discuss them extensively, in order to update, with the needed amendments, Sani and Sartori's research of the mid-seventies. The conclusions, I will show, suggest a significant evolution of the Italian party system, and will thus provide a first, useful piece of evidence on the transition. But another important issue deserving more attention concerns the

"right" number of poles contained by a "short", or "stretched", space, and the concomitant incentives to centripetal or, respectively, centrifugal, competition in the system. According to the model, the distinction that makes all the difference is between two and more than two, but sometimes it has been explicitly opposed by those who believe in Duverger's universal dualism (Galli 1966), or has been ignored altogether by placing Italy in the bipolar cell without additional discussion (Comiskey 1993: 370).¹⁴ More recently, it has been misunderstood by compounding bi- or multipolarism with the vote concentration, that is, with the bi- or multiparty format of the system (Melchionda 1995, Vassallo 1995); and finally it has been related - in rather confused ways - to the electoral system's supposed effects on bipartyism, bipolarism or even the reestablishment of a "neo-centrist hegemony" (Chiaramonte 1995, Melchionda 1995).

That all this causes distortions has been often stressed by Sartori (1982) and should anyway clearly result from my own reconstruction. However, Chiaramonte's, Melchionda's and Vassallo's misunderstandings, in particular, are not only the by-product of a cursory reading of the model, but may depend also from unsolved ambiguities inherent in its application to the Italian transition process. Indeed, its dynamic nature does associate transition to phenomena, events, properties more or less rapidly changing, and the number of the poles is, of course, no exception. To be sure, this does not detract from the fact that, as a rule and in the long term, bipolarism crosscuts the number of parties, that is, perfectly coexists with moderate pluralism, though not with the polarized case, as long as the ideological space is extended enough to make room for a third pole. However, since transitions involve processes rather than states, the analyst will probably have to deal with "mixed cases", that is, combinations different from those normally explained and predicted by the model: namely, two polarized poles, or three (or more) poles still competing on a "short", or shrinking, space (Figure 1,

¹⁴ See below for a similar suggestion by D'Alimonte and Bartolini.

column 6).

Of these "dynamic mixes", or "cases in transit from one cell to another", Sartori (1976: 287) says they are "an excellent thing, because they testify to the sensitivity of a taxonomy to change". Since he stops here, however, one has to suppose that the proof of sensitivity is expected *a posteriori* (that is, once the change has been accomplished), rather than anticipated by an analysis of the outstanding change. This, in turn, leaves the mixed cases as such unexplored and, thus, the passage from bipolarism to multipolarism (or viceversa) vague. Vagueness, however, may be obviated by devising proper indicators for the *instability* of mixed cases, in order to map out their most probable point of arrival. In the case of interest here, these indicators should provide information about the fate of the central pole once the model's stipulations predict its "squeezing" by left and right convergence on a "short" space, but - pending the transition - this pole is still surviving. Does its "resistance" allow us to speak of a persistent tripolar competition, or to lend credit to a "neo-centrist hegemony", eventually induced by the electoral system? The authors subscribing to such a view - I said - confuse multipolarism with multipartyism and, in so doing, miss both the model's interpretation and the proper indicators. According to the model, indeed, one or more center parties make a pole not simply because they exist, or resist, but to the extent that they "discourage _centrality_, that is, the centripetal drives of the political system". And the causal sequence I have sketched clearly suggests that these drives are discouraged, and "a centrifugal pull is started from the very center of the spectrum", if, and only if, the moderate electorate is "physically occupied" and, as such, "out of competition" altogether (Sartori 1976: 349-350).

By the same token, during a transition one should look for indicators of "liberation" of previously "occupied" votes, in order to assess if, and to what extent, the poles' number, and the related competitive mechanics, are changing. And since this means that attention should be paid to electoral instability (or mobility, or

volatility), the suggestion would seem trivial, given that the whole contemporary literature on Italy deals precisely with this topic. In the context of the above discussion, however, even a triviality may be instructive, signalling something that has been missed by other authors. As I have just said, indeed, the crucial aspect of the passage from polarized to moderate pluralism is the mobility of the center, the "liberation" of the moderate electors and their re-entry into the competitive market. Thus, when one examines the electoral results with the classical measure of block (or between-poles) volatility, not all possible aggregations should be considered interchangeable. Obviously enough, a theoretically correct aggregation must be able to capture the depletion of the third pole and, for this purpose, the mere calculation of left-right volatility is plainly useless. So, when D'Alimonte and Bartolini (1995: 447, Table 5) put this aggregation side by side with others, the result is rather confusing, and the confusion may feed the two mistakes just mentioned: a mistake of interpretation, because left-right volatility can only be calculated by absorbing the third pole into the (right) wing, that is, by subscribing to a bipolar configuration of the Italian polarized pluralism; and a mistake of verification, because to suppress the transfers from the center to left and right amounts to suppressing in advance the very indicator of the transition or, at least, seizing the opportunity to minimize the latter's scope.¹⁵

Moreover, the risk of minimization is enhanced by the fact that aggregate volatility only signals the *minimal, actual*, vote transfers within and/or between the competing blocks (Bartolini 1986; Przeworski 1975: 53). As such, the measure "underestimates individual voting shifts, and the latter underestimate the actual

¹⁵ Of course, D'Alimonte and Bartolini (1995: 448) try to meet this objection by claiming that they are reasoning about future developments, rather than on historical aggregations. If so, however, their bipolar configuration should not be used to stress the continuity with previous elections, that is precisely what the authors imply when they take it as the proof of "a minimal interchange and a volatility almost entirely constrained within the center-right block".

electoral availability" (Bartolini 1995: 11), that is, the system's potential competitiveness. It follows that the analysis of volatility not only has to be refocused (on the transfers from the center), but should be complemented by more inclusive indicators, in order to grasp the real extent of the transition. One of such additional indicators is represented by survey data on voting intentions that usually allow for mobility's estimates larger than aggregate volatility (Biorcio and Natale 1989). But since these estimates themselves are underrated (Mannheimer 1986, Corbetta *et al.* 1988), another improvement may be once again suggested by Sartori's model.

