The presidentialization of Italian politics: The political consequences of the 1993 electoral reform

Fulvio Venturino – University of Genoa

Abstract. A parliamentary political system may be said «presidentialized» in two cases: in inter-electoral politics, when the incumbent Prime Minister is prominent in comparison with other political roles; in electoral politics, when the choice of the expected Prime Minister constitutes a powerful motivation to cast a ballot in favour of his supporting party. The working of the Italian cabinet – as described by literature – shows a substantial equality among Prime Minister and his ministers, so denying the thesis of the presidentialization. The electoral situation is radically different. In 1993, the proportional electoral system existing since 1948 was replaced by a renewed mixed system. As a consequence, the Italian party system was deeply reshaped, and in the 1996 parliamentary election the majoritarian side of the competition was ran by a single party (Lega Nord) and two coalitions, the right-wing Polo per le Libertà and the left-wing Ulivo. Both these coalitions candidated their leaders – Mr Silvio Berlusconi and Mr Romano Prodi respectively – as chief-of-government in case of victory. Thus, after the ambiguous situation of the 1994 campaign, for the first time since World War II Italian voters were enabled to choose the head of the cabinet directly.

In this paper, I deal with the following problem: did the leaders of the electoral coalitions (and prospective premiers) affect the majoritarian vote in 1996? To face this problem, I use survey data (n = 3237). First of all, I examine the bivariate relationship between the «comparative evaluation of the leaders» and the vote choice. Then I assess a more complex multivariate model using non-recursive statistical tools (2sls, two stages least squares regression). In this case, sympathy for the leaders, sympathy for the coalitions and issue preference are taken into account together with a large array of other political and demographic vote predictors.

In general, the sympathy for the leaders is shown to be a very important motivation for the 1996 vote, and thus the choice of the premier by the citizenry – albeit a new practice in Italian politics – already can meaningfully influence the electoral results.

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The presidentialization of Italian politics: The political consequences of the 1993 electoral reform

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Theory

Since the mid-'80s a large body of literature has been spreading concerning the «presidentialization» of the parliamentary systems (Bean 1993; Bean and Mughan 1989; Graetz and McAllister 1987a; Stewart and Clarke 1992). This label focuses on an important characteristic affecting most political systems, principally in the area of the English-speaking democracies. Shortly said, the presidentialization is the growth of the power of the head of the executive. Quite obviously, this extremely general definition requires conceptual refinements to be useful for empirical research.

If one quickly reviews the large amount of literature about cabinets in the parliamentary democracies (Fabbrini and Vassallo 1999) he will discover that the word presidentialization assumes at least two different meanings, according to the fact that the researcher is interested in an electoral rather than in an inter-electoral perspective: examining presidentialization from an inter-electoral point of view actually implies a focus on the prominence acquired in the executive by the Prime Minister in comparison with the role of his colleagues occupying ministerial roles, due to his influence in the policy-making and/or his popularity in the communication toward public opinion at large; from an electoral point of view, a parliamentary system can be said presidentialized when the choice of the prospective Prime Minister is a motivation for voting more important than other traditional factors, such as party identification, ideology and issues.

During the political development of Western Europe in the age of mass politics, near all the countries adopted a form of government in which the cabinet is responsible toward the parliament, Switzerland being the most obvious exception and the more recent semi-presidential systems needing some specifications. Old constitutions written in the XIX and in the first half of the XX century were usually silent about the role of the Prime Minister face to his ministers. They emphasised the collegiality of the cabinet rather than the specific functions performed by one of its members. Then, the history of this century saw a dramatic increase of the role and the competence of the Prime Minister that is generated by the exigencies of coordination within a board by then composed of some tens of individuals. In part this problem was solved adopting internal committees – however leaded by the Prime Minister – composed by the ministers engaged in a policy area; but above all it was reduced by the growth of the
role of the Prime Minister and by the correlated decreasing power of the ministers (Blondel 1997).

The exigencies posed by the internal working of the cabinets in the age of big government are not the only causes of the prominence acquired by the Prime Ministers. As largely recognised by the specialised literature (Jones 1991, 5; Legnante 1999, 399; Mazzoleni 1998, 61-63), television breeds a «personalization» of politics which has several aspects, the most important being the popularity attained by the cabinet top leaders. It could be interesting to note that this effect is not a peculiarity of the Anglo-American (two-party) systems, rather it has been discovered in multiparty democracies – such as Norway – as well (Midtbø 1998; Calise 2000).

