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Partisan self-interest and electoral reform: The new Italian electoral law of 2005

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ABSTRACT

In December 2005, Italy's mixed-member electoral system was replaced with a system of bonus-adjusted proportional representation. The reform conformed with rational-choice models in that it was imposed by the ruling coalition, which sought to bolster its own power interests. But the case illustrates the impossibility of reducing such power-based motivation to a single goal, such as seat maximization. Power is shaped by many factors, and electoral systems influence many of these. This article develops a theoretical framework for understanding the various power-oriented considerations that may operate in electoral reform. It then analyses the role these played in Italy. It argues, in particular, for the need to take account of coalition dynamics when studying such processes.

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1. Introduction

Italy's 2006 general election was conducted using the country's second new national electoral system in little over a decade. Four months earlier, the government of Silvio Berlusconi had replaced the semi-compensatory mixed-member system adopted in 1993 with a system of bonus-adjusted proportional representation, using slightly – but significantly – different versions in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Despite widespread challenges, the new system was retained for the elections of 2008.

Understanding the processes that generated this reform is important for two reasons. First, the reform was, in itself, a significant episode in Italian politics that deserves our attention. Electoral reform has rarely been off the Italian political agenda since the change of 1993, but this is the only time when it has in fact been enacted. Second, analysis of this Italian case offers important insights for comparativists. While many political scientists initially sought to analyse electoral reform processes through very simple rational-choice models (e.g., Benoit, 2004; Boix, 1999; Colomer, 2005), scholars have increasingly sought to build beyond these models by incorporating more real-world complexity (e.g., Pilet and Bol, 2008; Rahat, 2004, 2008; Renwick, 2009). Italy's 2005 reform allows us to take that process further.

Specifically, the 2005 reform – in contrast to that of 1993 – was driven entirely by politicians. Those politicians, again in contrast to those in some other cases (e.g., Benoit, 2007: pp. 378–382; Blais and Massicotte, 1997: p. 117), seem to have been concerned solely with their self-interest, conceived in terms of maximizing their power. The simple models often operationalize power-maximization exclusively in terms of the maximization of partisan seat shares in the legislature (Benoit, 2004; Brady and Mo, 1992; Colomer, 2005). It is well known that reality is more complex. The Italian electoral reform of 2005 illustrates this fact and allows us to explore that complexity further.

While politicians' power interests show complexity on multiple dimensions, we argue that the principal lesson of the Italian case is the importance of taking account of coalition dynamics. Where single-party governments are

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the norm (and ordinary citizens are passive), the simple seat maximization assumption captures most (though not all) of the impact of electoral reform upon power interests: individual politicians are more likely to win election the greater is their party's seat share, and parties are more likely to gain office under the same condition. For multiple reasons, however, things are no longer so simple where coalition government is likely.

We proceed in three steps. First, we offer an overview of the Italian reform. Second, we draw on the comparative literature to develop a typology of factors that self-interested actors may take into account when considering electoral reform. Third, we use that typology as a framework for analysing the processes that underlay the Italian reform. Finally, in the conclusion, we draw out comparative insights.

2. Overview of the Italian reform

From the 1940s to the early 1990s Italy used a highly permissive system of open list proportional representation for elections at all levels. The effective threshold for elections to the lower house of the national parliament was barely 1 per cent; that for the Senate was slightly higher, but party fragmentation was no less marked. The system came to be blamed for many of Italy's governance problems, and by the early 1990s there was a strong movement for reform.

In 1993 the system was finally replaced by a partially compensatory mixed-member system in which 75 per cent of seats were filled by simple plurality in single-member districts and 25 per cent from lists. But the new system, largely a product of accident combined with narrow partisan interests, satisfied no one (D'Alimonte, 2005a; Katz, 1996; Morlino and Tarchi, 1996; Pappalardo, 1994). Numerous attempts were made both within and without parliament from 1994 onwards to 'complete' the reform by reducing further or eliminating entirely the proportional component. Reforms were successfully enacted at the local and regional levels, but remained blocked nationally, largely because successive governing coalitions contained parties with sharply diverging electoral interests. Following the failure of a pro-reform referendum in 2000, which secured turnout of just 32.4 per cent, the momentum behind the reform cause appeared to have been lost (Fabbrini, 2001).

Silvio Berlusconi became prime minister in 2001 at the head of a centre-right coalition comprising four parties: his own Forza Italia, the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale, the northern federalist Lega Nord, and a successor to the old Christian Democrats, the Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e dei Democratici di Centro (UDC). Though proposals for minor changes were made,[1] little happened regarding the electoral system during the early years of the Berlusconi government. The issue of major electoral reform resurfaced only in the summer of 2004: Forza Italia, the Alleanza Nazionale, and the Lega Nord were pursuing a package of constitutional reforms that included strengthening the prime minister and federalization of government; as its price for accepting these proposals, the UDC demanded a more proportional electoral system ('Il proporzionale', 2004; Vassallo, 2005: pp. 128–129). Berlusconi indicated that he would be willing to discuss the matter (Magri, 2004), but then stalled, proposing only slight adjustment of the existing system ('Verso le urne', 2004; D'Alimonte, 2004b). In June 2005, the UDC pressed the matter again, tabling a series of amendments in parliament that would have switched around the mixed-member system to elect 75 per cent of seats proportionally and 25 per cent in single-member districts.[2] This time, Berlusconi allowed the matter to proceed: Pasquino suggests that now it was a quid quo pro not only for UDC acquiescence in the constitutional reforms, but also for its agreement to drop a demand for primary elections to choose the leader of the centre-right, which Berlusconi wished to avoid (Pasquino, 2007: pp. 81–82). Behind-the-scenes discussions followed, and on 13 September, the government announced its agreed plan for a new system.[3] Various important details changed during the system's parliamentary passage; it was finally signed into law on 23 December. The electoral system was changed through majority votes in the two chambers of parliament. The opposition parties strongly opposed the reform and voted against at every stage.

