The Sources and Consequences of Christian Democracy in Italy

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to understand the sources and consequences of Christian Democratic dominance in Italy. As opposed to studies that postulate single cause and effect relationships among variables as the central explanation for a particular political outcome, the variables in this analysis will be treated as interrelated parts in a system where different types of patterns can be identified. Factors that might appear as single independent causes are modeled as endogenous components that have continual effects on other variables in the system, which can create different types of ‘feedback loops’. This approach allows us to understand Christian Democratic (DC throughout) dominance more as a sustained and cyclical pattern rather than as a single outcome. In this specific case, as the model will show, political and institutional factors continually reduced the DC’s governing capacity, which led to numerous crises and extreme government instability. As a result, the DC – in order to maintain its dominant position at the center of the political system – resorted to various forms of clientelism by systematically exploiting state resources to reward members, maintain its support base, and ensure its dominant position. Once these practices became the norm, the system of DC dominance was sustained through two reinforcing feedback loops. Furthermore, the paper argues that though DC dominance formally ended with the dissolution of the party in February 1994, the overall pattern within the loops remains in evidence.

The rest of the paper is as follows. In the first section I discuss the origins of the DC and provide a brief history of its dominance. The second section borrows the concept of feedback loops from systems thinking to explain how the DC was able to stay in power.\(^1\) The third section then describes the pivotal events in the early 1990s, when the entire party system imploded and single party dominance came to an end. In this section it is also argued that the two powerful reinforcing feedback loops established during DC dominance remain in effect. Specifically, governments remain weak and clientelism persists as an important mechanism through which support is maintained. The fourth section attempts to place Italy’s experience with single party dominance in comparative perspective by suggesting commonalities in the experiences of single party dominance in other contexts.

I. Single party dominance: Christian Democracy in Italy

The Italian Christian Democratic Party formed in 1942 as a successor to the Popular Party that had been active before parties were disbanded by the fascist regime that ruled in Italy starting in 1922. From its origin the DC was a centrist Catholic party that behaved in a ‘catch-all’ manner, promoting itself as the protector of Catholic values, the traditional Italian family, capitalism (for both workers and business owners), and representative democracy (Hine 1993; Ginsborg 2003). In doing so, the party became anchored to the center of the Italian party system.

In the 1948 elections, the first under the new republican constitution, the DC won 48.5% of the total vote for the lower house, while its main rival, the Popular Democratic Front, an alliance between the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and Italian Socialist Party (PSI), won 31%. Six other parties also won legislative seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Alcide De Gasperi of the DC formed the first postwar republican government with three parties, the Liberals, Republicans, and Social Democrats, as a means to cement the DC’s position as the dominant center party. The coalition lasted a year and half before the Liberals withdrew their support. De Gasperi then formed a new DC-led government, which also lasted about a year and half before another party, the Social Democrats, defected. The pattern of executive instability began. In every subsequent election, the DC always won more votes and legislative seats than any other competitor and was

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\(^1\) Rather than viewing DC dominance and decline as the result of a number of single factors, the approach in the paper uses systems theory to model the Italian political system as a complicated structure with several moving parts. Systems theory is useful in this way because it allows us to evaluate factors in a cyclical manner so that repeating patterns can be identified and understood. In other words, it models endogeneity as part of the explanation of single party dominance.
in a position to form a government. But since these elections never gave the DC a legislative
majority,\(^2\) relatively short-lived coalitions or single party minority government became the norm.
This is demonstrated in Figure 1, in which the DC’s percentage of electoral votes, legislative
seats, and executive ministries during its 46 years of single party dominance are graphically
displayed by government. Between 1948 and 1994 there were 48 governments.\(^3\) With important
exceptions, most of these governments were led by a DC Prime Minister.\(^4\) But it is also evident
from this figure that the DC did not control all government ministries at all times. Though this
happened somewhat regularly during periods of minority government, oscillation between single
party minority government and coalition government was the norm. As a result, any discussion
of “single party dominance” in Italy should take this important point into account.

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\(2\) The DC had a majority of legislative seats only during the First Parliament of the Italian Republic.

\(3\) In truth, the number of governments between 1948 and 1994 is either 48 or 49 depending on how Carlo Azeglio
Ciampi’s first independent cabinet is counted. It lasted eight days before two parties defected. They were replaced
by independents. Nonetheless, the number of DC members that held ministries in both cabinets is the same (eight of
23 ministries).

\(4\) Giovanni Spadolini of the Italian Republican Party became the first non-DC Prime Minister in 1981 and Bettino
Craxi of the Italian Socialist Party served as Prime Minister between 1983 and 1987. During the last legislature in
which the DC won legislative seats (1992-1994) only Giuliano Amato (PSI) and Carlo Azeglio Ciampi (technocratic
– independent) served as Prime Ministers.
42.4% of the lower house’s legislative seats, and yet controlled 68.9% of executive ministries. The fact that the average percentage of ministries is almost 69%, and not 100%, suggests that single party dominance in Italy was not absolute. Several other parties also placed representatives in executive-level ministries regularly over time. This table, coupled with Figure 1, demonstrates that the DC’s dominance was tempered by its reliance on other parties to form legislative majorities. It should also be noted that two parties, the Italian Communist Party and the Italian Social Movement (the successor party to the Fascist Party) were awarded no executive-level seats during this time.

