



Modernization and the Shape of the Political Spectrum. The Case of Italy (1994-2022)

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Abstract

We investigate the current polarization of the political debate around the world. In attempting to do so, we present a pluralistic typology of the political spectrum, based on four attitudes, rather than the classical two: conservatives vs. progressives. In our typology conservatives are split into two sub-types: conformists and moderates, and progressives are split into other two subtypes: reformists and antagonists.

The main tenet of the proposed typology is that the extreme types (i.e. conformists and antagonists) are residual forms of the pre-modern era, while the intermediate types (i.e. moderates and reformists) take the center stage much later, during the modernization process. However, modernization is not an irreversible event and periodically history presents breakdowns of this process [1]. The historical period in which we currently live in seems to be one of such critical times, where polarization implies the predominance of the dichotomy “conformists vs. antagonists” rather than “moderates vs. reformists”.

The theory here presented is applied to the case of Italy, where the electoral votes between 1994 and 2022 have been reclassified and assigned to each of the four aggregative poles (i.e. conformists, moderates, reformists and antagonists). The results fit with the theoretical hypotheses, insofar as the polarization of the political spectrum is quite evident, despite institutional reforms enacted by the Italian Parliament to converge on the two-party system of modern countries (moderates vs. reformists). In the conclusions we identify two explanatory factors of such a discrepancy between institutional goals and voters' choice.

Introduction

Since the inception of the parliamentary regimes in world history, induced by the Great Revolutions of England (1688), United States of America (1777) and France (1789), the political spectrum has been roughly divided between conservatives (Tories, Republicans, or the Right) and progressives (Whigs, Democrats, or the Left). According to modernization theory, these Revolutions were the final outcome of a long-term evolution of values systems: i.e. the separation of powers between institutions in order to provide check and balances; the separation between Church and State; individual autonomy instead of obedience as quality to transmit to children; scientific thought

rather than magic superstition to fix problems [2]. After the Great Revolutions, such new priorities became common ground for both conservatives and progressives, although with the differences due to their distinctive cultural roots and material interests.

The conflict between conservatives and progressives became smoother during the modernization process for two reasons: 1) the increase of means of productions (industrial revolution) that allowed for more resources to be redistributed through fiscal policies; 2) the institutionalization of peaceful political change, made possible by the introduction of constitutional rights and the rule of law promoted by the three Great Revolutions. On the contrary, in countries that were late comers to development, such as the emergent economies, social mentality is generally more fragmented along social classes, ethnic groups or territorial regions. In these contexts, which include the majority of the countries in the world, the political spectrum is more fragmented, as well as society, and political relationships are chronically conflictual.

In order to consider these differences between early and late comers to development, in this paper we propose a pluralistic typology of the political spectrum, rather than the classic dichotomy between conservatives and progressives. The proposed typology is based on four attitudes: conformism, moderatism, reformism and antagonism. Then we apply the pluralistic typology to the Italian case, as an interpretative key of the electoral results of the last thirty years (1994-2022). Italy is a late comer country to development [3], and because of that, modernization is still incomplete. Particularly, although the country is one of the most industrialized in the world, its governance's quality scores relatively low in international rankings (figure 4, below), the regional divide (North vs. South) is still wide, and organized crime is widespread domestically and abroad.

In 1992, after a big judiciary investigation known as *Mani Pulite* (*Clean Hands*) against widespread corruption, the entire political leadership resigned, the main parties collapsed, and new ones were created. The 1994 elections are known as a turning point, a divide between the so called first and the second Republic, marked by the change of the electoral system that shifted from the proportional to the majoritarian rule. The underlying assumption of such a reform, at the time, was that the Italian institutional instability (47 governments in 46 years from 1946 to 1992) was due to a fragmented political

system, and the goal was to imitate the bipolar system of more mature democracies (conservatives vs. progressives). However, from 1994 to 2022 Italy had 18 governments in 30 years, improving stability but not enough to guarantee long term plans (life expectation of governments increased only from 12 to 20 months).

We maintain that a two-party system is well tuned for a country which has already gone through a mature process of modernization, whereas the extreme wings of the political spectrum (conformists and antagonists) have no more reason to stay alive. On the other hand, when modernization is still a work in progress, the four-types spectrum is a better representation of reality. Moreover, pluralism rather than bipolarism reduces the political power of the extreme wings, through the formation of coalitions based less on ideological identities than on pragmatic goals.

In section 2 we discuss in detail the relationship existing between the stages of modernization and the shape of the political spectrum. Then, in section 3, we present the pluralistic typology of the political spectrum. In section 4 we apply this typology to Italian recent history, looking at the electoral results from 1994 to 2022. Finally, in section 5 we conclude discussing the possible future of Italian politics through the lenses of the pluralistic typology.

The political divide in early modernization countries and in the Italian case

In world history modern times start in 1492, the year of the discovery of the Americas. This is because in the following three centuries three historical events made a substantial difference with earlier historical eras: 1) the Protestant reform in the religious domain, 2) the discovery of the scientific paradigm which ignited the industrial revolution, and 3) the political Great Revolutions born from Illuminism, which brought up constitutional regimes (rule of Law) and liberal democracy (check and balances system of power).

Modernity is characterized by an inversion of the values system prevailing before the 16th century. Since then, individual freedoms have been preferred to patriarchal and religious authority, social justice to inequality, rationality to magic and superstition, and liberal democracy to autocracy of the dominant élites [2]. In the political philosophy domain, the inversion of the value systems generated two kinds of response: a defensive attitude, aimed at the survival of traditional values (conservatives), and a favorable attitude, enthusiastic toward cultural change, defined as progress (progressives).

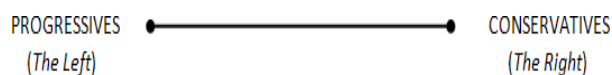


Figure 1: The classic, dualistic typology of the political spectrum

At this point it is important to briefly discuss the positive aspects of conservative arguments within the concept of progress. The inversion of the values system brought up by modernity is valuable only if it determines a win-win situation: i.e. in the long run, mutual benefits for all members of society should happen. If, on the contrary, a social group takes advantage of another, this situation would not imply progress for the entire society, rather a mere redistribution of privileges. This is why conservatives defend traditional values, not only to protect their economic interests, but also to avoid that unrestrained individual liberties promoted by progressive values might make society regress to a primitive stage of development. In other words, they are afraid to fall in a pre-civilized situation, where there are no rules at all, and each individual or ethnic group is at war with one another.