The new system is one of bonus-adjusted proportional representation for both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (Camera dei Deputati, 2005c). For the Chamber of Deputies, voters vote for closed party lists, and seats are initially allocated proportionally subject to thresholds of 2 per cent for parties belonging to a coalition, 4 per cent for parties not belonging to a coalition, and 10 per cent for coalitions. If, however, no party or coalition gains 340 seats (55 per cent of the domestic total) through proportional allocation, the largest party or coalition in terms of votes automatically receives 340 seats (the *premio di maggioranza*, or majority premium). These seats are allocated proportionally among those coalition parties that passed the threshold, and the remaining seats are allocated proportionally among the other above-threshold parties. The system for the Senate differs in two respects. First, the thresholds are applied regionally and are set at 3 per cent for parties in coalitions, 8 per cent for parties not in coalitions, and 20 per cent for coalitions. Second, the majority premium is also applied at the regional level, with the largest party or coalition in each region guaranteed 55 per cent of its seats. In addition, the 12 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and six seats in the Senate elected by Italians living abroad that were introduced in December 2001 have been retained unaltered; these are elected by proportional formula, but in very small districts of one to four members.

This new system has widely been referred to as one of 'full proportional representation' (e.g., 'President Ciampi',

[1] Legislative proposals C. 2712, C.3304, and C. 2620 were submitted between 2002 and 2003. The last of these was radically amended to form the basis for the new electoral law three years later. See http://legxiv.camera.it/.

[2] Amendments no. 1.5–1.13, made by deputies Volonte, di Giandomenico, and Mazzoni (all UDC) (Camera dei Deputati, 2005a: pp. 39–65).

[3] 'Legge elettorale' (2005); Camera dei Deputati (2005b: C. 2620 Soro, C. 2712 Fontana, C. 3304 Soda, C. 3560 Gazzara, C. 5613 Benedetti Valentini, C. 5651 Nespoli, C. 5652 Nespoli, C. 5908 Benedetti Valentini e C. 6052 Benedetti Valentini), Emendamenti e articoli aggiuntivi, pp. 50–162).

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2005; Barber, 2005; Hooper, 2005; Rizzo, 2005). In fact, however, it is clearly not fully proportional – hence our label of bonus-adjusted proportional representation. It does retain certain features of a proportional system, not just in the mechanics of voting, party lists, and seat allocation within the winning coalition and among parties outside the winning coalition, but also in its effects. It allows a proliferation of parties and gives small parties roughly proportional seat shares; it thus allows small parties to maintain some independence from their coalition partners. It emphasizes the role of parties over candidates. And – particularly in the Senate, but to a lesser degree also in the Chamber of Deputies – it makes it harder for any party or coalition to win a substantial majority, such as the 58.5 per cent majority secured by Berlusconi's centre-right coalition in 2001. But it also deviates from pure proportional representation in important regards. Most obviously, in the Chamber of Deputies it guarantees an absolute majority to the largest party or coalition. It also mimics plurality and majority systems in creating incentives for a bipolar structure of party competition: in pursuit of the majority premium, parties have strong reason to coalesce into broad coalitions; small parties have an added incentive for doing so arising from the differentiated thresholds.

From this basic narrative of the reform process and description of its outcome, several questions emerge that we must answer if we are to understand the reform that occurred. In particular: (1) why did the UDC push for proportional representation in 2004 and again in 2005?; (2) why did the other coalition parties respond positively to this demand?; (3) why, however, was the system finally adopted one of bonus-adjusted rather than pure proportional representation?; (4) why did the UDC agree to this major departure from its original wishes?

3. The pursuit of power: theoretical framework

We will argue that the questions just identified cannot be answered if we focus solely upon seat maximization: a range of other power-seeking considerations also influenced politicians' actions. In order to clarify the empirical discussion that follows, we outline here a typology of the various considerations that may influence power-seeking actors in approaching electoral reform, derived inductively from studies of electoral reform in Italy and elsewhere. It does not claim to be exhaustive, but it does systematize knowledge of electoral reform dispersed across a wide literature, and it allows us to apply those insights to the Italian case.

Self-interested politicians, as defined in Section 1, seek to maximize their power.[4] But their power is a function of a range of intermediate maximands that may be affected by different aspects of the electoral reform process. Accordingly, we define our typology on two dimensions: first, maximands; second, aspects of reform. We identify four maximands: parties may seek to maximize (1) their share of voters' partisan preferences, (2) their seat share (given their share of voters' partisan preferences), or (3) their influence in government (given their seat share); individual politicians may seek to maximize (4) their intra-party power. Following Reed and Thies (2001) and Shugart and Wattenberg (2001), we identify two aspects of reform: its outcome (that is, the electoral system) and the act of reform itself. That is, we allow that electoral reform may affect politicians' power not only through its effects on the electoral system in itself, but also through voters' perceptions of the reform: politicians seen as reforming the system to suit their own interests may be punished by voters; those seen as responding to public disquiet may be rewarded. This four-by-two-typology is summarized in Table 1, which includes examples in each cell of the various considerations that actors may take into account.[5]

