exceeded only by my admiration for his ability to manage the prime minister's office with one hand, complex political negotiations with the other, and still find the ways to alert me to innumerable pitfalls.

At Yale University Press, Laura Jones Dooley edited every line with impressive professional tact. And Marian Ash, whose editorial skills are well known to so many writers, did not deprive me on that score. She, like my friend Amato, wisely led me to make structural changes in the manuscript that I feel substantially improved it. John Nicoll added insights and strong advice that led to several late but necessary changes. Where imperfections persist, they have survived the best efforts of friends and colleagues to set things straight.

I composed this book on a word processor, about which apparatus I have mixed feelings. On one occasion, to my horror, I inadvertently sent a whole chapter into that black hole where electronic "bytes" go when they are not preventively "saved"—and printed! But word processors also release secretaries for more creative work. In my case, this meant that Sandra Rosen could turn her considerable talents to corrections of my manuscript as well as to the arcane ways of the personal computer itself.

Yale University's generous triennial leave program made it possible to produce a first draft of the manuscript at Rome. Thanks to my good friend and colleague Guglielmo Negri, I was able to use the facilities of the Chamber of Deputies library at Montecitorio.

By far my greatest debt is to the people of Italy. Over the years, many Italians, from every conceivable walk of life, have patiently offered me precious insights into the workings of their society, and particularly their political and economic institutions. Individually, the number who have gone out of their way on my behalf is much too large to enumerate here. Collectively, the Italians have made and reiterated one major point: to understand Italy, and especially its politics, requires a bit of *fantasia*. I hope the reader will find traces of that admirable and very Italian quality in the pages that follow.

# 1

# A DEMOCRATIC PARADOX

Early in 1985, Ronald Reagan greeted Bettino Craxi, Italy's visiting prime minister, with the same question other U.S. presidents had put to Craxi's predecessors many times before. "How's your crisis going?" Reagan asked. "Very well, thank you," Craxi replied. It is doubtful that the prime minister's sardonic response succeeded in reassuring official Washington that, as Mark Twain once said of Richard Wagner's music, things are not really as bad as they sound.

"Things" in this case is the Italian political system. For forty years outsiders have thought about Italy, if at all, as a nation tottering at the brink of political disaster. That protracted balancing act should in itself have alerted us to the possibility that "things" in Italy are not necessarily as they appear on the surface. A country that seems to lean into the void but never really falls into it may actually be firmly anchored there, like the Tower of Pisa.

Italian commentary on political leaders and institutions is typically an off-key, atonal cacophony, not easy to comprehend. The fragments we hear suggest a dire situation. The clearest word filtering through the babble is *la crisi,* the crisis. One prime minister's visit will scarcely modify the common belief that Italian democracy lives by its wits alone, and on borrowed time.

During Easter Week that same year, NBC's "Today Show" transmitted from Rome by satellite. From the Spanish Steps, the Colosseum, and the Vatican, ten million viewers each day were served up with breakfast visual images of "modern" Italy. Most of what they saw and heard were clichés. Valentino was there, with some of his most dazzling creations. By now everyone knows that, when it comes to twenty-thousand-dollar items of high fashion, the Italians are unbeatable. Fiat's Gianni Agnelli appeared

on the video screen. We have all heard, many times, that he is Italy's contemporary "Renaissance man." Peter Ustinov, appropriately dressed in Roman toga as Nero, was there too—but in a Colosseum where the most ferocious action these days is the clicking of high-speed camera shutters.

About Italian democracy, NBC's overriding question was, "How come it's still around?" There were predictable variations on this theme: Are the Italian Communists really Communists? Are the labor unions too strong? How do Italians feel about all of those changes in government? Do the Italians really have confidence in their political leaders? Are they too soft on terrorists? Is there too much corruption here? What about all of that tax evasion? All in all, "How is your crisis going?"

Stereotypes of Italy invite such clichés. Italians themselves seem to work hard to assure that they stay in place. When disaster fails to occur on schedule it is easy to conclude that it's all play-acting. A *New York Times* correspondent once lamented that, after more than twenty years of reporting from one or another of the world's hot-spots, he found his Italian assignment utterly boring. "Nothing really happens here," he complained. "It's only words, words, words." He was used to pitched military battles, coups, and civil wars. Compared to where he had been, he may have found prosaic such typical Italian events as political assassinations; bombs in crowded piazzas or grenades in sidewalk cafés delivered by terrorists; open warfare, from Sicily to Trento or Turin, between the police and organized criminals; financial scandals that sometimes bring down governments; and so many other events that, politically speaking, look pathological.

In a setting like Italy, where the tenth impression can be as deceptive as the first, it is easy to confuse illusion with the real thing. True enough, we should long since have realized that Italian Communists, who wear splendidly tailored clothes and talk like your friendly loan officer down at the bank, are really not plotting an Italian variation of the Bolshevik revolution. Or we might have guessed that one reason why Italians create the impression of crisis and chaos is that they want to be admired for their ability to manage life despite such conditions. The point is that, to get at reality, we need to overcome the clichés and, even more, to weigh events in the Italian context.

This book is about Italian politics or, more precisely, about democratic government as it is practiced in Italy. Its basic message is that, contrary to appearances, and despite what so many Italians would have us believe,



Italian democracy is alive and thriving. If this statement seems unlikely, given what transpires in Italy, if the existence or survival of democratic government seems paradoxical, it will appear less so once we get the hang of how the system itself actually works.

A second message of the book refers to our theories of democracy. If Italy is a strong democracy but nevertheless fails to conform to what our theories specify as the requisite conditions of democracy, this is not necessarily a paradox. It may mean instead that we need to revise or expand our theories of the democratic state.

## DISQUIETING SYMPTOMS

Italy abounds in symptoms that theorists and advocates of democratic government find disquieting. Political scandals are endemic. Officeholders and politicians, bankers and industrialists, military officers and members of the clergy, television personalities and magistrates themselves are hauled into court, and sometimes wind up behind bars, on charges of venality and corruption. Organized crime—the Mafia is only one of several major organizations—gains strangleholds, not just in Sicily or Naples but in cities like Milan and Turin and the places in between.

Terrorism has been part of the political landscape for fifteen years. Although domestic terrorists are not as virulent as earlier, they still managed in December 1984 to blow up a fast train headed from Florence to Bologna. The next spring, they murdered a professor of economics, in broad daylight, at the University of Rome. In March 1987 they shot and killed Gen. Licio Giorgieri in Rome. If this type of violence has been brought somewhat to heel, international terrorists have stepped in to keep nerves on edge.

Everyone agrees that the political management of the economy leaves much to be desired. Prime Minister Craxi himself publicly declared that as much as one-fourth of Italy's real gross national product might be in the "hidden"—that is, the cash and unreported—economy. At the 1987 exchange rate, this amounts to over sixty billion dollars! If this tells us that Italy is somewhat better off economically than the official statistics suggest, it also reveals that the government is not exactly on top of things. This is shown by such indicators as inflation rates, deficit levels, welfare expenditures, and the accumulated public debt of recent years.

To many, the institutions of Italian government seem weak and helpless

to cope with such problems. To others, the overall picture looks so discouraging as to create doubts that the country is governable at all. The pollsters have reported for decades that citizens are disgusted with politics, scornful of political leaders, and downright hostile toward political parties. Mass attitudes seem to add up to the kind of "political alienation" that should spell trouble for a democratic society.

On close inspection, it can be shown that levels of governmental incompetence, of fierce ideological conflict, have been no greater in Italy than elsewhere among West European democracies. If Washington is nervous about Italy, and if others think that the survival of Italian democracy is paradoxical, this is so in part because Italians themselves have helped fashion these views. For decades now they have broadcast to the world that not only politics but every other conceivable aspect of their society is deeply in crisis. Where such litanies do not cause foreboding, they create the impression that it is indeed just words, words, words, spoken by a melodramatic people overinclined to see a wolf at the door.

As we will see, it is important not to take at face value the things Italians say about politics. If we do, then, like the pollsters, we will discover more paradoxes than the objective situation warrants. In a recent poll, for example, Italians in large numbers assured the interviewers that their neighborhoods, their towns and cities, and their country were all in dire decline. Yet when asked to comment on their material and economic conditions and their personal futures, these people just as overwhelmingly said that they were doing quite well, thank you, and expected to go right on in the same direction.

## DEMOCRATIC BENCHMARKS

Even if we follow the stricture to be wary, the surface phenomena remain disquieting. The political scandals are real, and frequent enough to challenge credulity. The Mafia and Camorra are not perverse inventions of Mario Puzo, Hollywood, or the mass media but palpable, murderous organizations that wield economic and social, as well as political, power. Far from joining in any campaign to eradicate this problem, many enterprising members of the middle and upper classes invent scams of their own and thereby manage to bilk the state of hundreds of millions, even billions, of dollars. Furthermore, they often surpass the Mafiosi when it comes to the avoidance of prosecution and jail.



