**Modes of representation and parliamentary roles in Italy**

Federico Russo (Università del Salento)
Luca Verzichelli (Università di Siena)

Paper presented at the ECPR General Conference
September 2017 – Oslo

**Abstract**

Within the frame of the comparative study of representative elites, the Italian case has always received a significant attention, due to several reasons. Among them, the centrality of the legislative institutions within the Italian parliamentary democracy. However, after about twenty-five years of political change, the Italian parliamentary democracy seems to be still in the line of fire: new leaders appear but they do not seem to be able to make the difference; new «citizen-based» parties grow but they are also suffering of internal struggles and uncertainties. Very recently, another failed attempt reform of the peculiar Italian bicameralism confirmed once again that the transformation of a very fragmented and power-sharing democracy is not an easy thing to obtain. Moreover, the troublesome re-instauation of a stable party system makes the study of political representation in Italy stimulating and frustrating at the same time. Which kind of adjustment are we looking at? The paper, with the help of both a longitudinal analysis of MPs behaviour and an assessment of some recent attitudinal surveys, will try to answer such a question, in a broader frame of evolution of political representation in the South European scenario.

**Keywords:**

Italy, Parliament, Representative roles, legislative behaviour, Bicameralism.
Modes of representation and parliamentary roles in Italy

1. Introduction: between the old problems of a difficult democracy and the global challenges to political representation

In the frame of the comparative analysis of evolution of parliamentary representation in Southern Europe and Latin America, Italy represents a case of long-established parliamentary democracy which has been however, often indicated as a weak or difficult one. The recent transformation of political representation in Italy, in particular, will be at the core of this chapter. The theoretical framework behind this attempt is provided by the discussion on the crisis of representative democracy (Tormey 2015): according to some recent contributions (Manin 1997; Castiglione e Warren 2005; Bühlmann e Fivaz 2016), the traditional channels and institutions of representative democracy would have been challenged by a number of phenomena. Among them, the decline of parties and the transformation of their functions, in particular the functions of articulation of social interests and selection of political elites, the emergence of new practices of political representation associated to the role of non governmental organizations and associations, and the predominance of a leader-centred model of democracy (Koroseny 2005), which would have also seriously endangered relations between voters and elected representatives. The great economic crisis which plagued Southern Europe in 2008 has obviously contributed to weaken the popular trust in the basic institutions of representative democracy but, at least in Italy, this has only accelerated an already ongoing process (Russo e Verzichelli 2012). According to the Eurobarometer survey, the proportion of Italian citizens trusting the Parliament fell from about one third of the period 2001-2007 to less than one fifth since then. However, whether the consequences of the economic crisis marked a persistent shift or only a temporary perturbation of an already declining trust is a matter for future analysis.

As a matter of fact, a comprehensive analysis of the overall transformation of the practices of parliamentary democracy is beyond the objectives of this chapter. Therefore, we will investigate some of the possible consequences of the above mentioned transformation, focusing on the extent of change experienced by the Italian MPs in their institutional behaviours during the past twenty-five years. We will use the findings from earlier explorative studies to assess the effective alteration of different modes of representation within the Italian parliament. More precisely, we will start from a review of the traditional modes of parliamentary representation highlighted by the literature during the republican age (section 2). A short analysis of the expected and realised changes
occurring with the recent transitional phase will follow, based on the systematic analysis of existing aggregate data.

The empirical part of the chapter will concentrate on the recent legislative terms, focusing on the individual and partisan actors who have competed for the parliamentary offices and for the control over the Italian cabinets during the most recent period, and presenting the measurements of changes that have been surveyed so far. A first series of analyses (sections 3 and 4) will be based on the evolution of political recruitment and to the changing patterns of descriptive representation within the Italian parliament, focusing the paradox between the distinguished patterns of political recruitment showed by the different party lists and the growing tendency of elected representatives to switch from one parliamentary party group (PPG) to another. The following empirical dimensions to be considered (sections 5 to 7) are those of MPs’ attitudes towards different representative roles and their behavioural peculiarities, observed by an analysis of non legislative behaviours of MPs.