As has been said, indeed, the model anchors the strength of the third pole, that is, its ability to "occupy" the electorate, to the latter's need to find a "safe position", or "the position that best secures the survival of the existing democracy". In polarized systems, in other words, "the center position incarnates a <center logic> of defence against the extremes" (Sartori 1976: 349), and keeps its systemic relevance as long as supported by this motivation. By the same token, the decline of the proper motivation should be taken as additional evidence of availability (or potential mobility), especially if this decline goes hand in hand with other indicators of dissatisfaction of the moderate electors toward their traditional parties. So, both developments should be taken into account if the transition is to be fully understood, and the next section will accordingly spend some attention on them.

To sum up, transitions are highly complex phenomena and aggregate volatility is one of them, though not necessarily the most important theoretically and empirically. Indeed, when used in isolation, it turns out to (under) measure a variable (competitiveness) that is, in its turn, misleading, and may result in the dead end of postdiction, if one does not put it in the context of the theoretical model that spells out the logic of polarized and moderate pluralism and their conditions for change. For this reason, I have discussed in detail the two types,

trying to outline carefully their stipulations about both the format and mechanics of party systems. It remains now to see their application to the Italian case.

From the model to the case

What is the format of the Italian party system after the electoral reform and the critical vote of 1994? The question may be answered through the usual quantitative measures (fractionalization index, effective number of parties, vote concentration, number of parliamentary groups), as recently done by Morlino (1995), or D'Alimonte and Bartolini (1995: 431-443). In this case, it is difficult to deny that the new (semi)majoritarian rules have had little effect and that "the system remains a case of extreme pluralism", or is even more fragmented now than during the eighties. On the other hand, the limit of such conclusions is that they take at face value measures that (1), add up all the system's units (though giving them different weights); and (2), treat highly heterogeneous systems (that is, Italy before and during the transition) in a continuous fashion, thus distorting or concealing their irreducible discontinuities.¹⁶

As we know, the first problem may be dealt with by Sartori's counting rules, that the authors above do mention, though in passing. But the rules - I said previously - presuppose two conditions of applicability to make sense, and these conditions are crucial precisely because they stress, and allow us to control for, the second problem, that is, the discontinuities between the systems at hand. Let us

¹⁶ The inability to account for discontinuities is obviously inherent in mathematical indices. A critique of this limit is in Sartori (1976: 304-315).

take, indeed, the most important condition, the one that circumscribes the calculus of fragmentation (in terms of coalition and blackmail potential) to "real" parties, while excluding the "mere labels, the loose coalitions of notables changing from one election to the next". On this account, real parties are, for Sartori, the structured parties, and there is little doubt that until the late eighties all Italian political forces qualified as such, though to different extents. By the same token, however, it is just as sure that the first, huge, discontinuity introduced by the transition has been a drastic restructuration of the parties and the party system itself. Without entering the details,¹⁷ this situation leaves us with the following choice: either to put Italy among the atomized systems, that is, at "a point at which we no longer need an accurate counting" because "the number of parties - whether 10, 20, or more - makes little difference (Sartori 1976: 125); or, more moderately, to consider the country to be in a state of *semiatomization* (or *semistructuration*), and to distinguish accordingly the "notabilar labels" from the actors that have proved more "resistant" to the transition, or that are clearly on the way to re-structuration.

For many reasons, the second choice - the most difficult one - is also the more realistic: all available accounts, indeed, do show that some parties have been able to contain their crises within the manageable limits of a controlled change (PDS), or have only taken advantage of the disarray of others and put in place a significant, but substantially continuous, adaptation (AN). The second party of the left - Communist Refoundation - may be said to be "born old", that is, already structured, as the heir of organizational resources, personnel and electors of the old PCI. With various reservations, and apart from the electoral breakdown, a similar status may be given to the ex-Christian-democrats (Popolari and, perhaps, CCD), that have been able to save pieces of their old apparatuses and subcultural areas. On the other hand, the new parties, namely the Lega Nord and Forza Italia,

¹⁷ See Morlino (1995) and Bardi (1996).

are by definition marked by discontinuity; but they too seem "real" organizations, that is, organizations already beyond the structuration threshold under a variety of indicators.¹⁸

In my opinion, however, the list ends here; this is the borderline at which atomization begins and it is not worth counting any longer because one will only find a kaleidoscope of frantically changing labels (Di Virgilio 1995). To be sure, under these labels there are many vociferous and inconstant notables; but behind them no organizational structure, be it "light" or "heavy", exists; parliamentary seats, viceversa, are numerous, but they have notoriously been granted by the "proportionalization" of the majority system, that is, by generous concessions of the big parties (Di Virgilio 1995); and the few votes collected by the notables themselves have rapidly dwindled (-25% from the political to the 1995 regional elections) and should continue to fall, given that the structural factors of extreme pluralism (that is, cultural segmentation and ideological polarization) are on the wane, if not already vanished.¹⁹

Against this, one could argue that, until they survive, fringe parties and their notables maintain coalition, or blackmail, potentials that make them still relevant (Morlino 1995). But the objection trivially misunderstands Sartori's notion, that clearly implies the *autonomy* of those who exercise such powers. Indeed, without sufficient votes to gain seats, autonomy will manifest itself in verbal behavior or, at best, in the formation of separate parliamentary groups. But the key decisions (that is, the choice to give, or withhold, support to cabinets, and legislative voting) will be systematically in line with the strategies of the main

¹⁸ Besides note 17, see Diamanti (1995), Ignazi (1995) and Maraffi (1995).

¹⁹ On the "proportionalization" of the majority system, see Di Virgilio (1995) and Bartolini and D'Alimonte (1995). The factors of extreme pluralism are sorted out by the multivariate analysis of Bartolini and Mair (1990: chap. 10). On the decline of segmentation in Italy, see the synthesis by Cartocci (1994). Polarization is dealt with below.

parties. So much so, that the present parliament does not record a single instance of defection by the smaller parties, whereas their truly autonomous antecedents (that is, PSI, PRI, PSDI, PLI) were no less significant arbiters of the fate of coalitions than the dominant Christian Democrats.