Italy also seems to fall short on other measures we use to gauge the health and stability of democratic governments. The language of politics, for example, is very intense: full of ideological assertions, sweeping condemnations of political opponents, and other expressions that suggest open warfare and irreconcilable conflict. Were one to read only the partisan press and to listen to speeches made in parliament or in the piazzas, one would quickly get the impression that, politically speaking, Italians are engaged in a war of all against all.

This image might easily be reinforced by some facts about government at every level. Cities can go for weeks, even months, without governments because the elected assembly members and their parties can't get together to form a working majority. In the republic's relatively short life there have already been forty-five national governments, or more than one per year. Any day of the week, it is a safe bet that one of the major regional or municipal governments will find itself in a state of apparent disintegration.[1] This has been the country's steady state for the past four decades. Isn't this evidence enough that the shortcomings Italians keep referring to are real?

Well, it depends. The shortcomings are almost always exaggerated and the crises invariably something less than that. In addition, certain aspects of Italian politics and government do not imply in Italy what such things might mean elsewhere. We all know that no democratic country will look entirely reassuring when measured against some abstract, idealized conception of the democratic state. It is not in this extremely demanding sense, therefore, that we should judge democracy, Italian style. This idea is difficult to sell, even in Italy, where, from the beginning of its history as a nation, intellectuals, journalists, and politicians have lamented the "revolutions," especially the democratic ones, that somehow managed to fail.

More typically, those who find Italian democracy weak, defective, and full of paradoxes make comparisons between Italy and such other democracies as Great Britain, France, the United States, or the Scandinavian countries. Although comparisons of this kind are sometimes useful, they can easily become arid, invidious, and misleading. They are arid because they invite endless, unproductive speculation as to what kind of a place Italy *might* be if only its leaders and its citizens were to behave differently: If there were fewer political parties, cabinet crises, or Communists; if the law governing elections were changed; if radical surgery were performed on the institutions of government; if the Catholic Church stayed out of

politics; if Reaganomics replaced the welfare state; or if the Mafia were to disappear overnight. The wish list is open-ended, and speculation is limited only by the imagination. None of this helps us to understand how the political process actually works or how amenable a particular democratic system might be to change.

Comparisons with other countries are invidious because they imply, in some deep sense, that Italian democracy would be improved if Italy were more like Britain or the United States, if Italian citizens could emulate their counterparts elsewhere—in short, if Italians were less Italian. This sometimes leads us to the arrogant belief that American or some other brand of democracy is a template that can be stenciled onto almost any other country and produce similar effects there. We forget the spectacular failures that followed past efforts to export the American or British constitutional formula to Latin American, Asian, and African countries.

Comparisons of one democracy with another can also be misleading. For example, it is far from clear that Italian practice falls shorter of democratic norms than is true of other democracies in Europe or North America. Nor is it apparent why it makes sense to compare contemporary Italy with the Weimar Republic, a democracy that failed, or to insist, as so many Italians do, that the answer to what ails Italy is to make it, constitutionally speaking, more like the present Federal Republic of Germany. Prescriptions as to what changes are needed in Italy are also drawn from the French, British, or American models. The basic idea is that the ailing patient requires some combination of political amputation and grafts that will produce a sounder, healthier, longer-lasting democracy.

Most such thoughts are delusions. Political systems are highly complex, and for many reasons democracies qualify as the most complex of them all. This being so, most judgments as to what a particular symptom may mean, whether or not a given aspect of politics is or is not pathological, are little more than wild guesses. And when it comes to prescriptions, to suggestions as to what will correct the defects, the truth is that few of us would fare very well were there even mildly stringent laws against malpractice in the making and amendment of constitutions.

When it comes to political surgery, to radical intervention to remake political institutions, we know much less than we sometimes claim about what will cure or kill the patient. If the Italians change prime ministers more often than do the British, or than Americans change presidents, does this really mean that Italian democracy is more unstable than the others? If 90 percent of the Italians typically vote in national elections,



as compared with just over half that number in American presidential elections, is it really the case, as some American scholars have claimed, that the Italian and not the American pattern is pathological? On reflection, which is the more serious weakness for democracy: the Italian government's apparent inability to bring the Mafia to heel in Sicily, or the failure of other democracies to deal with large-scale crime in their major cities? And which kind of corruption is more insidious: the headline-making scandals that fill Italy's daily newspapers, or the extensive "white-collar" crime in the United States, that rarely gets any public notice at all? [2]

The trouble with such comparisons is that they make it difficult to assess democracies in their own terms, within their particular social, economic, and historical contexts. The theorists of democracy are aware of this, and most of them therefore are careful to hedge what they say about the necessary and sufficient conditions for the birth, growth, maintenance, and breakdown of democracies. The typical hedge is to say that two or more factors will relate in a certain way if all other things are equal. But they rarely are. And so we are left in a terrible quandary when it comes to nailing down the factors inimical to democracy or to explaining why a particular condition will be fatal for one but not necessarily for another democratic system.

In discussing actual cases of breakdowns of democracies, we can and do attribute these to certain "excesses" of citizens, to certain failures of their representatives, to complex relations among social classes, perhaps to proclivities of the military, and even to complex events in international affairs. The richer the fabric of explanation, though, the more likely it will fit only one country or one situation.[3]

It would be nice to speak with confidence, to make accurate predictions, about the consequences for democracy of patterns or levels of economic mismanagement, tax evasion, political corruption, political meddling by the military, and even political violence like insurrection or civil war. However, people and institutions do not bend as readily as chemicals in test tubes to our efforts to discover the axioms of politics. A people's history and culture, its economic conditions and social norms, its aspirations and its workways and, yes, even its "national character" will affect the style and structure of government that develops in its midst. These same factors also limit the kinds of political engineering that can be performed in any given country.

As for democracy itself, it should now be obvious that it can flourish in remarkably different environments. This knowledge alone should alert us

to the possibility that something inconsistent with or inimical to democratic government in one place may be less so in another. In setting the requisites or the benchmarks of democracy, therefore, we must be careful not to limit these to certain institutions or certain ways of doing things that are esoteric, anchored to one point, or descriptive of only one society.

In the Italian case, before leaping to the conclusion that democracy there is ailing and in need of remedial intervention, we should try to gain a better grasp of how the system works and with what effects on Italians. Many persons who find Italian politics perversely awry and paradoxical conclude that the Italians have the kind of government they deserve. Judgments of this sort are invariably simplistic. A deeper, more interesting truth may be another: that the Italians have the kind of government they *prefer*. Furthermore, not only are political practice and the governmental system essentially democratic, but they may also represent the only type of democracy that is viable within the Italian context. This system, like any other, is not without its imperfections. But it is highly unlikely that Italian republican government can be transformed into something different, and perhaps better, without placing democracy itself at risk.

## DEMOCRACY'S HISTORICAL ROOTS

The Italian republic is an accident of history. The *nation* of Italy is barely beyond its first century.[4] Giuseppe Mazzini, early in the last century, championed a united Italy, liberated from monarchies large and small, foreign or indigenous, and from the Catholic church, which had for so long dominated the peninsula. Another Giuseppe, the flamboyant Garibaldi, also wanted a united and republican Italy. To that end, he led his glorious Thousand into Sicily and Naples to liberate both from an alien Bourbon monarchy. The ubiquitous monuments to this republican-on-horseback fail to convey that, as things worked out, Garibaldi, Mazzini, and many who followed them fell short of their aspirations.

Count Camillo di Cavour, a contemporary of the Bismarck who united Germany, was a more skillful and pragmatic founding father. He brought the nation of Italy together under the aegis of the House of Savoy. And so Italy's first steps in the direction of democracy were guided by aristocratic oligarchs who had a great fear of populism and who had no intention at all of turning the national government over to the masses.

Contrary to the myths about the Risorgimento, this movement for



Italy's resurgence was anything but a popular ground swell—not in the north, certainly, but also not in the south. Tomasi di Lampedusa, in his wonderful novel, *The Leopard,* makes this point indelibly when he has the nephew of his Sicilian aristocrat say that in order for everything to remain the same in Italy everything must change. In any event, all over the peninsula the peasants were either indifferent to the Risorgimento or, in many cases, readily joined forces with their betters, local power holders all, in taking up arms against the country's unification.

The Risorgimento may or may not be one of Italy's "failed revolutions," but it did leave many legacies. The most important of these is a widely shared belief about what makes the nation possible. The requirement is that as little as possible about the true nature of the national state—the compromises its existence requires, the price that its continuance extracts from classes, groups, and regions of the country—should be clearly defined or legislated. One of the strengths of the 1948 Italian constitution, for example, is vagueness on many issues that, if forthrightly treated, might seriously divide the country. Another merit of that document is that many of its more radical provisions are not, as the lawyers say, self-executing. This means that before they can go into effect additional laws must be passed, and Italians are masters at taking their sweet time on that score. The purists have found this foot-dragging outrageous and have scored the Christian Democrats for their failure to implement the constitution. The positive side of the practice is that the Republic of Italy is still around.

