

Political Parties, Democratic Quality and the Italian Transition

Introduction

The purpose of the present paper is to assess whether and to what extent the quality of Italian democracy has changed in the course of what has been defined as an ‘endless transition’, that is that long and seemingly endless transition that began with the collapse of the traditional Italian parties and party systems in the early 1990s and has not yet been able to reach a conclusion.

In order to assess the changes in the quality of Italian democracy I will rely on a theoretical framework elaborated by Italian political scientist Leonardo Morlino and which has fruitfully been employed to investigate the democratic quality and the consolidation in Southern European and Latin American democracies (Morlino, 2001; Morlino, 2005).

Morlino suggested that democratic quality has to be assessed on the basis of six different dimensions (rule of law, vertical accountability, horizontal accountability, responsiveness, freedom and equality). Morlino further argued that how well one democratic regime fares in each of these dimensions depends on the interaction of both primary and secondary conditions. As we will discuss later on in the paper, Morlino applied this analytical framework to analyze the quality of democracy and the democratic consolidation in a variety of countries, among which was Italy.

If we regard the 1992 elections which were the last elections of what is generally, however incorrectly, called the Italian First Republic, as our starting point of the transition and we regard the 2006 elections as the end point, at least from a temporal point of view, of the transition, we perform some analyses to track how the quality of Italian democracy has changed from the beginning of the transition to the present day. By performing such an analysis, we find that the quality of Italian democracy has improved considerably in several of the dimensions.

This paper is organized in the following way. In the first part we outline Morlino’s framework for the analysis of democratic consolidation and democratic quality. In doing so we will point out that according to Morlino democracy is a complex phenomenon that involves six different dimension. In addition to discussing what are these six dimensions, how a country performance on each of these six dimension is affected by its authoritarian legacy, we will point out that the most important element in Morlino’s framework is represented by satisfaction with democracy. For Morlino voters’ satisfaction with democracy is the best indicator not only of democratic consolidation but also of democratic quality.

In the second part of the paper, we will apply Morlino’s framework to the analysis of the Italian political system in the course of the transition that began with the crisis/collapse of the so called First Republic. In addition to summarizing some of the most significant transformations of the Italian political system -- the electoral reform, party change, party system change -- we assess how the quality of democracy has changed from 1994 to 2006. The results of our analysis reveal that in the period under study, the Italian system became more responsive, more accountable and that voters’ satisfaction with democracy actually increased—evidence that sustains the claim that in this period the quality of democracy improved and that democracy itself was more consolidated than it had been in the more affluent 1980s.

Part One. Morlino's framework

Political scientists have discussed what is democracy, how does democracy come into being, and how does it manage to survive. Scholars have emphasized the importance of political culture, institutions, socio-economic development and above all legitimacy.

In fact, while some of the previous studies on democratic consolidation suggested that it could be signalled by whether democracy had survived three electoral cycles, by whether there had been at least two pacific transfer of executive power, by whether democracy had survived at least twenty or twenty five years, now the most widely accepted view on democratic consolidation is that it is indicated by legitimacy, that is by “the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for society” (Lipset, 1959).

Morlino (1986) developed a more nuanced notion of what is democratic consolidation. For Morlino democratic consolidation involves not only an increasing legitimacy of the democratic norms and procedures but also the institutionalization (Huntington, 1968; Panbianco, 1988) of democratic processes and procedures—an institutionalization that fixes the primary characteristics of the democratic system, while it allows its secondary characteristics to adapt to changing conditions.

Most of Morlino's theoretical work has then addressed the question of how the legitimacy/democratic compromise can be preserved. Lipset (1959) regarded legitimacy as an affective/emotional attachment to a political system for what we should call, for lack of a better word, ‘cultural’ reasons –the culture of the Junkers in the wake of WWI was not pro-democratic and this is why the Weimar republic failed – and rejected the notion that legitimacy could be performance based. In fact he went on to argue that, had the Weimar republic enjoyed some legitimacy, it would have been able to survive the economic catastrophe. Huntington (1991) noted instead that legitimacy can come in many guises one of which is performance-based and he has argued that while democratic regimes have some procedural legitimacy that non-democratic regimes lack, they are also prone to collapse if they are unable to tackle major economic crises. Morlino, in his work, has adopted a different focus and has suggested that democratic consolidation involves two distinct processes.