Row I begins the analysis of maximands a step further back than does the simple seat maximization model. The simple model assumes the distribution of voters' underlying preferences across parties to be fixed, but in fact, as indicated in Row I, that distribution can be influenced by electoral reform. It is most obviously influenced by the *act* of reform: politicians' fears that they would lose votes if they failed to respond to the popular demand for reform (I. b) were important to the electoral system changes in Italy and elsewhere in the early 1990s (Newell and Bull, 1993: p. 609; Reed and Thies, 2001: pp. 171–172; Denemark, 2001: p. 84). Contrariwise, as Quintal (1970) emphasizes, there are some reforms that public opinion will not accept (I. c). Politicians' fear of voter disapproval has hindered reform in, for example, the Netherlands and West Germany (Lijphart, 1978: pp. 131–132; Andeweg, 2005: pp. 508–509; Jesse, 1987: pp. 436–437).

The underlying distribution of voters' preferences can also be influenced by changes in the electoral system itself if they change the objects among which voters choose – for example, by moving between candidate-centred, party-centred, and leader-centred electoral competition (I. a). Doron and Kay (1995) suggest that one factor in the adoption of direct election of the prime minister in Israel in 1992 was Labor's desire to shift the focus of competition from parties to leaders, where, at the time, it held an advantage. Gouws and Mitchell (2005: p. 358) suggest a similar consideration in South Africa in the early 1990s.

Row II of the table encapsulates the simple model, under which politicians seek to maximize partisan seat share assuming their share of voters' underlying party preferences as fixed.[6] That simple model encompasses Duverger's two effects: it allows for the electoral system's psychological effect upon how voters translate their underlying preferences into actual votes – upon whether they vote sincerely or strategically (II. a) – and for its mechanical effect in translating those votes into seats (II. b) (Duverger, 1954: p. 226; Amorim Neto and Cox, 1997: p. 152). As the table indicates, however, the narrow model does not offer a complete understanding even of this maximand. This is

[4] Within power-seeking we include both office-seeking as an end in itself and the pursuit of influence over policy outcomes (cf. Strøm and Müller, 1999; Benoit, 2007: pp. 378–380).

[5] Table 1 is a slightly simplified version of Table 2.1 in Renwick (2009).

[6] See especially Benoit (2004). It should be noted that Benoit is careful *not* to claim that the seat maximization model captures the whole process of electoral reform.

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Table 1
A typology of power-seeking considerations in electoral reform.

Maximands	Aspects of reform	
	Outcome	Act
I. Share of voters' underlying partisan preferences	(a) Choosing between candidate-centred, party-centred, and leader-centred competition	(b) Responding to voters' desire for reform (c) Avoiding reforms perceived as illegitimate
II. Seat share (given share of voters' underlying partisan preferences)	(a) Selecting the system for its impact on the translation of voters' underlying preferences into votes (psychological effect) (b) Selecting the system for its impact on the translation of votes into seats (mechanical effect) (c) Selecting the system for its impact on intra-coalition candidate distribution (coalition effect)	
III. Influence over government/achievement of policy goals (given seat share)	(a) Splitting one's opponents (b) Ensuring favourable dynamic in one's current or potential coalition (c) Maximizing intra-coalition power	(d) Retaining or securing coalition allies (e) Securing other policy goals (f) Retaining legitimacy (g) Minimizing transaction costs
IV. Intra-party power	(a) Choosing between more party-centred and more candidate-centred competition	(b) Bolstering party leadership

the first instance where we have to take account of coalition dynamics, for coalition agreements can affect parties' seat shares independently of their vote share (II. c). In Italy after 1993, coalitions negotiated stand-down agreements in order to avoid mutually destructive competition in single-member districts, and these stand-down agreements systematically favoured some parties over others. We argue below that Forza Italia in particular had much to gain from avoiding coalition effects of this type.

The 'act' column of Row II is, however, empty. This is for the simple reason that Row II concerns the translation of preferences into seats, which is a product of the electoral system itself and is wholly uninfluenced by perceptions of the act of reform.

Rows I and II both, ultimately, describe ways of pursuing power through increased partisan seat share. But, so long as coalition or minority government is possible, seat share is not the sole determinant of a party's influence over government. That is, neither a party's chances of holding governmental office, nor its influence over government policy and prospects of fulfilling its policy goals are monotonically related to its seat share (Austen-Smith and Banks, 1988; Benoit, 2007: pp. 379–380). First, a party is stronger the weaker are its opponents (III. a). Mitterrand knew this when he changed France's electoral system in 1985 partly in order to strengthen the far right and thereby split his opposition: in this way he could hope to limit the right's capacity to implement its programme (Alexander, 2004: p. 214; Cole and Campbell, 1989: p. 136). Similarly, Bawn (1993: pp. 975–976) argues that West Germany's Social Democrats preferred proportional representation to single-member plurality in 1949, even though the latter would have given it more seats, because under proportional representation the Christian Democrats would be able to form a government only in coalition with others.

Second, an influence-seeking party that cannot secure a governing majority on its own will wish to belong to a coalition with a viable chance of entering government whose policies are close to its own; for several reasons, this may lead it to advocate an electoral system that does not maximize its own seat share (III. b). For example, analyses by Cox (1997: pp. 194–196) and Bueno De Mesquita (2000: p. 72) suggest that, where formateur power goes to the largest party, small parties have an interest in bolstering the seat share of their largest ally. Curtice (1996: p. 121) argues that Labour agreed to proportional representation for the new Scottish Parliament in part because, as a large centrist party (outflanked on the left, he says, by the Scottish Nationalists), it believed (wrongly, as we now know) that it would be essential to almost any governing coalition. We argue below that such logic was important in Italy in 2005.