In Italy, the clarification of political problems and the establishment of clear-cut choices regarding them remains fundamentally erosive to national unity. Indeed, such practice is alien to the national character! The republic is still on its feet because, unlike the French who worship at the altar of Reason, the Italians have never believed that Reason, especially in politics, is anything more than a blunt tool. Italian national unity and indeed democracy itself have managed to sink roots in highly improbable soil because so much about power relationships—rights and privileges, duties and responsibilities—remains ambiguous. Unless this is understood, much of Italian national politics, from the 1860s to the present day, would defy comprehension.

Sometimes, as in love relationships, ambiguity seems to enrage Italians. Even in this delicate area, though, there exist modes and degrees of tolerance and accommodation that many outsiders might well find astounding. In politics, ambiguity enrages primarily the self-appointed in-

Atlantic Treaty Organization, there were many in Washington, London, and Paris who doubted that Italy could ever be constructively included in the Atlantic community. In Italy itself, particularly among leading Christian Democrats, there were deep reservations as to whether the country should line up with the West in postwar international politics. It required heroic efforts on the part of several leading Italian ambassadors to persuade the victorious allies, on the one hand, and leaders like Alcide De Gasperi, on the other, that Italy's proper destiny lay on the side of the Western bloc of democratic countries.[9]

Italian democracy, then, did not rise phoenixlike from the ashes of fascism and war; nor was it a governmental formula worked out and agreed to in advance by the country's major postwar political protagonists. Benito Mussolini had promised his countrymen a Third Rome, embellished by imperial splendors and in no way to be confused with the Western democracies Il Duce despised. His fear that Adolf Hitler alone might win the war and walk off with the spoils overshadowed his earlier insight that nazism represented the darkest and most degenerate moment in German history. So he attacked France and led his country not to new imperial glories but, rather, to the brink of disaster and beyond. Few who inherited this folly, including the most ardently antifascist among them, believed that a democratic system, tailored along liberal republican lines, should or could be erected in its wake.

## PROBLEMATICAL DEMOCRACY

War left Italy in a state of extreme prostration. An estimated two-thirds of the country's economic capacity was destroyed. There were no Italian Dresdens, bombed beyond recognition by Allied aircraft, but key industrial centers were knocked out, and the railroad system was left a shambles. The vaunted fascist war machine not only turned out to be, like so much of the regime, a costly farce, but its quixotic deployment drained the country white and left industry in a state of obsolescence. By 1945 the country's productive capacity had fallen considerably below the level of 1938, a depression year.[10]

There was moral and psychological devastation as well, poignantly captured in great postwar films like *Rome, Open City,* and *The Bicycle Thief.* Most Italians had supported fascism, reluctantly at first but later with unabashed enthusiasm. The shameful conquest of Ethiopia, widely condemned in the West, was just as widely hailed in Italy as a first step toward a new Roman empire. Eventually, Fascist mythmakers persuaded most Italians that the famous March on Rome was a long, glorious column led by Mussolini rather than a ragtag band of political delinquents attracted to his cause. Above all, Italians came to value Il Duce's system of "law and order," and certainly preferred it to the chaos that preceded the advent of the fascist state.



Until disaster struck, Mussolini had gulled almost everyone into the belief that the regime's economic and military achievements were without parallel. We do not know for sure how many actually swallowed the propaganda that fascist science had invented a "death ray" that would stop enemy aircraft in midair. We do know that millions of Italian (and Italian-American) housewives responded at once to Mussolini's demand that they send him their wedding rings to help pay for what fascism wanted to erect.

It simply is not true that fascism was the madness of one man, forced on a reluctant people, just as it is not true that Italy under fascism was without anti-Semitism. Of course there was none of the mass murder of Jews that should forever mar the German psyche. But most Italians went meekly along with the fascist version of Jewish persecution that evolved under pressure from Hitler. Moreover, many in high places at Rome, including the Pope, were aware of Nazi depravity and did not utter a word in protest.

As the prospect of military defeat approached mathematical certainty, die-hard Fascists made a last-gasp effort to turn history around. In the north they formed, with Il Duce, the so-called Republic of Salò and thereby triggered a ferocious civil war. This war-within-the-war pitted neighbors against neighbors, brothers against brothers, sons against fathers. At one point, half of Italy had surrendered to the invading Allies, while the other half fought Allied troops in some sectors, Nazi troops in others, and each other in between. The climax of it all was, to say the least, as scarring as it was ignominious.

This was hardly solid ground on which to erect a democracy. And yet the democratic republic has already celebrated its fortieth anniversary. That republic is steady on its feet. Not only has it overcome the formidable handicaps that preceded and accompanied its birth; it has learned to walk and sometimes to run on its own. If there have been moments of regression, these seem to have encouraged an even greater resolve to make the republic work.

Many Cassandras are still inclined to bury the republic, but they are overwhelmingly outnumbered by Italians who must surely take perverse pleasure in confounding them. I suspect, too, that on the whole Italians are prouder of this extraordinary political achievement than they are willing to admit. The language of Italian politics is so inflated and so suggestive of unmitigated conflict and warfare, and Italians engage in such a degree of self-laceration in describing their politics—one has to get behind all of this in order to learn what is really going on.

By now, we are locked into the other image of Italy—the one that leads NBC reporters and others to wonder why the republic is still on its feet. All of that sound and fury, it seems, cannot be just that. The game of musical chairs that cabinet ministers play, the governmental crises, unreined terrorists in airports and train stations, double-digit inflation, and megascandals that reach even to the lofty heights of the Pope's favorite banker—these are a few of the symptoms that lead scholars to give their books such titles as *Italy: An Uncertain Republic, Does Government Exist in Italy?* or *Surviving without Governing*.

Some writers have made a virtual industry of depicting Italian democracy as headed if not toward oblivion then certainly toward some mortal encounter with its enemies. The country is described as dangerously "polarized," a word that easily produces images of two extreme groups, lethally armed and ready to mix it up in ways that assure that the first and principal victim will be the democratic system itself. An even more alarming picture depicts Italians as essentially anarchistic egoists, so selfish in their interests and so unalterably opposed to the interests of others as to create something like Hobbes's war of all against all. With images like these permeating one's consciousness, little wonder that Ronald Reagan, speaking for so many others, worries how Italy's "crisis" may be going.

If a democracy is launched in such problematical circumstances; if the structure of its basic institutions seems so fragile; if the climate of politics remains so stormy that the country seems to do little more than lurch from one crisis to another; and if Italians themselves keep warning that the shoals of complete disaster are nearby and inescapable, then the rest of us can be forgiven if we find its day-to-day and year-to-year survival paradoxical, even miraculous.

We will be rocked even more to discover the extent of Italy's economic and material well-being. This war-wracked country is today's fifth largest economy. Its people enjoy one of the highest living standards in the world. It serves as a magnet for millions of tourists each year who, beyond Italy's



legendary artistic wealth and natural beauty, are able to sense, if they are at all awake, that something about the way the country is governed must be right. It is impossible to square today's Italy, in every sense, with the stereotypes that abound about that country.

## A DEMOCRATIC POLYARCHY

In the pages ahead, we will see how and why Italy is less paradoxical than it appears. Several major themes run through this book. First, Italian society is permeated by politics and the democratic system itself is centered in the hands of political party elites. These leaders are much more skilled in the political management of the country than most persons, and especially the Italians themselves, are willing to acknowledge. Second, Italians, somewhat amazingly, given the monumental changes of recent decades, remain politically clustered into three major subcultures. Much of what occurs in Italian society, including politics, centers on these subcultures and the relationships among them. Third, Italy has a form of sub-rosa government that looks undemocratic but is not. In any case, it is the only viable democratic government there, given certain realities to be discussed later in detail. Fourth, historical events on the Italian peninsula, and especially the recent fascist interlude, have combined to create in Italy a deep-seated and widespread commitment to democratic government. Finally, Italian democracy is highly participatory, but not necessarily in the same ways as is characteristic of other democratic societies. If the Italian experience teaches anything about democracy, it is that there are myriad ways in which the ordinary citizen's actions involving politics will serve to reinforce his or her commitment to democracy.

To set the stage for what follows, we must note at the outset that we are in fact dealing with a democracy. The concept of course is slippery, not easy to define. We can easily agree that Italy, like all other representative democratic countries, does not resemble the classical democracies of ancient Greece.

Italian democracy does not fully satisfy the conditions of polyarchy either, although it comes much closer to doing so than many critics and detractors of the Italian system would have us believe. To qualify as a democratic polyarchy, certain conditions must be met.[11] These include the rights of citizens to formulate their preferences; to form and join

organizations; to become candidates for public office in pursuit of these preferences; to oppose peaceably the preferences of others, including those who constitute the government; to have access to information and to the instruments that produce and diffuse it; and to have preferences accepted or rejected as public policies both through free and open elections, and through procedures that ascribe essentially equal weight to all citizens, their preferences, and their votes.

This is a tall order, and no contemporary democratic state really fills it. One of the quarrels with Italian democracy is the allegation, already noted, that it is egregious in its failure to relate the formation of governments and the enactment of public policies to electoral outcomes. We assess this matter later in this book. At the moment, suffice it to repeat that, where the underlying issue is the form of political participation and the effects of participation on public policies, there are as many ways to it as there may be dead ends or blind alleys. We must be careful not to rule out the Italian way by mere fiat of definition.