From such a perspective both attitudes – conservative and progressive – are functional to societal evolution: the progressive one, because it promotes innovation; the conservative one, because it scrutinizes innovations through the lenses of the past. Actual

evolution will be proven true only if a win-win solution from the debate between the two opposite worldviews will emerge. Of course, such a dialectical synthesis may not always easily happen. This is why the historical process of modernization appears less as a smooth evolution than an alternate succession of innovative and regressive timespans [4]. In the long run, however, such a cyclical alternation has indeed produced steps forward in the history of civilizations. For example, take the case of early modernized countries, mentioned above: according to the *World Values Surveys* from 1990 up to 2020 Northern European and Anglo-Saxons countries, with their former colonies around the world, show constantly a majority of their population sharing modern and post-modern values. The keyword here is not as much “modern” as “majority”, in so far as is the general consensus on modern values that permits the division of voters into two fields: one (moderate) more conservative, the other (reformist) more progressive, without a major breakdown of civic society. The ordered alternation of moderates and reformists to the government of a country permits a flexible evolution of society and its laws³.

Italian history, on the contrary, has left a cultural landscape very much fragmented and hostile, where modern values are not prevalent at all within the population. The best reference to describe the Italian cultural syndrome is the one offered by an anthropologist who wrote a political history of Italy from 1861 to 2000 [5]⁴. He depicts a cultural syndrome over which modernization processes have impacted, as composed by three attitudes: 1) conformism; 2) rebelliousness; and 3) opportunism.

First of all, according to Tullio-Altan, Italian society is prevalently *conformist*: having hosted one of the most ancient and important civilizations of the world, the Roman (i.e. Latin) one, reprised and revitalized by the fascist regime (1922-1942), makes Italians think less with their sight toward the future and more toward the past. Scientific thought has always had a hard time in Italy: while Galileo was compelled to deny his own discoveries by a theocratic State, Francis Bacon in England would be appointed Sir and could lay the bases for the industrial revolution which changed the face of the earth, literally. These historical facts still affect the present state of the country. For example, high school programs (established during the fascist regime) are based on classical studies of ancient authors, rather than on scientific method. Science is treated as a technique rather than an epistemological approach. Social sciences are almost ignored in high-school curriculums.

Opposed to conformism is the second attitude described by Tullio-Altan: *rebelliousness*. It is a reaction to conformism, a refusal of any kind of power, considered wrong by default. In the past, many of those who attempted assassinations against monarchs in Europe were Italians (Felice Orsini against the French Emperor Napoleon the Third; Gaetano Bresci against the King of Italy Umberto the First). After the unification of the country, in 1861-1870, peasant bands (*briganti*) fought against the new order, apparently without a clear strategy. Fifty years ago, many terroristic groups appeared on the scene, more than in any other European country. Still nowadays, NIMBY⁵ groups are widespread in every county of the country. The main characteristic of rebelliousness is to prefer protest to planning. If we want to understand the root of such emotional behavior, we cannot but recall some aspects of the Christian gospel. Jesus was a man of love, but also not immune from moments of rage, as in the banishment of merchants from the temple. He preached the goodness of the family, but he pushed as well young people to leave their own families to follow the word of God. Supposedly, he had sympathy for the sect of zealots, who were rebellious against the Roman Empire [6]. Last but not least, wealth, as a symbol of power, is explicitly condemned in the gospel: “It is easier for a camel to enter a needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”. This association between money, power and evil has oriented Italian rebelliousness toward pauperism.

³The current polarization of the electoral vote in USA, UK and other western countries seems to contradict such a description, but this is a conjunctural scenario, due to the globalization process without governance. We will turn to this point in the conclusions of the paper, explaining how short-term breakdowns belong to the modernization process itself (Eisenstadt, 1970). In the long term, there is no doubt about the democratic stability of North America compared to chronic change of political regimes in South America, for example.

⁴One may ask why to refer to an anthropologist talking about history. And the answer is that, since the writings of Samuel Huntington (1996), it is unanimously recognized that modernization is not synonymous of Westernization. Rather than being a steamroller levelling cultural differences, modernization brought by globalization of trade must come to terms with national and local traditions. Carlo Tullio-Altan (1916-2005) was one of the major Italian cultural anthropologists (Cartocci, 2019). His civil passion pushed him to apply anthropological skills to Italian history in order to identify the Italian cultural syndrome, showing at the same time originality and effectiveness of interpretation.

⁵NIMBY = Not In My Backyard

Conformism and rebelliousness together have created over the centuries a deep divide among Italians. On one side there is a silent majority, generally reluctant toward any change at all. On the other side, a loud minority convinced to be ethically superior to the silent majority. Such a cultural divide has created a social fracture between two distinct anthropological types, who however are compelled to live under the same roof and to be governed by the same institutions.

The third attitude depicted by Tullio-Altan, *opportunism*, is the logic outcome of the deep social divide described above. The distance between conformism and rebelliousness is so great and so rigid, that a voter caught in the middle in Italy often adjusts to the mood of the moment. When conformists are in power, she/he acts like a conformist, when rebellious win elections, they change attitude in order to stay always on the side of the winners.

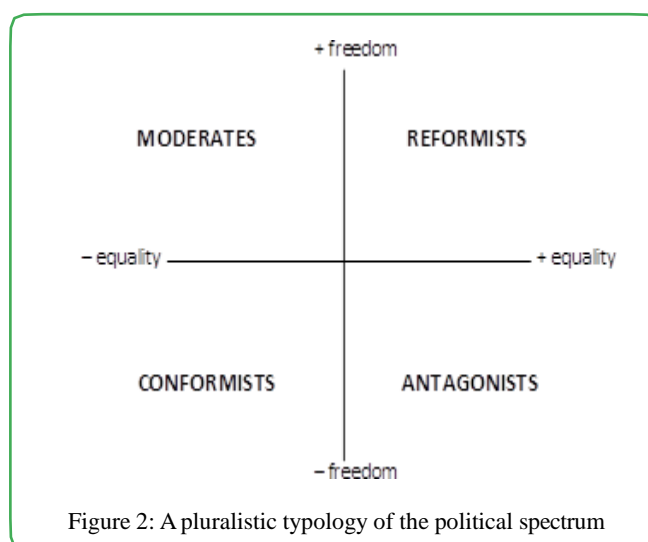
It is easy to conclude that the cultural syndrome composed by conformism, rebelliousness, and opportunism constitutes a huge obstacle to progress. First of all, because of the large gap existing between conformists' values system and rebellious' values system. Secondly because of the opportunistic behavior of the majority of

population, which jumps between these two extreme wings, giving instability to the entire political system.