The driving proposition of this explorative study lies in the idea that the practices of political representation at the level of national parliament would have lost some of its traditional characters. In Italy, in particular, such a dynamics would have followed a peculiar path of transformation due to the contextual action of a number of drivers. Namely, we would list the following factors: the decline of party organisational density (Bardi, Ignazi, e Massari 2007; Ignazi, Bardi, e Massari 2013), the decline of political participation at large, that is to say not just a reduction of political activism but a broader phenomenon of bifurcation between politics and society (Morlino e Tarchi 1996), the emergence of new and peculiar personal parties (Calise 2006) or a more pronounced role of leaders within the existing parties and factions (Venturino 2012) and the termination – this to a large extent can be considered a consequence of the end of the traditional party system of the so called first republic – of a patent pattern of subordination of the main interest groups, that used to depend upon the strategic and substantial preferences expressed by the establishments of the main parties (Morlino 1991).

The effects of this compound set of explanatory factors are, as one can imagine, numerous and somehow confused. On the basis of the recent literature on Italian legislative politics, at least three macro-phenomena can be indicated to show such dynamics of change: a continuous transformation within the elite of parliamentary elite, which has followed the missed consolidation of the party system emerged during the mid-nineties (Tronconi e Verzichelli 2014), an overwhelmed but significant transformation of MPs’ self-perception of their own roles, and a substantial
transformation of MPs’ practices of representation, through a patent change in their legislative and non legislative activities.

The political stalemate following the 2013 elections and above all the recent events conducting to the breakdown of the Renzi government¹ suggest us to use some grains of caution in proposing a fully fledged analysis: instead of producing a set of new and specific interpretations, this chapter will try therefore to systematize our empirical knowledge, in the attempt to refine our general propositions about the presence and future of political representation in Italy. The goals of our exploration are therefore the following:

1) first of all, we want to test the effective impact of the phenomena we should refine as perspective explananda. Should we really conceive what is currently occurring during the first decades of the twenty-first century as a period of revolutionary change of the Italian parliamentary democracy? The question does not seem naïve: during the past two decades or more, so many times, already, strong expectations have been raised, connected to the potential change of a more efficient and transparent parliamentary representation. Some of these expectations have been linked to institutional performances and to the overall “pattern” of parliamentary democracy. Others have pointed out the need to reconstruct the largely undermined sense of responsiveness of representatives – especially after such a devastating moral crisis like that occurred between 1992 and 1994. However, the quality of democratic regime in Italy does not seem to have changed that much, as well as its basic character of “power-sharing” (Morlino 2013). A reasoned discussion of all the relevant findings emerged during the past years will be therefore our first task, in order to shed a light on the magnitude of change occurring in the practices of parliamentary representation in Italy.

2) Secondly, we need to assess the nature of the case study we deal with. The review on the recent studies of parliamentary representation in Italy will be conducted stressing a number of variables: some of them, to be connected to the permanent instability characterising the political system since at least twenty-five years, could be labelled as country specific factors. On the other hand, some explanations have to do with the general dynamics of weakening of representative democracy (Tormey 2015). At the end of this analysis, we will be able to provide a precise estimation of the

¹ In particular, we refer to the failure of the Constitutional reform voted by the parliament in the course of 2016 but rejected by a popular referendum on December the 4th, the same year. With this rejection, the idea of Renzi and his ministerial team to make history reducing the cost of a “perfectly symmetrical bicameralism” and providing the executive with more effective legislative instrument was blocked and the perspective of a strong change in the basic rules of parliamentary democracy has been postponed for years.
impact of structural factors of instability affecting the Italian democracy vis-à-vis the other explanations to be extended to the whole Southern European area and, more in general, to the democratic hemisphere.

3) Third, we want to disentangle some of the puzzles behind the question of the crisis of democratic representation, associating them to more adequate empirical indicators of the longitudinal changes. For this reason, we have organised the descriptive part of the chapter analysing three broad dimensions of representation: the first dimension is that of descriptive representation, which has been neglected during the second part of the twentieth century due to the centrality of the mass parties, which could somehow substitute both the notion of functional representation, based on the promotion of a number of social interest and demands, and also the notion of social mirroring which had been previously relevant in the early visions of democratic representation. The second dimension is that of the attitudinal roles of representatives: what do they think about representing the people and/or their voters. Even at this level of analysis, the expectations of the mid-nineties seem to be largely neglected: representatives did not necessarily build stronger societal or territorial linkages, and the frequent changes of electoral regimes did not help the consolidation of some new kind of representative role. However, the main factor of stability at the core of the notion of parliamentary representation during the first republic – the undisputable centrality of political parties in determining the pattern of elite selection and the same perception of representatives about their own day-by-day work, has been definitively removed by the state of liquidity of most of the contemporary parties. The third dimension we want to analyse is that of the variety of representative roles in terms of concrete behavioural attitudes of MPs. This will entail a longitudinal analysis of legislators’ activities, in order to understand the effective extent of change in the role orientation of Italian MPs during the past couple of decades.