On most of the other measures of polyarchy, Italy does not do badly at all. Universal suffrage is not only well established, but it is more assiduously indulged than almost anywhere else. Qualifications for public office are much like those of other democracies, and those who successfully run for office remain there only so long as the voters are willing, in subsequent elections, to leave them there. Furthermore, no one, not even the military, would think of opposing the outcome of elections, except on constitutional or legal grounds.

Italy is so even-handed toward those who seek public office that even jailed persons accused of serious crimes sometimes get on the ballot and are elected to high office. The Radical party has made this maneuver one of its specialties. The most arresting case to date occurred in 1983, when the Radicals nominated and then elected to the national legislature Toni Negri, who was then in jail awaiting trial on charges that he was one of the "brains" behind the Red Brigades. When it appeared that the lawmakers would vote to lift Negri's parliamentary immunity so he could stand trial, he took off for Paris, which has been a haven for Italian expatriates suspected or convicted of terrorism. Not long ago, Negri publicly complained that the Italian parliament, on the petty ground that he was not in regular attendance at Rome, was sending him only half of his parliamentarian's salary. On this occasion the government displayed a tin ear. But the fact that the government pays him anything at all says



something about Italy's addiction to the rule of law and its political toleration. Toni Negri is, in writing, a sworn enemy of the Italian state.

By American, British, or German standards, the degree of freedom and liberty in Italy seems to border on license or anarchy. The press is certainly free, although its ownership structure would raise eyebrows in some other democracies. The Italian mass media also appear far more politicized than in other democracies, but this may mean no more than that the matter is more in the open there than elsewhere. On the other hand, the Italian mass media regularly publish material that in other democratic countries would be considered beyond the limits of "public decency" and, in many instances, libelous. In recent months, those who publish damaging statements about others have adopted the American-type defense that they are "investigative reporters" who need not divulge the sources of their incriminating claims. Such claims are hollow; genuine investigative Italian journalism is about as frequent as major snowstorms on the Isle of Capri.

On the other hand, unlike countries like the United States and Britain, Italy does not blandly accept the death of major newspapers as an inevitable outcome of the market's "hidden hand" at work. Instead, the government provides heavy subsidies to keep newspapers in print. This policy is even extended to radical papers like *Il Manifesto* that rarely have a kind word to say about the government. If, as some claim, Italians do not read very much—about politics or anything else—it is not because the print media are boring or conformist.

When it comes to political parties and pressure groups, Italians have shown no reluctance to further their proliferation. The best-known political parties number about six, although it is not uncommon for the voters to find three or four times that number on the ballot. These parties come into existence not just to participate in republican government; some of them openly intend to change the system radically if they attract enough votes. So far that has not happened, and it probably will not, but the basic freedom is there.

Italian democracy knows no alien and sedition laws. There are no witch hunts here of the kind that in the United States bear the names of the Salem Witch Hunts, Sacco and Vanzetti, or Sen. Joseph McCarthy. Even if Italian equivalents of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were to be convicted of high treason, life imprisonment, and not the electric chair, would be their severest punishment. The worst one can say about Italy's treatment of political opponents of the republic who are arrested for terrorism is

that they, like those arrested for other alleged crimes, may languish in prison for years before being tried.

On the other hand, terrorists not only survive in prison; they are notoriously well treated there. Unlike members of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group in West Germany, they are not found dead in their cells, officially reported as cases of suicide committed in maximum-security prisons.

The Italian system of justice is certainly not without its faults, and some would argue that the most serious of these has been a gradual tendency of judges to become the willing tools of political groups and causes, including those of the terrorists. We will explore this issue later, when we face the question how much of the existing institutional state of things is in need of change.

The point here, at the beginning, is not to make invidious comparisons, not to believe that, when it comes to assessments of other political systems, we stand on Mount Olympus. From where the Italians stand, in any case, it is far from clear that the polyarchical or democratic conditions found elsewhere are superior. The fact that masses of Americans do not participate in elections strikes many Italians as strange and irresponsible. The British government's treatment of terrorists in Northern Ireland seems to many Italians to be dangerously beyond the limits that democratic norms would impose on government. The number of Americans below the so-called poverty line and the level of unemployment in Britain suggest to Italians that there are aspects of their democratic system working better than those of these much older democracies.

Italy not only meets the conditions of polyarchy; it manages to do so under a range of existential factors that, in many other places, would make democratic polyarchy highly improbable, or place it in jeopardy. This may very well mean that a polyarchy, once established, has more staying power than we imagined. Or it may suggest that a wider range of contextual factors, including some that may initially appear incompatible with a democratic system, may actually work to support democracy.

## SOME APPARENT PARADOXES

Before we go on to explore this idea, we should enumerate a few of the specific aspects of Italian politics that make democracy there appear paradoxical to so many persons. Consider the following:



- Italy has the largest, strongest, and in many ways most able of Communist parties found among democracies. Nevertheless, that party has not only refrained from any subversive, to say nothing of revolutionary, assaults on democratic institutions and processes; at critical moments it has acted unambiguously to support and reinforce them.
- In much higher proportions than is true of other democracies (sometimes as many as eight or nine out of ten of those surveyed), Italians report that they are uninterested in politics, lack confidence in their political institutions, and never discuss politics with family members, friends, or neighbors. Yet they go to the polls—often, and in record numbers.
- The average life expectancy of a national government is around ten months, and since the late 1940s there have been forty-five of them. Some governmental crises lead to national elections in which voters can presumably reward and punish, modify the legislative majority, and thus produce the conditions for a new and different governmental coalition. Nevertheless, this never happens. From one election to another there are largely imperceptible changes in the proportion of the votes that go to parties of the left, center, and right wings of politics.
- Italians are acutely and unremittingly critical of government. They know where its weaknesses lie. With the help of the vigilant, and politically partisan, mass media, they can readily identify the miscreants, culprits, devils, and political machines and parties responsible for shortcomings, real or imagined. Nevertheless, no rascals are evicted from office here. There has never occurred the kind of alternation in office implied by the idea that once in a while the "ins" will be replaced by the "outs." As a matter of fact, a close look at the national legislature reveals that the Italian parliamentary system is without any opposition at all.

We could easily add more paradoxes. Outsiders find it strange, for example, that a country as Catholic as Italy is supposed to be reveals so much vehement anticlericalism. It is these same Catholics who, despite what the Vatican may say in the matter, award the Communist party about one-third of the vote. Furthermore, far from flourishing where poverty is rampant, the Communist party is strongest in some of the wealthiest regions of the peninsula and often weakest in the poorest regions.

Is it not paradoxical, as well as ironic, that the same national government that faces large-scale deficits in public spending fails to crack down on tax evaders, most of whom the government can readily identify if it is so

inclined? And does one marvel or shudder over a government that first, and knowingly, permits millions of violations of building codes and city plans and then passes a law that "forgives" or grants amnesty to the violators in exchange for modest fines?

And how shall we judge growing unemployment in a country where those who work for the government grow in numbers, complete their day of public "service" by two o'clock, and then go on to fill second jobs in the hidden, or unreported (that is, untaxed) economy? All manner of projects that aim to reform some of these things either bog down in legislative committees or, if they ever pass, are quickly sabotaged by the bureaucrats themselves, working hand-in-glove with those who stand to lose if the rules are changed.

This situation, which some Italians certainly find intolerable, is supposed to result in "political alienation," in hostility toward the so-called "political class," and in a much-remarked lack of respect for political institutions and those elected or appointed to them. Were this the case, then the tremors in the political system would be of seismic proportions. And someday they may well be, but there is very little evidence thus far that this is the case or, for that matter, that Italian democracy is on such a course.

Instead, a nascent democracy that looked unlikely forty years ago is in good shape today, and on a relatively steady course. In many ways, democracy, Italian style, seems in better condition than many older democracies (Belgium, the Netherlands, even France and Britain might be examples) that seem unable to resolve their own problems.

Let's take a closer look at this peculiar and interesting political system.

# 2

## WE, THE PEOPLE

Sixty million Italians make a fetish of appearing to be different from each other. It is not just that the haughty resident of Milan or Turin loathes being mistaken for a Neapolitan or a Sicilian—feelings that Sicilians and Neapolitans fully reciprocate. Residents of towns located within a few kilometers of each other also pride themselves on their cultural superiority over their neighbors.

Of course even Italians recognize that they resemble themselves more than they do outsiders, sharing not simply language, style of dress, and many other social preferences but also certain values, modes of behavior, and canons of public morality that are intimately related to politics. These may be assessed in terms of their negative, positive, mixed, or neutral consequences for democracy.

The stereotypes and dominant pictures we have of Italians are not entirely encouraging on this score. Giacomo Leopardi, a major nineteenth-century writer and poet, said that Italians not only lacked feelings for the nation as such; they were also devoid of any sense of society.[1] This being so, they were entirely without public morality, respect for others, and that minimum regard for public opinion that makes civilized living possible. Leopardi depicts Italians as rampant egoists, unremitting cynics, whose greatest and almost exclusive pleasure in life is to laugh derisively at humankind, beginning with themselves.