According to Morlino the first process concerns whether the legitimacy that democracy enjoys in a given country is exclusive or inclusive. Legitimacy is said to be exclusive when some important segments of the socio-economic elites “do not accept democratic institutions” (Morlino, 2001:227), while it is said to be inclusive when “all the political organizations are integrated and involved in the acceptance and the support of democratic institutions”.

The second process is the process of anchorage that is the process through which political/partisan elites and (civil) society build ties that bind. This anchorage or anchoring is, according to Morlino, due to “the emergence, the formation, the transformation or the disappearance of anchors which connect or even control civil society” (Morlino, 2001:228). These anchors are party organizations, clientelism, neocorporatism and gatekeeping. Party organizations are instruments of permanent participation, which represent, aggregate and integrate society into the political systems and decision making. Clientelism is what makes individual, unorganized and (according to Morlino) unprotected individuals depend on political parties and institutions that can distribute resources and benefits. Neocorporatism is an arrangement characterized by “stable agreements, business associations and strong

trade unions which contribute to the preservation of those agreements” (Morlino, 2001:231). Gatekeeping refers to parties’ and party elites’ ability to regulate which interest groups and socio-economic elites can gain access to decision-making.

In his empirical analysis, Morlino (2001: 234) focused on three of these four anchors (strength of party organization, strength of clientelism, and gatekeeping) and found that the Italian case (just like the Greek case) is characterized by the presence of very strong party organizations and that parties control society (by actively performing their gate-keeping function and by practicing clientelism)—which is why Morlino concluded that in the Italian case the process of democratic consolidation was not achieved through the elites, as occurred in Spain, nor through the state, as occurred in Portugal, but instead through political parties.

The anchors play a role not only with regard to the consolidation of democracy but also with regard to determining the quality of a democracy. Specifically for Morlino (2005) the quality of democracy involves six dimensions:

- 1) rule of law
- 2) vertical accountability
- 3) horizontal accountability
- 4) responsiveness (which includes)
 - a) to the policy needs of the voters
 - b) to the services that need to be provided to the citizens
 - c) provision of symbolic goods
 - d) provision of material goods to the voters
 - e) legitimacy of democratic institutions
- 5) freedom
- 6) equality

and parties and political leaders are crucial in a majority of these respects. They are instruments of permanent participation, integration, representation, expression and aggregation. They need to exist in the plural for inter-party competition to be even minimally democratic. They are the instruments without which there cannot be any vertical accountability. They translate demands from individuals and groups into political, public issues and take stances on these issues that are closer or farther from what the electorate wants (4.a and 4.b). They provide benefits symbolic or otherwise to the members and supporters (4.c) and provide material goods to the citizens (4.d). This is why political parties play a key role both in contributing to the consolidation of democracy and in securing the quality of the democratic regime itself.

Before we move to the empirical part of this paper, we need to make two final observations. Morlino suggests that voters’ satisfaction with democracy indicates that democracy is consolidated and that it is good (or of a good quality). Second, for Morlino the performance of a democratic regime on each of the six dimensions, on the basis of which its quality is to be evaluated, is a function of the characteristics of the country. Such characteristics include the level of participation, the quality of information, the effectiveness of the bureaucracy, institutional structure, the authoritarian legacies, the pre-authoritarian traditions, political culture, international factors, social structure and resources.

Specifically, the rule of law is undermined by the survival of norms and legislation crafted by the authoritarian regime or by the fact that the judiciary may not be properly independent; vertical accountability may be undermined instead by the

presence of right-wing and left-wing extremist groups, non-democratic culture, cynicism and statalism; while responsiveness may be undermined by the absence of an articulated public economy sector.