The final section of the chapter will be devoted to a first interpretative assessment: what kind of refined hypotheses can be achieved on the basis of the analysis? Above all, we will try to detect if the most relevant determinants of changes in the evolution of democratic representation in Italy have to be ascribed to the category of the country-specific variables, or they look in general connected to a given and peculiar political conjuncture, or they should be somehow classified as structural variables. In that case our propositions should be re-designed in the direction of some explanation suggested by the comparative literature.
2. **Traditional modes of Representation in Italy (1948-1992). A short review**

The Italian parliamentary scenario in the post-IIWW period has been described as a party-centred consociational arena where highly institutionalised and disciplined parties used to play a major role both at the level of parliamentary selection and, more substantially, in determining the main modes of political representation.

According to Maurizio Cotta (Cotta 1991), the main explanation of such a high degree of party control lies in the basic features of the new regime, emerged during the periods 1943-1948 (instauration and constitutional setting) and 1948-1953 (the phase of democratic consolidation, with the first Republican legislature). The failure of an attempt to force the system towards a majoritarian turn, with a significant amendment of the electoral system, introducing a «majority bonus» to be allocated to the electoral coalition which could be able to reach the absolute majority of the votes, marks the end of this age, dominated by the Christian Democratic leader, Alcide De Gasperi. With this symbolic watershed, the Italian parliament will remain not just a strong and somehow transformative legislature. Indeed, it will confirm a strong external party control over all its party components - including that of a highly factionalised party like the Christian Democracy.

The party summits became the main instrument of coalition governance (Criscitiello 1996)) while the negotiations within the parliamentary bodies (in particular, within the permanent legislative committees) were a frequent practice to include the left opposition in a sort of power-sharing mode of legislative behaviour which could last, though through different phase or more or less marked consensualism, until the end of the first republic.

The modes of representation emerged between 1953 and 1992 were therefore very much the consequences of these two characters of the strong party centrality and the high degree of consensualism. The process of parliamentary recruitment was, obviously, very much dominated by party establishments, although a fundamental distinction should be introduced here between the Christian democratic pattern, based on personal consensus of territorial leader and factions, and the purely centralised processes of selection operated by all the other parties, first of all the Communist party.

An expression used by Douglas Wertmann in his reconstruction of candidate selection procedures in Italy (Wertman 1988), *local involvement central control*, gives us an idea of the importance of the different factors determining the input side of representation: the strong parties of the first republic could use their territorial organizational units to grow highly competitive (above all within the Dc) aspirants to the national political offices, while the last say in all the processes of political selection
was left to the national and relatively self-restrained elite groups (this, particularly in the case of Pci).

The extremely controlled rate of parliamentary turnover during the golden age of the Italian party government (Figure 1) has been frequently used to describe the stability of the relationship between selectorates and representatives (Verzichelli 1998). At least three generations of politicians were recruited within the national political elite, and a partial transformation of the same party system was possible starting with the late seventies, but this did not seem to endanger the iron link between the central party elite and the territorial ranks, where the process of selection took place. The peak of turnover recorded with the 1992 elections was almost entirely due to the sudden emergence of a new party - the Northern League - promoting a totally new group of representatives, whose peculiar feature was that of representing micro-territorial units. The League was born, in fact, from the alliance of a number of regional and provincial parties and «civic lists». The promoters of this coloured and noisy platoon of representatives supported a deep reform of the State, claiming for a federal state, if not a pure secession from it operated by the rich regions of the North. A discussion about the capability of traditional parties to maintain a full control over the channel of political selection and political representation was therefore started. But nobody could predict that the rate of newcomers of the 1992 elections had to be just the start of a long and dramatic phase of political turmoil.