Third, a party operating in a coalition will seek to maximize its power within that coalition (III. c). While such intra-coalition power may principally be a function of the coalition partners' relative vote and seat shares, it depends also on the degree to which each party retains an independent identity and voter base, which can give it added weight in coalition negotiations. Again, this reasoning forms an important part of the story in Italy.

Influence over government and achievement of policy goals may be shaped by the act of electoral reform as well as the outcome. Proportional representation was not abandoned in West Germany during the grand coalition of the 1960s in part because neither large party wanted to alienate the Free Democrats (III. d) (Jesse, 1987: pp. 435–436). A party may bargain across issues, agreeing to an electoral reform in order to secure other policy objectives that matter to it more (III. e) (Katz, 2005: pp. 62, 68). The popular legitimacy of a system may matter not only for vote-seeking reasons but also for its impact on a government in office (III. f): as Katz (2005: p. 72) puts it, 'being seen to have won office by manipulating the rules devalues the victory'.[7] Finally, electoral reform has an opportunity cost, absorbing time and resources that might have been devoted to the pursuit of other goals (III. g); politicians will seek to avoid or minimize this cost (Colomer, 2005: p. 3; Shepsle, 2001: p. 323). Of these various considerations, we will emphasize the role in Italy primarily of (III. d):

[7] See also Plant (1995: p. 12), on Labour's decision to support proportional representation in Scotland.

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Berlusconi responded positively to the UDC's demand for electoral reform in part because he needed the UDC's continued cooperation in his governing coalition; the UDC eventually compromised partly because it too relied on the coalition for its power.

The final maximand moves from the level of the party to that of the individual politician (IV). Changes in the degree to which the electoral system favours party- or candidate-centred competition change the power of party leaders: closed lists, for example, allow leaders to control candidate selection more closely than do open lists or single-member districts, and they focus public attention upon those leaders (Shugart, 2001). We will argue that this mattered for all coalition partners in Italy in 2005, especially the conflict-ridden UDC.

4. Analysis of the Italian reform

With this theoretical framework in mind, we turn now to the detailed analysis of the Italian case. We begin by examining the role played by each of the maximands in Table 1 individually. At the end of this section, we pull these various strands together to answer the questions identified in the case overview above and to offer a rounded explanation of the 2005 reform.

4.1. Maximizing share of voters' partisan preferences

There was no public clamour for electoral reform in Italy in 2005 – certainly not reform in the direction of greater proportionality: asked in October 2005 whether the new electoral law was 'one of the fundamental requisites for the country's governability', 53.5 per cent of respondents said 'no', and just 28.1 per cent 'yes' (Ekma, 2005). It is thus unlikely that anyone in the Berlusconi coalition adopted the electoral reform cause in order to woo voters (I. b).

The need not to repulse voters (I. c) may have played a small role in the reform process. The new electoral system as originally envisaged in the draft of 13 September would have awarded the majority premium to the coalition winning most seats not the coalition winning most votes; given the concentration of small parties unlikely to pass the electoral threshold in the centre-left, this could have allowed the centre-right to capture the premium while winning fewer votes than the centre-left (Buzzanca, 2005). That this provision was changed after widespread criticism (Dominelli, 2005; Sartori, 2005) may indicate a sensitivity to adverse public opinion. On the other hand, that the coalition gave up the provision so quickly suggests that it was not important – perhaps that it was never even intended – anyway. Rather, what is striking about public opinion is its permissiveness. Berlusconi and his colleagues clearly believed they could impose electoral reform without opposition support just months before a general election with impunity, and this judgement proved correct.

Though act-contingent vote-seeking considerations appear therefore to have been marginal to the reform, one outcome-contingent consideration relating to voters' underlying preferences (I. a) did play a role. Under the 1993 system, the parties of the centre-right coalition typically won more votes in the list competition than in single-member districts: in 2001, for example, they won 45.4 per cent of the district vote, but 49.6 per cent in the proportional component (D'Alimonte, 2004a; Newell, 2006: p. 804). In the proportional tier, voters could cast their ballot for their preferred party, but in the district tier they had to vote for the coalition candidate, who might come from another party. Voters on the right were apparently less willing to do this than those on the left, and this contributed to a great dislike of single-member districts among politicians of the centre-right. For this reason, politicians from both Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale sponsored 'fused vote' bills in early 2005, under which voters would have cast only one ballot, for the party's list, which would have counted also for the coalition candidate in the single-member district (D'Alimonte, 2004b). We can assume that similar thinking influenced the coalition partners in adopting the bonus-adjusted system. Given, however, that adopting the fused vote under the existing system would have been sufficient to do this, this consideration cannot account fully for the more radical reform that was enacted.