In the next section we propose a four-categories typology, inspired by Tullio-Altan's cultural syndrome of Italians, to better understand the relationship existing between the modernization process and the shape of the political spectrum at a theoretical level.

A typology based on modernization theory

According to the most renown empirical research on values [7-10], modernization is characterized by the emergence of values such as equality and freedom. The more a country is modern, the more freedom and equality prevail over other values. The more a country is traditional, the easier coercion and inequality are tolerated, since they are considered inherent to human nature, thereby unchangeable. In figure 2 such dynamics is described by two axes, the vertical for freedom and the horizontal for equality. Going from the bottom to the top of the vertical axis freedom increases. Going from left to right of the horizontal axis equality increases.



We overlap our pluralistic typology to the axes of modern values in figure 2, in order to better characterize the contents of each attitude: being the most traditional of the four types, the conformists have been placed in the down-left quadrant, where the levels of freedom and equality are at the minimum level. The antagonists, being the opposite of the conformists along the equality dimension, have been placed on the down-right quadrant. The moderates, being the modern configuration of the conformists, have more propensity for freedom

than the latter, so they have been placed in the upper-left quadrant. Finally, the reformists are the modern configuration of the antagonists, so they try to balance equality with freedom to maximize the sum of modern values, and consequently have been placed in the upper-right side quadrant.

To better explain the contents of each attitude, table 1 shows a synoptic description of the four poles of political aggregations.

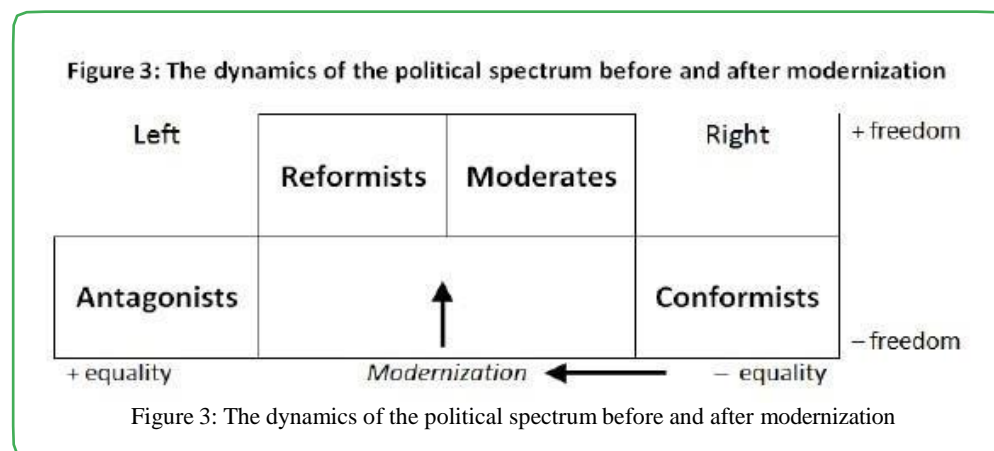
Conformists	During the process of modernization conformists defend traditional mores and habits. They worry that modern values might push society back to a primal stage of development, a stage of civil war. They are afraid of global markets and suspicious of transnational institutions. This is why they consider national laws to have priority against transnational regulations.
Moderates	Differently from conservatives, moderates clearly prefer modernity, but they want to get there gradually, since they share with conformists concerns about the unknown. They love mediation in every domain: among social classes, between the past and the future, the elderly and the youth, and among countries of different cultures.
Reformists	Reformists prefer modernity, just like moderates, but work actively to spread its values and behaviors. They love innovation, which they promote within the family, among friends and at the workplace. They are generally xenophile and consider North European countries an inspirational model to be pursued all over the world.
Antagonists	Rebelliousness is - by definition - against any kind of power and the status quo. Given such a propensity, antagonists are concentrated less on pragmatic proposals than on protest. The content of such a protest is various, ranging from the redistribution of income in favor of the poor, to the enlargement of civil rights.

Table 1: The four poles of political aggregation

In figure 3 we invert the horizontal axis of figure 2, to make it comparable with figure 1, where the right pole is labeled “conservatives” and the left pole is labeled “progressives” (as the place occupied by the

members of the two ideological attitudes in the original Parliaments).

Moreover, figure 3 introduces the dynamics among the four attitudes before and after the modernization process.



In premodern societies (down level of figure 3), based on agriculture, rent economy is the norm. Land is a limited good, irreproducible, and it is often divided in large estates (*latifundium*) and small plots for the peasants who are the workforce of the *latifundium*. In such a polarized situation there is also a polarization of the political spectrum. In the conservative field conformist attitude prevails, while in the progressive field antagonism is the only way to try to break the uneven distribution of the land.

During the modernization process (arrows in figure 3), the industrial revolution allows for a new class to emerge, the bourgeoisie, which is neither rich nor poor. The rise of the middle class moves the attitude for equality toward the center of the horizontal axis, from less equality to more equality. At the same time, the constitutional liberties conquered by the Great Revolutions moves the attitude for freedom in the upward direction (up level of figure 3). In such a situation, moderates prevail over conformists in the conservative field, while reformists prevail over antagonists in the progressive field. In fact, reforms are possible only in a constitutional and democratic regime.