Figure 1. Newcomer MPs (Chamber of Deputies and Senate).
Let's look now to the output-side of representation – the overall effect of MPs' behaviours. We can argue that this had been also very much stable all along the long season of party government, between 1953 and 1992. A number of indicators can be considered to prove that: the stable recourse to consensus-based practices of legislative behaviour, specially within the legislative committees, the difficulties of the government in imposing its agenda to parliament, and the high rate of parliamentary amendment to the executive bills and decrees. As concerning the extent of constituency service of MPs, the data show a stable mix of functional commitment and party discipline (Russo 2013), which resembles a sort of compromise between the necessary demand of territorial accountability and the strong «division of labour» imposed by each partisan elite. Once again, clear differences have emerged when the scholars have analysed some specific sectors of the parliamentary elites, stressing the patent territorial commitment of several Christian democratic backbenchers, vis-à-vis the monolithic attitudes of Communist MPs and also in comparison to the upper-middle ranks of representatives from their own party. However, we can conclude that the period 1948-1992 can be classified as a long phase dominated by party attachment and political stability within the parliament. When some specific issues resulted to be particularly divisive - specially within the main governmental party, the Dc - the instrument of the occasional rebellion during the legislative session could be considered to stress the internal fragmentation. This story has been often labelled as the story of the Franchi tiratori (snipers). In short, some factions or little groups of MPs from the governmental majority decided to negate their support to a given proposal from the executive, without an explicit discussion but simply using the secret vote in order to reduce the magnitude of the available support and to force consequently the majority to reach a new point of legislative equilibrium. The reiterated use of such a practice, especially during the phases of more evident consensual law making, brought the government and the same parliament to change the budgetary process procedure, centralizing the main financial decision within an annual financial law proposed by the executive. Moreover, the secret vote during the legislative sessions was abolished in 1988, thus marking the need to reduce the blackmail potential of each individual MP.

3. Descriptive representation. What changes after 1992?
What is the extent of change in the representative profiles expressed by the Italian MPs after the revolutionary events of the early-nineties? This question has been already at the core of a number of works recently dedicated to the broader phenomenon of the dynamics of the Italian political
system. However, there is no clear interpretation of the transformation of the process of representation and, in any case, this long political transition did not determine a clear equilibrium. Hence, what about the pattern of representation all along these twenty years between the 1994 elections and the new recent disruptive point of the 2013 elections? One should say that, although unified by the presence of a leader like Silvio Berlusconi and a (more or less) stable bipolar party system, the past two decades did not offer a coherent frame: the fluidity of the party system, the weak institutionalisation of some parties and two reforms of the electoral systems did not help the consolidation of a coherent set of representative behaviours. However, during that period a new parliamentary class and new patterns of recruitment could be slowly consolidating, as showed by a rate of parliamentary turnover lower than 40% (Figure 1). In 2008, when two "majoritarian" parties led by Silvio Berlusconi (the new People of Freedom, obtained by the fusion of Forza Italia and National Alliance) and Walter Veltroni (the democratic party) could get more than 2/3 of the overall votes, this dynamics seemed to come to a final point of equilibrium. But this was actually the beginning of a new phase of turmoil.

Indeed, after the emergence of the economic crisis and the breakdown of the Berlusconi IV government, the controversial result of the 2013 elections and the chaotic beginning of the XVII legislature have brought the parliamentary elite back to a very unstable and "experimental" situation. Moreover, these elections raised additional questions on the strategies available for individual representatives. Here, of course, many different dimensions and indicators should be recalled, since the transformation of the relationship between selectorates and individual representatives may be impacted by a number of variables, including the existence of different possible rewards and the tasks of each single MP, who can be more interested in specific policy field, in their own territorial issues, in a broad idea of careerism, or in the preservation of his "party role" as pillar of the majority (or the opposition).

For the explorative purposes of this chapter we do not go into the details of descriptive representation in Italy during the last twenty years (Tronconi e Verzichelli 2014; Russo, Tronconi, e Verzichelli 2014). We simply report some interesting traces of polarization in the representative profiles of a few PPGs. Some first peculiar cases of descriptive representation were, for instance, the initial core of Northern League's MPs (1992), who were stressing the occupational features of the small business and the farmer, and the earliest leading figures called by Silvio Berlusconi at the top of Forza Italia (1994), who were recruited among managers and, more general, within the universe of liberal professions. Later, a persisting divide between the representatives of centre-right
(mainly managers and professionals) and those of centre-left (mainly public sector and full paid politicians) became clear, marking an evident difference with the traditional homogeneity of the socio-occupational origins of the Italian MPs.

A new turn in the patters of descriptive representation took place in 2013: then, the *citizen parliamentarians* (elected thanks the random process of selection of *Five Star Movement*) were an absolute innovation for the Italian scenario. But there was also an evident acceleration of gender representation (above all within the democratic PPG) and a very pronounced generational change (both in the M5S and the Pd PPGs).