4.2. Maximizing share of seats, given voter preferences

Seat maximization may have been pursued at the level either of the coalition as a whole or of the parties within it. Regarding the first, the hypothesis that needs to be assessed is that the coalition's expected seat share was boosted by the electoral system switch. (Intra-)coalition effects are by definition not relevant at the level of the aggregate coalition, and so we need consider only the Duvergerian mechanical and psychological effects (II. a and II. b). The argument often made here is not that the government sought to boost its seat share through the use of the majority premium: given the opinion polling at the time of the reform, it would have required an improbable swing in public opinion for the governing coalition to capture the premium (see Fig. 1). Rather, it is more commonly argued that the government hoped the new electoral law would limit its defeat in 2006 (Pasquino, 2007: p. 81; Floridia, 2007; Berselli, 2005; Fisher, 2005; Mannheimer, 2005).

We can evaluate this argument by modelling the government's expectations of the electoral outcome under the old and new electoral systems. The polling summarized in Fig. 1 suggests that the centre-left could be expected to gain more votes than the centre-right, but not as much as 55% of the vote. Under the new electoral system, it would therefore win the 340 guaranteed seats in the Chamber of Deputies (and some of the twelve seats elected by Italians abroad), but no more than that. Excluding the seats for Italians abroad and the sole single-member district in the Val d'Aosta, the centre-left would thus have a majority of 63 seats in the lower house under the new electoral system.[8]

Table 2 shows four estimates of the centre-left's majority under the old electoral system made between September and December 2005. These estimates – which we presume are similar to those available to the

[8] In relying on polling data gathered under the old electoral system, this projection assumes no difference in psychological effect between the old and new systems.

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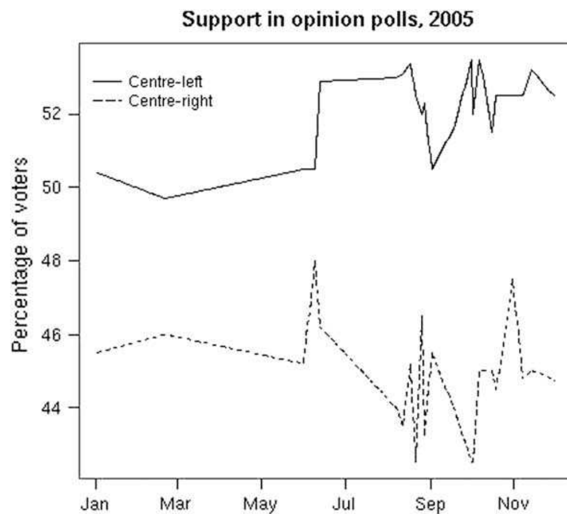

Fig. 1. Popularity of the centre-left and centre-right in opinion polls, June–December 2005. Sources: Polls by Lorien (19/06/2005), Piepoli (27/06/2005), Ekma Ricerche (1/07/2005; 30/08/2005; 5/09/2005;.3/11/2005; 25/11/2005; 2/12/2005), SWG (25/08/2005; 18/11/2005; 18/12/2005), ISPO (8/09/2005; 20/10/2005); IPR (13/09/2005; 25/10/2005; 6/11/2005; 11/12/2005; 18/12/2005), Eurisko (15/09/2005), Dinamiche Srl (7/10/2005) and Coesis (19/10/2005). All polls available at www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it/, last accessed 30 January 2007.

government – suggest that the change of electoral system would have been expected to reduce the centre-left's majority by, at most, 38 seats, and that at the opposite end it may have increased that majority by fourteen seats.

The expected gain for the government from the new electoral system in terms of seats was thus small and uncertain. Given the costs of changing the system in time and, potentially, negative publicity, it is hard to see that this gain could on its own have motivated the reform. Furthermore, though the new system may have marginally enhanced the centre-right's expected seat share, it did not *maximize* that share: a pure proportional system would (given that the centre-right expected to win fewer votes than the centre-left) have been the theoretical seat-maximizing choice. Nor was the new system the actual seat-maximizing choice: simulations conducted after the elections showed that the old electoral system would have given the centre-right more seats than they in fact won assuming no change in votes (Billari, 2006).[9] The reform of 2005 cannot have been motivated solely by short-term seat maximization at the coalition level.

Seat maximization did matter, however, at the party level. Were we to allow only for Duverger's mechanical and psychological effects in calculating the impact of the electoral system upon seat shares (II. a and II. b), we would expect the small parties in the coalition to gain from the move towards proportionality and the large parties to lose. In fact, the opposite was the case, for seat shares were

[9] This last assumption (no change in votes) is invalid, since part of the reason for the reform was to maximize share of voters' preferences by changing the objects over which voters choose.

Table 2
Projections of 2006 results under the old electoral system (Chamber of Deputies).

	IPR Marketing[a]	D'Alimonte[b]	D'Alimonte[c]	Draghi[d]
Seats won by centre-left	359	350	349	333
Seats won by centre-right	258	267	268	284
Centre-left majority	101	83	81	49

The IPR and D'Alimonte (I) estimates took no account of the reduction in domestic seats from 630 to 618; nor did they include the Südtiroler Volkspartei amongst the parties of the left; their estimates have been scaled accordingly. All estimates exclude the 12 seats elected by Italians living abroad and the single-member district in the Val d'Aosta.
[a] Polchi (2005).
[b] D'Alimonte (2005b).
[c] D'Alimonte (2005c).
[d] Arosio (2005).

determined under the 1993 electoral system not only by Duverger's effects, but also by the coalition effect: by agreements among coalition parties on which party would run in which single-member districts (II. c). Berlusconi depended for his power on maintaining the coalition, more so than any other partner in the coalition. This asymmetry meant that Forza Italia, though the largest coalition party, was disadvantaged in bargaining over the stand-down agreements and had to cede disproportionately many districts to the smaller coalition parties (see Table 3; see also Khatib, 2005).