Table 1: Executive disproportionality in Italy, 1948-1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>% Vote</th>
<th>% Legislative Seats</th>
<th>% Executive Seats</th>
<th>Executive Disproportionality 1 (Ministries – Electoral Votes)</th>
<th>Executive Disproportionality 2 (Ministries – Legislative Seats)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DC Christian Democracy</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>68.9</td>
<td>+29.9</td>
<td>+26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDI Social Democratic</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>+2.6</td>
<td>+3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRI Republican</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>+2.5</td>
<td>+3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLI Liberal</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>-1.3</td>
<td>+0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSI Socialist</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>+0.1</td>
<td>+0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSI Fascist</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>-5.0</td>
<td>-4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCI Communist</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>-26.2</td>
<td>-23.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data compiled by author.

II. Explaining DC dominance

The next section presents a systems model to explain the sources and consequences of the DC’s four and a half decades of dominance and provides evidence to support the causal linkages the model attempts to establish. Each part of the model is presented separately in sections.

Part 1: The effects of fragmentation, polarization, and the electoral system on Italy’s government formation outcomes, 1948-1992
Italy’s postwar cleavage structure was marked by significant ideological divisions, as well as divisions in religion, class, and territory (Hine 1993: Chapter 3). These differences were exacerbated by the choice of the electoral system Italy would use in her new republic. Because constitutional engineers were keen to ensure that power would not again be concentrated in one party, a party-list proportional representation electoral system was implemented. The system also included a provision for voters to write the name of an alternate candidate under the party of their choice; if that candidate received a certain threshold of support, the voters’ candidate would replace the party’s candidate if elected to the legislature. This preference vote system was created to ensure that parties could not exploit their power and to give citizens some degree of control over who would represent them, however, the system gave politicians direct incentives to divide their interests rather than consolidate them. DC members used this system to a considerable degree, which led to competitive strategies and significant factionalism among DC candidates (Wildgen 1985).

The proportional electoral system led to the proliferation of polarized party groups, leading to what Sartori called “polarized pluralism” (Sartori 1966). The number of party groups also grew over time as shown in Figure 2. In addition to the electoral system, increased fragmentation starting in the late 1970s was encouraged by reforms to party financing. Before 1974 there was no regulation concerning the relationship between private interests and political parties. In 1974, a scandal involving the DC and several of its coalition partners, who had received lucrative benefits from the state electricity company, ENEL, and a number of oil companies in return for writing favorable energy policies, emerged. The subsequent public outcry led to the fall of the DC government and the subsequent passage of Law 195, which provided for the public financing of political parties. The law, intended to increase the transparency of party finances, mandated that parties could receive two sources of public funding: 1) a regular contribution, which would be paid annually to parliamentary parties; and 2) a reimbursement payment for election expenses. Since payments were made based on the extent of each party’s parliamentary representation, the law was amended over time to lower the minimum threshold of representation that a party needed to achieve to receive the funds. This
served to increase the number of potential beneficiaries and encourage the continued fragmentation of the party system (Pacini and Piccio 2012: 12).

**Figure 2: Tracking multipartism during DC dominance, by parliament**

![Graph showing number of groups and effective number of parties over time.](image)

Taken from Cotta and Verzichelli 2007 and Fabbrini 2009.

Given the extent of multipartism and consistent with the ‘consensus’ model of government (Lijphart 1999; Fabbrini 2009), from the start it was clear that coalitions would be necessary to govern. However, and despite its large size, it was established that the PCI could not join any executive coalition, the *conventio ad excludendum*. Because Italy was now aligned with democratic Western Europe in the postwar geo-political context, communism as a governing ideology could not be allowed. The arrival of American reconstruction aid was also conditioned on non-communist governments (Hine 1993). Public opinion, both domestic and international, was against the PCI, now considered an ‘anti-system’ party (Sartori 1976), participating in government. The Italian Social Movement (MSI) was also not involved in government coalitions. This is very important for considering the sources of DC dominance. Figure 3 shows the percentage of seats won by the PCI and MSI combined over time, which generally increased, at least until the end of the 1970s. In addition, Figure 1 at the beginning of this article shows that DC support slowly declined over time. The reality that 1) two parties representing a significant portion of the electorate were never formally included in governments and that 2) the DC was slowly losing support yet remained the plurality party over time constrained the DC’s government formation process to a considerable degree. Specifically, the DC had to choose its partners from a limited pool (Strøm et al 1994). In addition, the remaining, ‘coalitionable’ parties were quite small, which meant that several of them were often needed for the DC to form a legislative majority.
Part 2: The DC’s reduced governing capacity

The second part of the model involves the DC’s governing capacity. ‘Governing capacity’ in this context involves the ability of the DC to pass its preferred policies through normal processes in the legislature. Despite its dominance, the DC had an exceptionally difficult time passing comprehensive legislation. For example, during the first years of the new republic, agrarian reform to redistribute land from wealthy landowners to the rural poor was badly needed. Significant social unrest in the southern part of the country in 1949 propelled a reluctant DC to
pass redistribution legislation. But instead of implementing comprehensive reform, the DC government managed to pass three small laws that were seen as a ‘first step’ to a larger legislative package that never materialized. Ginsborg explains that the agrarian problem “forced the DC to adopt for the first time what was to be one of their most persistent and unsatisfactory practices: the passing of various ‘temporary’ measures, with the promise that ‘real’ reform would follow, which it never did” (Ginsborg 2003: 131).

