Italian spatial competition between 2006 and 2008: a changing party system?

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Abstract
The 2008 Italian general election has registered a dramatic decrease in the number of parties who won seats in the National legislature. Still it remains an open question if also the spatial properties of the party system have changed. The evidence is mixed. On one side, the level of polarization of the party system has recorded a decrease compared to recent years. On the other side, this result seems to be mainly due to the choice of parties' leadership concerning electoral alliance, rather than the product of an endogenous change in inter-parties' dynamic. To underpin the logic of policy competition in the last two general election held in Italy (2006 and 2008), we employ a spatial framework that mixes the empirical analysis with a theoretical model that focuses on the electoral incentives facing parties. With respect to the 2006 general election, we show that the assumption of vote-maximizing (but not coalition-vote maximizing) parties illuminates well the observed – and widely scattered - distribution of parties' policy positions. The 2008 situation displays a more complex picture. Notwithstanding the persistent ideological dispersion of the Italian electorate, at least the largest party running in the election (namely the new born People of Freedom party) does present considerable electoral incentives to adopt a more centrist position compared to its actual one. In this sense, if the simplification of the party landscape should confirm itself in the next future, a strengthening of the centripetal dynamics in the Italian party system is expected.

Keywords: Italian party system; spatial competition; expert-survey; conditional logit

Introduction

The 2008 Italian general election has registered a dramatic decrease in the number of parties who won seats in the National legislature. This huge novelty, given the long tradition of party-fragmentation of the Italian political system, represents however just half of the story. As is well known, a party system is characterized not only by its format (i.e., by the number of effective parties operating within it), but also by its mechanics (i.e., by the nature of parties' mutual interactions) (Sartori 1976). It becomes therefore interesting to analyze if the 2008 election has produced any significant change also in the spatial properties of a party system that, since the beginning of the so called "Second Italian Republic" and until the 2006 election included, has been characterized by a bipolar system that did not generally produce a decrease in the overall level of polarization.

With the help of a new expert-survey we present mixed evidence in this respect. On one side, the level of polarization of the Italian party system, at least in the parliamentary arena, has recorded a noteworthy decrease according to well-known indices. On the other side, this result seems to be mainly due to the choice of parties' leadership concerning electoral alliance, mediated by the impact of the electoral rule (and voters' choices), rather than the product of an endogenous change in inter-parties' dynamic. Indeed, Italian parties display a considerable stability in their spatial collocations in the last decade, especially once we focus on the largest contenders.

To investigate these regularities in parties' behaviour, we employ a model of spatial competition recently advanced in the literature under the label of "unified theory of party competition" (see Adams, Merrill and Grofman 2005) to analyze the last two general election held in Italy (2006 and 2008). This model has the attractive advantage to incorporate voter choice into a spatial model where parties make their strategic calculus, therefore linking behavioural research to spatial modelling. With respect to the 2006 general election, the unified model in conjunction with the assumption of vote-maximizing (but not coalition-vote maximizing) parties illuminates well the observed – and widely scattered - distribution of parties' policy positions. The 2008 situation displays a more complex picture. Indeed, notwithstanding the persistent ideological dispersion of the Italian electorate, according to our model at least the largest party running in the election (namely the new born People of Freedom party) does present considerable electoral incentives to adopt a more centrist position compared to its actual one. In this sense, if the simplification of the party landscape should confirm itself in the next future, a strengthening of the centripetal dynamics in the Italian party system is expected.

1. **The 2008 Italian general election: a snapshot**

The latest general election was held in Italy on 13 and 14 April 2008. The election came after the dissolution of the Parliament two months earlier following the defeat of the government of Prime Minister (and leader of the centre-left coalition) Romano Prodi in January 2008 after less than two years from the previous election. The list of parties from which the Italian voters were called to choose from presented several novelties. The centre-left coalition led by the former Rome Mayor Walter Veltroni was formed by the new Democratic Party (Pd) and by Italy of Values (Iv). The Democratic Party (Partito Democratico) was founded on 14 October 2007 as a merger of various left-wing and centre-parties. However its bulk is formed by former members of the Democrats of the Left (Ds) and Democracy is Freedom – The Daisy (Dl) that even two years later (in 2006 election) ran together for the Chamber of Deputies under the same list named Olive Tree (Ulivo), before forming a unified parliamentary group in the Legislative arena. The leadership race for the new party was held through an open primary that registered the clear victory of Veltroni. Following the calling of the new election, Veltroni stated that his party will choose to run alone in the polls

with its own platform, and challenged Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of the main party of the centre-right (Forza Italia, Fi) to do likewise. Besides the need to foster the longer term party development, behind this choice there was also the willingnes to mark a clear difference between the new-born Pd and Prodi's government, perceived negatively by a large part of the electorate.

The Pd's choice had two main consequences. On the left side, the three main parties of the "radical left", formerly allied with the other centre-left parties (Communist Refoundation Party – Rc, Party of the Italian Communists – Pdci, and the Federation of the Greens) plus a left-splinter group of Ds, decided to contest the election together under the banner of The Left – The Rainbow (Sinistra Arcobaleno - Sa). On the centre-right side, the born and the following strategy adopted by the Democratic Party gave new life to the talk among the components of the House of Freedoms coalition, presented since the run-up to the 2006 general election, regarding a possible merger into a united party. Two months before the election Berlusconi announced that Forza Italia and the other main centre-right party (National Alliance – An) will run together under the common symbol of the People of Freedom party (Pdl), being regionally allied with the Northern League (Lega Nord – Ln) and with the little Movement for Autonomy (Mpa).

The fourth party that traditionally belonged to the centre-right coalition, the Union of Christian and Centre Democrats, was also invited to join the new Pdl party but its leaders refused to do so, therefore opting for running alone in the polls under the banner of Union of the Centre (Udc). Finally, another minor competitor in the 2008 election was The Right – Tricolour Flame (De), a far-right party born even in this case few months before the election, and formed by the neo-fascist Tricolour Flame and by a right-splinter group of An.

The election was held for the second time with the new electoral system introduced in 2005 by the incumbent centre-right government. It re-introduces in Italy a proportional system (on this point, see next section), albeit with a majority-prized for the winning pre-electoral coalition and with a complex system of thresholds. In the lower Chamber of Deputies ("Camera dei Deputati"), the majority prize works at a nationwide level[1] and implies that, if the coalition that obtains a majority receives less than fifty-five percent of the seats (which means 340 out of 630), its number of seats is increased to 340. Regarding the thresholds system, if a party belongs to a coalition who gets at least 10% on national basis, in order to participate to the seats distribution it needs to get either a national share of 2% or at least being the largest party among the lists joining the coalition who do not get 2% (the so called "better loser" – *miglior perdente*). If a party runs alone or belongs to a coalition who does not get a national vote share of 10%, the threshold increases to 4%. Finally the distribution of seats is organized at the national level by the largest remainder method.

The electoral results (see Table 1) saw the centre-right coalition led by Berlusconi clearly defeating that of Veltroni (47% of the vote vs. 38%). The new People of Freedom party achieved the largest share of the vote with around 4 point of advantage with respect to the Pd, while the Northern League achieved the greatest gains in the election, doubling its share of the vote from about 4.5% to 8.3%. The Union of the Centre party failed to achieve any breakthrough as a centrist third force, achieving about 5.5% of the vote, similar to its predecessors' 2006 performance. The significant loser in the election was the radical left, which fell from about 10% in total in the last election to about 3%, below the 4% threshold required for seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Also The Right failed to reach that threshold. As a consequence the 2008 election produced a Parliament with just five party holding more than 10 MPs, a dramatic simplification compared to the "legacy" of the Italian political past. In the next sections we investigate if, besides this simple (albeit important)

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[1] In the Upper Chamber ("Senato") the majority prize works at the regional level. In our analysis we focus on the Chamber of Deputies only. See however n.38.

numerical change, something really news happened in the spatial properties of the Italian party competition, such as to configure a change in its party system type.

> Table 1

2. Ideology and Policy Issues in the Italian Second Republic: a persistent polarization?

For a long part of its history the post-war Italian party system presented both the format as well as the mechanics that made it a prototype for Sartori's polarized pluralism. It was a party system with more than five parties (properly counted) and with a high level of ideological polarization, that together with the existence of anti-system parties[2], namely the communist party (Pci) at the extreme left and the neo-fascists Msi at the extreme right, and a centre occupied by a big-party (the Christian democracts – Dc), created incentives for a centrifugal competition, therefore preventing any attempt to reduce the level of polarization in the system.