Given the UDC's improved polling performance since 2001, it would have been even more demanding in coalition bargaining before the 2006 elections than in the past. By replacing such bargaining with proportional allocation of seats among coalition partners, the new electoral system boosted Forza Italia's seat share while reducing those of the UDC and the Lega Nord. Thus, in the elections the following spring, the seat shares of the UDC, Lega, and Alleanza Nazionale all fell though their vote shares rose; by contrast Forza Italia's losses in vote and seat shares were very similar (see Table 4). Forza Italia was therefore the major beneficiary from the new system in terms of seat share, and this likely contributed significantly to its approach to the electoral reform. By contrast, seat maximization at the party level cannot have motivated the other coalition parties to accept the change.

4.3. *Maximizing influence over government, given share of seats*

As the previous section shows, Italy's electoral reform cannot be understood if we focus on seat maximization alone: that goal offers some explanation for Berlusconi's willingness to accept the change, but it cannot explain why the UDC initiated the reform process, nor why the Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale went along with it. In the parties' efforts to maximize their influence over government given their seat shares we will find several of the missing answers.

As indicated in Table 1 (III. a), one way for a party to increase its influence given its seat share is to weaken its

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Table 3
Comparison of the individual coalition parties' shares of the centre-right's total votes and seats Chamber of Deputies 2001.

	% of the total PR vote for the centre-right[a]	% of centre-right candidacies in SMDs[b]	% of centre-right seats won in SMDs[c]	% of total centre-right seats won[d]
Forza Italia	59.4	50.0	43.4	50.6
All. Nazionale	24.3	25.2	28.4	28.3
Lega Nord	7.6	9.3	11.4	8.6
Biancofiore[e]	6.5	14.0	15.2	11.4
Nuovo PSI	1.9	1.5	1.4	0.9

[a] Calculated from Ministero dell'Interno (2002: p. 198).
[b] Di Virgilio (2002: p. 106).
[c] Calculated from party group affiliations at the start of the 2001 legislature, as reported at http://legxiv.camera.it/organiparlamentarism/239/260/documentoxml.asp.
[d] Calculated from party group affiliations at the start of the 2001 legislature, as reported at http://legxiv.camera.it/organiparlamentarism/239/260/documentoxml.asp.
[e] The Biancofiore was the predecessor to the UDC.

opponents. Some suggest this was a factor in Italy: the new system would leave any centre-left government led by Romano Prodi heavily dependent upon small coalition partners, including those on the far left, rendering it vulnerable to ineffectiveness or collapse (e.g., 'Another Great Week', 2006; Bull and Newell, 2009: pp. 62–93). While this is true, however, it was true also for the old system; this cannot have been a major consideration.

Rather, the parties focused their attention upon the dynamics of the party system and possibilities for coalition formation (III. b). For the UDC, proportional representation opened the prospect of a return to the centripetal party competition that had existed before 1993. The party's predecessor, the Christian Democrats, had then dominated Italian politics for approaching 40 years by occupying the central pivot position within the party system, and UDC leaders hankered strongly after a revival of that role.[10] Under such a system, the UDC could hope for longevity in office. It could also expect government policy to be closer to its ideal point than under the bipolar structure engendered by the 1993 electoral system, which pushed the party into uncomfortable coalition with the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale. Even if it did not break with the centre-right coalition, the enhanced possibility of doing so under proportional representation would increase its bargaining power with other coalition parties. The Lega Nord shared a similar perspective: it too was keen to preserve its independence within (and if necessary from) the ruling coalition (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005: pp. 959–960).

By contrast, for the Alleanza Nazionale, located far from the political centre, maintenance of bipolar competition under which left- and right-wing blocs alternated in power was crucial to its prospects of holding office. Its predecessor had been excluded from power for nearly 50 years by the centripetalism of the old system. Thus, party leader Gianfranco Fini made clear that bipolarity was the primary criterion by which he judged possible electoral systems: in autumn 2004, responding to the UDC's calls for proportional representation, he said, 'we are not against discussing proposals for reform, so long as they maintain democratic alternation in power and the logic of bipolarism' (Verderami, 2004). Similarly, as the debate gathered speed in early September 2005, he said, 'the Alleanza Nazionale is ready to discuss the electoral law… but "the era of bipolarism" cannot be rolled-back' ('AN', 2005). He sought to limit the operation of the proportional principle through high thresholds (Ostellino, 2005). He also asked for the centre-right's constitutional reforms to be passed before the electoral reform; by barring different legislative majorities during a single legislative term and requiring coalitions to nominate a candidate for prime minister, these would have reinforced bipolarity (Vassallo, 2005).

Berlusconi and Forza Italia also gained from and argued for the bipolar system. Yet Berlusconi's time horizon was shorter than Fini's. Fini hoped in the future to lead the centre-right coalition; his priority was therefore to maintain and strengthen the institutions that foster bipolarity over the medium term. Berlusconi's first priority, by contrast, was to maintain the existing coalition in the short term. Preservation of the coalition was necessary for him to claim that his government had lasted for the entire legislature, and thus allow him to contrast his performance with that of all previous Italian governments. This need had been a strong motif in a previous coalition crisis (Hine and Hanretty, 2006: p. 107). Additionally, in late 2005 it did not seem that Berlusconi would be able rapidly to return to power: the remaining three months of the legislative term were his last certain chance to implement his desired policies. To preserve the coalition, he needed to make concessions to his more independently minded coalition partners. Indeed, this coalition imperative had caused him generally to refuse to back further majoritarian electoral reforms since the late 1990s (Blitz, 1998; Donovan, 2000; Fabbrini, 2001). In 2005 he knew that the Lega's loyalty would become uncertain unless the constitutional reform package was passed and that the UDC would accept that package only if its demands for electoral reform were met. Here we see that act contingency (III. d) mattered to Berlusconi as well as outcome contingency (III. b): he sought a system that would maintain the bipolar logic, but he also regarded compromise with the UDC as crucial.