In agreement with Sartori, then, I repeat that the pseudo-parties should not be counted, so that we end up, at most, with six relevant actors: AN, FI, PPI, Lega Nord, PDS, Refoundation. Moreover, the qualification of one of these actors may be questioned under the second condition of applicability of the counting rules, that is, the condition that requires the alignment of all parties along one and the same left-right dimension of competition. Indeed, while this requisite was surely satisfied by all the subjects of Italian polarized pluralism, the second discontinuity introduced by the transition is the peculiar positioning of the Lega Nord, whose most recent strategy tends to stress its uniqueness, to present it as a "solitary player", unwilling to share the game and the rules abided by the other competitors. In so doing, the Lega circumscribes its "domain of identification" (that is, the "secessionist" project) and seems to retreat - among many contradictions, to be sure) - into its shell. But since at present (and in perspective as well) nobody else follows it, this choice "does not add another dimension of competition... and testifies instead to an *out of running* position" or, in other words, a systemically irrelevant position.²⁰

This conclusion is strengthened if one considers that self- isolation within the domain of identification may be advantageous in the short term, but "over time, [the concerned] party will have the problem of keeping its followers removed from the dimension where competition occurs, and it is likely to lose to it" (Sartori 1976: 354, n. 51). Indeed, the Lega left the left-right axis when it felt itself to be at risk of being "squeezed" by its competitors, but since then other problems have

²⁰ Sartori (1976: 340).

rapidly multiplied: the party's once most typical demand (that is, federalization) has become a valence issue deprived of any discriminating power; another electoral asset (the "old-new" alternative) has rapidly vanished; many middle class supporters have defected out of disapproval of the secessionist project; and the returns of the 1995 regional vote leave the party at an historical low-point in its northern strongholds and at 5.5% at national level.²¹

On the other hand, it is true that its isolation and its decline notwithstanding, the Lega is still in control of several northern areas and in others might be decisive for the victory of this or that of the two major competitors. But it should be just as clear that, in systemic terms, this does not render it any more significant than are parties with a comparable electoral power, like Le Pen's Front National or the Spanish communists. And even the most obvious indicator of relevance (support for the Berlusconi and Dini cabinets) may not be a safe asset, because it could easily be disconfirmed (or become unnecessary) in the near future, if the "secessionist" and xenophobic course of the present leadership is consolidated. Taking into account the ambiguities of an unstable situation, then, I would say that the actual system's format - six parties - exhibits a *potential for reduction* to five, or might eventually oscillate in-between, but without crossing this mark anyway.

If this is a reasonable conclusion, the following step is whether the format's change has been paralleled by changing mechanics, and to what extent. As I have extensively argued, this cannot be decided by looking at the level of competitiveness in isolation from the variations of ideological polarization, the number of the poles, and the direction of competition. Before turning to such a level, then, I will discuss the more "structural" variables, beginning with

²¹ On the Lega's problems, I am following the analysis by Diamanti (1995). The electoral percentage is calculated on the returns of the 1995 regional lists, plus the 1994 vote for the Lega in Trentino and Friuli. Thus, the percentage results from dividing it by the 1994 total valid votes.

polarization and, more precisely, its developments at mass level. The relevant indicators - I will recall - are (at least) three, and it is worth remarking that the really crucial one is the measure of ideological distance, as calculated from the left-right self-placements of the electorate. In Sartori's model, however, this matter is discussed from several points of view, or, in other words, by successive approximations. And the first step of this strategy draws attention to the fact that an "extended space" identifies societies characterized by "very deep cleavages", "low consensus", and low legitimacy of the democratic system (Sartori 1976: 135, 349). The evolution of these characteristics, in turn, may be detected empirically by survey data on regime support, such as those on which Morlino and Montero (1994) and Morlino and Tarchi (1995) have recently published works. Without entering the details, their conclusions can be summarized by four remarks, whose interest for our purposes is evident: first, democracy is today the most preferred regime by a proportion of Italian voters as high as the European average; second, this obvious indicator of legitimacy goes hand in hand with historically strong and actually growing levels of dissatisfaction for the performance of public institutions, that is, for the decisional efficacy, or the policy output, of the system; as such, dissatisfaction is essentially of a "pragmatic" variety, that is, mostly felt by moderate voters displeased at how they are governed, though unwilling to question regime stability. Thus its explosion with the transition does not signal growing polarization, but precisely the waning of the constraints polarization once posed on the expression of critical attitudes (toward administrative inefficiency, economic mismanagement etc.) and on the proper changes of voting behavior.

If this reading is correct, then, Italy might be entering the typical pattern of legitimate and consolidated democracies: low (or decreasing) polarization combined with the increased propensity of electors to use in full their "voice" and "exit" options in order to sanction the parties' programmatic offer and their effective action. Though it may not seem so at first sight, this mix is indeed

perfectly coherent, since only a high consensus on fundamentals allows the free expression of dissatisfaction, competition and opposition, while keeping the risk of dangerous legitimacy crises low (Lijphart 1984: 21-23). Before subscribing to such a wide-ranging conclusion, however, it is worth controlling for the model's additional indicators, both of which insist on the voters' left-right self-placements. Keeping till the end the most important variant (ideological distance), some useful information is conveyed, in the first place, by the frequency distribution of these self-placements. From a theoretical point of view, indeed, it is obvious that different distributions have different consequences for the "profitable tactics of electoral competition" offered by the system: namely, if the distributions show significant concentrations of self-placements at the extremes, left and right parties will be discouraged from converging to the center out of fear of losing more support among the "extremists" than they gain from the moderates²²; whereas, if the wings are underpopulated, their "blackmail" will be less- or ineffective and downsian (that is, centripetal) competition will prevail.

On these premises, Sartori (1982: 263-269) classified Italy as polarized pluralism in the late seventies, calling in support the corresponding distributions based on data from the Eight Nations survey of 1974-1976. In order to check their evolution, I present these data

Table 1. *Left-Right Self-Placements, % of Valid Responses*

	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995
Left	24.3	18.9	17	13.9	13.4
Center-Left	26.8	26.9	25.7	26.4	17.8

²² And - Sartori adds (1976: chap. 10) - even the center parties will tend to expand on both sides with the "oil-stain technique", thus giving their own contribution to the system's centrifugal pulls.