Leopardi goes on to say that Italians evince "a vivacity of character . . . that leads them to prefer the pleasures of *spettacolo*, and other delights of the senses, to other pleasures that are more appropriate to the spirit . . . and that impels them to entertainment, carelessness, and laziness." All they enjoy, he says, can be summed up in the *passeggiata*, or evening stroll, the spettacolo, and the church ceremony, which is of course just

arrangements of this kind may well suggest exactly the opposite. There is an underlying pragmatism at work here, an understanding and a general consensus that, despite the inevitable snags in the democratic process, the show must go on. And it does. We think about Italian politics as being so dominated by ideological conflict and so deeply characterized by inflated rhetoric, we fail to observe exactly how pragmatic, how prone to compromise, and how ingenious at the discovery of the instruments that facilitate compromise itself the Italians really are.

Similarly, we should not confuse spettacolo with the idea that this particular democratic process is a sham or that what it produces by way of public policies is lacking in substance. Were that actually the case, republican Italy would long since have withered away and, one way or another, been transformed into something else. Perhaps it would be better were Montecitorio to resemble more its British or American counterparts. But as I warned in the opening pages of this book, judgments of this kind may overlook the extent to which the Italian arrangement is not just a matter of choice but the only one possible. From a democratic standpoint, it also seems to work reasonably well. That seems to be the case not just with the national legislature but also with the electoral system, which is the first place we look when we seek to establish whether, and to what extent, a government is democratic.

# 5

# PARTIES AND ELECTIONS: THE RASHOMON SYNDROME

Constitutions provide the framework for democracy, but political parties and elections are its lifeblood. Dictators know this. When they take over, they quickly outlaw the competition. Elections, if held at all, turn into hollow rituals in which near-unanimous votes are cast, under duress, for the "leader" and his party. The Italians experienced almost two decades of this under Mussolini's fascist regime.

In republican Italy, elections occur regularly, and without duress. One finds there no more stuffed ballot boxes, or other forms of political chicanery, than in other democracies. And when electoral irregularities do occur, the miscreants often wind up behind bars.

By American or British standards, though, the number of political parties is excessive. Italians are as unabashed as their Israeli neighbors across the Mediterranean in the proliferation of political parties. In some regions, voters find upwards of fifteen parties on the ballot, most of them flashes in the pan. In national politics, the major and minor parties number about ten, of which seven have been around at least since 1946.

It is also the case that political parties in Italy enjoy a dubious reputation. In fact, as we will see later in more detail, growing numbers of Italians have fallen into thinking that the country is ruled by a "partyocracy" and that this is not a good thing. This mistaken idea is potentially dangerous; it can lead to attempts at "reform" that, ironically, may themselves upset the delicate balance that underlies any successful democracy. Furthermore, attacks on political parties, even when well motivated, frequently degenerate into attacks on democracy itself.

## THE PARTY SPECTRUM

The parties vary considerably in age, size of membership, ideology, and attractiveness at the polls.[1] The extreme left is from time to time occupied by smaller splinter parties that come into existence because some Communist party leaders accuse the party of betraying the revolution or working class, or of making too many compromises in the interest of gaining respectability with the voters and, especially, with the other parties—a much more pertinent consideration in Italy. One of these, the party of Proletarian Unity (PDUP), settled its differences with the PCI and rejoined it in 1983. The other, Proletarian Democracy (DP), now numbers seven deputies in the lower house, all of them prepared to remind the PCI of its Marxist origins.

The PCI itself is the strongest in the Western world. It boasts more than a million card-carrying members, and, more important, it attracts the electoral support of about one out of every three adults. Despite a declining membership and a mild electoral slide since 1979, it remains the only viable alternative to the Christian Democratic party.

Many but obviously not all Italians find this a worrisome possibility. Some of them are visceral or knee-jerk anticommunists of the kind found in the United States. Others have narrow material interests to defend and believe, rightly or wrongly, that these would be placed in jeopardy were the PCI to come to power. For most, though, the main reason for diffidence and suspicion turns on the fear that the Communists remain entirely too uncritical of and tied to the Soviet Union.

The PCI's political opponents exploit this fear to their advantage whenever they can. If more Italians than ever before agree that the PCI is willing to play by the democratic rules of the game, the PCI's competitors reply, "So what?" when the democratic game is the only one in town. As for international affairs, it takes no effort at all to show that, for all of its sometimes courageous criticisms of the Soviet Union's excesses (for example, in Afghanistan), it always manages to excuse Soviet behavior and never finds saving graces for the acts of the United States and other Western countries.

The PCI aids and abets these attacks because it wallows in a crisis of ambiguity. It has talked about a "third way" different from capitalism and democratic socialism, without providing even the dimmest description of what the alternative society its "way" would foster might look like. Its efforts to explain itself, to justify its failures to render internal party procedures more open and democratic, and to clarify its orientation toward the Soviet Union are swollen with language that makes ordinarily abstruse political discourse look like a paragon of clarity. Thus, sincere or cynical, principled or opportunistic, anti-Communists find their task child's play.



The Socialist party has also had its share of identity problems, some severe enough to suggest political schizophrenia. Should the party remain committed to socialism, or should it follow in the footsteps of other Socialist parties, like those of France or Spain, that have become the darlings of capitalists? Should the PSI be fundamentally allied with the Communists or the Christian Democrats, and with what protections against errors of the past? How should the party relate to the labor movement, to organized business, to the Catholic Church? What should be its international posture, especially on basic issues pertaining to East-West and North-South relations?

Bettino Craxi, with consummate skill, has put distance between the PSI and the Communist party, but without bringing about a complete rupture between them. He has stolen the initiative from the Communists, in the sense of compelling them to worry about what to do about the Socialists, and not vice-versa. In international politics, Craxi has made it plain that he stands with the West, although he has also sought, gingerly, to make Italy more autonomous in the Middle East and on north-south issues.

In times past, when the PSI was closely allied with the PCI, both parties seemed committed to the creation of a socialist society. Today, neither of them really is, but only the Socialists, under Craxi's impetus, have been able to say so openly. The PSI, far from causing any consternation among the owning classes, provides assurance and tranquility. If the Communists really wish to avoid being relegated to political limbo, they will have to be more assiduous in the clarification of their ideological and programmatic identity.

The secular or laical parties number four. The oldest are the Liberals (PLI) and Republicans (PRI), closely associated with the Risorgimento. Two parties that were born after the war are the Social Democrats (PSDI) and the Radicals (PR). As a group, these parties rarely get more than 13 percent of the vote, which places them, collectively, at about the level of the PSI. Aside from their support for the republic and for liberal democratic institutions, their antipathy toward Christian Democracy, and their even stronger dislike of the Soviet Union, the four parties have little in common.

The Republicans, as their name suggests, are fierce opponents of the monarchy and its trappings and of any inkling of church interference in politics. They are also strong advocates of "rigor" in public spending, which now means curtailed outlays for welfare-state programs. The Liberals, threatened by electoral extinction, have tried in recent years to develop a somewhat less conservative posture than has been true of that party during this century. The PRI and PLI are important symbolically to Italian democracy far beyond their puny electoral performances.

As for the Social Democrats, the only remotely left-wing aspect of the PSDI is its propensity to favor populist policies. The PSDI is better understood as decisively opportunistic, ready to move right or left in search of votes but, even more important, in a hungry quest of cabinet seats and anything else that might give the party's leaders access to patronage. Its new leadership may try to change that image, but it has been etched very deeply right from the beginning.

The Radical party is difficult to place ideologically, largely because it appears as little more than the extension of the ego of one man, Marco Pannella, its founder and guru. The PR has also attracted other mavericks who share highly libertarian views, dissatisfaction with the country's political institutions, and opposition to the domination of politics by the old-style parties. Despite their somtimes zany and often irresponsible antics, the Radicals have been at the forefront of certain reform campaigns and are implacable opponents of corruption. On balance, though, Marco Pannella, for all of his charm and partly for that very reason, comes off looking more like a P. T. Barnum than a serious democratic statesman.

Pannella sets a standard that makes of the PR the quintessential example of politics-as-spettacolo. It was the radicals who pioneered the use of the referendum, an important step they later managed to trivialize by their overuse of that instrument. It is they who use the fillibuster—by offering thousands of amendments to proposed laws—primarily to demonstrate the ludicrousness of certain institutions and procedures. It is they who make principled debate look like demagoguery, which on closer inspection turns out to be even more so. The Radicals claim it is democracy's good health they wish to promote, and many younger voters who support the PR at the polls believe this is so.

Smaller parties are also found on the right. Until recently, the two major conservative parties were the Monarchist and the neo-Fascist. Those who harbor nostalgia for the monarchy or believe it can come back are a disappearing breed, but others who favor some sort of fascist state in



exchange for a democratic one are not. These persons are now found in the Italian Social Movement (MSI), which constitutes the country's fourth largest vote-getter.