It is precisely the direction and the character of competition of a party system what clearly differentiates polarized pluralism from its main alter-ego, that is, moderate pluralism. In this latter case, as is well known, the system is bipolar and competition is centripetal, meaning that parties on either side of the spectrum have a tendency to coalesce towards the centre (Pennings and Lane 1998: 4). This does not dismiss the fact that even the number of relevant parties that actually compete in such a system matters. Indeed the format of the system contains "mechanical predispositions", such that the larger the number of parties, the greater the ideological distance, and viceversa (Pennings 1998: 81; Sartori 1976: 291). The importance of this last point will clearly arise in the last section.

The slow changing pace of the Italian party system, dating back at least to the 70s with the on-going process of the Pci's democratic integration (see Farneti 1985), experienced a huge push at the beginning of the 90s, due to well known international factor (the fall of the Berlin Wall that accelerated the transformation of the Italian communists into a more social-democratic party-type) as well as to domestics factors, namely the big corruption scandals highlighted by the judicial investigations, with the associated strong de-legitimizing impact on the parties therein involved. A political crisis resulted and a major institutional revolution followed in 1993 with the introduction in Italy after 40 years of proportional representation of a mixed-system that provided three quarters of the members of Chamber of Deputies in single member districts, and election of the remaining one quarter via proportional representation. The combination of these factors determined the most far-reaching reorganizations of a party system in any western democracies, marking the beginning of what has been called the "Second Italian Republic" (Giannetti and Sened 2004). Old parties either (or practically) disappeared after having played a central role in Italian political life (the social democrats, the liberals, the republicans, the socialists) or went through major transformations in ideologies and electoral strategies (the already mentioned Pci's case, as well as the transformation of Msi into Alleanza Nazionale - An). Besides new parties emerged (Forza Italia being the most important among these, and Northern League the other one) or they split off from old parties (with the implosion of the Christian Democratics post-1994).

For party-system configuration, the most important transformations were: first, the disappearance of anti-system parties, meaning that all parties become now available for cabinet coalitions. Second, the end of the "occupation" of the centre by the Dc, and therefore the disappearance of one of the main obstacle to a stronger centripetal competition (at least according to Sartori's model). Finally,

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[2] That is, parties who undermine the legitimacy of the regime they oppose (Sartori 1976: 133).

the formation of pre-electoral coalitions on the (centre)left and on the (centre)right prompted by the plurality part of the new electoral law.

A strong move toward a moderate pluralistic type of party system should have been therefore (theoretically) expected. In this regard, Table 2 compares the features of the Italian party system (its format and its mechanics) during four general elections that span almost a quarter of a century. The first election considered dates back to 1983 (during the "First Italian Republic") [3], while the others three refers to the more recent elections held in Italy (2001, 2006 and 2008). For all four cases we replicated our analysis considering the electoral stage and the parliamentary arena separately.

Ignoring for now the 2008 election, Table 2 clearly shows two aspects. First, if we consider the index of effective parties as a proxy for the format of the party-system, what we can see is that the fragmentation of the party-system increases considerably from 1983 to 2001, both in the electoral as well as in the parliamentary stage, notwithstanding the already mentioned introduction of a mixed-system majoritarian for its three-fourth. These unanticipated results of the electoral reform have been already analyzed in the literature, beings shown to be mainly due to the "proportionalization" of the plurality component of the new electoral system within each coalition (Bartolini et al. 2004)[4]. The level of fragmentation remains moreover at its high level (roughly one point above the Western-European average) even in 2006, the first election held with the proportional electoral system discussed in the previous section. The fact that in 2006, unlike 2008, only two coalitions were competing, which included all parties, clearly hampered the potential reducing effect of the system of thresholds presented in the new electoral law.

The same trend noted for the level of party-fragmentation applies even for the different measures of polarization reported in Table 2. Party system polarization reflects the degree of ideological differentiation among political parties in a system, and therefore measures how parties are dispersed along a given spatial continuum. The ideological polarization of a party system can be measured, in principle, along more than one dimension. Following Sartori, and before him Downs (1953), we however estimate it along a traditional Left-Right scale. While possibly being an oversimplification of political reality, it provides a good first approximation of the nature of party competition, by appearing as the most detectable and constant way in which not only mass publics but also elites perceive politics (Sartori 1976: 69) [5].

We have estimated each of the reported indices of polarization using parties' placements along the Left-Right scale according to four different expert surveys: for 1983 election we used the data from the Castles-Mair survey (1983), while for 2001 and 2006 elections we used two expert surveys

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[3] We chose the 1983 election because it coincides with the first available expert-survey that covers Italian parties (see below). In all our discussion we treat expert-survey as providing a valid measure of party positions. On this point see among the others: Benoit and Laver (2006), Laver and Hunt (1992), Volkens (2007).

[4] With "proportionalization" Bartolini et al. (2004) mean that it was a common practice for each member party of a coalition to receive a number of "safe" seats in single member plurality districts roughly proportional to the size of their electoral contribution to the success of the coalition (as assessed for example according to parties vote share in European or local elections).

[5] This is especially true for electoral competition (on which we focus here). As suggested by Budge et al. (2001) the electoral debate becomes increasingly simplified and consolidated into Left-Right differences during the run up to polling day. This, of course, does not deny the fact that a multidimensional space (and therefore a multidimensional analysis) is probably most appropriate in other instances, like, for example, in assessing the degree of government stability (see Curini and Martelli, forthcoming).

administered by Benoit and Laver[6]. Finally, for the 2008 case, we employ a new survey that we (together with Kenneth Benoit) administered to Italian experts two months after the 2008 general election.

The first index that we use (the "range of party system") considers the party-system polarization as the absolute distance between parties at the extremes of the spectrum (Keman 1997; Abedi Amir 2002)[7]. The problem with this index is that it does not consider how the other parties (besides the radical ones) are distributed in the system nor take party strength properly into account. Therefore we introduced a second index that considers the positions of each parties together with their national vote-shares (or seat-share) to build a measure of polarization (based on Dalton 2008). This measure is comparable to a measure of the standard deviation of a distribution, having a value of 0 when all parties occupy the same position on the Left-Right scale and 10 when all the parties are split between the two extremes of the scale[8]. The results reported in Table 2 show that up to 2006 there is no sign of a reduced polarization in the Italian party system, neither in the electoral stage nor in the parliamentary arena, that present very similar values among themselves. On the contrary, according to both indices, the polarization of the Italian party system seems indeed to be increased compared to the beginning of 80s[9]. Moreover, these values show a remarkable difference with respect to West-European average (see column 5)[10].

In the same Table we even reported two other indices that helps to better understand the evolution of the Italian party-system. First, we estimate the electoral and parliamentary strength of those Italian parties that can be loosely considered as centrist-parties (i.e., parties with a mean score along the 0-10 left-right scale between 3.5 and 6.5). As can be seen, they register a market decline from early 80s (where they represent roughly half of the votes) to 2006. Even in this case, there is a stark contrast with the West-European average. In particular, the aggregate vote-share by centrist parties in Italy 2006 is the lowest values among all the West-European countries considered. Second, as a further measure to assess the degree of centripetal convergence in the Italian party system, we estimated the absolute distance between the two main parties competing in each of the election here considered (respectively: Dc and Pci in 1983; Fi and Ds in 2001; Fi and Ulivo in 2006). Once again, there are no signs of an increased competition for votes in the centre, while the difference with the West-European average remains strong.

Table 2

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[6] The 2001expert-survey is published in Benoit and Laver (2006). The two authors replied the survey just few weeks before the 2006 Italian general election. We linearly re-scaled the original 1 to 20 left-right scale of Benoit-Laver survey on a 0 to 10 scale to allow a direct comparison with the Castles-Mair survey.

[7] In the case of the electoral stage we adopted Siaroff's (2000) convention of counting all parties which have won 3% or more of the popular vote. For the parliamentary arena, parties must also won seats in the national legislature at the country's most recent election to be counted as relevant.

[8] More in details the polarization index for party i (PI_i) is measured as the following:

$$PI_i = \sqrt{\left\{\sum\left(\text{party strenght}_i\right)\left(\left[\text{party L/R score}_i - \text{party system average L/R score}\right]/5\right)^2\right\}}\ .$$

[9] Of course, a high level of party-system polarization means different things (and has different overall consequences for the functioning of a democratic system) in a situation where there are no anti-system parties compared to a situation where relevant anti-system parties are indeed present. In the latter, a large ideological space implies that the polity contains parties that disagree not only on policies but also, and more importantly, on principles and fundamentals. In the former, it just implies a huge difference among parties in terms of policy. See Bartolini and Mair (1990).