The model shows that the DC’s reduced governing capacity was influenced by two key factors. One was the constrained executive formation process, which had an inverse relationship with the DC’s governing capacity: as the executive process became more constrained, the DC’s governing capacity was reduced. The reality that the DC could choose only certain coalition partners created a situation in which the smaller parties could hold the DC hostage to their interests, often at the expense of coherent or broad-based policy (Cotta 1994; Bull 2004). Since alternative governments, especially ones with PCI or MSI, were not viable, the smaller parties had nothing to lose in making constant demands on the DC. Even if the government fell, there was a high likelihood that subsequent governments would include the same parties. This blurred the distinction between government and opposition to a considerable degree (Barnes 1966) and led to numerous government crises. “Opposition” could come from the parties in the executive, the non-government parties in the legislature, or even within the DC itself. This is not to say that the government never passed important reforms. It did at times. But quite often it was not political will, but social turmoil or extreme economic necessity that compelled the parties to set aside their differences. Furthermore, ‘reform’ often entailed layering new policies over old ones, rather than enforcing comprehensive changes (Bull and Rhodes 2007).

Ongoing political crises set the DC on the search for different coalition ‘formulas,’ (Hine 1993; Mershon 1996). For example, in the early part of the republic, the DC formed centrist coalitions with the Liberals, Republicans, and Social Democrats. Starting in 1963 the DC tried a different approach by forming center left coalitions, replacing the Liberals with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). In the mid to late 1970s, an experiment called the ‘Historic Compromise” attempted to include the PCI in the decision making process (but not government). Finally, the DC began to form what became known as oversized pentapartito coalitions with the Socialists, Social Democrats, Republicans, and Liberals. The fact that the DC could not control the legislative process led the party to try different approaches to cabinet formation. In practice, none was particularly successful. Governments fell often, on average every 350 days during the period of DC dominance.

A second important factor reducing the DC’s governing capacity was the extensive factionalism that came to characterize most of the major parties, and the DC especially (Hine 1993; Mershon 2001; Boucek 2009; Boucek 2012). Thus not only was the party system fragmented with several parties, the parties themselves were also internally divided. Party factions, especially for the DC, were very important. For example, the so-called “Cencelli manual,” written by a DC politician in 1967, stipulated precisely how executive-level posts would be distributed given each faction’s level of support. These factions created additional ‘veto points’ that could be exploited to ensure a faction’s fair share of political spoils.

One way to measure the DC’s reduced governing capacity is to examine how particular institutional mechanisms were utilized by the government in order to pass its priority programs. For example, Article 77 of the Italian Constitution gives the government the procedural ability to pass temporary legislation (executive decrees) without parliamentary approval in extraordinary cases of necessity and urgency. Decrees remain in force for 60 days, after which the legislature must approve the legislation in order for it to remain in effect. If the legislature does not pass the decree into law, the government can create another decree with the same content as the first. Given the deadlock between the DC and its executive coalition partners and between the government and opposition in the legislature, increasingly the government made use of this particular procedure and issued multiple versions of the same decree when decrees were not made law in parliament. Della Sala explains that the use of executive decrees “must be understood within the context of weak governments, lacking the consensus to present coherent legislative programmes, faced with the norms of a legislative process that do not guarantee a safe
passage through parliament for government initiatives” (della Sala 1988: 20). In short, it became easier to use decrees rather than face intense legislative scrutiny and obstructionism in parliament. Figure 4 shows how the number of decrees issued by the government after the election of each legislature increased over time.

**Figure 4:**
*Government decrees issued*

Source: Italian Parliament

Step 3: Legislative obstruction
Another significant factor impeding the DC’s governing capacity was the parliament’s highly permissive array of legislative institutions that parliamentarians increasingly used to frustrate governments. In the idealized parliamentary system, a government that commands a majority in the legislature should, in theory, have little trouble in passing its preferred legislation without interference in parliament. There may be collective action problems within the executive if multiparty coalitions are necessary for a majority, but once any executive conflict is resolved bills should have easy passage once they arrive in the legislature. In the Italian case, this ideal was never realized. Bills faced significant collective action problems not only in the multiparty executives, but also in the highly fragmented and decentralized parliament.