As previously said, the centralisation of the cabinet decision-making and the popularity of the Prime Minister in the public opinion are not the only relevant aspects of the process of presidentialization. Indeed, a political system can be said presidentialized from an electoral point of view when voters cast their ballots taking their feelings toward the (prospective) Prime Ministers into account. In this case, several contextual factors should be considered. It is now largely recognised that the emergence of the candidate as shortcut for the vote arose quite recently. Traditionally, other factors were identified as relevant for the electoral behaviour in Europe. First of all, voters were said to be strongly linked with traditional parties which originated during the first years of this century (Lipset and Rokkan 1967); in a similar mood, the stability of the European party systems until the '70s was explained using concepts such as party identification (Budge et al. 1976) or ideology (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976).

Since the '70s the dealignment of the electorates (Franklin 1992) and the growth of the volatility (Crewe and Denver 1985), albeit denied by some researchers (Bartolini and Mair 1990), induced a modification in the research agenda. Short-term factors, as opposed to long-term ideology and party identification, were used to shed light on great movements of votes between two consecutive elections. The study of issue voting was the first consequence produced by this new interest (Macdonald et al. 1991), and the study of the presidentialization from an electoral point of view came second, fuelled by some case studies of particular interest.

One of these case studies is the inquiry about the reiterated electoral successes of the British Conservative Party led by Margaret Thatcher in an era of economic strain (Graetz and McAllister 1987b; Nadeau et al. 1994; Whiteley 1986, cap. 5). A very surprising fact found in that years using survey data is that the Conservative leader was more popular than the leader of the Labour Party even among leftist and labour-identified voters. It became then clear that
leader appeal – at least in a context of non-cleavage politics – is a factor that can powerfully shape voters’ attitudes toward parties.

But the initial spread of this topic of research in the Anglo-American democracies is not simply due to particular circumstances occurring in the ’80s. In this respect, lasting institutional designs are perhaps more important. In a comparative perspective, they allow voters to choose their government in two different ways. «Pure» parliamentary democracies are characterised by highly proportional electoral systems and multiparty systems. In such regimes, voters actually elect an usually strongly fractionalised parliament, but they can not express their preference about the government to be created after the election. The executive here is rather the final product of a coalition-making process taking place in parliament. In general, then, in systems like these the cabinet is chosen recurring to a two-tier procedure: the first step is the parliamentary election, the second is the appointment of the executive by the majority of the parliament. Pure parliamentary systems are the exact opposite of presidential democracies, where the direct election of the executive by the voters is openly foreseen. Examples of them are the Netherlands, Italy before 1993 and Israel before 1992 (Lijphart 1992).

The situation is radically different when majoritarian (Westminster-style) democracies are at stake. In this case, voters know in advance that the leader of the winning party will become the Prime Minister; as a consequence they formally cast their ballots for a given party, but at the same time their choices are influenced by the candidate premier: if the pure parliamentary system is the opposite of the presidential democracy, now the resemblance is surely greater.

The (as if) direct election of the Prime Minister is the typical situation in the Anglo-American (parliamentary) democracies, which since long time has been considered the best example of working democracies (Almond 1956). This institutional design is the model inspiring some reforms aimed to obviate the drawbacks of the pure parliamentary systems. For the democracy is believed to be better arranged when people are enabled to choose their rulers, in the last years institutional engineering addressed to the methods of selecting the Prime Minister (Sartori 1994, cap. 6.7). The Israeli case is perhaps the most interesting, because there the parliamentary form of government is partially retained by virtue of the confidence vote, but the direct election of the Prime Minister was introduced in 1992 (Hazan 1996; 1999). But beside this extreme case, electoral reforms or political customs introduced the nomination of the candidate premier before the election in other parliamentary democracies, so that a prominent scholar of comparative politics could state that «… we can find a convergence between parliamentary and presidential systems, because in many democracies people vote more and more for a party leader enabled to govern» (Linz 1994, 90).
In the last analysis, a parliamentary democracy can be said presidentialized from a post-electoral point of view when the Prime Minister has the dominating role inside the cabinet, while from a narrower electoral point of view it is presidentialized when voters are allowed to choose the Prime Minister directly (as in Israel) or «as if» directly (as in Anglo-American and in some continental democracies). So far I have examined this problem in a theoretical and comparative perspective. What about Italy?