[10] We used the Benoit-Laver expert survey to estimate the measure of party distance in Western European countries. We do not include France given that the left-right scores of French parties were not covered.

In this sense, Table 2 figures out an interesting type of party system for the Second Italian Republic. Going back to Sartori's typology, the Italian party system seems to represent (at least till 2006) a kind of *tertium genus*. Similar to a moderate pluralistic system, *and* unlike a polarized system, it presents a bipolar coalitional configuration without any (large) party occupying the centre and without any proper anti-system party. However, similar to a polarized system, *and* unlike a moderate pluralistic system, the ideological distance in the overall party system, as well as among the two main parties operating within it, remains considerable, with no clear sign of a centripetal convergence[11]. Besides, the number of effective parties within the system remains (fairly) large.

These particular features of the Italian party system of the Second Republic have been noted by other scholars as well: Morlino (1996), for example, analyzing the results of a series of mass surveys refers to the Italian party system as a neo-polarized one. Ieraci (2006), through a content analysis of parliamentary debates on the votes of investiture of four governments (between 1996 and 2001), reaches similar conclusions and talks about a "polarized bipolarism". Finally Wolinetz (2004) compares the Italian party system of the Second Republic, in terms of polarization, with the Italian situation during the 50s and the 60s.

According to this scenario, the 2008 general election presents a mix of new and old elements (see column 4 in Table 2). Besides the already mentioned marked decrease in the fragmentation of the Italian party system, as showed by the decline in the effective number of parties in both the electoral and in the parliamentary arena, we record also a decline in the overall level of polarization (according to both our indices), that produces a value much more in line with the other West-European countries.

On a theoretical level, this reduction could be due to three factors: 1) a changing behaviour of voters (that can choose, for example, to penalize the radical parties); 2) the impact of the electoral system (through its reducing effects); 3) a changing dynamic in the inter-party competition (in a more centripetal way). Note that among these three potential reasons, only the last one is directly linked to the essence or core of a particular party system, namely party interaction and the direction of competition (see Mair 1989: 273), while the other two reasons are indirectly related to it[12].

Going back to the 2008 election, the first factor has been surely present, given the remarkable decrease in the electoral strength of the radical left already noticed. Just as much if not more important has been also the role played by the thresholds system of the electoral law that, mainly thanks to the Pd's choice of running in the election without forming any pre-electoral coalition with the more leftist parties, exercised a stronger role in 2008 unlike the 2006 case. This can be clearly appreciated once we compare the polarization measures estimated in the electoral stage with the ones estimated in the parliamentary arena. Contrary to the other three elections, in the 2008 case the difference between the two stages (electoral and parliamentary) gets appreciable, and it is precisely only when we focus on the parliamentary arena (i.e., once discounted the effect of the electoral rule)

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[11] On the other hand Pappalardo (1996), by treating pre-electoral coalitions as unitary actors, presents evidence of an increased centripetal competition during the first two elections of the Second Italian Republic (1994 and 1996). Given the retained centrality of parties, both in the electoral arena as well as in the legislative arena of the Italian political life, focusing on pre-electoral coalitions to measure polarization within a party system seems to us suspect. Moreover, both in 2001 and in 2006 the distance between the two coalitions remains considerable (and remarkably higher compared to the standards of Western-Europe): 5.11 on a 0 to 10 scale in 2001 and 4.80 in 2006.

[12] As stressed by Laver (1989), electoral change should be seen to lead to party system change only when it brings about a shift from one type of party system to another. Cautious therefore should be put against a simple categorization of party system change or persistence which derives largely, if not solely, from aggregate electoral trends.

that something really news, in terms of level of polarization, seems to have appeared in the Italian party system.

The third possible explanation regarding the decreased level of polarization of the Italian party system seems to have played only a secondary role. The evidence of this can be found in Table 3, where we compare parties' position along the Left-Right dimension in the last three elections. As can be seen, there are some significant movements of parties along the three different temporal periods. For example the move of An toward a more moderate position between 2001 and 2006 is statistically significant according to a formal t-test, once taken into account the measure of uncertainty (i.e., the standard error) surrounding each score. The same happens for the Northern League between 2006 and 2008, while also the Udc moves significantly leftward after having left the centre-right coalition in 2008. However, there is also a lack of any pronounced change in the *direction* of party competition if we focus our attention on the two pivotal parties in each election. In particular, if we compare the position of Pd and Pdl with the (weighted) average position in 2006 of those parties that two years later would have formed them (see section 1), we do not find any significant dynamic[13].

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│   Table 3   │
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It is not therefore surprising that the ideological distance between the two pivotal parties even in 2008 does not show any clear sign of reducing (see Table 2), still ranking therefore among the highest one in Western Europe. Interestingly this happens notwithstanding an electoral campaign that in 2008 was so unusually "quite" for Italian standards to prompt some commentators to introduce the nickname of "Veltrusconi" to refer to the two competitors (Veltroni and Berlusconi), precisely to emphasis the supposedly similarity in the policies advocated by them.

In the next section, by focusing on the 2006 and 2008 general elections, we illustrate how *and if* these regularities in parties' behavior can be conceived as a rational response of strategic parties who care about electoral result.

3. Spatial models of party competition

Spatial model of party competition are firmly based on policy considerations. In the Downsian tradition, candidates and/or parties are assumed to compete for the position(s) available by advocating one of the feasible policies in a Euclidean space (one-dimensional or multidimensional). Voters, on their parts, are assumed to possess symmetric single-peaked spatial preferences with unique ideal points, therefore voting for the candidates whose platform is closest to the voter's ideal point. Assuming a quadratic proximity utility (mostly for mathematical convenience) and a single issue-dimension centred on the Left-Right continuum, taken as the dimension that most constraints parties' positions across a broad range of policies (Gabel and Huber 2000), we can represent formally this statement via the following equation:

$$U_{ik} = -\left(x_i - p_k\right)^2 + \varepsilon_{ik} \qquad (1)$$

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[13] The means are weighted according to parties' vote-share in 2006 election. Using a simple mean does not affect our results. Interestingly our findings shows (contrary to McDonald and Mendes 2001: 100) how expert survey scores can present a dynamic variation, at least for some parties, even in such a short time-span (seven years) as the one considered here, pointing therefore to the utility of creating a time series of expert placements to compare parties' position over times.

where U_{ik} is the utility of elector i to vote for party k, and x_i and p_k are respectively the ideal point of elector i and party k's location on the underlying Left-Right policy dimension. The negative sign is used so that voters dislike other positions more the further they are away from their preferred one. By adding the term ε_{ik} we allow for a stochastic component in (1) to model unmeasured components of voter utility. This means that the voter's evaluation of party k consists of a policy term and an "error" term which captures non-systematic influences independent of proximity considerations (Lin et al. 1999). As a result, contrary to deterministic models in which each voter always votes the candidate/party closest to him in the issue space, now the voting choice becomes probabilistic from the parties' (as well as from the analyst's) perspective. In this sense probabilistic models seems to represent voter utility more realistically (Merril and Adams 2001)[14].

The general quest of spatial modellers is to look for the existence of a policy equilibrium during a single election period (i.e., a set of locations in the policy space such that no party can improve its position by changing its policies, given the policies of its rivals). This is, however, a special troublesome issue for multiparty competition. Indeed, while deterministic studies focusing on vote-seeking strategies conclude that multiparty equilibria are unlikely except under particular circumstances (Adams 1999)[15], equilibria appear more likely for probabilistic vote models, particularly in cases where the random component of voter decision making is sufficiently large. Still, the equilibria typically display considerable policy convergence, with the parties coalescing into a limited number of blocs or adopting identical policy positions.

More divergent equilibria - and therefore equilibria that appear much more in line with real-world elections - become however possible if we increase the complexity of voters' utility function. This can be done by considering in equation (1) measurable nonpolicy variables that empirical research usually finds important: from voter-specific variables (such as sociodemographic characteristics, perceptions of economic conditions, and, most notably, party identification) to party-specific variables (such as judgements about party's competence, integrity, reliability, as well as retrospective evaluations of incumbent performance). Merging the behavioural perspective and the spatial modelling paradigm associated with rational choice theory has been explicitly proposed by Adams, Merrill and Grofman (2005; see also Schofield and Sened 2006) as a way to explain the theoretical puzzle of party divergence and to identify the factors that most strongly affect the extent of divergence. They label this behavioural-rational choice hybrid the "unified theory of party competition".