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Center	34.4	40.2	40.8	42.5	33.2
Center-Right	9.5	9.6	11.3	10.8	20.4
Right	5	4.4	5.1	5.3	15.1

Sources: For 1975, calculated from Sartori (1982: 258); for 1980-1990, Eurobarometer; for 1995 (3-6 November), ISPO.

in Table 1, together with the later available evidence. As shown, the variety of sources and the samples' heterogeneity notwithstanding, left self-placements appear constantly and markedly falling, and almost halved between 1975 and 1995. Data heterogeneity, viceversa, does affect the in-between positionings, probably being the main factor in their strong *intra*class fluctuations; but the "noise" falls back (and disappears altogether by comparing 1975 and 1995) if the three classes are summed up to give an amount of moderate opinion substantially stable between 70 and 80%. Consequently, the really disturbing fact remains the jump of rightist self-placements, too strong to be imputed to technical distortions and clearly in contrast with the depolarizing trend on the left. It would seem, indeed, as if the one counterbalances the other, and the centrifugal pulls once detected on the left side of the spectrum came now from the right, thus suggesting a persistent "state of extremization". Here, to be sure, one could answer that what counts most are the modes and the asymmetry of frequency distributions (Sartori 1982: 264-265), and that both suggest that the Italian curve has never been more alike those (unimodal and symmetric) of Germany or Britain. But the fact that it remains apart because its wings are more populated (and the central mode lower) cannot be minimized anyway, and compels us to ask the really crucial questions: Which wings? And how far apart?

At the beginning of the eighties, Sartori (1982: 256-269) answered by identifying the extremes with the two antisystem parties (PCI and MSI) and

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finding that their distance was by far the largest in its sample and more than twice as large as in Germany and Britain. Taking again these data as the reference point, Table 2 compares them with three more recent observations that reveal, at first sight, an impressive stickiness: distances almost unchanged everywhere, similarly stable cross-country gaps and thus - one would say - a still overextended Italian space, containing "alien, if not foes" parties (AN and CR?), that "neither desire, nor have much to gain, in competing centripetally", because "their goals are best furthered by tearing the system apart", that is, "by more, not less, polarization" (Sartori 1976: 350).

Table 2. *Left-Right Polarization: Between-Parties and Between-Poles Distances*

Country	1975	1983	1993	1995	
<i>Italy</i>					
				2.7	CR
PCI/PDS	2.5	2.5	2.4	3	
PSI	3.7	3.5	3.6	5.5	LEGA NORD
PSDI/PRI	4.8	4.9	--	5.7	PPI
DC	5.9	5.7	5.7	6.9	CCD
PLI	6.5	6.8	--	7.1	FI
MSI	8.3	7.5	7.9	8.1	AN
Maximal distance	5.8	5	5.5	5.4-4.2*	
<i>Great Britain</i>					
LP	4.4	4.4	4		
LIBERALS	5.6	5.3	5		
CP	7.2	7	7		
Maximal distance	2.8	2.6	3		
<i>Germany</i>					
GREENS	--	4.5	4.5		

- ¡Error!Marcador no definido. -

SPD	4.5	5.9	5.4
LIBERALS	5.8	6.7	6.8
CDU/CSU	7		
Maximal distance	2.5	3.1	2.5

* Distance between the center-left (average self-placement of CR+PDS+PPI = 3.3) and the center-right (AN+FI+CCD = 7.5) poles.

Sources: For 1975, Sartori (1982: 257-258); or 1983 and 1993, Gunther and Montero (1994: Table 12); for 1995, ISPO.

Obviously enough, nobody - least of all Sartori - would today subscribe to such a view. Thus, one would be tempted to discard a "variable" that rather behaves as a constant, that is, proves to be totally insensitive to the wide-ranging changes that surely have affected Italy in the last twenty years. But another possibility is that the insensitivity is the artifact of wrong measurement or, better, of a calculus no longer appropriate to the changed situation.

This is suggested by the fact that in Sartori's model, the subjects of the system's mechanics are the *poles*, not the parties as such. Quite correctly, then, in the past ideological distance was measured by the PCI-MSI differences: in the Italian polarized pluralism, indeed, the two parties and the lateral poles were one and the same thing. But, in my opinion, this is no longer the case since the beginning of the transition, and especially since the 1994 elections. It is all the more clear, indeed, that both the transition and the majority system have displaced the center of gravity of (electoral and interelectoral) competition from parties to the center-left and the center-right blocks. And though these blocks' (or poles') cohesion are still debatable and debated, it is without doubt that it has rapidly progressed and that, since the 1995 regional vote, the systemic relevance of the two major competitors has clearly prevailed over the alternatives that

D'Alimonte and Bartolini (1995: 460-466) could still take seriously in 1994.²³ On these counts, then, the traditional measure in Table 2 (that is, the first value of column 4) does not provide any longer homogeneous information either cross-temporally and cross-nationally. To continue to measure the same phenomenon in the new situation, indeed, one should rather look to the second value of column 4 that calculates the distance between the present poles and, since these are coalitions of several parties, expresses such distance taking into account their relative strength.²⁴ As can be seen, what results is a finally noticeable change: from the 5.8 value of 1975 to the 4.2 of 1995: the distance's reduction is as large as 28%. As a consequence, the gaps with Germany and Great Britain fall to a historically low-point, and this is mirrored by an Italian "index of polarization" down to 0.47 (from 0.64 in 1975), while those of the remaining two countries are unchanged at 0.28 and 0.33 respectively (Sartori 1982, 261).

If my calculations are well founded, then, I would conclude that depolarization is going on, and what might be debatable is its amount, not its occurrence. To be fruitful, moreover, the debate should be as inclusive as possible, that is, it should take into account as many indicators as may provide useful information. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the process of ideological depolarization is complemented by the virtual disappearance of religious

²³ As the two authors themselves put it, indeed, the "center has chosen", though not one and the same side.