4. *From Snipers to Switchers. The difficulties of party representation in contemporary Italy*

A paradox should be enlightened here: the parties which seem to have marked more clearly the social profiles of their representatives tend to progressively loose control over the PPGs formed by the same MPs. Different indicators should be discussed to cover the different dimensions of such a phenomenon, including the variables of legislative rebellions. Here we limit our analysis to a general measurement of the difficulties of the parties to control their parliamentary elite, using the simple indicator of the frequency of party switching (Heller e Mershon 2008), while we deserve the following analysis to the role perceptions of parliamentarians.

As figure 2 clearly shows, during the whole period of the so called *second republic*, both the indicators of the proportion of MPs who switch among PPGs and that of the monthly average of switches held remain quite high - the only exception remaining the 2001-2006 term, dominated by a strong and robust majoritarian government (led by Berlusconi). After the 2013 elections, the trend of parliamentary switching returns to a clear pattern of "implosion" which has been inflated during the phases of formation and crisis of the Renzi Government (February 2014 – December 2016), given the divisive nature of his leadership and the assertiveness of his policy proposals. This has determined a new record of mobility during the XVII legislative term, when more than 35% of the current MPs have changed their PPG at least one time. This is a really remarkable figure, even in a rather undisciplined comparative scenario (Heller and Mershon 2009).
How is it possible that such a situation of continuity could persist for years? The main reason is the failure of the reconsolidation of a new party system: due to a number of reasons we are not going to recall here, the capability of all the parties to keep their parliamentary ranks unified have clearly decreased. Even the two most important PPGs resulted after the critical 2013 elections seem to suffer the syndrome of party switching. On the one hand, the Democratic party led by Matteo Renzi, able to reach 40% of the vote cast in the European elections of 2014, showing a remarkable rate of attractiveness – a number of MPs both from the centre and from the radical left switched to the PD PPG between 2014 and 2015 – lost a big number of components, due to the "impositions" from the new party leader, especially after the defeat of the 2016 referendum, with the formation a new left group called Democratic and Progressive Movement, including two previous leaders as D'Alema and Bersani. On the other hand, the PPGs (Lower chamber and Senate) of the new-born Five Star Movements lost about 20% of its original components, due to personal conflicts leading to voluntary
exits or to exclusions decided by the party leaders (and confirmed by on-line surveys among activists).

Although the literature has clearly identified the Italian case as an evident example of parliament dominated by party switching (Di Virgilio, Giannetti, e Pinto 2012), we find that a too general operationalisation of such concept leads to imprudent and imprecise discussions. Therefore, we have classified all the cases of *switching*, distinguishing among the *forced or collective changes* (splits or changes due to the removal of a given PPG do the lack of legal number), all the possible cases of *Individual voluntary change* and the cases of *hopping* (individuals or small group of MPs passing from one party to another from a different electoral cartel). The result of our analysis, reported in Figure 3, gives us an idea of the overall composition of the switches among PPG occurred between 1992 and 2017.

Figure 3. Types of parliamentary switching. 1992 - 2015

As one can see, the proportion of MPs deliberately changing PPGs, or hopping among alternative PPGs, has remained quite relevant all along the period 1994-2015. However, the highest peak of "individualist hopping" recorded between 1994 and 1996, when the format of the party system was in the middle of its process of de-structuration, has never been reached again. Overall, the specific
factors dealing with the uncertainties of the Italian party system seem to be mostly relevant: the legislative term 2001-2006, dominated by a clear parliamentary majority and by a relative rate of government stability, shows a very low percentage of hoppers and voluntary changes. On the contrary, after 2013, with the new phase of de-structuration of the party system, voluntary changes return to be numerous and, overall, they account for about 50% of the whole population of switchers. At the same time, we can argue that the state of ambiguity denoting many of the party actors represents a strong incentive for individualism, as the persistence of relative but stable number of “pure hoppers” confirms.

5. What the MPs think of themselves. Attitudinal analysis

In the polemical “Speech to the electors of Bristol”, Edmund Burke defended his duty to serve the government and the country without being swayed by the grievances of the people that actually elected him. That speech is often taken as a significant example of the potential role conflict which may arise when parliamentarians perceive that the interest of their constituencies does not collimate with the general interest of the country. The concept of focus of representation was introduced in the political science literature in the sixties by Wahlke and colleagues (Wahlke et al. 1962) in a classic study on the role of legislators in four US states. The authors identified several possible focuses of representation, including the constituency, the party and the country as a whole. In a second study Eulau and Karps (1977) restricted their interest to the national vs. local dilemma, resembling the original distinction suggested by Burke. Nevertheless, in the European context, where parties used to be deeply-rooted in society, researchers always included the party as a possible representative focus.