According to this approach, the researcher must first empirically estimate the parameters of a more satisfactory version of equation (1) enriched by the just mentioned nonpolicy factors. Applying a Conditional Logit model on survey data is the preferred choice in this regard (see Thurner 2000). The parameters estimates of the empirical model must then be used to search for an equilibrium policy configuration. To this end Merrill and Adams (2001) introduce an iterative algorithm (therein after: MA algorithm) that looks precisely for the existence of a Nash Equilibrium (if any) in parties' positions[16].

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[14] Assuming that electors employ a proximity criterion when choosing among parties is not however the only way to represent electors' choices in a spatial framework. An alternative consists in pretending that voters discount parties' policy positions (see Kedar 2005, Merrill and Grofman 1999) or that they vote in a directional way (see Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989).

[15] The problems with the rareness of multiparty equilibria under a deterministic framework are exacerbated once we relax the uniformity of voter ideal points assumption (a normal feature given the empirical world of policy preferences). See Cox (1990a).

[16] An Excel spreedsheet that implements the algorithm proposed by the two authors can be found at the following URL: http://course.wilkes.edu/merrill/. Building on this, we developed a script in *R* that allows the researcher to run the empirical and the theoretical part of the model in one step.

Through this, and by comparing the theoretically-derived equilibria with the actual (perceived) parties' policy positions, it is possible to illuminate the underpinning logic of policy competition in a given election. In other words, equilibria become counterfactual claims on the nature of the electoral incentives facing parties (see Cox 1990a). Moreover, spatial equilibria can also be used to inform our expectation about what positions competitors will adopt in that and similar elections. We are now going to apply this analysis to the 2006 as well as to the 2008 Italian general elections.

4. The 2006 Italian general election case

The 2006 Italian general election has been characterized by a competition between the centre-right coalition (called "House of Freedoms") led by the incumbent Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and the centre-left coalition (called "the Union") led by the challenger and former Prime Minister Romano Prodi. As already stated, the 2006 election was held with a new PR electoral system introduced in late 2005 by the incumbent government. This context revealed itself as the most uncertain one of the entire history of the Italian Republic, ending with the centre-left coalition winning the election with less than 30.000 votes out of around 40 millions (in the lower Chamber). Table 4 reports the vote share obtained by the two coalitions and by the parties forming them, as well as parties' positions on a 0 to 10 left-right scale (where the value 0 on such a scale represents a leftist position) according to the already mentioned Benoit-Laver expert survey (Benoit and Laver 2006)[17].

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Table 4
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To shed light on the nature of the Italian party competition in 2006 we are going to employ survey data to estimate the distributions of voters' policy preferences and the parameter of the statistical model as the basis for analyzing the strategic policy decisions of parties. The survey data come from the 2006 Italian National Election Studies (*Itanes*) survey (see: www.itanes.org), a panel survey consisting of three different "waves" of interviews (before the election, soon after it, some months later). In this sense, while our dependent variable (the respondents' reported votes in the Chamber of Deputies) derives from the second wave of interviews, all the independent variables we employ are extracted from the first wave. The reason behind this choice is that we want to minimize the risk that respondents rationalize ex-post their answers according to their voting behaviour (i.e., the very same thing that we want to explain). This can be particularly true for both left-right self-placement as well as for party-ID[18]. For example, our data show that if we use the party-ID of the first wave of interviews, among respondents who reported voting for one of the ten parties analyzed in the 2006 election and who also reported a party identification, one out of four (26%) voted for a different party. However this percentage drops to 10% when we use the party-ID of the second wave, pointing to the possibility that respondents may view current party identification and current vote as equivalent. In a similar fashion, the number of respondents who declared no party-ID in the

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[17] Note that the two main parties of the centre-left coalition (Ds and Dl) presented a joint list for the Camera (under the name of "Ulivo") while running separately in the Upper Chamber. Therefore, in our analysis we estimated a weighted mean between the spatial localizations of the two parties, according to their electoral result in the Upper Chamber, to locate the Ulivo position (originally not included in the expert survey we employ). Using a simple mean does not affect our results. Moreover, we did not include the Udeur in the analysis given the extremely low number of respondents who expressed their vote for that party in the survey we employ.

[18] In the context of the Michigan approach, partisanship means the longstanding sociopsychological attachment to a party. In rational choice approaches, however, this concept captures the effect of an individual's past voting behavior on the actual and future votes and the carry-over effects of past campaigning and party reputation (Fiorina 1981, Thurner 2000).

pre-election survey is around 30%, a percentage that once again clearly drops in the post-election survey (19%). On the contrary, the self-placement of voters seems remarkably stable between the first and the second wave (R-Pearson: .85)[19].

The model we estimated for the 2006 Italian general election is a Conditional Logit (CL) that assumes that voter i's utility for candidate k, Ui(k), ($i=1,…,n$; $k=1,…p$) is a function of V_{ik}, the vector of i's utilities for k's policy positions (as given by equation (1)), Z_i, the vector of i's individual attributes, α_k, the constant of the model for party's k, plus a stochastic error ε_{ik} (whose distribution is given below):

$$U_{ik} = AV_{ik} + B_k Z_i + \alpha_k + \varepsilon_{ik} \qquad (2)$$

where A, B_k and α_k represent coefficients to be estimated. With respect to V_{ik}, x_i is identified by the self-placement of survey respondents along a 0 to 10 Left-Right scale[20], while to measure the "true" party position (i.e., p_k) we use the experts' placements of parties' reported in Table 2[21]. Employing experts' placement of parties allows us not only to have a Left-Right score for each party considered, but by being exogenous with respect to the respondents' answers, it protect us against any risks of projection (i.e., the tendency of respondents to place favoured parties near themselves and disfavoured parties farther away) [22].

With respect to Z_i, the vector of individual voter attributes, we included the respondent's partisanship, coded 1 if the respondent considered herself close to a party and zero otherwise. The importance of partisanship in affecting voter's choice has been largely discussed in the literature for the Italian case. See for example Itanes (2006), Maraffi (2007), D'Alimonte and Bartolini (2002). We even explored the importance of several commonly-used sociodemographic characteristics such as sex, age, education, religion and work-type. In our reported model (see below) we include however just the variable age, given that the other variables add little to the explanatory power of the model (once accounted for the influence of the independent variables we considered). Given our specific attention to the final equilibrium configuration in parties' placements, rather than on empirical issues per se, we value a parsimonious model. Finally, α_k, that is, party-specific intercept, capture all the other unmeasured non-policy sources of voters' party

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[19] As previous simulation studies on the electoral effects of party policies in real-world elections, our analysis raises the assumption that voters' policy preferences are exogenous – that is, that these factors are not influenced by the parties' policy positions – at least in the short-run (Laver and Hunt 1992). Adams et al. (2004) provides evidence that parties respond to public opinion preferences (captured by a left-right placement) rather than the other way around.

[20] Left-right self-placements are meaningfully correlated with respondents' answers to a set of questions, also presented in Itanes survey, directed to capture policy preferences regarding immigration, health care, abortion, measures against terrorism and unemployment. In this sense, instead of being a merely exogenous orientation, respondents' left-right self-placements seem clearly linked to respondents' underlying beliefs about policy dimensions.

[21] Use of mean (or voter-specific) placements of parties instead of experts' placement for the seven parties covered in Itanes (the same reported in Table 1 with the exception of: Pdci, La Rosa and Iv) yields similar parametric estimates and equilibrium positions. Indeed, respondent placements accord very well with experts' placements of parties (R-Pearson: .98). This reassures us about using experts' placements to locate the parties in the same policy space of the respondents.

[22] Evidence of projection is clearly presents in the Itanes 2006 survey (results available from the authors upon request). This does not imply that parties' placements by experts cannot present their own ideological bias. If, following Curini (forthcoming), we employ a "correct" placements for parties to discount for any ideological bias in experts' answers, our main results are only strengthen.

evaluations, including voters' valence-related evaluations of the parties (such as the judgment related to party leaders' competence, integrity, moral stance or charisma - which cannot be ascribed to the policy choice of the party: see Stokes 1964; Schofield and Sened 2006).

The errors of (2) are independently and identically distributed with type I extreme value distribution[23]. Because ε_{ik} are unobserved, the voter's decision is probabilistic[24]. Formally, the probability that voter i votes for party k is given by the following choice probabilities (see McFadden 1974):

$$P\left(vote = k \big| A, B_k, V_{ik}, Z_j\right) = \frac{\exp\left(AV_{ik} + B_k Z_j\right)}{\displaystyle\sum_{n=1}^{p}\exp\left(AV_{in} + B_n Z_j\right)} \qquad (3)$$

The probability that alternative k is chosen is the probability that the utility of alternative k is higher than that of any other alternative.