[10] See, e.g., the UDC's positive reaction to a call from former European Commissioner Mario Monti for a return to the politics of the 'grand centre': 'Il Presidente' (2005); also Massetti (2006: p. 263).

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Table 4
Changes in votes and seats between 2001 and 2006.

Party	Vote share (%)		Change in vote share (% of 2001 share)	Seat share (%)		Change in seat share (% of 2001 share)
	2001[a]	2006[b]		2001[c]	2006[d]	
Forza Italia	29.4	23.7	−19.4	29.0	21.3	−26.6
AN	12.0	12.3	+2.5	16.2	11.5	−29.0
Lega Nord	3.9	4.6	+17.9	4.9	3.7	−24.5
UDC	3.2	6.8	+112.5	6.5	6.2	−4.6

[a] Calculated from electoral results available at http://www.cattaneo.org/index.asp?l1=archivi&l2=adele.
[b] Calculated from electoral results available at http://www.cattaneo.org/index.asp?l1=archivi&l2=adele.
[c] Calculated from data on parliamentary group membership at http://legxiv.camera.it/organiparlamentarism/239/260/documentoxml.asp.
[d] Calculated from data on parliamentary group membership at http://legxv.camera.it/organiparlamentarism/239/260/documentoxml.asp.

4.4. Maximizing intra-party power

So far we have discussed considerations operating at the level of party or coalition. But the distribution of intra-party power mattered too. The 2005 electoral reform was dominated by politicians and, among politicians, by party leaders. It is therefore no surprise that several aspects of the reform strengthen those leaders *vis-à-vis* their parties, especially their parliamentary colleagues. Two particular mechanisms for this can be identified, both coming under the heading of (IV. a) in Table 1. First, though the parties had under the 1993 electoral system employed centralized seat allocation (Di Virgilio, 2002), their leaderships had needed to take account of possible negative reactions on the part of local leaders and voters. This task seemed much harder in 2006, as the coalition weakened and factional divisions in the parties grew (Ignazi, 2005). Closed lists, by increasing party leaders' power over candidate selection, would encourage existing and aspirant members of the legislature to minimize factional differences in the months before list formation.

Second, a seemingly minor provision – the elimination of limits on multiple candidacies – allowed party leaders considerable post-election influence over the composition of their parliamentary team: candidates could be elected in multiple regions; leaders could decide where they stood down and thereby determine who was elected in their place (Di Virgilio, 2007). UDC leaders were able thereby to ensure that few followers of former party secretary Marco Follini were elected in April 2006 (Di Virgilio, 2007: 382n).

4.5. Synthesis

We now pull together these various elements to offer a full account of Italy's electoral reform. In Section 2 we identified four questions that particularly need to be answered: (1) why did the UDC push for proportional representation in 2004 and again in 2005?; (2) why did the other coalition parties respond positively to this demand?; (3) why, however, was the system finally adopted one of bonus-adjusted rather than pure proportional representation?; (4) why did the UDC agree to this major revision of its original proposal? We consider these four questions in turn.

In light of the preceding discussion, answering the first question is straightforward: the UDC favoured proportional representation primarily because it offered the best opportunity for a return to a centripetal structure of party competition (III. b). Additionally, the UDC shared with its coalition partners two further reasons for favouring proportional representation that also partly answer the second question: the coalition parties tended to win more votes when voters cast their ballots for parties rather than candidates (I. a); their leaders preferred closed party lists, which boosted their intra-party power (IV. a). In further answer to the second question, the Lega Nord shared the UDC's qualms about a bipolar dynamic of competition (III. b), and Forza Italia expected proportional representation to boost its seat share by eliminating the coalition stand-downs (II. c). Finally, the UDC's coalition partners—most pressingly, Berlusconi—needed to compromise with the UDC to maintain the governing coalition (III. d), secure the parliamentary passage of the package of constitutional reforms (III. e), and, for Berlusconi, avoid potentially damaging primaries (IV. b).

Regarding the third question, however, Forza Italia and, more particularly, the Alleanza Nazionale were strongly interested in maintaining the bipolar competitive structure (III. b). They accepted the features of proportional representation that they liked, but they adjusted it through the majority premium to ensure that the incentive towards bipolarity survived. Indeed, though the reform has sometimes been portrayed simply as a concession from Berlusconi to the UDC in return for the latter's agreement to the government's wider package of constitutional reform (Pasquino, 2007: pp. 81–82), in fact the UDC's gains were slight. The new system damaged the party's share of seats in the 2006 election. And though it may have helped give the UDC greater post-election independence from the centre-right coalition, the underlying logic of the new system nevertheless still favours bipolarity.