This leaves Christian Democracy, Italy's catch-all and hegemonic party par excellence. Because it has averaged almost 40 percent of the vote, it has accounted for all but two of the postwar prime ministers. When Giovanni Spadolini, a Republican, and Bettino Craxi, a Socialist, gained that coveted office in the early 1980s, it was at the sufferance of the DC. Until Craxi, no one doubted the DC's ability to orchestrate politics pretty much as it might desire.

Although the DC appears to occupy the center of the left-right spectrum, it is not, strictly speaking, a center party. For one thing, many of the policies it has enacted would certainly qualify as left of center. For another, within the party's ranks there coexist all manner of ideological preferences. In fact, the DC's internal groups often differ so fundamentally that they could easily split off and form separate, more ideologically coherent, parties.

What holds such a party together? To some extent, confessionalism—that shared, deeply felt identification with Catholicism that helps to bring together under one roof Christian Democrats of markedly different and even antagonistic ideological persuasions. But there is also power, for which the Christian Democrats have an uncommon appetite and an even more unusual capacity to hold on to once they acquire it. By itself, the cement of common religious identity, as strong as it is, would not suffice to bind together these strangest of bedfellows. Religious conviction combined with secular power turn out to be sufficient conditions for profitable, even if sometimes uncomfortable and acrimonious, cohabitation.

To hang on to power, Christian Democrats have employed unexcelled electoral and patronage skills. Any other party with a similar record of scandal, corrupt behavior, collusion with the underworld, and other blemishes would long since have been catapulted from office. Instead, the DC has made it almost axiomatic that morality in public office and success at the polls are, if anything, inversely related to each other. Their shared religious convictions have not led many Christian Democrats to imagine that the earth will someday belong to the meek or that the more important rewards will be found in the afterlife.

It must be added, though, that the DC is everyone's favorite target. Everything in Italy considered unsavory or evil is laid at the DC's doorstep. Everything commendable about the country, all that it has achieved in

the last forty years, is attributed to others. The left, above all the intellectuals of that persuasion, believe that anything good registered in Italy occurs despite the monopoly of power the DC has enjoyed.

If the DC opportunistically raises the specter of the Communist menace, the Communists rave on about the danger of Christian Democratic hegemony. For the PCI, the DC is the hallmark of political immorality against which it measures and displays its own superiority. But with little effect: not even in times of egregious scandal and corruption in which the DC was clearly implicated have the Communists managed to turn this to their own advantage on election day.

## PARTIES TIMES FACTIONS

Like everything else about Italian politics, there is more to these parties than their number and labels suggest. For example, the parties are, to put it mildly, faction ridden. A faction, or *corrente* in the Italian lexicon, is a group of party leaders and militants who agree to work together to control the party itself. This means that they will, as a group, compete for leadership positions within the party at the local, regional, and national levels and then use these positions to name party candidates (mostly their own faction members) for elective and appointive office, coveted jobs in the public and private sectors, positions of great influence in the print and visual media—in short, for the range of patronage discussed in an earlier chapter.[2]

Not only are there many factions, but they are often formally recognized, in the sense that the parties' internal rules permit them to present formal motions about platforms and programs, to organize formal slates for election to internal governing bodies, and to obtain guaranteed minority representation on these same bodies. These factions may be based on ideological affinity and agreement as to public policies, on the geographic origins and location of those who make them up, or/on major personalities in the system of patron and client that guides politics. More often than not, they are based on a combination of all of these things—but driven by the overarching, opportunistic quest for power.[3]

Only the PCI claims to be without factions, and the party's by-laws prohibit them. Bettino Craxi, too, as well as the DC leader, Ciriaco De Mita, went through the motions of having their respective parties agree



to abolish factions. This happens from time to time, especially in the DC, which, as an openly catch-all party, has given factions the freest reign. But neither the PCI's authoritarian ways nor the efforts of Craxi or De Mita to emulate them ever succeed in abolishing these groups. If, as is true, one can identify right, center, and left factions within the PCI, why would they not persist in political parties that are internally much less self-disciplined?

The PCI leaders nevertheless still go to great pains to deny this. For example, before the 1986 PCI Congress, no formal votes were cast against the theses, or party positions, approved by the PCI Central Committee for the congress, even though it was a matter of public record that disagreements on many of the theses were extreme and uncompromising. This became clear in the debates and votes of the local and regional party meetings that led up to the congress. Some amendments to the theses were openly pro-Soviet, while some leaders on the right were identified by the press as the "American party." Thus, one good reason for the PCI's identity crisis is that its leaders go to such extremes to paper over these differences and to mask the fact that the party's consensus is bogus. In this way, too, the colorless bureaucrats who run the PCI succeed in denying the party even the faintest glimmer of a personality.

What about the Socialists? Under Bettino Craxi, who has tried to reorganize the PSI along monarchical lines, with himself as absolute monarch, the factional structure of old is supposed to have disappeared. And well it might. Even when it got under 10 percent of the national vote, the PSI still managed to spawn five different factions! But even Craxi's magic is limited. The old left wing of the PSI is still there, perhaps as strong as 30 percent of the party. The factions will reemerge, full blown, as soon as Craxi shows signs of weakening or moves on to higher office, like the republic's presidency.

Even the smallest parties, like the Liberals and the Republicans, have their identifiable factions, headed by single leaders. A leading journalist identified with the PLI lamented in 1986 that a party whose electoral appeal varied between 1 and 2.5 percent could still produce four internal factions!

As I suggested a moment ago, the quintessential factional structure is found, not surprisingly, in the Christian Democratic party. This is so not just because the DC is the largest party. As a catch-all party that contains so many ideological groups, and as a confederation of party "notables"

who control their own local or regional political machines, the party cannot escape—indeed, it could scarcely do without—factional structure. Efforts to overcome this reality are doomed to fail.

Factions carry some costs. They make it improbable that one person or, for that matter, one faction will for long succeed in giving a party central direction. Needless to add, it is from these same factions that are drawn the sharpshooters who bring down their own governments.

Factions, obviously, exist wherever there are political parties.[4] They may be more visible in Italy, but this alone does not establish that they weigh more there. It is, in any case, wrong to ignore the inner workings of parties and to treat them instead as if it were a single living person who walks on two feet, faces options, and chooses, more or less rationally, among them. We should try not to gloss over what may be one of the most interesting and important aspects of any democracy: the nature of political struggle within, and not just between and among, parties. A great merit of Italy's political parties is that their factional structure is so blatant it makes unlikely the fiction that the parties are single, coherent entities, easily placed on a left-to-right ideological scale.

In Italy, it seems plausible that the benefits deriving from party factions outweigh their demerits. Factions, and not the parties as such, constitute the bridges between and among parties. Not only do factions constitute the major network of interparty communication; they also make it possible for like-minded persons from several different parties to act in collaboration with each other. For example, clearly identifiable left-wing factions within the DC and PSI have more in common with the right wing of the PCI than they have with the other factions of their own parties.

Factions also constitute effective channels for the representation of interests, not only within specific political parties but in legislative bodies and the bureaucracy as well. As in the case of lottizzazione, it is really through the factions—at least the more important ones within each party—that most of the valued things the government controls are distributed. This makes factions prime political brokers through which individuals, organizations, patrons, and clients operate. They keep the system running. Without them, it would probably fall apart.

Thus, as perverse as it may seem, factions in Italy are a vital piece of the mechanism that makes the system a successful polyarchy. If like-minded persons can find appropriate factions in several *different* political parties, then, for example, society's cleavages and conflicts will not degenerate into a hopelessly polarized situation, inimical to democracy.



Finally, to anticipate a subject that will come up more than once as we move along, factions tend to correct what many claim to be one of Italian democracy's more serious defects. I refer to the alleged malfunctioning of representative institutions like the legislature and to the lack of a strong connection between electoral outcomes and the formation of government and the enactment of public policy. Italian democracy, and especially the representative aspects of it, operate overwhelmingly through the political parties. This being so, the division of these parties into subdivisions called factions is not only quite logical, it is a godsend.

## ELECTIONS AND VOTERS

Because political parties and elections are vital to democracy, they get a lot of attention—from pollsters, journalists, scholars, and just ordinary citizens. If there is any meaning at all to the democratic idea "rule by the people," it is in elections and what results from them that we would expect to learn whether the idea itself is valid or vacuous.

Italian evidence on this point is fuzzy. Italy holds many elections, although those caused by national cabinet crises are still rare. As a rule voters are called to the polls at least once a year to elect members to a variety of deliberative bodies. These include the schools and neighborhood councils and extend through cities, communes, provinces, regions, and the national government.

There is also the referendum. As we saw in chapter 2, it definitely gives the people an opportunity to vote their minds on laws the national legislature has enacted. Only rarely has a democratic state ever extended this type of power to its national electorate.

Italians spend much time preparing for, voting in, and then talking about the results of elections. In fact, political life might be described as one of elections occasionally interrupted by politically quiescent periods in August and around the Christmas holidays. For many years, no one dared call a national election in summer, but even that norm was broken in 1983.[5]

Elections point up a number of Italian political characteristics that are worth underscoring.