*Is there any presidentialization in Italian politics?*

In studying Italian politics, scholars paid attention above all to the party system (Sartori 1976; 1982). As a consequence, until recent times other relevant aspects of the Italian politics remained unexplored, or at least less examined. Despite the study of the cabinet has not been an exception (but cfr. Calise and Mannheimer 1982; Pasquino 1987), the growing amount of literature demonstrates that the attention for this topic is steadily developing (Barbieri 1998 and 1999; Cama 1997; Cotta 1997; Cotta and Verzichelli 1996; Criscitiello 1994; Hine and Finocchi 1991; Vassallo 1994). In general, these researches show that the role of the Italian Prime Minister is lessened by at least four circumstances. First, the great instability of the government and the rapid turnover prevent the formation of a strong leadership; second, Prime Ministers exercise few influences on the choice and the eventual dismissal of their ministers; third, despite a reform accomplished in 1988, they lack again a stable and reliable staff (Mortara 1989); fourth, during the ’80s a practice was undertaken – the so-called majority summits (*vertici di maggioranza*) – by which the power agenda of the Prime Minister was further reduced with advantage of the most important ministers and of the leaders of the parties supporting the government.\(^1\)

All of these characteristics produce important consequences on the cabinet internal life. For instance, the budgetary process is said to be badly arranged among the Prime Minister, the cabinet, the Treasury and other ministers, even if the Treasury – and not the Prime Minister – has sometimes played the leading role (D’Alimonte 1989, 202; Verzichelli 1999). As far as the communication towards public opinion is concerned, it has been noticed that an enduring confusion affects the flows of the messages put forward by the ministers, and the Prime Minister is unable to overhang them or to act as mediator when two ministers are conflicting (Cama 1997, 288). Most criticisms has been directed against this situation, but the constitution adopted in 1948 never was modified and in the ’90 the Italian government continues to

\(^1\) Criscitiello attests this situation reporting that «… the summit replaces the more formal governmental institutions» (1994, 197).
present «ministerial individualism, lack of co-ordination, and the unpredictability of the law-making process» (Cotta 1997, 156).

While the internal working of the cabinet shows little if none change towards the «presidentialization», the situation is radically different to the extent that the electoral rules are considered. The most important fact here is the electoral reform introduced by the parliament in 1993 and so far used two times in 1994 and 1996. The new electoral law ended the proportional era enduring since 1948 by creating a mixed system, which has been defined dependent with correction (Massicotte and Blais 1999, 346; Chiaramonte 1998)\(^2\). The number of the MPs (630) was maintained to the same level, but the method of election drastically changed: only 155 MPs are actually elected with the proportional system, and moreover a threshold was fixed at 4% which must be exceeded to obtain parliamentary representation. The most important innovation is the election of 475 MPs (the 2/3 of the Low Chamber) with a typical majority rule, recurring to a second ballot.

In 1994, the rightist coalition named *Polo delle Libertà e del Buongoverno* (including Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale, Lega Nord, and other minor parties) won a tiny majority and formed a short-lived government, followed by a caretaker cabinet which remained in life until the new election, held in April 1996, whose results are displayed in Tab. 1. The left side shows the results of the proportional competition, where single parties were engaged: here we find both the successors of the traditional parties (Rc, Pds, Ppi, Ccd-Cdu, An) and new – not cleavage – parties, such as the Greens, Lista Dini, Lista Pannella and Forza Italia, together with the Lega Nord, the party which for the first time in Italian history mobilised the centre-periphery cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). The right side shows instead the results of the majoritarian competition. In 1996, the alliances were deeply reshaped in comparison with 1994, and only three parties or coalitions campaigned with some success: Ulivo brought together the candidates of the left-wing parties (light grey area, from Rc to Lista Dini), Polo per le Libertà assembled candidates from the right-wing parties (dark grey area, from Lista Pannella to An), Lega Nord refused to join any alliance and obtained 39 parliamentary seats thanks to its strong territorial concentration in the regions of Northern Italy\(^3\).

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\(^2\) These electoral systems are said «correcting» because proportional seats are allocated to correct the distortions caused by the majoritarian rule; also they are «dependent» in that the role of the proportional formula varies according to the outcomes produced by the majoritarian rule.