Hence the fourth question: having demanded a proportional electoral system that would weaken bipolarism, why did the UDC end up accepting a system of bonus-adjusted proportional representation that maintained strong bipolar pressures? The major consideration in answering this question is that the new system, though it does not give the UDC all it wanted, is still an improvement from its perspective on the previous one. Though both systems encourage bipolarism, the new system allows the parties to run all their candidates under their own party labels, thereby enhancing their separate identities (III. c) and their vote-winning capacity (I. a). Certainly, UDC leaders had hoped to achieve more: indeed, the party's then secretary, Marco Follini,

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rejected the compromise and resigned shortly after the bill's passage through the Chamber of Deputies ('Il documento', 2005). But to hold out for a more proportional system would have risked the collapse of the talks, a severe loss of face for the UDC, and a great restriction on its freedom to campaign with an independent identity in the forthcoming election; it might also have made the negotiation of stand-down agreements using the existing system more difficult. Few in the party were willing to run the risk of thus losing their coalition allies (III. d).

In short, though the reform was initiated by the UDC, Berlusconi successfully manipulated the situation to ensure that it was he who gained most. Forza Italia could expect the new system to increase both its vote share and its seat share given its vote share; it allowed Berlusconi to maintain coalition unity, avoid difficult intra-coalition bargaining over stand-downs, and enhance his power within his own party. Only by taking account of all these considerations can we understand why the 2005 electoral reform took place. The reform was not intended simply to limit the coalition's defeat in the 2006 election. Reducing that defeat was one goal, but it was only one among many. Other goals concerned the immediate future (the few months between the passage of the reform and the elections) and the longer term: the evolution of the centre-right parties and coalition once the 2006 election was over.

Our primary purpose has been to understand the goals that underlay the reform, not whether the reform succeeded in advancing those goals. Nevertheless, it is useful briefly to consider the onward story. As we showed in Table 4, Forza Italia did succeed in curbing its seat losses in 2006, whereas the other centre-right parties suffered more harshly. Whether the centre-right parties gained votes through the reform cannot be known, but certainly they scored unexpectedly well in 2006 and achieved a resounding victory in 2008. Perhaps most notably, Berlusconi and Fini succeeded in securing the maintenance of bipolar competition. Indeed, by 2008 the two blocs had consolidated considerably: nominal party mergers occurred on both left and right, though the durability of the new formations, particularly on the right, cannot be predicted.

There is a striking paradox in the fact that the 2005 reform, widely criticized at its launch as holding the potential for greater party fragmentation, was accompanied at its second usage, in 2008, by substantial consolidation at the parliamentary level. Yet it would be difficult to argue that the mergers stemmed directly from that reform: the centre-left *Partito Democratico* was formed for other reasons, and Berlusconi then hastily assembled his *Popolo della Libertà* to prevent the *Partito Democratico* from emerging as the largest single party. The thresholds introduced in the new law do appear to have had some effect in reducing fragmentation. Nevertheless, achieving such transformation of the party system was not in the minds of the reformers in 2005 (cf. Carbone and Newell, 2008: pp. 141–142; Bull and Newell, 2009).

The UDC appears to have been out-manoeuvred: despite failing to secure the fully proportional reform that it wanted, it broke free of the centre-right coalition after the 2006 elections. As a result, in 2008, it was marginalized and its future looked uncertain. It had only three seats in the Senate, and 36 (down from 39) in the Chamber, and while it might after a future election hold the balance of power and thus regain significant influence, it might also be squeezed out, particularly if the battle between left and right is close. Having failed to break bipolarism through the 2005 reform, its attempt to pursue a centrist strategy is very risky.

Thus while four parties had effective input into the 2005 reform, and three of those emerged in 2008 as beneficiaries, it is difficult to argue that many of these outcomes were predictable in 2005, or played a part in decision-making at that point.

5. Comparative implications and conclusions

The preceding analysis shows that, even where electoral reform is dominated by politicians and even where these politicians focus solely upon their self-interest, still such reform can be a complex business. In developing an understanding of the forces underlying Italy's 2005 electoral reform, we have found at least some role for most of the power-seeking considerations summarized in Table 1. Thus, in order adequately to comprehend this reform, we need to allow for the distinction between outcome- and act-contingent factors, for power-seeking behaviour at the level of individual politicians, parties, and coalitions, and for multiple maximands, ranging from share of voters' preferences through votes, seats, office, and influence in office.

In common with other recent authors (including Farrell and McAllister, 2006; Rahat, 2008), we argue that understanding this complexity is a crucial part of our task as students of politics. Reform could occur in Italy in 2005 where it had failed repeatedly between 1994 and 2000 not because some magical sword was found to cut the Gordian knot, but because a combination of factors allowed the knot to be partially unpicked. No single factor on its own can account either for the fact of reform in 2005 or for its nature.

Nevertheless, if our Italian findings are to contribute to comparative analysis, it is useful that we pick out some highlights. Above all, we suggest that the Italian case shows the importance of taking account of coalition dynamics. The UDC and the Alleanza Nazionale both approached electoral reform primarily from the perspective of whether it encouraged centripetal or centrifugal patterns of coalition-building (III. b). Berlusconi wanted to be rid of the coalition effect (II. c), which reduced the seat share of Forza Italia, and needed to ensure that he kept his coalition allies on board (III. d). The UDC and Lega Nord were keen to enhance their independence within (or even from) the Berlusconi-led coalition (III. c). The presence (or possible presence) of coalitions thus refracts thinking about electoral reform in multiple ways. We have illustrated the operation of some of these mechanisms in Italy in 2005, and we cited several authors above who have noted their existence in other cases, ranging from Scotland to Israel. But we are not aware of their having received any sustained attention in comparative analysis. We suggest it is important that such attention be given.

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