While figure 3 describes two ideal-typic situations, before and after the modernization process, we are aware of the circumstance that, in historical reality, the concrete configuration of the political spectrum may include all four types of preferences (conformists, moderates, reformists and antagonists) at the same time. By the same token, premodern and postmodern concepts have not only a time dimension, but also a spatial dimension: nowadays premodern and postmodern societies live side by side. Take for example the new rent economies, based on natural resources like gas and oil. Just like the ancient *latifundium*, they present a largely uneven distribution of wealth and power. Oligarchies, whether of monarchic (Saudi Arabia) or of State (Russia) origin, belong to the bottom of figure 3, and the autarchic regimes that they run transform political opponents in antagonists. On the contrary, democratic capitalism belongs to the top level of figure 3, whereas the alternation of governmental posts between moderates and reformists allows for fine tuning changes in policies, according to the prevailing mood of electors during a specific historical conjuncture.

Before leaving the presentation of the pluralistic typology, two themes need to be shortly addressed: populism and opportunism, two issues nowadays at the forefront of the political debate. Why have they not been mentioned in the typology? Why has no type been labeled by these names?

Populism claims that the voice of the people has a priority over any other norm, and identifies people's will with justice and good morality [11-13]. The content of the issue is not as much important as the opposition to the elite, considered against people's interests by default. For this reason, populism appears not to be an ideology

characterized by a certain set of values, goals and instruments, as much as a tactic of the political discourse aimed to conquer people's vote [14]. This is why populism might nest in any cell of the pluralistic typology: among conformists in defense of traditions as well as among antagonists to criticize the elite. But, in some cases, also among moderates and reformists who would like to capture the electoral consensus. This is why populism cannot be one of the four labels of our typology.

As far as opportunism is concerned, quoted by Tullio-Altan in the Italian cultural syndrome, it represents the pattern of moving from one party to another in order to stay always on the side of the winners. So, it cannot be a label by itself. In recent years the number of members of the Italian Parliament who moved away from one political party to another has greatly increased. Both the increase of populism and opportunism in recent years could be linked to the decline of political ideologies and the raise of politics as a profession [15], itself a potential outcome of the modernization process.

The polarization of the Italian vote in the passing from first to second Republic

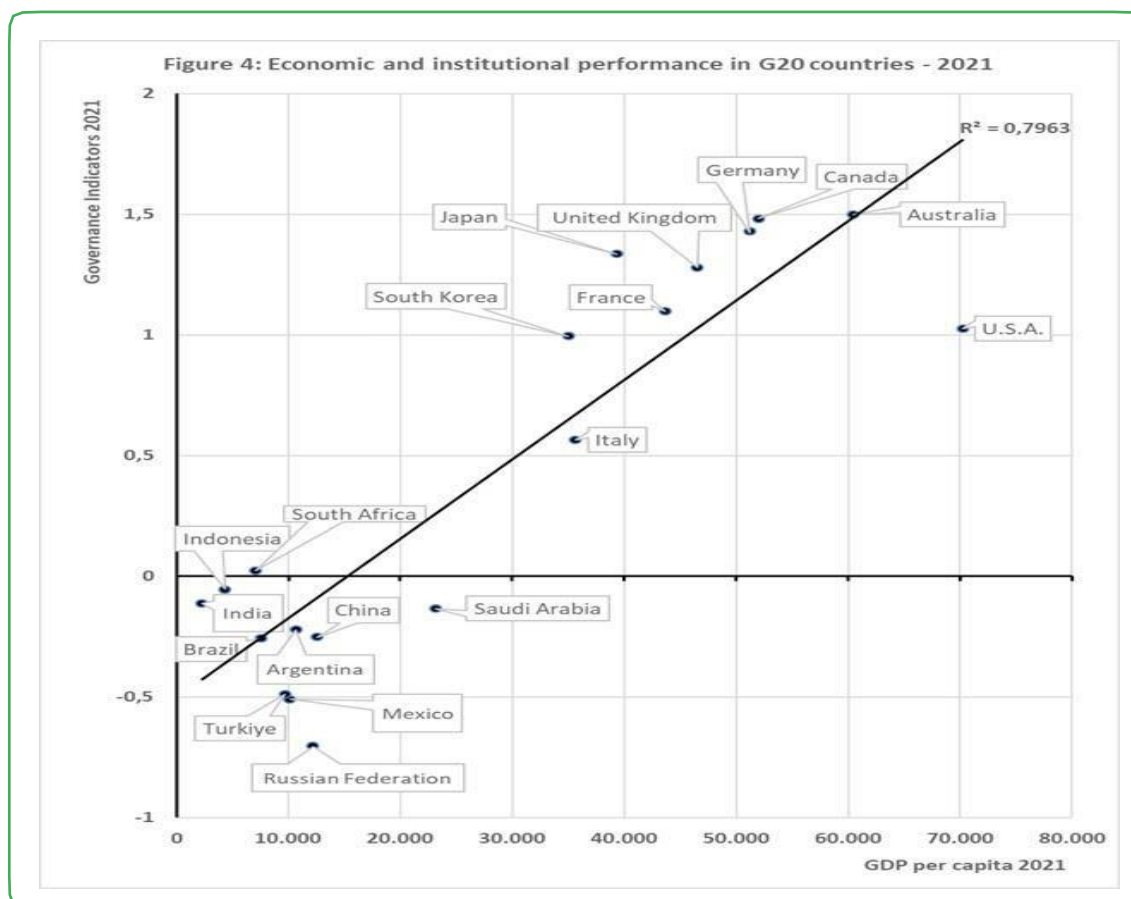
After World War II Italy shifted from Monarchy to Republic (1946). The party who emerged as a winner in the elections of 1948 was the Christian Democratic Party (DC). Probably because of its religious roots, DC tried to pacify a country which was conflictual by tradition [5] and had just come out from a civil war between Fascists and Anti-Fascists. The central position in the political spectrum gave to DC a position of ease, against the extreme wings of post-Fascists and Communists, but not the absolute majority of the vote. Consequently, the coalition which governed Italy from 1948 to 1994 was composed by DC and three minor parties of social-democratic inspiration.