The successive report refers essentially to the Low Chamber (*Camera dei Deputati*). Even if Italy has a symmetric bicameralism and for the *Senato della Repubblica* a different electoral system is adopted, the exam of the High Chamber does not add nothing to this description.
Tab. 1 Results of the parliamentary election, 1996 (low Chamber)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>parties</th>
<th>proportional vote</th>
<th>majoritarian vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vote %</td>
<td>seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rifondazione Comunista</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pds</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ppi</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lista Dini</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lista Pannella</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ccd-Cdu</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forza Italia</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alleanza Nazionale</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lega Nord</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The 1996 parliamentary elections are often said to continue several political tendencies of the Italian electoral history, such as the lowering turnout (Caramani 1997), the territorial concentration of the leftist vote in Central Italy (Natale 1997), and the poor rationality of the voters (Chiaramonte 1997). However, this election shows important innovations as well, the most apparent being the formation of a coalition government led by Mr Romano Prodi supported for the first time by a left-wing parliamentary majority. This event a part, other changes took place. For instance, the sum of the votes of the left-wing parties competing in the proportional side is \(8.6 + 21.1 + 2.5 + 6.8 + 4.3 = 43.3\%\), while right-wing parties reach \(1.9 + 5.8 + 20.6 + 15.7 = 44.0\%\). But in the decisive majoritarian competition the leftist vote went up to 44.8 and the rightist vote went down to 40.4\%, clearly showing that voters were able enough to practice split-voting, even is this divided vote was not a strategic vote, because it advantaged minor parties lacking any hope to gain a single seat\(^4\). Moreover, because of the fading away of party identification bred by the disappearance of the traditional party and the rise of new parties (Ignazi 1992, Baccetti 1997), voters are trying new methods to orient themselves. Venturino (1997) for instance discovered the role of issue voting in the proportional competition; however, the involved issues are constitutional reform and immigration, while economic voting is non existent with the only exception of tax policy. Marini and Roncarolo (1997) demonstrate the growing role of the media (Tv and newspapers) to orient the

\(^3\) To be picky, Rc and Lista Pannella adopted particular forms of co-operation with the major coalitions, but they did not acquire a full membership.

\(^4\) Movimento Sociale Italiano-Fiamma Tricolore is a former fascist party that campaigned almost exclusively in Southern Italy and – in the majoritarian side – obtained 1.7% votes and no seats. D’Alimonte and Bartolini (1997, 257) estimate that this little dispersion of the vote caused the loss of 36 (potential) seats for the Polo per le Libertà.
voters’ choice, also highlighted by the fact that today the party option is increasingly made very near the election day (Zucchini 1997).

All of this is important to fully assess the party system changes actually occurring in Italy. Nevertheless, in order to fully appreciate the possible presidentialization of the Italian electoral process, the most important innovation to be considered here is a consequence directly connected with the formation of the electoral coalitions competing in the majoritarian side. Lega Nord apart, in 1996 both the two major coalitions – Polo and Ulivo – openly candidated their leaders as Prime Minister in case of victory. During the ‘90s, the direct election of the head of local governments has been introduced by law for the administrative elections of Comuni, Province and – more recently – Regioni. For parliamentary election a formal appointment is not legally requested and the indication of the candidate premier is a gradually emerging practice. In effect, when the first election with the new mixed electoral system was held in 1994 only the rightist coalition explicitly appointed Mr Silvio Berlusconi as candidate premier; the leftist coalition instead was more ambiguous, and Mr Achille Occhetto was considered the leader of the coalition being the chief of the largest participating party – Partito Democratico della Sinistra – but never he was indicated as possible Prime Minister. In 1996 both coalition leaders – Mr Berlusconi and Mr Prodi – were openly appointed, so that «for the first time in Italian history the 1996 parliamentary election was straightforwardly conceived by the public opinion as a personal competition between two candidates premier» (Volli 1997, 179, italicised in the original).

So far the (as if) direct election of the Prime Minister has not been fully investigated. In particular, I am interested here in the influences that it could have produced on the voters’ behaviour. This problem is intriguing because some attributes of the two last elections fit nicely with the available theoretical statements about the role of personal factors in politics (Legnante 1999). For instance, in the United States the candidate-centered politics (Wattemberg 1991) is often considered as a cause of electoral volatility, and aggregate data of recent Italian elections show a very high level of volatility, with an extraordinary peak in the 1994 election (Cartocci 1997, 183). Also, the so-called «premiership effect» has been tentatively indicated as a cause of the divided vote by rightist voters discussed above (D’Alimonte and Bartolini, 1997, 281). In the next sections, the empirical part of this paper will ascertain if the appeal of the candidates premier has influenced voters’ attitudes in the 1996 campaign.

**Empirical analysis**

To research this topic, I use survey post-electoral data concerning a sample of 3237 Italian
voters. The candidate appeal was measured with a typical thermometer scale extending from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates low appreciation and 10 attests high regards. Last row of Tab. 2 shows that the popularity of the leftist candidate premier (5.3) was greater than his competitor Mr Berlusconi (4.3). This advantage is spread in all sectors of the electorate: first, leftist voters appreciate Prodi (6.8) more than rightist voters appreciate Berlusconi (6.6); second, Berlusconi’s popularity among leftists (2.8) is lower than Prodi’s popularity among rightists (3.7); third, Prodi is more acceptable among the supporters of other parties and non-voters.