Within legislatures there are several institutions through which potential government decisions can be denied. These legislative veto points are institutions (rules) that allow political actors the procedural ability to thwart government efforts (Kaiser 1997). Most legislatures have at least some legislative veto points. Institutions such as amendment rights, for example, give legislators an opportunity to influence the content of legislation as its being debated in parliament. In practice though, most democratic legislatures are restricted in what they can do to government-sponsored legislation, both formally through rules and informally through norms. What is noteworthy about the Italian Parliament during the period of DC dominance (and beyond) is the availability of several types of institutions that in effect decentralized the decision making process to a considerable degree (Bull and Pasquino 2007; Hine and Finocchi 1991). Within the legislature, these institutions include: secret voting, which allowed government members (until 1988) to defect from government agreements without retribution; ‘legislative session’ committee assignments that give committees the ability to pass a bill directly, without referral to plenary for final approval (di Palma 1977; della Sala 1998); unrestrained bicameralism, which give legislators not one, but two, opportunities to change government
legislation; and generous and unrestrained amendment and proposal rights, which contributed significantly to legislative obstructionism and the deliberate clogging of the legislative process. While these institutions may have been implemented to reduce the possibility of parliamentary tyranny, it did not take long for legislators to learn how to engage in extensive bargaining and exchange with each other for policy benefits, often at the cost of comprehensive policymaking.

Yet perhaps the most important institution that decentralized decision making was a highly inclusive parliamentary agenda setting process that was implemented in 1971. Before 1971, the presidents of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, elected by each house after national elections, set each chamber’s timetable and agenda. This concentrated power in the hands of the chamber president, usually a member of the DC. To mitigate the persistent political problems among the major parties in parliament, in 1971 parliamentary rules were changed to include opposition parties in the agenda setting process (Leonardi et al 1978; della Sala 1993). With the support of the opposition, the parliament passed extensive procedural reform, which in effect transferred agenda setting powers from a small group of privileged individuals in the government parties to the ‘Conference of Parliamentary Group Leaders.’ Leaders from each political party now met with the chamber president to decide on the parliamentary calendar and agenda. The decision-rule for the conference became unanimity, which gave each party leader veto power on the calendar and agenda. The procedural changes were expected to enhance democratic governance by encouraging consensus among the parties, but this effect was never quite realized. While there was a trend toward consociational politics in the late 1970s culminating with the Communists’ formal declaration of support during the Historic Compromise (Leonardi et al 1978), the fragile arrangement between the government and opposition soon collapsed and the political system returned to its previous state. Nonetheless, by this time, the reforms to the agenda setting process had become institutionalized; by the late 1970s, “not only did government-sponsored bills not have any priority on the agenda…the executive was unable to control where and under which procedure its bills would be decided” (della Sala 1998:79). This is of paramount importance when we consider the legislative session committees, mentioned above, which have the procedural ability to pass legislation in committee without referral to the plenary for final approval. After a bill had been referred to this committee, it was possible for a small minority of members of parliament in the plenary (10%) to request plenary consideration for the bill’s final approval. This rule was to prevent legislators from taking advantage of parliamentary rules for their own benefit, but paradoxically what it led to was extensive logrolling among the parties in each committee. As long as most parliamentarians were engaged with this process, the outcome was the proliferation of what is now known as leggine, little laws that deal with narrow, particularistic issues for individuals or small groups of legislators that often spent public money unchecked (di Palma 1977). This initiated a piecemeal approach to policymaking, which served to greatly increase public debt. For many legislators, the passage of leggine may have been the only way to get legislation passed, given the government’s inability to pass comprehensive reform (Kreppel 1997).

In all, the highly decentralized institutional rules utilized by the Italian Parliament during the long period of DC dominance led to two outcomes. First was legislative obstructionism. The procedures gave the opposition ample tools to frustrate governments and ensure government-sponsored legislation would not pass easily in the legislature. This precipitated many government crises. Second, many of the decentralized institutions (participation in committees in particular) provided incentives for legislators to engage in reciprocal strategies and behavior to secure targeted benefits. Thus, even though the DC was in control of all governments between 1948 and 1994, it could not protect its own policy proposals, nor could it prevent the passage of certain types of legislation in parliament. Furthermore, because of factionalism and the spoils members could receive (important because of the preference vote-driven electoral system as well), many government members, including those from the DC, participated heavily in these affairs.

Figures 5 and 6 provide evidence that parliamentarians progressively utilized the legislative instruments in their arsenal. Figure 3 presents data on the number of bills presented by

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5 The rule was revoked in 1990.
members of the parliament to the lower house. In the 1948 parliament, this was 1028 bills. By the 1987 parliament, this number had increased to 5028. The downward trend in the number of bills in the 1970s may have been the result of the new agenda setting procedures that were designed to promote consensus and a more streamlined legislative process. The superficial accord did not last long and once the Historic Compromise failed, the number of bills began to rise again. Figure 4 demonstrates that while most of the proposed parliamentary bills did not pass, some did and generally this number increased substantially during the latter half of the DC’s tenure in office.

Figure 5: Parliamentary bills presented to lower house

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6 The number of parliamentarians has remained the same since the implementation of the 1948 constitution: 630 Deputies and 315 Senators.
7 The Historic Compromise ended when one of its chief creators and proponents, Aldo Moro, was kidnapped and killed by political militants in 1978. He was kidnapped on the day he was scheduled to begin negotiation for a confidence vote that would include support from the Communist Party.
Part 4: Clientelism and the two reinforcing loops
The last part of the model adds clientelism as one of the key variables that create the two feedback loops. The model demonstrates that the DC’s reduced governing capacity was the primary driver of clientelism. Specifically, the negative signs imply that as the DC’s governing capacity decreased, clientelism increased.