Our analysis focuses on the subsample of 892 respondents (out of 1,013) who reported voting for one of the ten parties reported in Table 4 and who could place themselves on the Left-Right dimension. The results of the CL model are reported in Table 5. As is well known, CL models have to be identified by placing restrictions on the model before estimation. We identify An as the reference party and we therefore subtract its party utility from the remaining utility to identify the CL model estimated in this study. Despite its parsimony, the statistical fit of the model is very satisfactory. Moreover, our model predicts almost perfectly the aggregate vote share for each party as it appears in the sample (as we can see from the extremely low value of the absolute average distance between sample vote and predicted vote)[25].

> Table 5

Both the policy salience coefficient, measured as the (squared) distances of voter's self-placement from each party along the Left-Right scale, and party-ID, result highly significant. Regarding the variable age, older voters have a higher tendency to vote for Fi, Iv, Udc or Ulivo relative to vote for An. Finally, all the party intercepts significantly different from zero have a negative sign. Given that the constants are all relative to the score of An, which is normalized to be zero, this implies that there are unmeasured sources of voters' party evaluations that benefited An relative to all parties but the Ulivo, Fi and Ln.

Using the parameter estimates of our empirical model, we looked then for the existence of a Nash equilibrium in parties' locations. In particular, we applied the MA algorithm on a simulated sample of 2,000 subjects that we recovered starting from our sample of 892 respondents. To this end, we employed a bootstrapping procedure without replacement (the only assumption that must hold, in this case, is that the respondents in our sample, for each party considered, represent fairly the

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[23] The independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA) property on voter choice means that the relative odds of selecting between two candidates or parties is independent of the addition or subtraction of other alternatives from the choice set (see Alvarez and Nagler 1998). Dow and Endersby (2004) show that for most application the IIA assumption is not as restrictive as it might appear. This is especially true for party-centered elections (compared to candidate-centered elections), when no entry or exit of parties is considered.

[24] The model implies that voters vote sincerely for their most preferred party. Strategic voting is however implicitly incorporated into the empirical estimates since we estimate the model parameters using respondents' reported votes as the dependent variable, regardless of being it a strategic vote or otherwise.

[25] We use the mean probability as the predicted vote share for each party.

distribution's properties of the real voters). We moreover repeated the analysis 1,000 times. By simulating a larger sample we can better approximate the true composition of the Italian voters during the 2006 electoral campaign, given that the voter distribution based upon survey data may not accurately reflect the underlying voting population[26], while, by repeating the analysis one thousands time, we can check how robust are our final results.

We explored two different scenarios. In the first, parties are primarily interested in maximizing their vote-share, while in the second they are coalition-vote maximizers. Vote-seeking parties promote the policies that they believe maximize their own electoral support, while coalition-seeking parties present policies that maximize the collective appeal of their coalition bloc. Given the existence of pre-electoral coalitions in the Italian political scenario, this latter assumption is an interesting assumption to explore[27].

The results of our analysis under the first scenario are reported in Figure 1 (the parametric bootstrap standard errors of the equilibrium estimates are reported in parentheses)[28]. This Figure makes clear that there are marked similarities between actual and simulated positions. This does not imply that all parties are simple-minded vote-maximizers, but still by assuming it we get to a close proxy to the actual, but unknown, utility function deployed by the party leaders (Schofield and Sened 2006).[29] Besides the relative small size of the standard errors (except for Iv) indicates that both the pattern of the equilibrium configuration and the fact that the equilibrium strategies are in general distinct from one another are robust. Finally, the projected vote-share of parties found in the Nash equilibrium looks remarkably close to the actual vote-share in 2006 (less than 1% of difference as an average; see Table 6), confirming our impression that the 2006 general election was indeed one where parties could be considered be primarily interested in maximizing their own vote-share.

Figure 1

Table 6

The fact that parties' optima are largely dispersed over the policy space becomes more understandable once taken into account the particular distribution of voters' ideal points along the Left-Right dimension in the 2006 electoral context. Indeed the polarization index for voters' self-placement (estimated as explained for Table 2) is 6.08, pointing therefore to a distribution that far

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[26] To this end we simulate our larger sample according to party's vote share in the 2006 election. Repeating the analysis according to party's expected vote share according to the last electoral surveys available produces no noteworthy difference in our main conclusions. The electoral surveys are reported in: www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it.

[27] See for example Baldassarri and Schadae (2004) who argue that at least for the 2001 Italian election three out of four parties of the centre-right coalition (with the exception of Forza Italia) pursued this strategy at their vote-share detrimental.

[28] Note that for each simulation, there is a unique Nash equilibrium that is independent of the randomly generated starting points used in the algorithm for the parties' initial placements. In this sense, the bootstrap standard errors in Figure 1 are only due to the boostrapping procedures (i.e., to the fact that each of the simulated sample to which the MA has been applied is different from the other one).

[29] In equilibrium parties' positions are even strongly correlated with the mean positions of party identifiers (R-Pearson: .97). This is consistent with previous works (for a review see Adams, Merrill and Grofman 2005), which conclude that vote-seeking parties and candidates are motivated to present policies in the direction of voters who are favorably disposed toward them for nonpolicy reasons. However, given that parties also have opportunities to attract some limited support from rival partisan constituencies as well as from independents, they are also prompted to attach moderate weights to these rival partisans' policy preferences others than the ones of their respective partisan constituency.

from being a well-behaved normal distribution, is dispersed evenly over the entire Left-Right continuum. This is an important aspect for party competition. The more dispersed the distribution of voters' ideal points along the ideological dimension, the more dispersed we should expect vote-seeking parties' positions to be at equilibrium, and, similarly, the stronger the centrifugal incentives which push vote-seeking parties away from the mean or median voter position (for a similar point see Cox 1990a). On the contrary, in a system with voters compacted together, the parties should have more incentives to converge toward the median (or the mean). In a similar fashion, Adams et al. (2006) empirical study of party positioning in eight Western European democracies supports the prediction that parties' policy dispersion increases with the dispersion of the voter distribution. This is what reasonable happens for the 2006 Italian general election.

In the second scenario, as already stated, we suppose that party's utility from the election is not linked only to the vote-share they get, but also, on varying degree, on the electoral success of their own coalition. We can therefore define a parameter α such that when $\alpha = 0$, then parties are purely vote-seeking (like in the first scenario), while if α increases parties start to weight both their own votes and those of their own coalition partners. At the extreme, when $\alpha = 1$, parties are purely coalition-seeking party, meaning that their own votes weight for them exactly as those their coalition partners in their utility calculus[30].

We explored three different situations. In the first one, parties of both coalitions (the centre-left Union and the centre-right House of Freedoms) are supposed to be heavily coalition-oriented (i.e., $\alpha = 0.8$), while in the second situation they are only moderated so (i.e., $\alpha = 0.3$). Of course, it is not necessary to assume that parties in both coalitions are equally coalition-oriented. As a result, in our third situation we assume that the parties belonging to the House of Freedoms are half as much coalition-oriented compared to centre-left parties (i.e., respectively $\alpha = 0.3$ vs. $\alpha = 0.6$). Given that during the 2006 electoral campaign (especially at the beginning) the leadership of Silvio Berlusconi within the centre-right coalition was openly questioned by both Gianfranco Fini (leader of An) and Pierferdinando Casini (leader of Udc), while the leadership of Romano Prodi was never really challenged within the Union, this seems to us a reasonable hypothesis.

In all the three situations, the Nash equilibrium locations we get are very different to the equilibrium configuration obtained for vote-maximizing parties and − for most parties − vastly different for the parties' actual positions. For example, the moderate centre-right party (Udc) moves to the left of both the two communist parties in each of the three equilibria computed, while the moderate-left party Iv moves to the extreme-right, and the rightist An moves to the centre (results not reported here). Such optimal strategies seem unrealistic at best. By taking the correlation as well as the absolute average distance between the equilibrium and the actual positions of parties as a roughly measure of the goodness of fit of the estimated models, Table 7 clearly shows the weaker performance of coalition-seeking parties models, under the three situations analyzed, compared to the vote-seeking model (i.e., $\alpha = 0.0$). In other words, despite the already mentioned existence of pre-electoral coalitions in 2006 general election, members of either of the respective blocs were not focusing on how their (declared) policies could have affected the likelihood that the coalition of which they were a member would become the winning coalition.