Tab. 2 Premier popularity according to the majoritarian vote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>majoritarian vote</th>
<th>Prodi</th>
<th>Berlusconi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mean</td>
<td>mean</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polo delle Libertà</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulivo</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>1406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lega Nord</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lista Pannella</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other parties</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>invalid ballots</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abstensionism</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grand mean</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>2957</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The independent variable usually utilised to estimate the role of the candidates is the so-called «comparative evaluation» (Page and Jones 1979), which is built here for each voter by subtracting the score attributed to Berlusconi to the score attributed to Prodi. This variable may assume values comprised between −9 and +9: negative values indicate a good evaluation for Berlusconi, positive values attest a good evaluation for Prodi, while values near 0 imply an indifference towards the two leaders. The very simple hypothesis to be initially controlled is that the predisposition to vote for a coalition is greater when the voter reveals a good evaluation of the coalition leader. The dependent variable is trichotomous, in that it assumes value 0 when the voter supports Polo, 1 when s/he supports Ulivo and finally 0.5 when s/he supports other parties (Lega Nord, Lista Pannella, and minor parties) or s/he does not vote (invalid ballots, abstention). The variables are arranged in such a way that if the leaders play a substantive role for the voters’ choice the sign of the coefficient regression shall be positive.

I have run Ordinary Least Square (ols) regression and I have obtained results which strongly uphold the thesis of the presidentialization of the Italian electoral process: not only the sign is positive as theoretically predicted, but also the regression coefficient b = 0.07 is nearly unaf-

5 Renato Mannheimer deserves special thanks for granting the use of the data he gathered after the 1996 election. As usual, I bear the responsibility for the results reached in this paper.
6 Even if the number of interviews is too little to draw any inference, this is true for Lista Pannella as well, a minor party formally competing by itself, but whose leaders declared their support for Polo per le Libertà.
affected by a standard error – which reaches only 0.001 – and the t-value = 56.99 appears to be very high when matched with the critical value t = 2.58. The standardised regression coefficient is beta = 0.72 and the explained variance is $r^2 = 0.525$.

This test sustains the thesis according to which in 1996 parliamentary election the evaluation of the coalition leaders – namely the candidates premier – played an important role in orienting the voters’ choice. Nevertheless this short exam cannot give us a complete and realistic picture of the majoritarian competition, because it overlooks the role of other factors, such as ideology, party identification and issues. In Italian electoral studies a prominent role was usually attributed to party identification or analogous concepts (i.e. «political belonging», Parisi and Pasquino 1977; Cartocci 1990); but in the ’90s the party system changes made this concepts obsolete, and also I have to deal with electoral coalitions, and not parties. By consequence, I will use a non recursive model where the role of three endogenous variables – leaders, coalitions and issues – is considered. This model allows the exam of the reciprocal relationships which tie these variables, with no theoretical assumptions about the specific role and the eventual pre-eminence of one single factor. This non recursive model can be visualised as in Fig. 1. The variable leaders used in this model is the same I have already discussed before; it is the comparative evaluation of the candidates premier built as a difference between the appreciation for Prodi and Berlusconi.

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**Fig. 1 The non recursive model**
When the voters’ attitudes towards the coalitions are considered two problems have to be faced in the same time, namely the theoretical definition of the concept and its measurement. The nearest concept is party identification, which is usually measured recurring to the self-location on a scale, the most well-known being the seven points scale used in the American National Electoral Studies. Unfortunately my database does not include the items necessary to measure the attitudes of the voters towards the coalitions, and as a consequence I have to build a proxy variable using the available items about the feelings towards parties. To this aim, the variable coalitions is the mean of the scores attributed by each voter to the parties engaged in Polo per le Libertà and in Ulivo, then subtracted to obtain a comparative evaluation akin to the comparative evaluation of the candidates considered above. Once more, anchoring points are –9 when the voter appreciates Polo more than Ulivo, and +9 when s/he appreciates Ulivo more than Polo; values averaging 0 indicate indifference.