This coalition was highly unstable, giving birth to 46 governs in 48 years and confirming once again Tullio-Altan thesis about the conflictual cultural matrix of Italians. On one side there was the minority of DC along with the three social-democratic allies which - according to our typology - could be defined as reformists. On the other side there was the majority of DC which - according to our typology - could be defined as moderates. Although within the usual Italian turbulence, the alternation between moderates and reformists sped up the process of modernization of the country, within the international partnership with N.A.T.O., which enabled importing of technical innovations and cultural models from U.S.A.. Along with the treasures of the local artisanal manufacture now sold on the international marketplace, Italy was able to capture the advantages of relative economic backwardness [3] and to achieve the *Italian miracle* (1950-1970).

Generally speaking, modernization is a process where not only

economic prosperity increases, but also the quality of government, the level of democracy and the freedom of individuals raise [2]. However, the general rule applies with many exceptions, due to the history of each country, which influences social mentality and the quality of institutions. In these cases, elements of modernity and backwardness might survive side by side, as in fact they do, in a systematic fashion. To prove the validity of such a statement, figure 4 compares the economic with the institutional performance in each

of the G20 countries in 2021, the latest data available. Italy's institutional performance is clearly lower than the group of European countries with a similar level of economic prosperity (France, United Kingdom and Germany). According to recent literature [16] Italy is in stagnation since 1990 up to now just because of its backwardness in public administration, high levels of corruption and low levels of domestic market liberalization.



Source: Authors' elaborations from *World Bank Economic Indicators* see <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator> and *The Worldwide Governance Indicators, 2022 Update* see <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>

Note: "Governance Indicators 2021" (vertical axis) is the average of the following Six indicators: 1) Voice and accountability, 2) Political stability, 3) Government effectiveness, 4) Regulatory quality; 5) Rule of law, 6) Control of corruption. The G20 countries in Figure 4 are 19 because the 20th is the European Union, not included as such in the *World Bank Indicators* but as single countries.

At the end of the Italian miracle (1950-1970), the clash between modernity and backwardness materialized in social conflict: antagonists and conformists conquered the centerstage of the political scene, which had been occupied for more than two decades by moderates and reformists: street riots, the use of political violence and the birth of terrorist groups appeared from nowhere, while organized crime (*mafia*) drew sap from the economic miracle. It expanded its regional influence to the North of the country, while corruption of public officers and bribery to fund political parties became widespread.

In 1992 this chaos generated a big judiciary investigation against corruption known as *Mani Pulite* (*Clean Hands*), which caused the resignation of almost the whole political leadership of the country. The main political parties collapsed and new ones were created. The elections of 1994 are known as a divide between the first and the second Republic. The party system was enlarged to include, on the left side, the former Communist Party, now free from the alleged influence of the Soviet Union which in those same years had collapsed; and, on the right side, the creation of National Alliance, a post-fascist party able to recognize the anti-fascist nature of the Italian constitution. The electoral system was changed, from proportional to majoritarian, with the purpose to imitate the bipolar

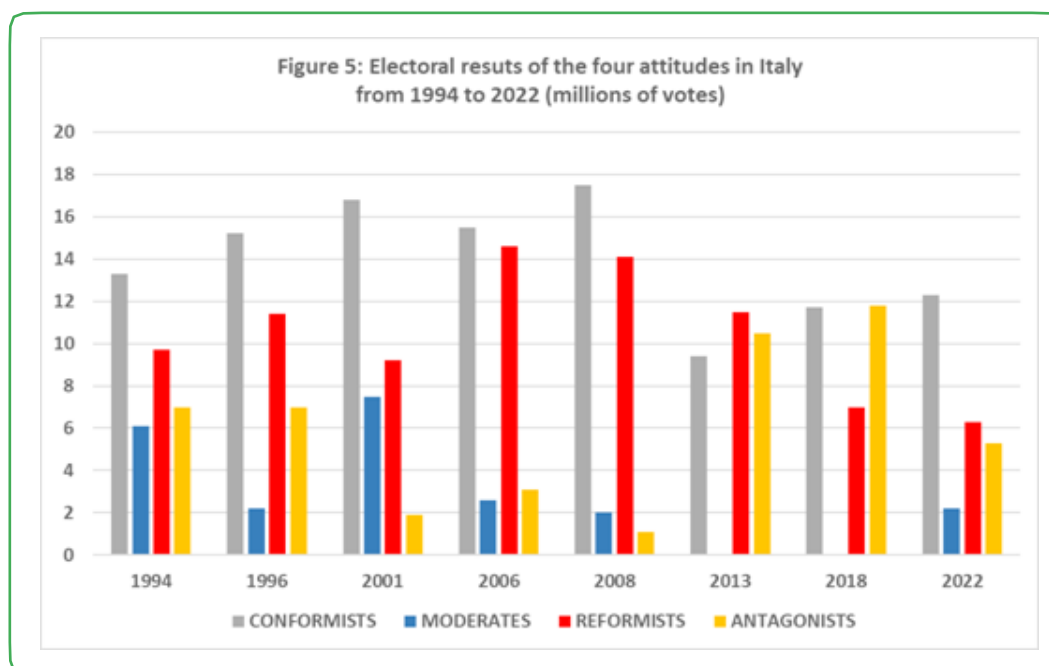
system of more mature democracies. The underlying assumption of such a reform, at that time, was that Italian problems (corruption in the public administration, corporativism, a slow judiciary system etc. etc.) were due to the oligopolistic nature of the party system: i.e. the persistence in power for almost three decades of a conflictual alliance between moderates and reformists. Introducing competition between only two poles, the moderates and the reformists, was supposed to be the keystone to solve the problem of the quality of governance.

However, since the Italian problem was not as much an institutional as a socio-cultural one, institutional reform toward a two-party system failed. During the second Republic (1994-2022) conformists prevailed over moderates in the conservative field, while antagonists were overrepresented in the progressive field. We maintain that - in a bipolar system - this happens whenever the minority groups (often the radical wings) have a bargaining power within the coalition, coming from a significant incidence in the public opinion. The result was a general instability, both within each coalition and between the two coalitions.

From 1994 to 2022 Italy had 18 governments in 30 years, improving stability if compared with 47 governments in 46 years from 1946 to 1992, but not enough to guarantee long term plans (life expectation of governments increased only from 12 to 20 months).

To have an analytical picture of the electoral behavior of Italians in the second Republic (1994-2022), the many parties of the Italian political landscape have been grouped into the four attitudes of the

pluralistic typology (see Appendix for grouping methodology). The results are presented in figure 5.