Table 7

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[30] More formally, the utility that party k belonging to coalition j, attaches to an electoral outcome is the weighted sum of its expected vote-share (*EV*) and the expected vote of its coalition partners: $U_k = EV(k) + \alpha EV\left(\sum_{i=1}^{j-k} i\right)$, where i are the parties – other than k – belonging to coalition j

Summing up, with respect to the 2006 general election, assuming vote-maximizing (but *not* coalition-vote maximizing) parties appears to illuminate well the observed – and widely dispersed - distribution of parties' policy positions, as well as the existence of two coalitions that do no present large incentives to move centripetally. Given the good fit with the empirical facts of such a parsimonious model, in terms of parties' assumptions, we try now to extend it to the 2008 election.

5. The 2008 Italian general election case revised

The main aspects of the 2008 electoral context have been already presented in section 1. To analyze the dynamic of the party competition therein developed we employ a mass survey administered by ISPO (*Istituto per gli Studi sulla Pubblica Opinione*) three days after that the election were held. As usual, our dependent variable is the respondents' reported votes in the Chamber of Deputies. As a surrogate of partisanship we used in this case the recalled vote (i.e., the self-reported vote in 2006) given the absence in the survey of a direct question concerning party-ID. This is a common practice in the literature (see Adams, Merrill and Grofman 2005; Adams and Merrill 1999). To reconcile the 2006 vote with the 2008 vote (given the different lists of parties running in the two elections) we focused on the original constituent unities that formed the new parties running in 2008 electoral context. For example, all the respondents who reported having voted in 2006 for An or Fi are coded 1 with respect to Pdl recall vote[31]. And so on. Besides the self-placement of voters along the Left-Right scale[32], we even considered all the previously mentioned socio-economics variables.

As usual, we focus on the subsample of 680 respondents (out of 989) whose self-placement on the Left-Right dimension was available and that reported voting for one of the parties of Table [33]. We followed the same steps highlighted in the previous section. First, we estimated our empirical model. In this case, our CL model includes, besides the usual proximity coefficient and parties' intercepts, the already mentioned recall vote and a dummy for sex (0 for male; 1 for female). Even for the 2008 election the statistical fit of the model is very good (see Table 8), while the coefficients of both the policy salience and the proxy for party-ID (i.e., recall vote) presents a value close to the one computed for the 2006 election. Regarding the variable sex, given that the reference party is the Pd, we can argue that females present a higher tendency to vote for centre or centre-left parties relative to vote for Pdl, even if only in the Pd case we have a significant value (albeit at 90%). Finally, note the all the intercept clearly show that there are large and significant unmeasured non-policy sources of voters' party evaluations that benefit Pdl relative to all the other parties (but the Northern League). We are going back later to this point.

$$\boxed{\text{Table 8}}$$

As a second step in the analysis, by employing the parameter estimates of our empirical model we looked for the existence of a Nash equilibrium in parties' locations. As usual we employed the

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[31] The rate of respondents who changed their vote between 2006 and 2008 is quite close to the percentage of voters that in the 2006 survey (see previous section) reported voting for a party different from the one towards which they expressed an identification (roughly the 25%). This further strengths our confidence in using the recall vote as a proxy of party-ID.

[32] In the 2008 survey the self-placement of respondents is along a 1 to 5 left-right scale. To bring back this value to a 0 to 10 scale we employed a classification tree technique (see Breiman et al. 1984 Porro – Vezzulli – Iacus 2004) on the 2006 survey. The estimations of the model are then applied to the 2008 survey to predict the 0 to 10 self-placement of its respondents. The correlation between the original 1 to 5 scale and the predicted 0 to 10 scale is over 94%.

[33] Both the Right party ("La Destra") and Mpa have been excluded from the analysis given the extremely low number of respondents who self-reported to have voted for one of the two parties.

bootstrapping procedure discussed in the previous section producing therefore a larger sample of 2,000 virtual voters[34]. The results are reported in Figure 2 under the assumption that parties are primarily interested in maximizing their vote-share[35]. As can be seen, compared to the 2006 election, the equilibrium parties' position looks less in accordance with parties' actual position. Indeed, the average deviation from actual party position is .24 higher and the R-Pearson is .09 lower than in 2006. Similarly, both measures show a lower fit in 2008, compared to 2006, when we consider the relationship between the projected vote share and the actual vote share (see Table 9).

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┌─────────────────────────────┐
│          Figure 2           │
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┌─────────────────────────────┐
│          Table 9            │
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These results, however, are mainly due to the largest party running in the electoral context, namely the Pdl. Indeed, according to the equilibrium found, the optimal positions of the Pdl is clearly more moderate compared to its actual position (a score of 4.80 *vs.* a score of 7.52), and on the contrary very close to the overall mean of the voters' distribution (4.90). This is evident not only if we contrast the equilibrium position of Pdl with its actual position, but also if we compare parties' equilibrium positions between 2006 and in 2008. In this regard, we built Table 10 exactly as we did for Table 3, but using this time the optimal parties' locations. As happened with expert-surveys, parties look fairly stable in their positions, but for the position of Pdl (see Table 9) and, to a lesser degree, of Northern League, the only two parties to show a significant difference in their positions (according to a t-test) from 2006 to 2008. Moreover, our results show that the Pdl has (large) incentives to move towards the centre of the electoral distribution, given that in this case it would gain almost half of the national vote-share (+8.4% compared to its actual vote share), mostly at the detrimental of the Democratic Party (-5.6%).

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┌─────────────────────────────┐
│          Table 10           │
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Interestingly, this happens notwithstanding a voter distribution that remains far from being normally distributed, with once again a remarkable high score according to the polarization index (5.15). In 2008 election, however, the centrifugal incentives arising from the electorate's policy preferences are counteracted by the lower number of parties competing in the electoral context, which adds, through the "mechanical predispositions" of the format of a party system previously quoted, new centripetal incentives to inter-party dynamic (for a formal statement: see Adams, Merrill and Grofman 2005; see also Cox 1990b). In this sense, the "mechanical predispositions" of the format of a party system previously quoted is "set in motion" influencing the same mechanics of the system.

Moreover, given that the simplification of the electoral supply involves principally the right-side of the ideological space (in particular, the two largest centre-right parties: Forza Italia and National Alliance), the fact that the party most motivated to change its optimal position (compared to the previous election) is precisely the Pdl comes with no surprise. Experiencing less serious intra-coalition competition on its right, and with large non-policy advantages, others than sex, relative to

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[34] As happens for the 2006 case, simulating our larger sample according to party's expected vote share according to the last electoral surveys available does not significantly affect our analysis.

[35] Assuming that parties are coalition-vote maximizers produces bizarre results in terms of parties' optimal positions (as in 2006). The same happens if we suppose that parties belonging to the centre-left and to the centre-right coalitions are mainly interested in competing in maximizing the vote margin between the two coalitions (a plausible assumption given the presence of a majority prize in the electoral system). We do not explore either of these scenarios here any further.

other parties, including the Pd (as pointed by the highly significant intercepts in Table 7[36]) a move towards the centre becomes more lucrative, given that it allows the Pdl to gain the extra-voters therein located (mainly, but not only, independent voters, i.e., voters without a clear party-ID) without losing the support of its own partisans[37].

Still the Pdl did not attempt to move in a centripetal way in the actual electoral context and this obviously raises the question of why the leadership of the new centre-right party did not attempt such a policy shift. In this sense, a virtue of the model we employ is that it allows to judge parties' actual behavior against a clear baseline (that of vote-maximizer parties). However, party leaders can care about more than simple vote-maximization and as a result in some instance they can decide not to react as the model expects to their competitors' policy strategies and to the others electoral incentives characterizing their environment. This likely can occur either because they plausibly weight policy objectives (Schofield et al. 1998), or because they feel a higher pressure, compared to other parties, from their activists (see Schofield and Sened 2006). Moreover parties in some instances cannot feasibly change their policies to reflect current public opinion if this implies some radical policy shift that would destroy their reputations for consistency and reliability (see Downs 1957: 107-13, Budge et al 2001; Warwick 2005). In this sense parties can exchange short-term electoral gains for pursuing other objectives[38]. Note, however, that at least the largest of the two original component of the Pdl, namely Forza Italia, is generally considered as a prototype of a "personal party", more than as an ideologically committed party or as a party in which the activists play a large role (Calise 2005)[39]. In this sense, regardless of the reason (including a possible "strategic mistake") that could have led the Pdl to adopt such a market different position compared to its optimal one in the 2008 general election, its electoral incentives are potentially so large to make the aforementioned trade-off infeasible in the long-term.