Clientelism is the deliberate and strategic exchange of political goods for public support (Piattoni 2001; Stokes et al 2013). Clientelism in the Italian case during the period of DC dominance became highly institutionalized; for many scholars Italy represents an “extreme case of systemic political corruption in an established, democratic setting” (Golden and Chang 2001: 591; Vannucci 2009). Once it became clear that the DC would not be able to use the ‘normalized’ process of parliamentarism – whereby governments expect legislative majorities to pass their preferred policies – the DC and its respective factions resorted to clientelism to maintain their support bases (Golden 2003). Scholars have also suggested, too, that this outcome was reinforced by the use of the proportional electoral formula (Kunicová and Rose-Ackerman 2005), specifically the open list proportional system (preference vote) used in Italy (Golden and Chang 2001), and how party finances were procured (Rhodes 1997).

A pervasive argument in the literature is that clientelism evolved to solve political problems (Piattoni 2001). Clientelism in Italy involved many types of redistribution, such as the awarding of lucrative contracts, jobs, or services in exchange for political support. Once this strategy became the governing norm, many in the smaller government parties and opposition also behaved in the same way. Some scholars have argued that these strategies were not only the reason for which the DC remained in power, but also explain how Italy, as a new democracy, was able to survive (Tarrow 1990). Guaranteeing important interests their spoils in the early part of the republic increased the likelihood that they would not try to overturn the system. The DC understood this well and formed lucrative business relationships with powerful wealthy families and with the leaders of other parties. As the dominant party, it allowed others “a share of patronage – if not power – if only because any other strategy would have increased polarization.
and undermined its position at the center of the political spectrum” (Tarrow 1990: 319). Thus the practice of clientelism guaranteed both the sustainability of the new republic and the DC’s position in it at a time when, because of the country’s highly fragmented and polarized nature and the government’s reduced governing capacity, it was particularly vulnerable to collapse. In this particular environment, clientelism emerged as a means to ensure that the democracy stayed intact with the DC at helm. In the economic sphere, this would come to have major and longlasting consequences as the DC continually rewarded wealthy families representing big business for their continued support (della Sala 2004; Deeg 2005; Cioffi and Höpner 2006). This ensured that the business sector would remain concentrated in few hands through pyramidal ownership that allowed the families to control much of the economy with relatively little capital. The DC was a partner with these families, which led to what has been termed ‘blockholder capitalism’ (Deeg 2005). But given that the DC remained the plurality party, it was clear that voters did not ‘punish’ the DC for their questionable behavior by changing their votes, even if they were generally unhappy with their govenrment and parliament. A well-publicized fear of Communism partly explains this trend, and as a result it took an exceptionally long time to ‘vote the rascals out.’ The fear of Communism served to continually galvanize the DC. According to one commentator in 1977, the DC’s “very weaknesses – the scandals, the universal feeling that the DC was guilty of inefficieny and corruption, the general unhappiness over the economic crisis – were turned into sources of renewed strength when it appeared that there was danger of a Communist victory.” (Levi 1977: 34). Hence the DC maintained its support base, not by promoting sound policies and governing effectively, but by maligning any alternative government. But because of the realities concerning its tenure, i.e. the conrained executive formation process and subsequent reduced governing capacity, clientelism and political corruption as a governing tool progressively increased.

Measuring clientelism is a tricky task (Golden and Chang 2001; della Porta and Vannucci 2012, page 10). While most scholars agree that the Italian political system was rife with political corruption during the period of DC dominance, and that the amount of corruption increased over time, it is exceptionally difficult to quantify the extent to which such corruption was present. One possible indicator is the extent of perceived corruption, for example as measured by Transparency International, but data for perceived corruption in Italy is not available for the years of DC dominance. One novel indicator of political corruption can be borrowed from Golden and Chang (2001) who measure corruption as charges of malfeasance against DC members and subsequent requests to lift parliamentary immunity so that such charges could be pursued. Though the requests for investigation were often denied, the requests themselves provide information about suspected corruption. Figure 7 below shows how such suspicion against DC members generally increased over time. A high point was reached in the mid-1980s, when one fifth of the DC’s members received a charge of malfeasance.

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8 According to the World Values Survey, during the DC’s tenure Italian citizens were not very confident in their Parliament. In 1981, 69.8% of survey respondents reported that they had ‘not very much’ or ‘none at all’ confidence in Parliament. In 1990 this number remained consistent at 68%.

9 Golden and Chang borrow the majority of their data from Franco Cazzola. The authors note that the validity of their indicator may be in question, since allegations of malfeasance may not be entirely correlated with actual political corruption or clientelism.
In an attempt to create a theory to explain the persistence and growth of political corruption in Italy, Della Porta and Vannucci consider external factors such as moral values or economic incentives alongside endogenous factors which make the continuation and proliferation of corruption path dependent (della Porta and Vannucci 2012). They explain:

Once a certain organizational texture and “cultural adaptation” to corruption has developed governance structures and enforcement mechanisms provide internal stability to illegal dealings in specific areas of public activity, reducing uncertainty among partners in relationships which thus appear more lucrative and less morally censurable…. The heritage of corruption in the past produces increasing returns in subsequent periods by neutralizing moral barriers, by creating more profitable opportunities rooted in formal procedures and decision-making processes, and providing organizational shields and mechanisms of protection against external intrusion by the authorities and internal friction among corrupt actors. (della Porta and Vannucci 2012, 14).