Besides the items about candidates and parties, voters were requested to express their opinions on nine issues largely debated during the 1996 campaign. These issues concerned constitutional reforms, economic policy, European integration and immigration. The available answers were five, ranging from complete disagreement to full agreement with the statement, the central position expressing ignorance or indifference for the problem under exam. The variable issues measures the sympathy attributed by each voter to Polo and Ulivo in reference with the position assumed on these nine issues. I use here the same procedure already used by Page and Jones (1979, 1073): first, I locate Polo and Ulivo on the issue space using the mean of the self-location of the respective voters; second, I calculate the distance in absolute value between each voter and the two coalitions, following the method usually adopted by spatial theorists (Downs 1957); third, for each voter and each issue I subtract the distance between voter and Polo from the distance between voter and Ulivo; fourth, I add up the nine values so obtained to build an index of comparative sympathy for the two coalitions on the basis of their issue standing. Once more, the variable issues assumes low values when voters have issue

7 Calculating the mean of the scores for Polo per le Libertà I have included Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale, Centro Cristiano Democratico and Cristiani Democratici Uniti, so excluding Lista Pannella; for Ulivo, I have included Partito Democratico della Sinistra, Partito Popolare Italiano, Rifondazione Comunista, Verdi, la Rete, Rinnovamento Italiano and Lista Maccanico.

8 The nine items are formulated as follows: 1. a presidential form of government should be adopted in Italy; 2. a federalist arrangement should be introduced in Italy; 3. Italian government should accelerate the process of European integration; 4. during last years judiciary had too much political power; 5. immigration of foreign workers should be limited; 6. inflation is more urgent than unemployment; 7. the weakness of the currency is an advantage for the Italian economy; 8. budget deficit is the main economic problem affecting our country; 9. fiscal pressure damages the Italian productive system.
preferences near Polo and it assumes high values when voters prefer Ulivo; central values attest indifference towards the electoral programs of the two coalitions.

The non recursive technique needed to estimate the general model reported in Fig. 1 is Two Stages Least Squares (2SLS) regression. This method of analysis poses some additional problems, because in the form displayed above the model results underestimated, i.e. I have only three observations to assess the six theoretically relevant relationships. To obviate this problem it is necessary to add exogenous variables to the core model so far considered. The three endogenous variables – issues, leaders, and coalitions – represents the short-term factors entering the campaign and they are influencing each other; the wanted exogenous variables instead are supposed to exert some influences on the previous three, but meanwhile they are not affected by any variable included in the model. Given this required characteristic, the variables to be considered here should represent the long-term factors affecting the vote, namely those factors unchanged between two consecutive elections.

The first exogenous variable is ideology, which represents the sympathy comparatively attributed by each voter to the two coalitions on the basis of the positions on the left-right dimension, where 1 indicates extreme left and 10 attests extreme right. This variable is calculated using the same procedure already employed for the issues: first, I calculate the positions of the two coalitions as mean of the self-location of their voters; second, I measure the distances between the self-location of each voter and the location of the two coalitions; third, I subtract these two measures to obtain a single comparative evaluation of the coalitions.

Other variables which are surely not affected by the campaign debate are the voters’ social attributes. As a consequence, I utilise the usual background characteristics as further exogenous variables: area distinguishes voters inhabitant in different zones; education is the school level attained; profession divides between self-employed and workers, the latters including housewives, students, pensioners and unemployed; status differentiates among voters’ social conditions; age separates six age groups; residence measures the size of the voters’ town; gender distinguishes female and male voters.

Given the great importance in the electoral process, the variable ideology is connected with all the three endogenous variables \( (b_3, b_8, b_{14}) \); the background variables instead are correlated

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9 The background variables may assume the following values:

- **area**: 1. north-west; 2. north-east; 3. centre; 4. south and islands;
- **education**: 1. no title and primary school; 2. secondary school; 3. high school; 4. degree;
- **profession**: 0. self-employed; 1. workers;
- **status**: 1. low; 2. medium-low; 3. medium; 4. medium-high; 5. high;
- **age**: 1. 18-24; 2. 25-34; 3. 35-44; 4. 45-54; 5. 55-64; 6. >64;
- **residence**: 1. <5,000; 2. 5,000-20,000; 3. 20,000-50,000; 4. 50,000-100,000; 5. >100,000;
with the endogenous variables as indicated in the following regression equations, where endogenous variables are indicated in capital letters and the exogenous variables are lowercase:

$$\text{ISSUES} = a + b_1\text{COALITIONS} + b_2\text{LEADERS} + b_3\text{ideology} + b_4\text{education} + b_5\text{residence} \quad [6.1]$$

$$\text{COALITIONS} = a + b_6\text{LEADERS} + b_7\text{ISSUES} + b_8\text{ideology} + b_9\text{age} + b_{10}\text{profession} + b_{11}\text{status} \quad [6.2]$$

$$\text{LEADERS} = a + b_{12}\text{ISSUES} + b_{13}\text{COALITIONS} + b_{14}\text{ideology} + b_{15}\text{area} + b_{16}\text{status} \quad [6.3]$$