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[36] If we re-estimate the CL model forcing the intercept of the Pd (relative to the Pdl) to be zero, and therefore artificially canceling the non-policy advantages enjoined by the Pdl with respect to the Pd, the Pdl's optimal position moves to the right compared to Figure 2 (a score of 5.2), while the projected vote-share of the Pdl decreases from 49.1% to 47.0%. Similarly, the Pd's optimal position moves to the right (3.70 vs. 3.51) and its projected vote-share increases by 2.5%. In this sense, while clearly having an effect on the parties' equilibrium in the 2008 election, the non-policy advantages of the Pdl relative to its main competitor is not the only or even the primary reason that explains its incentives to move centripetally (compared to its actual position).

[37] The fact that we could not include in our analysis the rightist party running in the election (i.e., The Right: see n.33) has reasonably only a marginal impact on the magnitude of incentives of both the Pdl and (to a lesser degree) the Northern League to move centripetally, given the limited support of that party.

[38] The existence of a perfect bicameral system in Italy together with a majority prize that according to the electoral system in the Upper Chamber, unlike in the Lower Chamber, works at the regional level (see n.1), could provide a further reason to explain this discrepancy. Indeed, if we assume that voters' distribution varies across regions, a party could have an incentive, under particular circumstances, to present at the national level a different position compared to its theoretically optimal one, precisely because this would produce for that party a competitive advantage in some crucial (and highly disputed) regions (see Grofman 2004). This could explain the difference we found in Figure 2 between the actual and the optimal position of Pdl. We do not formally investigate this possibility here. We just note that for this being true, the more uncertain/disputed regions in the 2008 general election should have presented a distribution of preferences clearly skewed to the right to be able to effectively press the Pdl to move far away from its optimal position (according to our model). But a region with such a skewed voters' distribution can hardly be considered a "disputed region" in the first place. Here lays the contradiction.

[39] Indeed, the parties more eager to articulate their sincere policy preferences during an electoral context are normally the radical ones. See Adams, Merrill and Grofman (2005) for empirical evidence about the French case.

According to our model, it is therefore reasonable to expect a strengthening of the centripetal dynamics in the Italian party system *if* the main features of the electoral context, mainly the simplification of the electoral supply as experienced in 2008, should confirm itself in the next future. In this regard, two are the conditions that seems more important to be fulfilled. On one side, the success of the institutionalization of the Pdl as a new party (see Panebianco 1984), in particular its ability to cope with the succession of Silvio Berlusconi's leadership without jeopardizing the internal equilibrium between Forza Italia and National Alliance. On the other side, the continuity in the choice of the Pd's leadership to run in the election without any alliance with the extreme left parties. Any change in the electoral system would of course considerably impact our expectations.

Conclusion: a brand new party system?

Party system change may be defined as an enduring change in the inter-party relationship that both results from and affects the competition and cooperation between political parties (Pennings and Lane 1998: 5). Its occurrence may be related to a broad variety of both long as well as short-tem factors, like a changing international environment, a transformation of the economy, electoral rules, societal discontent, regime collapse, shifts in the pattern of social cleavages, earthquake elections, etc. In the Italian 2008 case, however, the basis for attempting to change a party system that has been consolidating since 1994, are mainly linked to a change in party leadership's strategy. In particular to the decision of the leadership of the new-born Democratic Party to run alone in the following election, prompted in this by the poor performance of the incumbent government ran by Romano Prodi. This accelerated the formation of a unified party (or at least, of a unified electoral list) even in the centre-right coalition as well as a creation of a common list in the extreme left. As we saw the result has been a dramatic decrease in the effective number of parties as well as a reduction in the overall level of polarization, especially if we focus our analysis to the parliamentary arena. However, this reduction seems to be mainly due to the institutional environment in which parties are operating (i.e., the electoral system) given the aforementioned elites' choice, rather than the result of any relevant transformation in the direction of competition, that is, in the core that defines a party system as such. On the contrary at least the largest Italian parties show a considerable stability in their ideological position.

By employing a spatial framework that mixes the empirical analysis with a theoretical model that focuses on the electoral incentives facing parties in a given context, we showed that 1) in 2006 election the dispersion in voters' policy preferences produces enough centrifugal incentives to sustain as an equilibrium a situation in which vote-maximizer (but not coalition-maximizer) parties adopt a position quite close to their actual (perceived) ones; 2) contrary to 2006 election, in 2008 the simplification of the party landscape generates centripetal electoral incentives that could have pushed a stronger centripetal move in the party system, involving in particular the Pdl's position. We presented some arguments that could explain why the leadership of the Pdl did not attempt such an apparent favorable move. There is however probably too much to gain for Pdl for not at least attempting such a policy change in the nearest future. But once done it, a counter-move by the other main party (the Pd) could well be expected, therefore moving Italian politics towards a different path of development, in terms of party system type, compared to the one followed in its last twenty years.

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Tables

Table 1. Italian 2008 election results: vote-share by party ("Camera dei Deputati")

Coalition	Vote share		Vote share
		Pdl – Popolo della Libertà	37.39
Centre-right coalition	46.81	Ln - Lega Nord	8.30
		Mpa – Movimento per le autonomie	1.13
Centre-left coalition	37.54	Pd – Partito Democratico	33.17
		Iv – Italia dei Valori	4.37
Principal competitors outside the two main coalitions:		Udc – Unione di Centro	5.62
		Sa – La Sinistra, L'Arcobaleno	3.08
		De – La Destra	2.43

Table 2. Fragmentation and polarization measures of the Italian party-system: 1983, 2001, 2006, 2008

	Castles-Mair	Benoit-Laver	Benoit-Laver	Benoit-Curini	West-European Average (excluding Italy)
Election considered	*1983*	*2001*	*2006*	*2008*	*2001-2006*
Electoral stage					
Effective number of electoral parties*	4.23	5.76	5.20	3.46	4.15
Polarization Index in the electoral stage	4.32	5.04	4.94	4.28	4.09
Party system range	7.50	7.79	7.91	7.09	6.32
Centre vote-shares strength	45%	25%	13.8%	11.2%	41.1%
Absolute distance between the two largest parties	3.80	5.06	4.19	4.13	3.39
Parliamentary arena					
Effective number of parliamentary parties**	3.95	5.20	4.86	3.04	3.79
Polarization Index in Parliament	4.36	5.08	4.94	3.94	4.00
Party system range	7.50	7.79	7.91	4.58	6.32
Centre seat-shares strength	47%	21.5%	14.2%	11.7%	42.6%
Absolute distance between the two largest parties	3.80	5.06	4.19	4.13	3.39

* Effective number of electoral parties calculated using Laakso and Taagepera's formula with reference to national vote-share; ** Effective number of parliamentary parties calculated using Laakso and Taagepera's formula with reference to the seats in the Lower Chamber

Table 3. Parties' Left-Right scores according to expert-surveys: 2001, 2006 and 2008 elections
(in italics parties for which the difference in the position along two adjacent elections is significant)

	2001			2006				Party	2008	
Party	Left-Right score	s.e.	Party	Left-Right score	s.e.	Weighted mean	s.e.	Party	Left-Right score	s.e.
Rc	0.60	0.11	Rc	0.67	0.08					
Pdci	1.22	0.12	Pdci	1.08	0.11	0.96	0.10	Sa	0.88	0.10
Greens	1.59	0.12	Greens	1.66	0.12					
Ds	2.62	0.11	Ds	2.68	0.12	3.16	0.12	Pd	3.39	0.14
Dl	3.70	0.12	Dl	3.95	0.13					
Iv	4.78	0.18	Iv	4.40	0.18			Iv	4.15	0.20
Udc	5.99	0.11	Udc	5.96	0.13			*Udc*	*5.58*	*0.10*
Fi	7.68	0.16	Fi	7.36	0.11	7.59	0.10	Pdl	7.52	0.15
An	8.39	0.11	*An*	*8.04*	*0.09*					
Ln	8.36	0.15	Ln	8.58	0.14			*Ln*	*7.97*	*0.15*
Msft	9.49	0.14	Msft	9.49	0.16			De	9.27	0.13

*Table 4. Italian 2006 election results: vote share by party ("Camera dei Deputati")
and experts' party placements*