The empirical part of this section relies on different elite surveys carried in which parliamentarians were asked, among many other questions, a question on their self-perceived representative focus. The two most recent instances when such question was asked are the IntUne elite survey (two waves in 2007 and 2009) and the 2013 Comparative Candidate Survey (Di Virgilio e Segatti 2016). To evaluate the impact of the long term transformations which invested the Italian political system, most notably the decline of party organizations, it is useful to make a comparison between these recent surveys and two antecedents, the first which was carried out between 1970 and 1971 (Di Palma 1977) and the second in 1999 (Legnante 2004) (table 1). The wording of the questions is slightly different, but the options offered to the interviewees are broadly comparable. In the
candidate survey only responses from elected candidates are considered. The responses of the 2007 and 2009 surveys are pooled to increase the sample size.

**Table 1. Parliamentarians’ main focus of representation, in percentage (only valid responses).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local constituency</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Party (not asked in 1999 and in 2007-2009)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Party</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole country</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total valid (N)</td>
<td>100 (160)</td>
<td>100 (104)</td>
<td>100 (143)</td>
<td>100 (121)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*"My own electors” in 1999, “other social groups” in 2007-2009 and in 2013

Many contemporary constitutions, including the Italian one, state that parliamentarians represent the whole country, and this normative idea is difficult to ignore. Both in the 1970s and in the 2000s about half of the respondents declared to interpret their role as representatives of the whole country. In 2013, perhaps also because the wording of the question placed more emphasis on normative conceptions, this figure rose above 70%. What is striking to be observed is, however, the steep decline of the party as focus of representation. In the oldest survey the (national) party was the most popular choice, indicated by 45.6% of the sample. After about 45 years, this percentage declined to about 10%. According to Di Palma Italian representatives struggled to define their role without reference to their party: most of them explicitly recognised that their voters had different views and interests, but all those conflicts could be reconciled by following party discipline. Collective and individual representation were not seen as contrasting principles; rather, parties provided a way to aggregate and structure individual demands. With regard to the local constituency, its importance seems to have increased at the turn of the new millennium to decline somehow in more recent years. In the seventies less than one in ten parliamentarians admitted to see the constituency as the most important focus of representation. Together the options “Local constituency” and “Local Party” were selected by 9.4% of the respondents. Four decades after that survey, the percentage of MPs indicating the constituency as the major focus of representation more than doubled, reaching 22.4%. In 2013 the same options lost about 7 percentage point totalling 15.7%. All in all, it seems that an undoubted decline of the traditional vision of “party delegation” strictly connected to the existence of centralized party machineries has happened, but there is no clear affirmation of alternative models, although the representatives of M5S elected in
2013 clearly stressed their role of “delegates”, according to the picture of the unmediated vision expressed by many populist movements (Tormey 2015). Undisputable evidences of that have been found looking to the representative styles of the elected candidates (Cmatarri e Segatti 2016) as well as to their legislative activities (Pinto e Pedrazzani 2015).

However, we need to know to what extent these noises can be seen as signs of a peculiar changes of the Italian representative roles. In order to place Italy in the comparative context it is useful to compare the attitudes of Italian MPs to those of their colleagues in other European countries. The two waves of the IntUne elite survey allow us to carry out this comparison. Figure 4 shows the percentage of parliamentarians who selected the party as the main focus of representation in all the countries covered by the study. In the overall ranking Italy occupies the 12th position among 18 countries. The percentage of representative of the constituency is not too far from that of France but much lower than those of the other big European countries (Spain, Germany, Poland, UK). Conversely, Italian MPs are among the most attached to the role of party representative.

In summary, the diachronic and the cross-country comparisons give a mixed picture: in comparison with the seventies Italian MPs are much less likely to see themselves as party-representatives and much more likely to be representatives of the constituency. However, in the comparative context representatives of the party are still relatively common while representatives of the constituency are not so abundant. Once again, the long term specificities of the Italian political system seem to be crucial, although we cannot exclude that the relative (but remarkable) decline of party delegation is the sign of a trend which should be associated to similar phenomena in other democratic realities.
6. *Constituency oriented behaviors*

All MPs have to balance different pressures. On the one hand, they are requested by formal and informal rules to behave as representative of the country; on the other hand, electoral systems are designed to provide at least some degrees of connection between local constituencies and parliamentarians. In the previous section we showed that, at least in terms of self-perceptions, Italian MPs see themselves representatives of the whole country more often than of the constituency. At the same time, the number of representative of the constituency seems to be increasing, especially at the expense of party representatives. In this section we aim to describe the evolution of MPs’ behaviour to assess whether the increasing orientation toward the constituency had some behavioural consequence.