This is important as we consider the cyclical nature of the reinforcing loops presented in the model here. The continuation of corruption depends on particular “skills of illegality” (della Porta and Vannucci 2012, 14) that are reinforced as a culture of corruption becomes more and more accepted by the political and economic elite. Once in place, the pattern becomes exceptionally difficult to break.

Completing the reinforcing loops

As seen in the final model, clientelism completes the two reinforcing loops, indicated with an “R” and a circular arrow to indicate the direction of causality in the loop. In the first loop, increasing multipartism led to greater constraints on executive formation, which reduced the DC’s governing capacity and led to increased clientelism. Increased clientelism then reinforced multipartism because the factions or parties that benefitted from these practices had incentives to continue the patterns of bargaining and exchange; once all groups began this practice, the system reinforced itself. This in turn sustained the other variables in the loop, leading to more multipartism, more constraint on executive formation, less governing capacity, and more clientelism over time.

The second reinforcing loop shows how the increasing permissiveness and use of Italy’s decentralized legislative institutions also reduced the DC’s governing capacity, which reinforced the use clientelism as a political tool. Institutions are usually considered fixed and unchanging,
but Italian politicians tinkered with their legislative institutions over time (especially with regard to agenda setting, which had direct implications for committee assignments), making them more decentralized and less under the DC’s control. Decentralized legislative institutions allowed not only DC members, but members of other parties, to utilize the political process for clientelistic purposes at the expense of coherent and comprehensive policy.

III. Breaking the pattern

As long as the factors that fed into the system outside the loops remained static (the electoral system, negativity toward Communism, the degree of ideological polarization and Italy’s cleavage structure, and factionalism for example), the system’s reinforcing loops continued to have their effects: the DC’s governing capacity continually declined while the use of clientelism continually increased. But in the early 1990s, under the pressures of international and domestic events (Bull and Rhodes 1997), it became evident that the conditions that had sustained DC dominance for decades were crumbling. On the international side, the fall of Communism starting in the late 1980s in Eastern Europe challenged the claim that the PCI could not govern and the international boycott on communist parties softened. The PCI itself also underwent a significant transformation in the early 1990s and the larger of its successor parties, the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), shed its tie to international communism.

On the domestic front, a number of important events and changes also challenged DC dominance. First, the Clean Hands movement, a massive anticorruption investigation that began in February 1992 through the efforts of public prosecutor Antonio Di Pietro, exposed the highly questionable tactics that the DC and other parties had used to maintain power (Colazingari and Rose-Ackerman 1998). Within just a few years, “six former prime ministers, more than five hundred members of Parliament and several thousand local and public administrators had become caught up in the investigations” (Vannucci 2009: 233). The Clean Hands movement revealed the extent to which political corruption had become an institutionalized part of the Italian political landscape.

Second, the nature of Italian ideological polarization and how it fed into traditional cleavage structures that had supported the DC’s hold on power was also crumbling. Scholars are divided in how this happened. Some have argued that the nature of the country was changing, that the rural and religious electorate that had traditionally supported the DC was modernizing and giving way to a more urbanized and secular citizenry eager to support different or new parties (Ignazi and Wellhofer 2013). Yet others point to the growing importance of the international economic context in Europe. Specifically, Italy was dangerously close to not meeting the convergence criteria set by the Maastrict Treaty for European monetary integration in the early 1990s. A large number of business interests, mostly concentrated in the North, who had traditionally supported the DC, had much to gain from participation in the Euro; to be denied the opportunity of integration because of Italy’s decaying political environment propelled them to support new parties, primarily the Northern Leagues that supported Northern economic and political independence (Golden 2004).

As a result, a push for electoral reform emerged as the solution to Italy’s chronic political and economic problems. The proportional electoral system was seen as the main culprit in sustaining the old party system and the DC’s incapacity to govern effectively. Two important and successful abrogative referendums in 1991 and 1993 paved the way for major electoral reforms. The first in 1991 called for the removal of the system’s preference votes. The second in 1993 endorsed changing the proportional formula to some form of plurality. Both passed with

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10 A second trend toward decentralization was regional devolution. Though this is not a legislative institution, it deserves mention because it decentralized the governing process even further. Title V of the 1947 Constitution called for the creation of regional governments. But the concern that some regional governments would be dominated by left wing parties (especially in the so-called ‘red belt’ in the center part of the country) prevented Title V’s full implementation. Significant social unrest and gains for left wing parties in the 1960s pushed regional reform onto the agenda and as a result, in the early 1970s the regional governments finally came to life (see Putnam 1993).

11 The PDS accepted three ministries in Ciampi’s 1993 technocratic government, but withdrew a week later.
overwhelming majorities. As a result, a technocratic government under Carlo Azeglio Ciampi (who had served as governor for the Bank of Italy) was implemented and tasked to write the new electoral law in 1993. The Ciampi government created the Additional Member System, which involved a complicated electoral formula with 75% of the legislative seats in both houses elected with plurality rule in single member districts and the remaining 25% divided by proportionality (Sanchez 2002). In addition, there was the addition of the scorpo, or the ‘price,’ that large parties would have to pay to smaller parties to allow the smaller parties some share of representation.