Coalition	Vote share		Vote share	Left-Right
		Ulivo – the Olive Tree	31.20	3.16
		Rc – Communist Refoundation Party	5.83	0.67
		Rose in the Fist	2.59	3.79
The Union	49.80	Pdci – Party of the Italian Communists	2.31	1.08
		Iv – Italy of Values	2.29	4.40
		Greens	2.19	1.66
		Udeur – Popular	1.40	5.05
		Fi - Forza Italia	23.66	7.36
		An – National Alliance	12.31	8.04
House of Freedoms	49.69	Union of Christian and Centre Democrats - Udc	6.75	5.96
		Northern League	4.58	8.58

Table 5: Conditional logit equation predicting the vote (party baseline: An) - 2006

Variables	Coef.	s.e.
Proximity	0.10	0.11***
Party-ID	1.99	0.01***
Fi	-0.52	0.38
Iv	-3.48	0.90***
Ln	-0.71	0.55
Pdci	-2.02	0.73**
Prc	-1.25	0.55**
Rose	-2.07	0.65**
Udc	-1.50	0.49**
Ulivo	0.06	0.42
Greens	-1.28	0.72*
Fi:age	0.25	0.10**
Iv:age	0.45	0.21**
Ln:age	-0.02	0.15
Pdci:age	0.11	0.20
Prc:age	0.15	0.15
Rose:age	0.16	0.17
Udc:age	0.32	0.12**
Ulivo:age	0.22	0.11**
Greens:age	-0.26	0.24

*** = 0.0; ** = .05; * = .1
Pseudo R^2=54.4%
Percent correctly predicted = 94%
Absolute average distance between sample vote and
predicted votes for the CL model: 0.03

Table 6: Comparison of actual vote-share with projected vote-share in equilibrium for parties – 2006
(standard errors for parties' vote-share computed relative to the overall simulated mean)

Party	Actual vote*	Projected vote in equilibrium	s.e.
Rd	6.23	7.63	0.002
Pdci	2.47	2.01	0.001
Greens	2.19	1.41	0.001
Ulivo	33.25	34.25	0.005
Rose	2.77	2.34	0.001
Iv	2.45	1.35	0.001
Udc	7.21	7.05	0.002
Fi	25.29	23.72	0.004
An	13.16	15.07	0.004
Ln	4.88	5.15	0.001

Correlation with actual vote .99
Absolute average distance from actual vote .90
* Note: parties' actual vote share are expressed as percentages of the ten-party vote

Table 7: Goodness of Fit of party equilibria for partially coalition-seeking motivations - 2006 election

Weight of coalition partners votes	Absolute average distance from perceived positions	Correlation with perceived position
1. Parties heavily coalition-oriented (α =0.8)	3.1	-0.10
2. Parties moderated coalition-oriented (α =0.3)	2.3	0.50
3. Parties more coalition-oriented within the Union (α =0.6) than within the House of (α =0.3)	2.7	0.26
Vote-seeking parties model (α =0.0)	.96	0.97

Table 8: Conditional logit equation predicting the vote (party baseline: Pdl) - 2008

Variables	Coef.	s.e.
Proximity	0.14	0.02***
Recall	2.18	0.14***
Sa	-3.88	1.10***
Pd	-2.12	0.64**
Iv	-3.07	0.83***
Udc	-2.51	0.76***
Ln	-0.33	0.64
Sa: sex	0.68	0.70
Pd: sex	0.65	0.39*
Iv: sex	0.66	0.51
Udc: sex	0.32	0.48
Ln: sex	-0.57	0.43

*** = 0.0; ** = .05; * = .1
Pseudo R^2=69.8%
Percent correctly predicted = 94.5%
Absolute average distance between sample vote and
predicted votes for the CL model: 0.02

Table 9: Comparison of actual vote-share with projected vote-share in equilibrium for parties – 2008
(standard errors for parties' vote-share computed relative to the overall simulated mean)

Party	Actual vote*	Projected vote in equilibrium	s.e.
Sa	3.35	2.58	0.002
Pd	36.08	30.4	0.004
Iv	4.75	3.0	0.001
Udc	6.12	4.1	0.002
Pdl	40.67	49.1	0.004
Ln	9.02	10.8	0.003

Correlation with actual vote .97
Absolute average distance from actual vote 3.4
* Note: parties' actual vote share are expressed as percentages of the six-party vote

Table 10. A comparison of optimal parties' position between 2006 and 2008
(in italics parties for which the difference in the position is significant)

|	2006				2008		
Party	Left-Right score	s.e.	Left-Right score	s.e.	Party	Left-Right score	s.e.
			Weighted mean				
Rc	1.95	0.07					
Pdci	1.96	0.13	2.07	0.10	Sa	2.23	0.08
Greens	2.55	0.14					
Ulivo	3.55	0.06			Pd	3.51	0.05
Iv	3.56	0.79			Iv	3.04	0.12
Udc	5.19	0.25			Udc	5.80	0.22
Fi	6.37	0.07					
An	6.96	0.08	6.57	0.07	*Pdl*	*4.80*	*0.04*
Ln	7.23	0.1			*Ln*	*6.25*	*0.09*

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Figures

Figure 1: Comparison of party equilibrium with actual (perceived) party positions: 2006 election
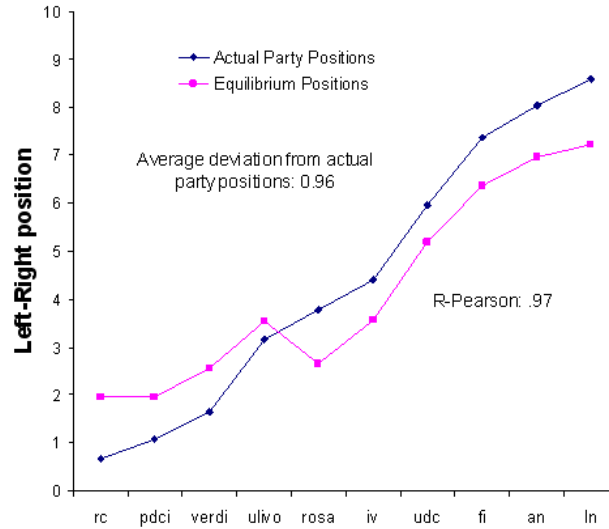
	Rc	Pdci	Greens	Ulivo	Rose	Iv	Udc	Fi	An	Ln
Actual Party Positions	0.67	1.08	1.66	3.16	3.79	4.4	5.96	7.36	8.04	8.58
Equilibrium Positions	1.95 (0.07)	1.96 (0.13)	2.55 (0.14)	3.55 (0.06)	2.65 (0.11)	3.56 (0.70)	5.19 (0.25)	6.37 (0.07)	6.96 (0.08)	7.23 (0.12)

Figure 2: Comparison of party equilibrium with actual (perceived) party positions: 2008 election
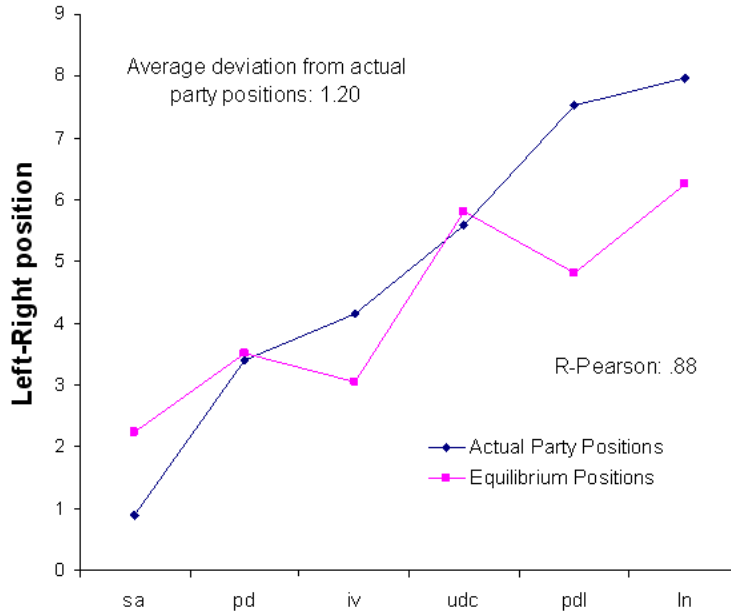
	Sa	Pd	Iv	Udc	Pdl	Ln
Actual Party Positions	0.88	3.39	4.15	5.58	7.52	7.97
Equilibrium Positions	2.23 (0.08)	3.51 (0.05)	3.04 (0.12)	5.8 (0.22)	4.8 (0.04)	6.25 (0.09)