²⁴ The calculus was made by summing up the self-placements' values of all electors of the parties belonging to each pole and dividing by the total number of these parties' supporters. A similar measure was used by Bartolini and Mair (1990: 204) to calculate the block policy distances in their research on volatility. The latter measure, however, is weighted on the actual electoral results, whereas here I have preferred survey data because these show that rapid and significant changes are under way in the withinblock relationships of strength. Moreover, Bartolini and Mair's calculus includes all parties, whereas I have considered only the relevant ones, with the exception of the Lega, that cannot be safely ascribed to any of the two major sides. Thus, the center-left block comprises Refoundation, the PDS and the PPI, and the center-right block AN, FI and the CCD. As will be remembered, the latter party was not counted in my calculus of the system's format, but has been added here as the only minor party on the verge of relevance. Anyway, its addition alters the center-right average position by a meaningless fraction (0.1)

polarization, that in 1975 almost doubled the overall distance between the poles.²⁵ This, in turn, represents a major incentive to centripetal competition, given that the fall of confessional identifications has made the bulk of center (ex-catholic) voters available to the appeals of the non confessional wings. On these counts, I cannot but disagree with D'Alimonte and Bartolini (1995: 461) when they say that "instead of being the geometric place of median and undecided electors, the center remains "occupied" by a political party that the majority system would try to evict, but that, thanks to its identity, its social entrenchment, and the link to the Church, has no intention to clear off". Meanwhile, indeed, that party has effectively "cleared off", by splitting in two pieces and going to opposite sides; and even a cursory glance at the usual indicators of secularization would have sufficed to predict its fate, given that *all of them* show that no room exists any longer for a *confessional* pole (Cartocci 1994: 186-190). But is it as sure that the same applies to a *laïc* or, possibly, a *mixed* third pole?

As I have argued at length, the answer depends precisely from the stable "occupation", or the occupability, of moderate voters, and D'Alimonte and Bartolini - it seems - would agree. In keeping with the quotation above, however, their analysis tends to minimize the extent of electoral mobility and, in particular, the moderates' mobility to the left. With this aim, indeed, they provide various measures of block volatility, calculated by aggregations that seem, more often than not, rather puzzling. I have already said, indeed, that - if the problem is to catch the transition from a tripolar to a bipolar system - one cannot reason on the transfers between *two* (left and right) blocks, as the authors do in their Table 5 (1995: 447). In so doing, Italy is treated as if it were Britain and, as in Britain, a "minimal interchange" is detected that is, however, nothing but an operational artifact of the choice to collapse the center in the rightist front, thus reducing to *within-block* transfers the related movements. If this *ex ante* neutralization of the

²⁵ Sartori (1976: 273-279). On the secularization process, see Cartocci (1994).

proof of the transition is - as I believe - in contrast with theory, history and common sense, just as doubtful are the calculations of the two previous columns: the main problem of column 4, indeed, is the "invention" of a block ("new center-right") resulting from the gains of the Radicals, Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale, minus the losses of the Socialdemocrats, the Republicans and the Liberals; while the third column puts in the same "great center" the Radicals, the Lega and Forza Italia, side by side with the Christian Democrats and the minor secular parties. So though it is true that these aggregations do drop the plainly wrong bipolar configuration, a distortion still persists, in that they continue to mix up pieces of the old third pole with pieces of the new ones, and a fraction of block volatility, then, is again mistaken as within-block transfers.

Table 3. *Electoral Volatility, 1992-1994 and 1992-1995*.*

		1992-1994	1992-1995
Total Volatility		39.4	61.5
<i>1992-1994</i>		<i>1992-1995</i>	
New Left	+7.9	New Center-Left	+19
Penta-Party Center	-37	Penta-Party Center	-53.3
New Right	+31.2	New Center-Right	+35.2
Others	2.9	Others	-4.6
Block volatility	38.1		
Within block volatility	1.3		

* *New Left*: CR, PDS, Greens, Neo-PSI, AD, Rete; *New Center-Left*: includes the *New Left* parties, plus the PPI, the Patto Democratici and other minor lists individually presented in the proportional arena, but allied with the center-left in the regional *listoni*; *New Right*: AN, FI, Radicals; *New Center-Right*: AN, FI-Polo popolare, CCD; *Others*: 1994, minor lists; 1995, minor lists, Lega Nord, Radicals.

Since the last two variants imply a partial distortion only, the resulting block volatility is considerably larger than the minimum detected by the bipolar configuration; but since it remains relatively low as a percentage of the total (40%), D'Alimonte and Bartolini (1995: 449) may still conclude that it is at least premature to speak of "an electorate no longer constrained by past identities and free to choose on the base of market offer". Yet this is precisely what is suggested by the only one among their aggregations that is compatible with the model's assumptions, and that is shown in the first column of Table 3:²⁶ this aggregation, indeed, does correctly discriminate what polarized pluralism discriminated, that is, the old pro-system pole ("penta-party center"); moreover, it leaves on the one or the other side its historical competitors, plus the new actors that did ally with the latter to capture the moderate vote in 1994. The moderates' answer, then, is rightly approximated by the historical high-point of block volatility (38.1%), that unambiguously proves how little is left of the once "occupied" center.

On the other hand, it could be objected that this is no more than a "snapshot" of 1994 and, as such, does not take into account later political and electoral events, namely the defection of the Lega Nord from the center-right coalition and the other realignments for the 1995 regional vote. The crucial point, however, is whether these events do contrast with the bipolar restructuring of the system, that is, the basic trend underlining the political elections. And viceversa - I think - this trend is now at its strongest, since in the meantime the ex-Christian Democrats have chosen (the right or the left), while the Lega is actually wavering between incoherent strategies (that is, the solitary stance at the regional elections and very conflictual relationships with the center-left) that truly amount to an unclassifiable position. So, if the Popolari are accordingly redistributed to the opposing wings, and the unclassifiable Lega is put among the "Others", the 1995

²⁶ Another aggregation suggested by the authors is in turn dubious because it arbitrarily imputes to center-left the losses of the historical PSI, thus artificially deflating this block's competitiveness.

updated "snapshot" is illustrated by column 2 in Table 3, whose results may be summarized as follows: to be sure, the center now comprises the bulk of the electorate, as confirmed by spatial self-placements; at the same time, the center parties, and with them the third pole, have all but disappeared; so, the moderates cannot but choose the left or the right, and the latter cannot but compete for their support by converging toward them. Convergence, in turn, may not be perfect, as shown by the still ongoing reduction of left-right ideological distance; but the amount of 1994 block volatility and its jump to 56% in 1995 clearly show that the reduction has already been sufficient to convince the overwhelming majority of median voters that democracy is no longer threatened by both wings and, thus, that it is finally possible to float freely between them.