The events surrounding the Clean Hands movement and the new electoral law had several effects. First, the DC could not withstand the pressures from the judicial investigations and formally dissolved in January 1994. The DC members in the Italian Parliament formally changed their party affiliation to the Popular Party. Second, and for the first time in modern Italian political history, after national elections in March 1994 wholesale alternation in the executive became possible. The winner take all plurality system used for 75% of the legislative seats ensured that the main competition in each constituency would be between one of two parties. However, rather than consolidating all the votes into two main parties (as was hoped), legislators representing parties found new ways to collaborate and consolidate their interests into two main ‘ blocs’ of parties. A party in the bloc would run in a constituency on the plurality side of the ballot only when it believed it could win there; the other parties in the bloc would not submit a candidate. The system thus remained highly fragmented, but the parties were now aligned into one of two camps, what we might call ‘ catch-all blocs’ (Forestiere 2009). Because the stigma on both the left and right had been removed, each bloc could now serve in government. Party blocs alternated in 1994, 1996, 2001, 2006, and 2008. Clearly both the DC and single party dominance came to an end.

But does this mean that the governing capacity of post-DC governments has increased and that, as a result, clientelism has decreased? Unfortunately, the answer to both these questions is no. Despite the DC’s termination, the reinforcing loops are still in effect. First, concerning the government’s governing capacity the hopes that electoral reform would diminish the number of parties did not materialize. Parties quickly learned how to manipulate the new electoral system to ensure their survival. Moreover, as mentioned previously, laws concerning the provision of public party financing still play a role in maintaining significant multipartism since the access thresholds for public funding are very low (Pacini and Piccio 2012). The presence of sustained multipartism means that governments still face hostile environments both in the executive and in the legislature. For example in the immediate post-DC period, the first government after national elections in 1994 introduced Silvio Berlusconi to the national political stage. His party, the newly crafted Forza Italia! (named from a popular soccer chant) won a plurality with 21% of the votes. Berlusconi thus needed coalition partners to form an executive, which he found in the Northern League (whose main interest was regional autonomy) and the National Alliance (the successor party to the Italian Social Movement, whose main interest was national solidarity), in addition to two smaller parties. The ideologically incongruent coalition lasted nine months before another technocratic government under Lamberto Dini took over, primarily to ensure that Italy would implement the necessary austerity measures to ensure participation in the new European currency. After elections in 1996, a 5-party center-left coalition formed a government, with Romano Prodi as Prime Minister. The coalition depended critically on the support of the Refounded Communist Party (PRC). This lasted about a year and half before the PRC withdrew its support. A new coalition formed in 1998 with Massimo D’Alema, a former Communist, as

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12 Almost predictably, one parties understood how this system worked, ‘decoy parties’ that were really extensions of the larger parties, were set up to ensure that the bigger parties did not lose seats. Voters were encouraged to vote for the larger parties on the single member district list but for the decoy parties on the proportional list. In practice the larger parties and decoys were the same party. In 2001 both the House of Freedoms and the Olive Tree coalitions (both comprised of several parties) engaged in this strategy, thereby avoiding the price. The strategy was so successful that Silvio Berlusconi’s party, Forza Italia, was awarded more seats than it had candidates (since candidate lists had to be submitted by a certain date before the election), which meant that the Constitutional Court had to decide the fate of 12 seats.
Prime Minister. At the end of 1999 D’Alema was forced to reshuffle his cabinet and in 2000 a new Prime Minister, Giuliano Amato (a former Socialist who had served as one of Italy’s last Prime Ministers before DC dominance ended) formed a new government. Thus, while there has been alternation in the executive since the end of single party dominance, coalition politics still remain turbulent and unpredictable, which means that governments can rely neither on their fickle coalition partners nor on their fragile legislative majorities.

And this has led to the government’s continued inability to get important and comprehensive reforms passed and implemented. This was especially true for badly needed financial legislation in the late 1990s to transform Italy’s underdeveloped equity and securities market by ensuring minority shareholder protection for example. Despite a new political majority, the ‘Draghi reforms’ of 1998, proposed by the Bank of Italy’s Governor and designed to transform Italy’s ‘blockholder’ economy by introducing new shareholders, did not have their desired effect (Deeg 2005; Culpepper 2007; Forestiere and Allen 2011). The power of the blockholders was simply too strong. Furthermore, it appears that clientelism and political corruption are still pervasive elements in the Italian political system. The furious judicial activity that precipitated the political earthquake that ended both the DC and its hold on executive power eventually fizzled out. The Italian citizenry seems to have reached a ‘saturation point’ since political corruption no longer seems to capture the attention of the public as it once did. In addition, the individuals who were best adept at avoiding prosecution and conviction during the Clean Hands movement returned to the public sphere and in many cases continued their practices, but with greater levels of precaution. The ‘survival of the [corrupt] fittest’ explains why corruption has increased, how new forms of corruption are emerging, and why, importantly, those committed to ending such practices face immense difficulties (Vannucci 2009). Put simply, political corruption is part of Italian politics and the politicians who practice it adapt better to changing conditions than those who wish to eradicate it. Furthermore the economic benefits from corruption are considerable, certainly worth the risk to those who practice it. The use of corruption has become a path dependent political norm.