- If turnout at the polls is one sign of civic-mindedness, Italians walk away with the honors on this score. They vote in astonishingly large numbers. Politicians and the experts become perplexed when partici-

when participation falls below 90 percent. This figure refers not just to "registered" voters in the American sense. Italians, like Europeans in general, need take no special steps to register; their names are automatically maintained on the electoral registries. Failure to vote, even in several consecutive elections, does not result in the citizen being dropped from the electoral lists. A 90 percent turnout in Italy means that nine of every ten adult citizens have gone to the polls.

- For a variety of reasons, Italians maintain their place of official residence where they were born and not where they may actually be living today. However, except for those who live abroad and a few others, absentee voting is not permitted. Thus, in order to vote, one must travel back to one's hometown. Several million do this, typically by public transportation provided at cut-rate prices to encourage fuller electoral participation. There is also moral pressure to do this: the constitution makes it the citizen's civic duty to vote, and official notice is taken of those who fail to do so.
- Inside the polling booth, voters have the option of marking their ballots for one party or another or leaving them blank. They can also deliberately invalidate the ballot by writing messages on it or otherwise defacing it. The number of blank, or spoiled, ballots can run into two or three million, and the trend of recent years has seen that number edge upward. I once asked a friend why he would travel four hundred miles to write on his ballot, "This government stinks." He said he went home, at the special travel rate, primarily to see his family and to visit with friends. But he voted, too! It would not have occurred to him to do otherwise.
- If you look at electoral outcomes, at the votes for each party, and, even more important, at the proportions of the total vote that go to clusters of left-, center-, and right-wing parties, Italians for four decades have seemed to vote in a monotonously similar way. This remarkably persistent pattern will require a closer look in a moment.
- There is little apparent connection between what happens at the polls and what follows, for example, in the selection of a prime minister, the formation of a cabinet, the naming of cabinet members, to say nothing about the content of public policies. Trasformismo is obviously at work here. But there is more to be explored. The nagging question, the apparent paradox, is this: Why do Italians continue to vote in such record-breaking proportions if they know in advance that elections



themselves will change very little, or nothing, about the politics of the country?

- Italy has held ten national parliamentary elections in forty years, eleven if we count the 1984 elections to the European parliament. This is average among democracies. In that same period, however, Italy has actually had forty-five governments, and that number is way over par! Prime ministers come into office knowing that by and large they will not remain there for as long as a year. If, as in the case of Aldo Moro, tenure exceeds two years, and, in the Bettino Craxi case, an unprecedented almost four years, these exceptions not only raise the average; they imply that some governments last only a few weeks, or days. As soon as a new government is installed, speculation begins as to whether the prime minister will be in Palazzo Chigi long enough to learn its floor plan.
- On no occasion in these past forty years has a national election resulted directly in the defeat of the previous government and its replacement by an opposition. As a matter of fact, "government and opposition" is simply not an appropriate description of national politics. Think of national government instead as an umbrella under which, depending on circumstances, as few as one party and as many as six may find shelter.

## THE ELECTORAL CONNECTION

We now turn to the results of these ten elections to discover, if possible, what they might mean.[6] Bear in mind that what we say regarding them depends in part on where we stand, what we see, and how we count. We "see" at best imperfectly; our preferences and prejudices not only direct our vision, they also obscure it. We wear lenses through which the so-called facts are filtered, and in this way we create our private reality. The lenses reflect our individual wishes or needs, our beliefs about society and politics, our ideologies, and even our fantasies. We do not wish to be disappointed, upset, or frightened by the "facts" of political life. Above all, we do not wish to be surprised by them.

Pirandello, that ironic Sicilian playwright, exploited this human condition by placing it dead center in more than one of his works. Akira Kurosawa, the distinguished Japanese film director, has done much the same. The action in his outstanding film *Rashomon* opens with a scene of

sexual violence and death. There then follow descriptions and interpretations of what happened from each of the major protagonists and a witness to the opening scene. The viewer, of course, "sees" it all and is able to appreciate not just the subtlety of Kurosawa's direction but also the plausibility of each interpretation.

The messages of Pirandello and Kurosawa are one and the same: the "reality" of things is not something objective out there, waiting to be discovered. It is at its core a construction of our own minds and an extension of our personalities. Trial lawyers are acutely aware of this. They are more prepared than the rest of us for the fantastic variations in the accounts of events provided by two or more eyewitnesses.

Politicians "see" in this specialized way deliberately, as a matter of practice. The lenses they wear come with their job descriptions. Reporters and editorial writers, and scholars themselves, are not much better off. The so-called conceptual frameworks the scholars boast are little more than another device for filtering reality.

Italian elections are ideally suited to produce a Rashomon Syndrome. To begin with, there is no direct election of a president, no single contest that might permit us to identify which party has won and which has lost. National elections are held to name over six hundred members for the lower chamber and about half that number for the senate. In these contests, no single party has ever reached 50 percent of the votes cast.

When citizens vote, they are better able to predict which parties will not be part of the government than which will. Even if they guess the basic makeup of a coalition, they would not come close to predicting which party factions would be represented in the cabinet.

Typically, the losses or gains registered by individual political parties from one election to another tend to be quite slight, sometimes infinitesimal. Irrespective of the outcome, the general assumption remains that neither the Communists nor the neo-Fascists will be invited to join a governmental coalition. This means that somewhere between 35 and 40 percent of the electorate regularly go to the polls without any expectation whatever that they can "win," as that term is usually intended.

It is also understood that everyone, with the possible exception of the very extreme parties on the left and right, will somehow get a piece of the action once a government is formed. That is, regardless of what may happen at the polls, party leaders know that they will rarely be completely cut out of the system that distributes things people value. The two-tiered, visible versus invisible, aspect of the national legislature described in the last chapter would be an example of what this assumption means in practice. The allocation of coveted jobs on the basis of lottizzazione would be another example. In this basic sense, everybody "wins" in Italian elections.



On the other hand, since coalitions are typically based on the lowest common denominator approach to public policy; because no single party can expect its own programs to prevail; and because even coalitions with strong legislative majorities can readily be ambushed and shot down by the snipers, nobody really "wins." Indeed, Italians who detest this system complain that everybody, and particularly the country itself, "loses."

## THE RASHOMON SYNDROME

Let us see how the Rashomon Syndrome might work out in practice. As soon as the results of the June 1983 national elections were known, television screens and newspapers produced a table that looked more or less like this one:

*Votes and Seats, by Party, Chamber of Deputies, 1979 and 1983*

| | *1979* | | | *1983* | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Party* | *Votes* | *%* | *Seats* | *Votes* | *%* | *Seats* |
| DC | 14,046,290 | 38.3 | 262 | 12,145,800 | 32.9 | 225 |
| PCI | 11,139,231 | 30.4 | 201 | 11,028,158 | 29.9 | 198 |
| PSI | 3,596,802 | 9.8 | 57 | 4,222,487 | 11.4 | 73 |
| PSDI | 1,407,535 | 3.8 | 20 | 1,507,431 | 4.1 | 23 |
| PRI | 1,110,209 | 3.0 | 16 | 1,872,536 | 5.1 | 29 |
| PLI | 712,646 | 1.9 | 9 | 1,065,833 | 2.9 | 16 |
| PR | 1,264,870 | 3.5 | 18 | 809,672 | 2.2 | 11 |
| DP | 294,462 | 0.8 | — | 541,493 | 1.5 | 7 |
| PDUP[a] | 502,247 | 1.4 | 6 | — | — | — |
| MSI | 1,930,693 | 6.1 | 35 | 2,511,722 | 6.8 | 42 |
| Others | 666,377 | 1.8 | 6 | 1,185,157 | 3.2 | 6 |

[a]In 1983 the PDUP rejoined the PCI.

Who "won" this election? Obviously it depends.[7] If the test is which party received more votes than any other, then the DC won, as it has won, in this sense, every election since 1946. But in 1983 everyone agreed that the DC had taken quite a beating, evidenced by the downward slide that is apparent between 1979 and 1983. Indeed, the newspapers described this slide as an "earthquake." It was not that at all, but it looked

that way in a country where small shifts are rare and where even these tend to be blown up out of proportion.

Ciriaco De Mita, the DC's secretary general, did not equivocate. He said to the press: "Who says that Victory has a hundred fathers and that Defeat is always an orphan? This time, Defeat's father is right here, with first and last name, address, and telephone number. It is I." Then he added, "The other parties hope they can govern without us. Just let them try!" He was right, of course. The DC went right back into office, not with the prime ministership, but with most of the cabinet seats, as befits the largest party by far within the government coalition. From that vantage point, the DC went right on winning.

What about the Communists; did they win or lose? Again it depends. In past years, if the PCI failed to get as many votes as predicted or if it fell back even .1 percent, not only its Italian opponents but also foreign newspapers like the *New York Times* would editorialize about the party's "setback." The Communists, on the other hand, took the view in 1983 that since they had declined only .5 percent when everyone thought their losses would be much greater, they had actually "won."