These conclusions - I believe - would be strengthened if more inclusive measures of volatility were available, like the one proposed by Eijk and Oppenhuis (1991) to catch the combined effect of actual electoral movements and the *propensity* to move detected by survey data. In the absence of better information, however, a rough glance at surveys as such suggests that, at least from 1993, voting intentions record very strong swings; swings, in turn, translate into frequent reversals of hypothetical majorities; and the only trend emerging from the huge uncertainty is the fast, continuous and apparently irreversible marginalization of the Popolari and the other remnants of the so-called "Great center".²⁷ So, if the Italian structure of voting intentions were to be compared cross-nationally, we will no longer find it "deviant" (that is, stable and tripolar), but, at most, more scattered, because of a higher (and to a large extent systemically irrelevant) fragmentation. And if a more in-depth analysis were to explore the motivations behind this change, it would discover a number of mutually reinforcing factors: namely, a strong fall of the "fear of the extremes"

²⁷ I refer here to survey data presented by Ricolfi (1995: 276) and to the ISPO panel supervised by Renato Mannheimer.

that in polarized pluralism held the moderates together in the "logic of defense" of democracy embodied by the third pole; an even faster growth of their dissatisfaction for this pole and its heirs, clearly going hand in hand with the decline of its "historical" merits; and the recalled "liberation" of the demand for decisional efficacy, no longer constrained by the tolerance of policy immobilism that was the price once paid for the monopoly of power allotted to Christian Democracy and its allies.²⁸

Without overstressing its importance, this information cannot but confirm my overall diagnosis. Even so, however, a problem remains and, once again, D'Alimonte and Bartolini may help to assess it. These authors, indeed, could concede that bipolarism is now dominant and the median electors more and more mobile, especially after the breakdown and realignment of the ex-Christian Democrats. But since mobility is a matter of degree, their objection would be (indeed, to a large extent, is) that it remains "imperfect", greater to the right and much smaller to the left, where "residues of polarization" restrain both "systemic competitiveness" and the probability of alternation, that is, the crucial proof that the Italian democracy has "normalized".²⁹

As will be remembered, a possible critique of this reasoning has repeatedly been put forward: from a theoretical point of view, to choose competitiveness as the criterion of classification, and to use alternation as its evidence, means taking the *explanandum* for the *explanans* and thus to give up explanatory and predictive aims in favour of mere postdictions on the basis of electoral results. On the other hand, D'Alimonte and Bartolini find support from some data, and theoretical rigor alone does not suffice to disconfirm them. It is worth, then, checking these data, in order to assess whether they really justify the "no left turning" argument. The first

²⁸ Eurobarometer data in Morlino (1995).

²⁹ Bartolini and D'Alimonte (1995: 357-369).

piece of evidence concerns the marginal seats that our authors find to be few, and very unequally distributed over the country. This - they write (1995: 454) - implies "a very low competitiveness in terms of symmetry of votes. The overall numbers are, from this point of view, deceiving, because they hide the abysmal differences that, the bipolar structure notwithstanding, have divided the first two candidates in the majority of constituencies. In the North, 161 out of 180 seats for the Lower Chamber have been won by the candidates of the *Polo delle libertà*, with an average difference of 25% over the second best... In the Senate, the gaps have been smaller, but anyway considerable... The same, though reversed, has happened in the Center... The South only shows a more varied political map, whereby it has been avoided that all, or almost all, seats were gained by one and the same force or political alliance". Thanks to its greater competitiveness in the South, then, "the left has got relatively many seats, thus avoiding a complete rout" (Bartolini, D'Alimonte 1995: 371); but since the South, and the PDS strongholds in the Center, do not counterbalance the rightist hegemony in the North, this side has little future chance to capture the fractions of moderate voters that would be needed to reverse the 1994 results.

How far is this conclusion plausible? The answer fundamentally depends on the operational choices made for determining the marginals' number and - second - on the criteria by which it has been decided whether they are "many", or "few", or "enough". As to the operationalization, however, the objections put forward by Melchionda (1995: 160) against the measure (first difference between first and second candidate) used by D'Alimonte and Bartolini to discriminate between more or less competitive constituencies are very convincing; thus, I would rather follow Melchionda's advice in favour of the squared difference, that allows us to take into account "the relative strengths of all actors", including third parties; and, as a result, I concur with him that the marginals go up to almost half (Chamber), or more than half (Senate) the total, as against the 29 and 38.8% calculated by

Bartolini and D'Alimonte.³⁰

So, a change of measure does change - by far, it seems - the competitiveness and the openness of the electoral market and, though to a lesser extent, does reduce also some territorial imbalances in the seats' distribution (Melchionda 1995: 163-167). Whatever the measure, however, I have just said that some criterion is needed to decide whether it identifies "many" or "few" marginals. And since Bartolini and D'Alimonte (1995: 338) explicitly write that the criterion should be "comparative control", it is worth remarking that the latter *does not* confirm their expectations: indeed, the British marginals were 25.2% of the total in 1992; through the postwar period (1955-1992), the average has been the same, with a high-point of 31.6% and a minimum of 20.6; since these percentages are based on differences between first and second candidates up to 9.9%, they are, moreover, surely larger than those that would result by applying the threshold chosen by Bartolini and D'Alimonte (8%); but even if precision is relaxed, the British marginals clearly appear less numerous than the Chamber's 29% and the Senate's 38.8, not to speak of the 45 and 55% found by Melchionda.³¹

To be sure, this does not mean that the 1994 elections have introduced in Italy the "Westminster model" and its "virtuous" standards. Such a conclusion, indeed, cannot be predicated on simply counting the marginals without taking into account the other indicators suggested by Norris and Crewe (1994) and much more besides. So, I limit myself to remarking that, while their exact size and meaning are debatable, the above mentioned data show an openness and a competitiveness of the electoral race comparatively high, not low or "very low". But, this said, another topic merits special attention.

This topic - indeed, the crucial one put forward by Bartolini and D'Alimonte

³⁰ Bartolini and D'Alimonte (1995: 338); Melchionda (1995: 157-164).