Part Two. The Transition

The Italian political system has undergone some major changes in what has come to be defined as “the endless Italian Transition” (Pasquino, 2002). The literature has established that several aspects of the Italian political system have changed in the course of the transition. First of all, parties have changed: several of the traditional Italian parties have disappeared, several other parties transformed (the PCI into the PDS, the MSI-Dn into AN), some parties survived in spite of a much diminished electoral relevance, and some new parties (LN and FI) emerged. Second, the electoral system changed: in the wake of the April 18, 1993 referendum and the enactment of the laws 276/93 and 277/93, the laws for the election of the Senate and the Italian chamber of deputies were modified (Katz, 1996). While both Chambers had traditionally been elected with a PR formula, the 1993 electoral reform established that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the seats were to be elected in single member districts with a majoritarian, plurality formula—while the remaining seats were to be allocated on the basis of PR to parties that were able to reach a 4 percent threshold.

The interaction of party change and electoral reform led to a third and more important change: parties could no longer compete in the electoral arena on the basis of their own programs and platforms and form government coalitions in the wake of the elections, but they had to join forces before the elections, form a coalition, draft a common platform, run the campaign and, if successful, govern. Party change and electoral reform led to a change of the pattern of inter-party competition and government formation. For most of the so called First Republic, the Italian party system was characterized by the presence of seven relevant parties: PCI, PSI, PSDI, PRI, DC, PLI and the neo-fascist MSI that reflected a highly segmented society. This party system was identified by Giovanni Sartori (1976) as an instance of polarized pluralism. The party system not only displayed a high level of fragmentation, as indicated by the presence of more than 5 relevant parties, but also by the presence of irresponsible parties (PCI, MSI-Dn) located at the extreme position of the party system that held anti-system views. These parties, argued Sartori, not only were opposing the government as any other opposition party would, but they opposed the system of government. The Neofascist MSI-Dn had not been involved in the drafting of the 1948 Constitution that was inspired by the values of the anti-fascist resistance, was not terribly in favour of a democratic system government and, given the large presence of Monarchists in its electorate, was not entirely supportive of a republican form of government. The PCI, that later on gave its support to the governments of National Solidarity (1976-79), for the first three decades was also opposing the system of government and the capitalist economy in the name of a radical, communist alternative. Given this combination of fragmentation and ideological polarization, coupled with the presence of an electorally strong center-party that prevented other parties from converging centripetally, the nature of competition was centrifugal, the center was losing votes in favour of parties occupying more extreme positions, there was a high degree of ideological irresponsibility as parties had an incentive to make unrealistic and unreasonable promises to maximize their electoral returns in spite of the fact that such promises may undermine not only the stability of governments but also that of the whole democratic regime. Under these circumstances, there was no

alternation in power, the Communists and the Neo-fascists could coalesce to disrupt government stability and performance but were unable to join forces and provide an alternative, they could not be coopted in a DC-led government coalition. As a result, there was no government alternation, forty percent of the voters were constantly and consistently not represented by the various cabinets, and the system experienced at best what Sartori called peripheral alternation: the DC stayed in power by switching government partners. But this arrangement could hardly be regarded as proper government alternation.

With the crisis of traditional parties and the electoral reform, Italy developed a new party system. The competition in each election held from 1994 onward has been bipolar: a coalition of center-left parties has competed against a coalition of center-right parties. Third parties have attempted (Patto Segni in 1994 and the LN in 1996) to run by themselves but they were either defeated (Patto Segni) or forced to eventually join forces with one of the main coalitions. These changes have been well documented in the literature. But did these changes affect the quality of Italian democracy? And if so how?

For Morlino (2005), as we have previously observed, the quality of a political system needs to be assessed on the basis of six dimensions: rule of law, vertical accountability, horizontal accountability, responsiveness, freedom and equality. As I am not sure how to address equality, freedom and rule of law, I will focus in the remainder of this section on responsiveness and both types of accountability.

Responsiveness

There are several ways in which we can empirically measure the responsiveness of a political system. One of these ways, which is discussed by Morlino in several of his works, consists in analysing survey data to see how close party and party positions are to the position of the median voter not only in the left-right dimension, which is generally regarded as a macro-level, super-issue, but also on a variety of more specific issues.