Source: See Appendix, Table 5.

Figure 5 induces the following comments:

1. First of all, Tullio-Altan was right in defining Italy as a conformist country: conformists are always ahead, in all the competitions, with the exception of 2013.
2. Quadripolar shape of the political spectrum is present all along the Nineties until 2001. From 2006 up to 2018 it gives way to bipolarism, to come back to quadripolar shape in the latest election, on september 2022. The rise of bipolarism (2006-2018) was due to two electoral reforms (2005 and 2017) that pushed purposely the system toward it (see Appendix for details).
3. The decade of bipolarism (2006-2018) can be split in two subperiods: from 2006 to 2012, where conformists and reformists were hegemonic, and, from 2013 to 2018, where reformists gave way to antagonists.

We interpret the above trend toward the polarization of the political spectrum by two explanatory factors: a path dependency pattern, and the global political climate.

The path dependency pattern (incomplete modernization) is shown by the abnormal incidence of conformists and antagonists which together amount to the majority of the voters (61% on average; minimum 52% in 2006; maximum 77% in 2018; see table 6 in Appendix), notwithstanding the electoral reform was supposed to promote the alternation between moderates and reformists, according to Duverger's Law. The electoral behavior shows the persistence of pre-modern attitudes (conformists vs. antagonists) and the path dependent behavior of Italian electorate. Rather than Duverger's Law, the political culture approach [17, 18] seems to be a better theoretical paradigm for the Italian political scene (and other emergent economies, late comers to development).

Particularly, Giovanni Sartori's work and his idea of *polarized pluralism* [18] are the theoretical antecedent of the typology proposed in this paper. The term "pluralism" stresses the non-dichotomic shape of the typology, while "polarized" suggests that movements and parties clump together around poles. In our typology there are four, structural poles that are the precipitation of the long-term world history. The distance existing between conformists and antagonists in pre-modern societies is much higher than the distance existing between moderates and reformists in post-modern societies, as we

already noticed - at the end of § 2 - in the history of the Italian case study. In Sartori's work [18], such a distance has been statistically measured. We report here the main results: the polarization index (from 0 to 1) that measures the distance between the self-placement of respondents in a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is the most progressive and 10 the most conservative attitude, scores 0,08 in the USA (less polarized); 0,27 in Switzerland; 0,28 in Germany; 0,30 in Austria and Belgium; 0,31 in England; 0,33 in Netherlands; 0,48 in Spain; 0,57 in France; and 0,64 in Italy and Finland (more polarized). Clearly there is a positive correlation between the countries early arrived to modernity and the low level of political polarization. This is the path dependence effect.

Then there is the second explanatory factor of the polarization shown by figure 5, and it concerns the current global political climate, characterized by the polarization of the political spectrum all around the Western world (Trump in the USA, Johnson in the UK, Bolsonaro in Brazil are the most amazing manifestation of such a trend, but not the only examples). The general and reasonable explanation of such polarization focalizes on the globalization of markets without a world governance. International trade and human migrations are reducing considerably absolute poverty, to the point to let O.N.U. establishing the first of 2030 Sustainable Development Goals "The end of extreme poverty for all people everywhere". At the same time, however, the dislocation of industrial plants from West to East and mass migrations from South to North are alarming the populations of Western countries, the early comers to industrialization. The impossibility of national states to manage international phenomena that go beyond their constitutional powers, pushes voters to find a shelter in the nationalistic and nostalgic rhetoric (*Make America great again; Italians First etc*).

Conclusions: neo-centrism as a strategy to modernize the Italian political scene

The raising polarization of voters, in our opinion, is not to be intended as the decline of the pluralistic typology in favor of the bipolar shape of the political spectrum. Rather, as the literature has already showed, we may conclude that in the long run modernization reduces political conflict, with the rise of the dichotomy "moderates vs. reformists" rather than the dichotomy "conformists vs. antagonists". However, in the short run, every time a crisis appears on the horizon

(i.e. an economic recession, a war, a pandemic), a breakdown of the modernization process may happen [1]. In such time conjunctures, like it already happened between the first and the second World Wars, people resident in countries affected by economic or political crisis try desperately to go back to the earlier times, pushed by charismatic and dangerous leaders [19,20].

So, what can be done to invert the trend toward the pre-modern polarization? To answer this question let us keep focused on our case study: Italy.

In Italy, socio-economic development between 1950 and 1990 has modernized the country from a rural to a tertiary economy. However, one of the many unintended consequences of Italian modernization has been the creation of a “mass rent seeking society” [21] where rents and privileges, once restricted to a small percentage of the population (landlords) have been now redistributed to the majority of the population, thanks to economic growth and the clientelist use of public expenditures. Nowadays this political strategy is incompatible with international competition, demographic transition and the fiscal crisis of the state [22]. This incompatibility puts at stake the status quo, and voters react splitting between conformists and antagonists. The formers believe that, by reducing welfare provisions, the national workforce will be induced to accept lower wages and precarious jobs. The latter suspect that the restrictions on the welfare state are not objectively founded, but a consequence of neo-liberalist policies, so they protest to keep intact or to improve social benefits even beyond economic compatibility. Both invoke solutions which are a replica of the past, rather than innovations for the future.

However, the latest elections (September 2022), which have brought back a pluralistic shape of the political spectrum (figure 5) notwithstanding the electoral system inducing bipolarism, seem to signal a turning point. The electoral body, which in the past ten years had been enchanted by nationalists and populist mermaids, seems to have woken up, although in a minority of the electorate. Reformists plus moderates (the so called “center”) account now for 33% of the total votes (table 6 in Appendix). If this trend will continue, and the two parties will prefer an alliance among them, rather than with the closer companion of the bipolar scheme, a step forward in the modernization of politics will be achieved. Something similar happened recently in France, with the election of President Macron.

After the current breakdown of modernization, if and when the extreme wings (conformists and antagonists) will become less significant in numbers, the two poles in the center of the spectrum might split again, to guarantee competition and an ordered alternation between moderates and reformists to the leadership of the national government. In fact, as Douglass North [23] has written, flexibility is the keyword for having effective institutions in democratic capitalism.