³¹ The British data are from Norris and Crewe (1994: 216).

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- imputes the major weakness of the left to its heterogeneous following, which includes moderates side by side with the postcommunists, that is, ideologically hostile groups, whose "residues of polarization" do not allow them to sum up their votes in full. According to our authors, then, the uninominal "candidates of the leftist cartel fare systematically worse than the lists" individually presented by each party for proportional representation. "In some cases, the difference is minimal... but in others it appears sensible, given that the candidates of Communist Refoundation lose on average 2.8% of the total vote collected by the lists... Where do these lost votes come from? Our hypothesis is that they are ideological electors, that is, voters of the moderate left who simply refuse to vote for a candidate of Refoundation when they find it in their constituency... This proves... the persistence of a deep gap between the left and the center-right", a gap that, once again, validates the low competitiveness of the system (Bartolini and D'Alimonte 1995: 455-457).

As can be seen, the explanation stresses a structural factor (ideological polarization), whose effects tend by definition to be distributed uniformly and to persist in the long term. Strictly speaking, then, its persuasiveness should be evaluated through time, that is, on a whole series of successive national elections. Such a check might definitively show whether or not the systematic negative difference to the left (and the positive one scored by the right) is (at least in part) the result of short term causes, like the different ability of the competing fronts to meet the demand for "new faces" that was of crucial importance in the 1994 election.³² Leaving aside this alternative, however, a cross-temporal comparison has recently been proposed by D'Alimonte on the 1995 administrative ballot. And though far from homogeneous, the latter shows - by the author's admission - an

³² The systematic differences of "summability" between left and right, indeed, are matched by a systematic lesser turnover of leftist candidates in comparison with the opposed block. See Massari (1995), Mattina (1995).

already changing situation. The admission, of course, is very cautious and does not prevent D'Alimonte (1995: 23) from confirming "a negative result" for the left, though "less so than at the political elections". To prove this, however, he now calculates its percentages on the very different absolute values of the majoritarian and the proportional ballots, whereas, if one replicates the procedure adopted by Bartolini for the 1994 data,³³ the electoral performance of both center-left and the center-right turns out to be systematically positive (Table 4). The reason for this inconsistency, of course, is trivial, that is, it depends on the strong "excess" (over three million votes more) recorded by the "majoritarian" ballot through the coalitional regional *listoni* in comparison to the vote for the single party lists. Less obviously, however, this fact introduces a specific *condition of admissibility* of D'Alimonte's calculation and, more important, modifies the *relevance* of the majoritarian/proportional difference for the left's competitiveness.

Table 4. *Difference Between the Vote for Coalitions and for Individual Parties in Percentage of the Total Proportional Vote, 1995 Regional Elections*

	Piemonte	Lombardia	Veneto	Liguria	Emilia-Romagna
Center-Left	+6.7	-0.2	+1.4	+2.4	+1.7
Center-Right	+7.2	+2.5	+5.8	+3.4	+4
	Toscana	Umbria	Lazio	Marche	Abruzzo
Center-Left	+2.8	+1.3	+7.8	+3.8	+1.4
Centr-Right	+5.2	+5.1	+8.6	+5.5	+6.8
	Molise	Campania	Puglia	Basilicata	Calabria
Center-Left	+5.7	+3.9	+1.5	0	+4.6

³³ This calculus takes the difference between the absolute values of the majoritarian and the proportional vote and expresses it as a percentage of the total proportional vote in each constituency.

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Center-Right	+2.4	+5.9	+7.3	+5	+4.3
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As to the admissibility, the new calculation makes sense under a *postulate of equidistribution* of the "excess" majority votes between the competitors. Only this allows crucial weight to be given to the fact that "the growth of valid votes has not been _neutral_ with respect to the parties relative strength"; to record, then, a less than proportional increase of the center-left "listoni"; and to explain the disproportionality with the usual reasons, that is, "ideological vote", "residues of polarization", limited "summability" of a heterogeneous electorate (D'Alimonte 1995: 21).

The conclusion, in other words, is now subordinated to an assumption that was unnecessary in 1994, when the gap between majority and proportional voting was meaningless. And, in my opinion, this affects its solidity, because the postulated neutrality of distribution may be questioned on two counts. The first one is suggested by the explicit and public *delegitimization* of majority voting strongly emphasized, out of a survival imperative, by the smaller center-left partners, Refoundation and the Popolari in particular. Since the center-right by no means share this attitude, indeed, it is rather arbitrary to hypothesize a homogeneous preference structure of both electorates, that is, the same overall propensity to vote for the common candidates and the individual lists. But if this propensity reasonably differs, it is just as reasonable to expect different majoritarian/proportional voting percentages on the two sides. Such a difference, in turn, should be explained also (if not only) with the contrasting messages conveyed to the electors; and both messages and differentiated behaviors would not be as much the consequence of ideological polarization (though this could be one factor at work) as the result of a *fragmentation differential* that logically

compels the many smaller center-left actors and the few center-right "biggs" to stress the respectively most remunerative electoral arenas.

To this, the second objection adds an even more tangible piece of evidence, whose importance is readily grasped if one looks at the percentages of proportional vote for the competing blocks: in eleven regions out of fifteen, the center-left is over 40%, and in six cases over the 50% mark; the center-right, on the other hand, oscillates between 30 and 40% in seven cases, goes beyond this percentage in the remaining eight regions, but only once past 50%. Thus there are significant and diffuse differences between the *thresholds* to which the one or the other coalition should be able to add the "excess" majority vote; these differences, in turn, suggest that marginal growth becomes increasingly difficult the stronger the initial position is;³⁴ and since the strongest (proportional) position by far is recorded by the center-left, the postulate of neutral distribution becomes questionable again and the worse performance of this coalition *vis-a-vis* the center-right turns out to be explainable as a "threshold effect" rather than a "polarization effect".