In this paper I will deal exclusively with the analysis of responsiveness as reflected by the proximity/distance between parties and median voter on the left-right dimension. Whenever an election is held, the Istituto Cattaneo of Bologna performs a national election survey. Respondents are asked a variety of questions one of which generally concerns their own self-placement and parties' placement on the left-right dimension. Data for the 1994-2006 period are presented in the table. While in some elections, the responses were given on a 5-point scale and in other instances they were given instead on a 10-point scale. In estimating party position, I have recoded the responses provided on the 10-point scale into 5-point scale responses so that we can have a homogenous sets of answers for the whole period under investigation. The data provide us with the information on where parties are perceived to be located according to the voters. Also by computing the mean of voters' self-placement on this scale, I estimated the median voter position. By computing the average party position, I estimate the position of the party system center. If we compute the absolute distance between the position of the median voter and the center of the party system, we find that the responsiveness of the Italian party system has increased in the period under study. In fact after a sudden and marked increase in the distance between the position of the median voter and that of the party system center, distance has steadily declined so that in 2006 it was even smaller than it had been in 1994. These data sustain the claim that the system has become more responsive.

Table 1. Italian Party Positions

	1994	1996	2001	2006 Pre- election
PRC	1.46	1.23	0.85	0.78
PDCI			1.04	
PDS	1.70	1.56	1.47	1.31
green			1.99	1.64
SDI			2.06	
BONINO			2.25	
DEMOCRATICI			2.25	1.77
PPI	2.95	2.78	2.28	
IDV			2.36	
DINI		2.67	2.38	
UDEUR			2.38	
European democracy			2.66	
CDU			3.11	
CCD-CDU		3.39	3.20	3.05
LEGA	3.70	3.52	3.89	4.05
FI	3.77	4.13	4.00	4.06
AN	4.37	4.58	4.30	4.34
MS-FT		4.62	4.50	
CENTER	2.99	3.16	2.73	2.62
IDEAL	2.91	2.66	2.61	2.54
PARTY/MVP				
Distance party system center- mvp	0.09	0.50	0.12	0.08

Vertical Accountability

Turning our attention to vertical accountability, one has to note that Italian democracy has improved immensely even in this regard. For most of the post war era, the Italian party system was a perfect case of polarized pluralism, two of the major parties were not coalitionable because of their ideological extremism, the Christian democracy was a staple in each and every government with a variety of smaller coalition partners. Under those conditions, the quality of Italian democracy was vitiated by two basic problems: first, governments could not be punished at the end of an electoral cycle for their less than impressive performance as there was no viable government alternative—hence the first and the most important mechanism of electoral, vertical accountability could not be employed. And in fact no alternation in power occurred between 1948 and 1992. Second, given the multi-party nature of the government coalitions, it was hard for voters to keep government parties accountable for their performance. In fact, multi-party coalitional arrangements created the conditions for coalition members to claim credit for successes for which they had actually little

responsibility while allowing coalition partners responsible for policy failures to share the blame with their fellow coalitional partners.

The situation changed completely with the fall of the first republic and the beginning of the transition: a center-right government elected in 1994 was followed by a center-left government in 1996, the center-right was able to go back in office in both the 2001 and 2008 elections, while the center-left has been able to win in 2006. Though some scholars (Pasquino, 2002) claim that proper alternation began only with the 2001 elections when an incumbent government of the center-left was defeated by the Berlusconi-led center-right coalition, it is hard to deny that the main feature of the transition is that it has institutionalized a pattern of alternation in government.

This alternation in office cannot be reduced to just electioneering, to the fact that the LN ran alone in the 1996 elections while it joined with the other center-right parties in 2001 and 2008. Because if the inclusion of the LN in the center right coalition had been a sufficient condition for the electoral success of the Berlusconi-led coalition, then the center-right should have won the 2006 elections in which it was instead defeated. The alternation in power occurs because, while a considerable portion of voters casts an identify vote or

purposes of the present analysis: first because the quality of democracy is not assessed on the basis of a crude quantitative indicator, such as the Gastil index, and it is also not assessed on the basis of other easily quantifiable variables such as income inequality, percentage of women in parliament, electoral participation or corruption as it is done by Lijphart (1999). Hence, we cannot simply assess the statistical relation between oversight potential on the one and our proxy for democratic quality—because this is not how democratic quality is viewed in this project. Second, and more importantly, even if we were able to quantify the quality of democracy, we could not perform in any case an analysis of the statistical relation between the quality of democracy and oversight potential, because as the number of oversight tools available to parliament has not changed over the period under study, the oversight potential variables is constant and cannot be used to perform a statistical analysis—statistical analyses such as correlation and linear regression are performed and can be performed only to relate how the variation in the values of one variable are related to or caused by variation in another variable, which is precisely what we cannot do in this case.