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Appendix: electoral results and methodological notes

The electoral votes for the Italian Parliament from 1994 to 2022 are included in this appendix, along with the methodology of grouping the many parties and social movements of the Italian scene in the four categories of the pluralistic typology (i.e. conformists, moderates, reformists and antagonists).

Due to the crisis ignited by the judicial prosecution named “Clean Hands” against political corruption in 1992, the political system that had been born from the Republic’s institution in 1946 collapsed at once, generating a plethora of new political parties. In order to promote coalitions among the many parties, a new electoral system was approved in 1993, that moved from a proportional rule to a mix of 75% majoritarian and 25% proportional.

In 1994 the first elections with these new rules were held. In table 2 the official coalitions among the main political parties are shown.

Coalitions
Pole of Freedom and Good Governance Forza Italia, Lega Nord, Centro Cristiano Democratico, Alleanza Nazionale
Alliance of Progressives Partito Democratico della Sinistra, Partito della Rifondazione Comunista, Federazione dei Verdi, Partito Socialista Italiano, La Rete, Alleanza Democratica, Cristiano Sociali, Rinascita Socialista
Covenant for Italy Partito Popolare Italiano, Patto Segni

Table 2: Official aggregations of political parties in coalitions at the elections of 1994

In table 3 the reclassification of the political parties into the four attitudes of the pluralistic typology proposed in this paper is shown. Some parties in the passage from table 2 to table 3 are missing, because they did not reach a minimum threshold of 2% after votes’ ballot.

Conformists
Forza Italia, Centro Cristiano Democratico, Alleanza Nazionale
Moderates
Partito Popolare Italiano, Patto Segni
Reformists
Partito Democratico della Sinistra, Partito Socialista Italiano
Antagonists
Lega Nord, Partito della Rifondazione Comunista, Federazione dei Verdi

Table 3: Political parties in 1994 classified by the four attitudes of the pluralistic typology

By comparing table 2 with table 3 the reader may note that entire coalitions have been labelled with one of the four attitudes: Pole of freedom and good governance as conformist; Alliance of Progressives as reformist; Covenant for Italy as moderate. The fourth attitude, i.e. antagonists, is composed by single parties which, although belonging to one of the three official coalitions of table 2, have shown rebelliousness in their usual political behaviors and programs. The following is a list of this anti-system groups.

Lega Nord

Lega Nord is a social movement born in 1991 from the critique to state subsidies oriented toward the South during the previous forty years. Lega Nord maintains that such subsidies had been also an opportunity for political bribery in Rome, the capital city, as the place where the Parliament is located. At that time, the movement aimed to detach the North from the South through secession. The critique to the Parliament as institution and the goal of national secession are the two criteria by which we have labelled Lega Nord’s program as antagonist. During the years, however, the contents of its rebelliousness have changed in favor of values typical of the Italian conformism, such as: the critique of the Euro and the European Union, the foreclosure of national boundaries to immigrants, and the cultural war against other religions and in defense of Christianity. This is why from 2001 elections up to now we have moved the collocation of Lega Nord from antagonism to conformism (table 4).

Rifondazione comunista

In 1991, after the Italian Communist Party changed its name in Democratic Party of the Left, its most left wing abandoned the party to found a new party: Rifondazione comunista. Its need for maintaining a radical goal such as communism is the reason why we have placed it among the antagonists in table 4. This party’s behavior, moreover, was rebellious within the political coalition and in society: in 1994 election

Rifondazione comunista signed a pact with the reformists, so the progressive pole won the election. But just two years later, it did not approve the governmental financial law, provoking anticipated elections which took place in 1996. As for the social domain, the party backed up all street riots organized by no-global movements that were flourishing in those years.

Federazione dei Verdi

Green parties all over Europe and North America are movements born to reform capitalism toward an economy sustainable from an ecological point of view. In Italy, because of the presence of the largest communist party in the Western world, and the resistance to its modernization on the part of groups such as Rifondazione Comunista, ecologist movements have been often intertwined with post-communist aspirations. Still today in Italian parliament (table 4) sits a group called Alleanza verdi-sinistra (green-red) which believe that a sustainable economy is impossible to be obtained without overcoming of the capitalistic system, since capitalism itself would be at the origin of the ecological disaster. However, in other years, the posture of green movements in Italy was detached by the post-communist influence. This is why in table 4 the reader may find the collocation of ecologists in two different attitudes: among the antagonists in 2008, 2013 and 2022 elections; and among the reformists in 1994, 1996 and 2006.

* * *

Before closing these methodological notes, some information needs to be given about the electoral rules in which the political competition took place between 1994 and 2022.

The original electoral system approved in 1993, that moved from a proportional to a majority rule, was changed again and again: in 2005, 2015, and 2017. Without entering into too much detail, the main content of so many electoral reforms was a shift back toward a more proportional mix (63% proportional and 37% majoritarian), in order to gain a fair representation in Parliament of the many groups and social movements present on the Italian scene. On the other end, with the aim of giving governability to the system, barrages such as minimum thresholds and premiums to coalitions have been introduced. The crucial aspect of the whole system - however - is that it has always been conceptually supported by a bipolar framework, with the purpose of imitating the tradition of countries with a more mature democracy (conservatives vs. progressives). Of course the Italian solution is in evident contradiction with Duverger's Law, that reads «majoritarian elections tend to favor a two-party system», while in Italy a prevalently proportional system lives side by side with a two-party system.

The results of our reclassification of political parties from the official one (table 2) to the interpretative one (table 3), along with votes gained in all the national ballots of the Chamber of Deputies from 1994 to 2022, are presented in table 4, 5 and 6. Table 5 is the source for figure 5 in the text body of the article.