Fig. 2 reports the results of this extended model; displayed values are standardised regression coefficients (beta) created by the 2sls regression analysis. To evaluate the effects produced by a variable on another variable I firstly consider the value of the path directly connecting these two variables, then I multiply the values of the paths indirectly connecting the two variables, and finally I sum up the value of the direct path with the product of the values of the indirect paths\(^{10}\). Let us examine for instance the effect produced by the variable co\textit{alitions} (considered as independent) on the variable issues (considered as dependent). In this case, the value of the direct path is 0.23, and the values of the indirect paths are 1.27 and 0.19. The global effect produced by co\textit{alitions} on issues is calculated as:

$$\text{coalitions} \Rightarrow \text{issues} = 0.23 + (1.27 \times 0.19) = 0.23 + 0.24 = 0.47 \quad [6.4]$$

\(^{10}\) This procedure is extensively described in Berry 1984.
Values averaging 0 show the very limited role played by the background variables. In general, they mean that long-term social and economic factors – often strongly emphasised by Italian electoral research – do not affect electoral behaviour with the same strength shown in the past. The fading away of the class voting, which according to previous researches dates back to the ’70s (Barbagli et al. 1979), is witnessed by the irrelevance of the variables profession and status; other personal characteristics such as age, gender and education are irrelevant as well, while area and residence indicate that local factors are diminished by the «nationalisation of the vote» already discovered in the proportional competition (Cartocci 1997, 196)\(^\text{11}\).

If the sociological variables are ineffective, it could be expected that political accounts of the
1996 campaign are better fitting to the results shown in Fig. 2. Tab. 3 reports the reciprocal effects produced by the short-term endogenous variables – namely leaders, issues and coalitions – calculated with the procedure displayed above. Given the operationalization procedure I have conformed to, a positive sign indicate that the independent variable has some effects on the dependent variable, while in case of negative sign no effect can be assessed. The variable issues is an example of complete irrelevance, clearly shown by the negative signs exhibited by this variable in its relationships either with leaders or with coalitions. Although this result attests a complete absence of issue voters, the point is to be remarked that in the proportional competition – not examined here – issues played in 1996 an important though not prominent role (Venturino 1997).

Tab. 3 The role of the short-term endogenous variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Relationship</th>
<th>Equation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>coalitions ⇒ issues</td>
<td>0,23 + (1,27 × 0,19) = 0,23 + 0,24 = 0,47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coalitions ⇒ leaders</td>
<td>1,27 + (0,23 × 0,02) = 1,27 + 0,01 = 1,28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leaders ⇒ issues</td>
<td>0,19 + (1,13 × 0,23) = 0,19 + 0,26 = 0,45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leaders ⇒ coalitions</td>
<td>1,13 + (0,19 × -2,36) = 1,13 – 0,44 = 0,69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>issues ⇒ leaders</td>
<td>0,02 + (-2,36 × 1,27) = 0,02 – 2,99 = -2,97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>issues ⇒ coalitions</td>
<td>-2,36 + (0,02 ×1,13) = -2,36 + 0,02 = -2,34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unlike issues, sympathy for both coalitions and leaders heavily influences voters’ attitudes. Feeling towards coalitions is the variable which in general brings about the most important consequences, in that it affects either the voters’ issues positions (beta = 0,47) or the comparative evaluation of leaders (1,28). But feeling towards leaders plays a substantive role as well: reported coefficients show that voters who appreciate Prodi have a positive evaluation of Ulivo and a negative evaluation of Polo delle Libertà, while the support in favour of Berlusconi is intuitively associated with a positive/negative evaluation for Polo/Ulivo (0,69). Voters’ issue standing is also affected by leaders’ evaluation, as stated by the coefficient beta = 0,45.

Tab. 4 The effects of ideology on the short-term endogenous variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Relationship</th>
<th>Equation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ideology ⇒ issues</td>
<td>0,17 + (1,08 × 0,23) + (-0,26 × 0,19) = 0,17 + 0,25 - 0,05 = 0,37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ideology ⇒ leaders</td>
<td>-0,26 + (1,08 × 1,27) + (0,17 × 0,02) = -0,26 + 1,37 + 0,01 = 1,12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ideology ⇒ coalitions</td>
<td>1,08 + (-0,26 × 1,13) + (0,17 × -2,36) = 1,08 – 0,29 – 0,40 = 0,39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that the present approach does not clarify enough the importance of territorial aspects for the voters’ evaluation towards Lega Nord. Nevertheless, the reasons are too trivial to deserve more attention here.
A «political» account of the 1996 campaign can not overlook the role of the Left-Right dimension, perhaps the most important cleavage in a country where traditional politics was said to be strongly persistent until few years ago (Franklin 1992). In effect, results displayed in Tab. 4 – where values are calculated using the usual procedure – show that ideology is a cue used by voters to form their evaluation of issues (beta = 0,37), leaders (1,12), and coalitions (0,39).