If instead of adopting oversight potential as a proxy for horizontal accountability, we adopt the number of procedures that were initiated by interpellations and that were concluded, we find that there was a sharp increase in percentage terms in the number of procedures that were concluded both in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate. More importantly in the period under consideration there was a major increase in the percentage of interpellations that were answered by the government. And in so far as asking interpellations (or questions) and forcing the government to provide answers and information is an indication of successful oversight and greater horizontal accountability, we can conclude that even in this respect the quality of democracy has improved—see table 2.

Table 2.a. Interpellations directed to Ministry of Budget from the House of Deputies

	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII	XIII
Procedures initiated by the interpellations that were completed	63.6%	32.7%	25%	18.5%	2.8%	21.4%	64.7%
Interpellations answered	45.4%	27.6%	25%	14.8%	0%	19.2%	64.7%
Interpellations withdrawn	18.2%	0%	0%	3.7%	2.8%	3.8%	0%
Interpellations transformed	0%	5.2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
N	of 11	of 58	of 16	of 27	Of 35	of 26	of 34

Table 2.b Interpellations directed to the Ministry of Budget from the Senate.

	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII	XIII
Procedures initiated by the interpellations that were completed	36.3%	56.3%	0%	16.7%	15%	11.1%	40.9
Interpellations answered	36.3%	43.8%	0%	16.7%	10%	11.1%	15.9%

Interpellations withdrawn	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4.5%
Interpellations transformed	0%	12.5%	0%	0%	5%	0%	20.5%
	of	of	of	of	of	of	Of
N	11	16	5	12	20	9	44

Table 2.d Interpellations addressed to Foreign Affairs Ministry-from the House of Deputies

Number of interpellations	VII (1976-79)	XI (1992-94)	XII (1994-96)	XIII (1996-2001)	XIV (2001-2006)
Whose procedure was completed (% of introduced)	73.1%	42.8%	32.4%	46.9%	63.1
Answered (% of introduced)	43.9%	41.9%	29.4%	44.5%*	
Withdrawn (% of introduced)	24.4%	0%	1.5%	.5%*	
Transformed (% of introduced)	4.5%	.9%	11.5%	2.5%*	
N	of 41	of 105	Of 68	of 228; 200*	of 171

Source: Camera dei Deputati; legend: * Though the chamber of deputies makes it clear that 107 of the 228 interpellations were completed, it only provides more detailed information concerning the first 200 interpellations introduced in this legislature. The procedures for 95 of these 200 interpellations were completed: 89 interpellations were answered (44.5%), 1 was withdrawn (0.5%) and 5 (2.5%) were transformed.

Table 2.d. Interpellations to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-from the Senate.

Number of interpellations	VII (1976-79)	XI (1992-94)	XII (1994-96)	XIII (1996-2001)	XIV (2001-2006)	XV (2006-pres.)
Whose procedure was completed (% of introduced)	33.3%	18.4%	40.5%	35%	34.9%	40.6%
Answered (% of introduced)	33.3%	15.8%	37.8%	23%		
Withdrawn (% of introduced)	0%	0%	0%	1%		
Transformed (% of introduced)	%	2.6%	2.7%	11%		
N	6	of 38	Of 37	of 100	of 86	Of 32*

Source: Chamber of Deputies. Legend: * as of March 12, 2007.

Satisfaction with Democracy

While each of the indicators that we have so far employed shows, consistently, that the performance of Italian democracy has improved on each of the dimensions identified by Morlino's framework for analysis, the evidence is nonetheless insufficient to prove conclusively that the quality of the Italian democracy now is better than what it was at the end of the so called First Republic.

For Morlino, the best indicator of whether a democratic system is consolidated or not and the best indicator of the quality of a democratic regime is represented by the level of satisfaction with democracy. If citizens are satisfied with democracy and think that democracy is the best political regime, the democratic system enjoys legitimacy and is consolidated.