1994	POLITICAL PARTY	VOTES
CONFORMISTS	FORZA ITALIA	8.136.135
	ALLEANZA NAZIONALE	5.214.133
MODERATES	PATTO SEGNI	1.811.814
	PARTITO POPOLARE ITALIANO	4.287.172
REFORMISTS	PARTITO DEMOCRATICO DI SINISTRA	7.881.646
	PARTITO SOCIALISTA ITALIANO	849.429
	LISTA PANNELLA	1.359.283
	FEDERAZIONE DEI VERDI	1.047.268
ANTAGONISTS	LEGA NORD	3.235.248
	RIFONDAZIONE COMUNISTA	2.343.946
1996		
CONFORMISTS	FORZA ITALIA	7.712.149
	ALLEANZA NAZIONALE	5.870.491
	RINNOVAMENTO ITALIA	1.627.380
MODERATES	CENTRO CRISTIANI DEMOCRATICI E CRISTIANI DEMOCRATICI UNITI	2.189.563
REFORMISTS	PARTITO DEMOCRATICO DI SINISTRA	7.894.118
	FEDERAZIONE DEI VERDI	938.665
	POPOLARI PER PRODI	2.554.072
ANTAGONISTS	LEGA NORD	3.776.354
	RIFONDAZIONE COMUNISTA	3.213.748

2001		
CONFORMISTS	FORZA ITALIA	10.923.431
	ALLEANZA NAZIONALE	4.463.205
	LEGA NORD	1.464.301
MODERATES	DEMOCRAZIA EUROPEA	888.249
	CENTRO CRISTIANI DEMOCRATICI E CRISTIANI DEMOCRATICI UNITI	1.194.040
	LA MARGHERITA	5.391.827
REFORMISTS	DEMOCRATICI DI SINISTRA	6.151.154
	LISTA DI PIETRO	1.443.725
	IL GIRASOLE	805.340
	LISTA PANNELLA-BONINO	832.213
ANTAGONISTS	RIFONDAZIONE COMUNISTA	1.868.659
2006		
CONFORMISTS	FORZA ITALIA	9.048.976
	ALLEANZA NAZIONALE	4.707.126
	LEGA NORD	1.747.730
MODERATES	UNIONE DI CENTRO	2.580.190
REFORMISTS	L'ULIVO	11.930.983
	LA ROSA NEL PUGNO	990.694
	FEDERAZIONE DEI VERDI	784.803
	DI PIETRO ITALIA DEI VALORI	877.052
ANTAGONISTS	COMUNISTI ITALIANI	884.127
	RIFONDAZIONE COMUNISTA	2.229.464
2008		
CONFORMISTS	IL POPOLO DELLA LIBERTA'	13.629.464
	LEGA NORD	3.024.543
	LA DESTRA - FIAMMA TRICOLORE	884.961
MODERATES	UNIONE DI CENTRO	2.050.229
REFORMISTS	PARTITO DEMOCRATICO	12.095.306
	DI PIETRO ITALIA DEI VALORI	1.594.024
ANTAGONISTS	LA SINISTRA L'ARCOBALENO	1.124.298
2013		
CONFORMISTS	IL POPOLO DELLA LIBERTA'	7.332.134
	FRATELLI D'ITALIA	666.765
	LEGA NORD	1.390.534
MODERATES	---	---
REFORMISTS	SCELTA CIVICA	2.823.842
	PARTITO DEMOCRATICO	8.646.034
ANTAGONISTS	RIVOLUZIONE CIVILE	765.189
	SINISTRA ECOLOGIA LIBERTA'	1.089.231
	MOVIMENTO 5 STELLE	8.691.406
2018		
CONFORMISTS	LEGA	5.698.687
	FORZA ITALIA	4.596.956
	FRATELLI D'ITALIA	1.429.550
MODERATES	---	---
REFORMISTS	PARTITO DEMOCRATICO	6.161.896
	+EUROPA	841.468

ANTAGONISTS	MOVIMENTO 5 STELLE	10.732.066
	LIBERI E UGUALI	1.114.799
2022		
CONFORMISTS	FRATELLI D'ITALIA	7.302.507
	LEGA	2.464.005
	FORZA ITALIA	2.278.217
	NOI MODERATI	255.505
MODERATES	AZIONE-ITALIA VIVA	2.186.747
REFORMISTS	PARTITO DEMOCRATICO	5.356.180
	+EUROPA	793.961
	IMPEGNO CIVICO	169.165
ANTAGONISTS	MOVIMENTO 5 STELLE	4.333.972
	ALLEANZA VERDI-SINISTRA	1.018.669

TABLE 4: ELECTORAL BALLOTS BY POLITICAL PARTIES (1994-2022)

Source: Authors' elaborations from Historical Archives of Ministero degli Interni, available at the link <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/> As for the year 2022 see Ministero degli Interni Eligendo, at the link <https://elezioni.interno.gov.it/>

Attitude	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008	2013	2018	2022
CONFORMISTS	13,3	15,2	16,8	15,5	17,5	9,4	11,7	12,3
MODERATES	6,1	2,2	7,5	2,6	2,0	0,0	0,0	2,2
REFORMISTS	9,7	11,4	9,2	14,6	14,1	11,5	7,0	6,3
ANTAGONISTS	7,0	7,0	1,9	3,1	1,1	10,5	11,8	5,3
TOTAL	36,1	35,8	35,4	35,8	34,7	31,4	30,5	26,1

TABLE 5: ELECTORAL BALLOTS BY ATTITUDES OF THE PLURALISTIC TYPOLOGY 1994-2022 (millions of votes)

Source: Authors' elaborations from Historical Archives of Ministero degli Interni, available at the link <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/> As for the year 2022 see Ministero degli Interni Eligendo, at the link <https://elezioni.interno.gov.it/>

Attitude	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008	2013	2018	2022
CONFORMISTS	36,84	42,46	47,46	43,30	50,44	29,94	38,36	47,13
MODERATES	16,90	6,15	21,19	7,26	5,76	0,00	0,00	8,43
REFORMISTS	26,87	31,84	25,98	40,78	40,63	36,62	22,95	24,14
ANTAGONISTS	19,39	19,55	5,37	8,66	3,17	33,44	38,69	20,30
TOTAL	100,00	100,00	100,00	100,00	100,00	100,00	100,00	100,00

TABLE 6: ELECTORAL BALLOTS BY ATTITUDES OF THE PLURALISTIC TYPOLOGY 1994-2022 (percentages by year)

Source: Authors' elaborations from Historical Archives of Ministero degli Interni, available at the link <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/> As for the year 2022 see Ministero degli Interni Eligendo, at the link <https://elezioni.interno.gov.it/>