As a result, even though some of the factors outside the model have changed, the causal processes within the loop remain mostly the same, which means that even though DC dominance has come to an end, the reinforcing loops remain intact. The only factor within the original loops that has been significantly altered is the constrained government formation process, which is what largely explained DC dominance in Italy for almost 50 years. Clearly this is no longer applicable since Communism is no longer a threat and coalition blocs between the center right and center left have alternated in power. Now that each electoral bloc is viable for executive-office, single party dominance will most likely not result again. Nonetheless, executive alternation did not signify the end of Italy’s governing woes. To the contrary, because of internal coalition politics and the legislature’s institutional environment (which remained the same), even though there is now executive alternation between coalitions, the government’s maneuverability and capacity to govern continue to deteriorate, which has allowed clientelism to remain a primary mechanism through which exchanges are made.\footnote{It will be interesting to see what happens in the next year, as Italy’s new ‘rottamotore’ Prime Minister Matteo Renzi tackles electoral and institutional (primarily in the Senate) reform and attempts to remove clientelism from the public sphere. However, within days of taking office, 1) the government had to bypass parliament and pass a decree to ensure that Roman funds would not run out and 2) a cabinet minister was forced to resign because of corruption allegations.}

The following model shows how – despite important changes – the reinforcing loops linking the government’s governing capacity and clientelism are still in effect. This was started by the DC but it did not end when the DC disintegrated. In this picture, the main modifications have been to the electoral system and cleavage structure, which have eliminated the presence of a constrained government formation process. As a result, single party dominance is no longer a preordained outcome. But extreme multipartism and Italy’s decentralized legislative institutions remain the primary drivers of the government’s reduced capacity to govern, which continues to fuel clientelism and political corruption.
IV. Implications for other cases of single party dominance

Most scholars of Italian politics are familiar with the catch-phrase “Democracy, Italian Style” that LaPalombara penned almost 30 years ago as the title for his provocative book (LaPalombara 1987). It is highly likely, too, that other single party dominant regimes have their own idiosyncrasies. Is it possible to use Italy’s experience to generate any expectations for other cases?

The model presented here suggests that Italy’s preference vote proportional system coupled with a constrained government formation process on the one hand and a highly decentralized legislative process on the other were the root causes for the DC’s reduced governing capacity and the high levels of clientelism as seen in the two reinforcing feedback loops. These conditions were reinforcing for well over 40 years. But the conditions that led to these outcomes are not necessarily eccentric features of the Italian system. Many new democracies opt for some variant of the proportional representation electoral system, which reduces the likelihood of a single majority winner. Furthermore, previous experiences with authoritarianism might create “anti-system” or “pariah” parties that mainstream centrist parties would prefer not to collaborate with in the new democracies (Van Spanje and Van Der Brug 2007). This situation – in which a plurality winner cannot negotiate with all parties in the legislature – could create an environment in which smaller parties hold a great deal of power. Unless there is some mechanism to guarantee compliance, significant government weakness

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14 The electoral system changed again in 2005 to a party list proportional system with a majority prize (55% of the legislative seats) for the plurality coalition winner. It is the system that is in use at the time of writing this article. The current Renzi government that took control in February 2014 wishes to change it. Nonetheless, at present the reciprocal electoral strategies and multipartism remain the same.
could result. As a consequence, extraordinary practices (clientelism among them) may result, especially when such weak governments are coupled with a permissive legislature that impairs the government’s ability to protect its legislation. One interpretation suggests that clientelism resolved intractable collection action problems and may have prevented Italy from reverting to authoritarianism. But now that such practices are the norm, it will be increasingly difficult to break the pattern. What the Italian case shows is that once politicians learn how to manipulate their environment, changing such strategies is exceptionally difficult.


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15 In many countries in Latin America, where presidentialism is combined with the proportional electoral system for the legislature, many executives have had to use presidential decrees to pass legislation (see Siaveles 2009 for a good description of executive-legislative relations in Latin America).


Christian Democracy (Italian: Democrazia Cristiana, DC) was a Christian democratic political party in Italy. The DC was founded in 1943 as the ideal successor of the Italian People's Party, which had the same symbol, a crossed shield (scudo crociato). As World War II was ending, the Christian Democrats started organizing post-Fascist Italy in coalition with all the other mainstream parties, including the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), the Italian Liberal Party (PLI), the Italian Republican Party (PRI), the Action Party (Pd'A) and the Labour Democratic Party (PDL). Christian Democracy (Italian: Democrazia Cristiana, DC) was a Christian democratic party in Italy. It was founded in 1943 as the ideological successor of the historical Italian People's Party, which had the same symbol, a crossed shield (scudo crociato). The DC, a catch-all party comprising both right-wing and left-wing factions, dominated the politics of Italy for almost 50 years from 1944 until its demise amid a welter of corruption allegations in 1992–1994. It was succeeded by several parties, including the Italian People's Party, the Christian Democratic Centre, the United Christ...