Measuring the representative behaviour of parliamentarians in countries where voting behaviour is constrained by party discipline is not an easy task. A possibility is looking to the components of legislative behaviour that are less subject to discipline. Parliamentary questions are one of them. The vast availability of electronic data of parliamentary questions and modern techniques of computer assisted textual analysis have opened new possibility to map MPs’ behaviour. The analysis of the content of parliamentary questions has proved to be a promising strategy to assess the specialization of different parliamentarians and to measure their focus of representation (Martin e
Rozenberg 2012; Martin 2011; Russo 2011). For this study, each oral or written questions asked in the 10th, 14th, 15th and 16th Chamber of Deputies has been downloaded from the official website of the Parliament (data on the current legislature are currently being coded). Then, we built a dataset containing the following information for all questions: name of questioner (only the presenter, disregarding the cosponsors), text, geographical keywords, minister who was responsible for answering. Integrating this dataset with the CIRCaP archive on Members of Parliament, which report the region of election for each MP, we coded the questions to be constituency oriented if their content was related to the region in which the presenter was elected.

The results undoubtedly point to a reduction in constituency oriented behavior. In the late 1980s, at the end of so called first republic, about half of the total parliamentary questions concerned the region in which the questioner was elected. This figure declined to about 30% in the 14th and 15th legislature and plunged to less than 15% in the 16th legislature. The most obvious explanation has to do with the incentives given by the three different electoral systems which were adopted to elect Italian deputies. From 1948 to 1992, members of the Chamber of Deputies were elected by proportional representation (PR) in multi-member electoral districts with open lists. In 1993 the open list PR was replaced by a mixed system where 75% of the seats were allocated in Single Member Districts and the remaining sets were allocated proportionally at the constituency level. Since 2005 the Chamber of Deputies is elected with a proportional representation system (with majority bonus) using closed party lists at the regional level. The incentives to cultivate a personal vote constantly declined and, unsurprisingly, the amount and proportion of constituency oriented questions also descended. It is interesting to note how MPs needed a short period of learning after the introduction of the 2005 electoral law: while in the first legislature elected with closed list proportional systems they still maintained their old behavior, the sharp declined was only postponed to the next legislative term.
Table 2. Number of parliamentary questions and proportion of constituency oriented questions in several legislative terms (Chamber of Deputies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legislature</th>
<th>Parliamentary Questions (monthly average)</th>
<th>Of which: oriented to the constituency (monthly average)</th>
<th>% of constituency oriented questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10th (1987-1992)</td>
<td>39807 (686.3)</td>
<td>19786 (341.1)</td>
<td>49,70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th (2001-2006)</td>
<td>32137 (554.1)</td>
<td>9462 (163.1)</td>
<td>29,44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th (2006-2008)</td>
<td>10829 (451.2)</td>
<td>3451 (143.8)</td>
<td>31,87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th (2008-2013)</td>
<td>21350 (368.1)</td>
<td>3082 (53.1)</td>
<td>14,43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The diachronic trend highlights the importance of electoral incentives to influence how MPs use their own time and the activities in which they invest. However, studies based on individual level analyses (Marangoni e Tronconi 2011; Russo 2011, 2013) also found considerable behavioral differences among different type of parliamentarians. Explanatory factors belong to three different groups, having to do with the territorial, the party and the individual level. A first important distinction should be made with regard to the region from which parliamentarians come from; being elected in a southern region has always a significant and positive effect on constituency orientation. This geographical difference has deep roots, because it stems from the interaction between voters and their representatives. Southern Italy, dominated by a tradition of political patronage and plagued by endemic unemployment, had always offered more incentives to cultivate a personal vote (Golden 2003). Indeed, until the abolition of the open list proportional system adopted after in the post-war period, preference voting was a mainly southern phenomenon. At the same time, attitudinal studies (Legnante 2004) found that southern MPs are also more likely to define themselves as constituency servants. Also party membership often makes a difference: MPs elected with the Northern League and National Alliance use both parliamentary questions and private member’s bills to raise issues touching their constituency. With regard to the Northern League, this tendency can be explained with reference to the regionalist nature of that party. It is perhaps more surprisingly to see how MPs elected with National Alliance (and formerly with the Italian Social Movement), a rightist party which put much emphasis on the national community, are inclined to
behave as constituency servant. However, it is worth noting that being member of an opposition or a governing party does not influence constituency orientation, offering an indirect confirm that parties do not impose discipline on questioning behaviour. Finally, looking at individual level variables, all the mentioned studies found that previous experiences in the constituency are positively related with the index of constituency orientation. MPs who have had local offices for instance as mayors or regional councillors, are more likely to devote attention to the constituency. In addition, also being born in the constituency of election is found to increase the MPs’ constituency orientation.