Be that as it may, the real problem is the relevance of D'Alimonte's reasoning today, that is, what the administrative returns demonstrate with respect to the left's competitiveness. In this connection, even this author (1995: 22-23) recognizes "an important difference", because "while for the 1994 election one may effectively speak of a center-left that *loses pieces* between the proportional and the majoritarian arenas, in 1995 it is perhaps more correct to speak of a difficulty in "gaining pieces" of the majoritarian electorate". More than his own calculation, indeed, Table 4 allows us to remove the dubious formula, given the systematically positive results recorded by the center-left. And if this is true, one can even leave aside the neutrality postulate's critique and move to a conclusion that Bartolini and D'Alimonte rejected on the evidence of the 1994 elections. Now,

³⁴ This difficulty may depend on several factors, the most important being the demobilizing pull exercised by the anticipation of a safe victory on the potential supporters of the strongest side.

indeed, D'Alimonte himself recognizes that "what we are saying does not bar the possibility that the center-left might gain a significant amount of seats in the North. Indeed, even a negative performance, in our sense of the term, could anyway allow it to get one vote more than the rival block... In other words, the electoral cartel could be large enough, that is, start from such a high level (of proportional votes), as to compensate for the losses due to coalitional indiscipline. In this case, the sum would remain negative, or even strongly negative, without, however, compromising victory".

With a final note of caution, D'Alimonte concludes that "this is an entirely open bet" and, strictly speaking, he is right, given the heterogeneous data at hand and the hypothetical nature of future coalitions. Yet, for the sake of speculation, let us remember that in 1994 the total Chamber's vote for the uninominal leftist candidates in the North was 25.7%, and that for proportional lists 26.3, as against 49.4 and 44.9 for the right; in 1995, instead, the left vote picked up at 31.8 and 33.7%, whereas the right was down to 40 and 40.4.³⁵ The latter, moreover, has surely exhausted its potential basin of allies and electors, whereas the still weaker center-left may count on agreements with, and votes from, the Lega and Communist Refoundation. This, in turn, would probably bring it ahead and, eventually, ahead enough to "gain a significant amount of seats in the North", the true (or supposed) ideological defections notwithstanding. Thus the "bet" is perhaps partly won, and a really bipolar, "systemic competition" on the verge of full operation.

Conclusions

³⁵ The calculus takes into account only the northern regions where the 1995 elections were held, thus excluding Friuli and the Trentino.

In this article, I have presented an analysis of the Italian transition clearly less "continuist" than many others. Taking Sartori's model seriously, both analytically and empirically, I have indeed shown that both the format and mechanics of the party system no longer lend themselves to the classic polarized pluralism case: the relevant actors and their distances, the direction of competition, the number of the poles and the level of competitiveness itself have changed, or are changing deeply. Yet, it must be recognized that to accept such a conclusion has a rather paradoxical implication. This implication is that Italy is entering moderate pluralism, that is, a type of democracy both stable and efficient, in which the median electors' demands are appropriately and rapidly met by the "moderate politics" of a responsive, responsible, accountable, ruling class. But - here is the paradox - many (I myself included) would deny that this is presently the case. So, what?

So, one might reject responsibility like Sartori (1982: 206-207) does when he writes that "a model tries to pick up the mechanisms... of a given structure... The model's predictions depend", among other things, on the condition that "the so-called logic of a system, that is, its mechanisms, do prevail on their operators. Thus, the limit of a model is readily said: it cannot foresee man, and, more exactly, the men who react to the structures' mechanics and that may restrain, or even may prevail, on systemic constraints... I will say, then, that a model only arrives at where the inertial course of a political system arrives at. It predicts a trend, not outcomes; and it does not even predict the timing. Outcomes and the timing depend on men".

Though translated from a different context, the quotation is perfectly fit, and not only because it "absolves" the model from faults it does not bear; what is more, the quotation (fortuitously) recalls a weakpoint of the present transition, namely the anachronistic, centrifugal, or simply unforeseeable behavior that many

observers have rightly imputed to the Italian elites.³⁶ To be sure, these behaviors pose a serious problem, all the more so because they feed a seemingly endless vicious circle between the uncertainties of the transition and the elites' inability to drive the country out of it. But the problem should not be overrated either to the point of giving the elites the decisive say, the power to de- or re-radicalize the system by their choice only, and, eventually, to generate a "neo-polarized pluralism" (Morlino 1995: 20-23). Though they may modify the timing and, thus, postpone outcomes, indeed, men will much less easily succeed in manipulating, or reversing, structural trends; and on trends - Sartori would say - the "competence" belongs to the model, that is, a model only may allow theoretically and empirically justified explanations and predictions.

In spite of those who swim against the stream, then, I maintain that the transition will finally end up with full-fledged moderate pluralism. But a final objection could be that the latter has not materialized not only because of men's bad will, but also because of the lack of some structural requisites of stability and efficiency that the model plainly ignores. True. Indeed, Sartori (1976: 291) avoids extending the model to the electoral system and the "constitutional structure", though admitting that to add these "intervening variables" would improve its accuracy and predictive strength. Moreover, I agree with Morlino and Tarchi (1995) that the present, dramatic, levels of citizens' dissatisfaction point to two problems (bureaucratic inefficiency and the decline of the welfare state) that I myself recalled as components of the Italian crisis in the introduction. Undoubtedly, these are areas on which little has been done, apart from a significant, but partial, electoral reform and some economic policy choices to deal with the most explosive tendencies of the public debt. The "intervening variables, then, are numerous and, unfortunately, more or less badly related in the

³⁶ D'Alimonte and Bartolini (1995: 457), Morlino (1995: 20-23), Pasquino (1995), and Segatti (1995).

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theoretical debate and empirical research. At present, indeed, party systems' modelling coexists side by side with the research on electoral systems and constitutional engineering, but these branches have not yet been organically merged, in spite of important contributions (Fischella 1982, Lijphart 1994). The numerous theories of implementation, in turn, do not refer, or refer very fragmentarily and embryonically, to the many interactions between the political-institutional and the administrative subsystems. And the rather plethoric literature on the crisis of the welfare state continues to amass frameworks and models -economic, sociopolitical, quite unrelated with one another.

Confronted with such an unmanageable and confused complexity, I have preferred parsimony and relevance, by choosing to test accurately the most classical and authoritative available model of the Italian democracy. The results - I believe - speak for themselves, though - of course - are by no means exhaustive. Extensions and integrations, then, are welcome, especially if they are able to build cumulatively on the task of fully understanding the transition.

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