The literature on democratic consolidation has generally argued, from Lipset (1959) onward that the legitimacy of a political system is an affective dimension. For Lipset (1959) legitimacy is not performance-based and it is what allows a democracy to survive even in time of crisis. Other scholars (Huntington, 1991) have instead pointed out that while the legitimacy of a democratic regime is not exclusively performance-based, it is also, among other things performance-based. Hence, in so far as the relationship between performance and legitimacy is concerned, one would expect that citizens' satisfaction with democracy should be somehow related to the government's performance in the economy, that is to the government's ability to promote economic growth.

Interestingly enough, the Italian case tells a slightly different story. When Italian voters were asked what they thought about democracy in 1985, when the Italian economy was booming, had high rates of economic growth, was on its way to becoming one of the seven largest economies in the world, had low unemployment and an inflation rate substantially lower than it had been in the 1970s, this is how they responded: 75.5% of the respondents said that democracy is always the best political system, 13.% of the respondents said that sometimes a dictatorship is better than a democratic regime, while 10.7% of the respondents said that it does not make any difference whether a political regime is democratic or not. The same question was asked in 1996, when the Italian economy was performing remarkably less successfully: rates of growth were low and unemployment was extremely high.¹ Yet, in spite of the poor economic performance, democracy enjoyed even more legitimacy than it had done a decade earlier. In 1996, in spite of economic woes, 78.6% of the Italian respondents said that democracy is always the best political system. In other words, democracy in Italy managed to become even more consolidated in spite of shaky economic performance.

Conclusions

The purpose of the present paper was to assess whether and how the quality of democracy had changed in Italy in the course of the so called transition that began in the early 1990s with the collapse of the so called First Republic.

The political science literature has elaborated many ways in which the quality of a democracy can be measured and some measures work better than others in some respects and less well in other respects. The Gastil index of Freedom, which is customarily employed, to measure the quality of democracy is quite helpful if one is interested in comparing liberal democracies with quasi democracies, but it becomes

¹ According to the data provided by the World Bank, the unemployment rate in 1984 and 1985 was respectively 10.0 and 10.3 percent. In 1995 and in 1996, it was 12 and 12.1 percent. In other words, unemployment had increased by 20% of its original value in a decade. GDP growth had instead considerably decreased: the Italian economy averaged a yearly GDP growth of 1.92 percent from 1980 to 1985, and it had rate of growth of more than 2.5% in 3 of the six years. From 1990 to 1995 the Italian economy averaged a rate of growth of 1.25 percent a year, it had rate of growth of 2.5% or more twice and in 1993 it experienced negative growth (-0.9 percent). Yet, the worsening of economic performance did not have a negative impact on voters' satisfaction with democracy.

remarkably less useful once a scholar decides to focus on the most liberal democratic among the liberal democracies. In fact, if one is interested in comparing western industrially advanced liberal democracies such as USA, UK Germany or Italy, one finds that the Gastil index assigns the same score to all of them and is therefore not very useful for assessing whether the quality of democracy varies across countries. Similarly the Gastil index displays, at least for most liberal democratic countries, little variation across time, and making it virtually impossible to measure whether the quality of democracy varies over time.

This is why scholars interested in studying western liberal democracies proposed alternative ways to assess the democratic quality. Morlino (2005) suggested for example that the quality of democracy should be evaluated on the basis of six dimensions—which include rule of law, vertical accountability, horizontal accountability, responsiveness, freedom and equality. For Morlino a political system's performance on each of these six dimension is affected by the authoritarian legacy, is a major determinant of the democratic quality and is ultimately responsible for the consolidation of democracy.

We used Morlino's framework to evaluate whether and the quality of Italian democracy has changed in the wake of the collapse of the so called First Republic. Specifically, by focusing on vertical accountability, horizontal accountability and responsiveness, we found that Italian democracy has improved: the supply of public goods, as signalled by the position of the party system's center, is closer to the position of the median voter; there is more vertical accountability because Italian voters are now able to reward and more commonly punish incumbents for their performance in office; and there is more horizontal accountability as the Italian parliament is more actively performing its oversight tasks. While this evidence sustains the claim that the quality of Italian democracy has improved in the course of the transition, this conclusion is also supported by the fact that Italian citizens are more satisfied with democracy than they were in the past in spite of the fact that economic conditions have worsened.

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