7. Implications (so far)
We can resume now the main points emerged from our work of systematic review of the recent studies on representative democracy in Italy, corroborated by the fresh data we have discussed so far. The main points we have unveiled so far are the following:
1. there is a vertical fall of party control over the whole process of representation. This can be an obvious inference, to be connected to the well known dynamics of party organizational decline (Van Biezen, Mair, e Poguntke 2012), and to other phenomena like, for instance, that of personalization of politics. However, given the scope of the transformation, it is worth to underline that the Italian case has suddenly evolved from a patent case of pronounced party control to an example of endemic lack of control. This makes the Italian parliament one of the most liquefied and unpredictable of the European scenario. Both the elite sociographic profiles and the elite attitudes deserve, therefore, a closer look in order to refine our hypotheses and detect about the true meaning of the dynamic of representation.
2. Secondly, the decline of the party as MPs’ representative focus has not been balanced by a coherent alternative model. Attitudinal data point to a mild increase in the importance of the constituency, but it is not clear what is the exact definition of constituency in a system with very large electoral districts. In any case, the return to a proportional list, in 2005, has reduced the perspective of consolidation of "territorial attachment" of MPs. The combination of these two phenomena, the decline of party control and the enfeebling of territorial representation, give a worrying picture of the quality of representation in the Italian parliament. The simultaneous hollowing of collective and dyadic representation might reinforce the well-known problems of confidence in the national representative assembly.
3. Third, MPs’ behaviour is clearly influenced by their different individual backgrounds. But they are rather changeable and fragmented backgrounds, sensible to the region of elections, the social realities behind them, and also the party of origins. A number of noises emerge when one tries to control these different variables, in explaining the variance in the representative orientation, making the frame of the changing practices of political representation even more complicated than in the past. Alternative role like the classic figures of constituency servant or policy advocates (Searing 1994) did not emerge. On the contrary, a number of fragmented and pluralistic interest linkages, personal opportunities, connections to territorial or functional interests, party factions, etc. co-exist in a compound Italian Montecitorio’s world. A world which, after more than twenty years of transitional politics and debates on possible institutional reforms, still look very inward-looking and far from the expectations of the public opinion.

These general notes do not represent, of course, a sufficient empirical ground to build an interpretative assessment of the transformation of the Italian representative democracy. However, we can confirm that most of the factors at work can be seen as the inheritance of a path dependent set of structural features which basically obstructs the passage to a truly innovative mode of representation based on personal delegation rather than party delegation, territorial engagement of representatives and new representational styles. On the other hand, the lack of strong and centralised party elites like the ones who ruled the old days of the first republic determines a number of phenomena that marks the difference from those days. At first, the high rate of party hopping. This picture is therefore grounded on a triple paradox: a parliamentary elite who looks today much increasingly pluralised and socially representative which does not seem to gain reputation; a scenario of decline of “party obedience” where new and more direct linkages with the ordinary people have hard times anyway; a new set of representative styles that does not seem to consolidate consistently to the introduction of new electoral rules and new procedures of parliamentary selection. The uncertainties summarised in these paradoxes, in the end, explain why all the scholars dealing with the overall transformation of parliamentary democracy have been very cautious in assessing the recent changes (Russo 2013; Pedrazzani 2017). And this implication can be somehow interpreted as a sign of the difficulties that Southern European democracy have to get out from the post-crisis period with a stronger set of representative institution, nevertheless a rather different shape from one country to another (Morlino e Raniolo 2017; Kriesi e Pappas 2015).
The recent failure of the constitutional reform proposed by the Renzi government in the December of 2016 can be probably labelled as another and decisive step to make representative democracy much similar to the past.
References