Discussion

Before to draw some tentative conclusions about the results emerging from the empirical inquiry realised in the previous sections, let us briefly resume the main steps of the analysis. Following the introduction of the mixed electoral system in 1993, and after the first election contested with the new rules in 1994, in 1996 campaign two coalitions arose competing in the majoritarian sector, named Ulivo and Polo per le Libertà. The presence of third parties notwithstanding, the competition is shaped in a bipolar way, in that besides the two coalitions only Lega Nord obtains a good outcome in votes and seats by virtue of its local location (cfr. Tab. 1 above); also, and more important here, only Ulivo and Polo candidated their leaders as premier with an explicit – albeit informal – procedure and with a credible commitment. In this paper I have examined whether in 1996 parliamentary election the majoritarian vote has been influenced by the opportunity of choosing indirectly the head of the government, a clear symptom of presidentialization of the Italian politics or at least of the party campaigning. To research this topic I have used a non recursive model where the role of the comparative evaluation of leaders is assessed together with other factors entering the electoral campaign, i.e. party programs and coalition evaluations, using the Left-Right location and the social and economic characteristics of voters as control variables. Being the non-relevance of the sociological characteristics clearly shown by the results, the majoritarian vote should be principally explained by political factors: ideology – modelled as a long-term exogenous variable – is an important factor, which exerts an effective influence above all on the voters’ attitudes towards leaders; coalition and leader sympathy – both modelled as short-term endogenous variables – strongly affect the political outlook of the public opinion; only issues and electoral manifestos did not play any substantial role during the campaign. How can these results be interpreted? What do they mean for the changing Italian party system? Which theoretical perspective can shed light on these facts?

Because any sociological explanation is apparently inadequate, the act of voting should be accounted as a rational behaviour carried out by voters in a low-information situation (Popkin
1994). This is a consequence produced by some normal attributes of the electoral process: it deals with public goods, and therefore voters are affected by the free rider paradox both for actual participation and for the assumption of information (Downs 1957). To face costs connected with the knowledge of parties and candidates, voters use shortcuts operating as a judgement criterion, aimed to assume a position about the political topics discussed during the campaign (Sniderman et al. 1991). Here I did not research the choice of specific shortcuts by different kind of voters. In effect, the empirical inquiry is aimed to clarify the role of the sympathy for the leaders, meanwhile evaluating the other variables affecting the campaign.

Starting this paper, I have examined the relevant literature and I have excluded the presidentialization of the Italian politics from an inter-electoral point of view, i.e. Prime Minister can not be considered a prominent role, the recent reform of the executive notwithstanding (Criscitiello 1999). Concluding the paper, I rely on the empirical scrutiny of survey data to state the existence of a strong presidentialization of the Italian electoral politics, especially due to the mixed electoral system introduced in 1993 and actually mirrored in the relevance that candidate premiers have acquired for the voters’ choice. This is particularly important if one considers the novelty of the electoral reform, and also the fact that the full personalization of the competition took place in 1996 for the first time after the partial experience of 1994.

Results reached here are surely extremely intriguing, but they can not of course be considered conclusive. I have ascertained that leader evaluation plays an important role when considered in a comparative and prospective way, but I can not say anything about what happens when they are examined individually and retrospectively (Nadeau et al. 1996). Also, the thermometer scales allow the exam of the general evaluation voters attribute to each leader, but by this method the assessment of particular traits of his personality – such as competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy – is not made possible (Funk 1999).

Surely the future role of the presidentialization in Italy relies on real politics more than on scholarship. The existent institutional design is strongly debated, and in particular the mixed electoral law will be submitted to a pro-majoritarian referendum, or it could eventually be changed by the parliament, where a pro-proportional majority is constituting. Albeit contested, bipolar politics is not dead. But the restoration of a proportional – probably corrected – democracy would push the Italian transition towards unknown places, where the choice of the government depends on parliament more than voters.

12 Levels of political competence (or similar concepts, such as information and sophistication) are often indicated as a direct cause for this choice; I have examined this problem in Venturino 1998.
References


XXVI, 2, pp. 245-58.