Did the Socialists "win"? You would have to stretch to believe it. Whereas in 1979, 98 of every 1,000 voters who cast valid ballots voted for the PSI, in 1983 that number had risen to only 114. Furthermore, since the polls predicted that the PSI would do much better, many concluded that the Socialists had actually "lost." Bettino Craxi, however, took a different view of it. A journalist asked him, "Really now, do you actually believe you have won?" Craxi replied, "We won. It's the first time in twenty years that the PSI moves ahead in this way in national elections . . . the first time. We've gone through a ring of fire. Think of it. Everyone was on our backs, parties and newspapers. And we held our own and made gains. We didn't expect much more." In the most dramatic sense, Craxi was right: a few weeks later he moved into Palazzo Chigi as the first Socialist prime minister in Italy's history.[8]

In the Italian context, the clearest "winner" in 1983 was the Republican party. From the scant 3 percent of the vote it received in 1979, the PRI jumped 60 percent in 1983 and came close to doubling its representation in the legislature. Yet, whereas its paltry showing in 1979 brought the party the prime ministership, in 1983 it was awarded only three seats in the five-party cabinet headed by Bettino Craxi.

Not to be outdone by these esoteric interpretations, one of the country's leading newspaper editors provided his own unique reading of the 1983



results. With only a mild apology to his readers, he added together blank and invalid ballots (5.6 percent), those who did not vote (11 percent), and the votes cast for the MSI (6.8 percent), Radicals (2.2 percent), DP (1.5 percent), and a few minor parties (2.0 percent) for a total of 29 percent. He then concluded that well over one-fourth of the electorate had voted "against the republic."

This argument is the Rashomon Syndrome run wild. Among other things, it ascribes to the nonvoters a very specific and antagonistic attitude toward the existing political system. Imagine how this would sound in the United States, where half the electorate typically fails to vote in presidential elections. Italians really worry about electoral abstainers, and think about them and those who cast blank and defaced ballots as the third largest "party."

Another leading journalist, without benefit of even a small survey of voters leaving the polling place, claimed, reasonably enough, that the most unambiguous aspect of the 1983 outcome was the sharp drop in the DC vote. But he added: "The DC was punished, in a delayed reaction, for the prolonged laxity of some of its governments in the face of disorder, waste, corruption, crime, inflation, and other types of crises, and for the wicked operation of the bureaucracy and other public services."[9]

## POLLSTERS AND PUNDITS

Everyone speculates—more often than not guided by the same factors that encourage Rashomon Syndrome interpretations of political events. The evidential basis for speculation inevitably varies, and there is no special demerit that goes to those who fail to consult what the public opinion polls may have to say about politics. This is particularly the case with Italy, where although many polls are conducted they are, on the whole, less reliable than in other democracies.

A major reason why the 1983 electoral results were so surprising is the pollsters themselves. They and other pundits predicted that the DC would hold its own or improve its electoral standing, that the PCI would continue its decline since 1979, and that the PSI would do considerably better than turned out to be the case. Ciriaco De Mita was so gulled by these reports that, during a televised debate with the PCI's Enrico Berlinguer, he made the remarkable statement that there no longer existed any prejudice against the Communists forming a government, were the electoral results to

justify such a step. As it turned out, the PCI came astonishingly close to cashing in on De Mita's unprecedented concession.

Polls often go wrong for technical reasons.[10] The sample may be too small. It may be difficult to reach certain people, and so the sample used, even if large enough, may not be truly representative of the population. Or the polls conducted before election day may fail to pick up last-minute shifts in voter opinions. Other technical difficulties abound.

Polls go wrong for political reasons, too. Italy is not the only country where political parties use their own polls, and their own esoteric interpretations of them, not as a means of getting objective information but rather as just another weapon in the political campaign. Polling "results" can be reported to create a bandwagon effect, or to scare voters about unhappy or dangerous outcomes if they fail to vote, or if they vote for one party as against another. The mass media, too, highly politicized as they are, conduct their own polls, as they do in other countries. This means that, far beyond locating and reporting the news that's fit to print, the mass media actually manufacture the "news" itself, on which they then comment, often with their own political ends in view.

Even in the best of circumstances, Italy confronts the pollsters with a nightmarish problem. Normally, upwards of 20 percent of those who are interviewed refuse to reveal how they have voted in the past or to give any indication whatever of which party they intend to support in an oncoming election. Ingenious questions devised by the pollsters have failed to solve this problem. This means that predictions about how the elections will turn out are, to say the least, extremely problematical.

Nor is this the only ingredient in the nightmare. Italians greatly enjoy confounding the experts. They are highly skeptical of claims that human behavior can be studied "scientifically." The social sciences, particularly those that boast refined empirical theories and methods of conducting research, have had very tough sledding in this country. The Marxists, with their ready-made "scientific" explanations of history and everything else in society, are instinctively hostile to modern social science. So are those millions of others who, consciously or otherwise, share the reservations about social science engendered earlier in this century by Benedetto Croce, a gifted and domineering Italian philosopher.

It may be that this diffidence toward social science is eroding. Italians, who are peerless when it comes to fascination with electronic gadgetry, have fallen head over heels for computers and computer software. Totocalcio, the national weekly gambling pool based on soccer matches, for



example, was once a real game of chance that provided fabulous winnings for those rare persons who guessed the outcomes of thirteen out of thirteen Sunday afternoon matches. Computerized betting "systems" are now so sophisticated that there are now dozens and even hundreds of "thirteens" each week.

It will nevertheless be some time before this fascination with "science" helps the political pollsters. The reason is—privacy. Unlike many other peoples, Italians are avid about guarding their private affairs from public, and especially governmental, scrutiny. They find it incredible, for example, that Americans, in exchange for a paltry credit card, will reveal to total strangers information about their income, savings, and ownership of property. This kind of information is in Italy as tightly guarded as are secrets of state—often against one's own family members, to say nothing of outsiders.

Remarkable bookkeeping practices, ingenious tax-evasion schemes, solutions to marital problems that, until recently, had to exclude divorce, and even the Italian's so-called addiction for *la bella figura* signal the same warning: what you claim to see or to understand about this country and its inhabitants may not be even remotely related to things as they actually are. Why should this change when a pollster arrives to ask questions about one's past, present, and future political preferences or affiliations—in a country, we might add, where for better or for worse every aspect of life itself is permeated by politics. Viewed from this perspective, the remarkable achievement of the pollsters is that their error margins are not larger.

Over the years, the Rashomon Syndrome has been most apparent regarding the electoral performance of the Communist party. For one thing, it is the members and the supporters of this party who are the most reluctant, and perhaps the most perverse, when it comes to telling the pollsters a straight story. For decades, the polls showed that under 10 percent of those sampled supported the PCI. Just as monotonously, the party received from twice to more than three times that number of votes in elections.

Wishful thinking has also been at work here. Despite years of research that shows it to be inaccurate, many still believe a very early American interpretation of the Communist vote as "negative," or as representing "protest." This simplistic view of politics would have the Communist vote decline as the basic material needs of the population are satisfied.

It has not happened. Americans in particular keep scratching their heads about the persistent strength of the PCI, long after Italy has become the

world's fifth leading economy and Italians themselves have experienced unimagined improvements in their standard of living. This does not make the Italians odd. It means only that outside observers have failed to capture as well as they might the implications of Italy's political religions and political subcultures, or its political families."

Bad predictions of the PCI's electoral performance, surprise over the failure of the PCI to fade away, and stubborn insistence that sooner or later the PCI *must* decline, are also based on the thought that what goes on inside a political party will make a difference to the voters. The idea is that if the party is not internally democratic, if its leaders cannot make up their minds what to do about "democratic centralism," or if they are forever at odds over the correct reading of Karl Marx, this will cost them dearly on election day. This is nonsense.

To begin with, no one bothers to explain why, if there is some sort of axiom here, it should apply to the PCI and not to other parties. That party is certainly tightly controlled at the center. But so is the PSI under Bettino Craxi. In the PSI's case, however, centralized control is supposedly beneficial and not harmful. How come? The answer lies in part in the kind of anticommunism discussed earlier, in part in the genuine fear that the PCI's disciplined internal structure gives it a lopsided advantage against other parties.

Looked at internally, though, few political parties in the history of democracy would qualify as anything better than oligarchies. In any case, it is unlikely that the average voter either notices or cares about their internal workings. It would be astonishing if more than a tiny fraction of any electorate voted for or against a given party on this basis. In Italy, there is no evidence at all that this has ever been a salient electoral issue. A stronger prediction is that, despite what may transpire within the parties or within the country, citizens will vote tomorrow as they voted yesterday.

## THE VOTING HABIT

We can now turn to some of the perplexing questions raised earlier in this chapter. Why do Italians vote in droves if they know in advance that the ritual is an empty one? Why have there not occurred, if not radical shifts in the vote for each party, at least enough changes to force one group from power and to open the door to an alternative group? If people are as disgruntled, or as "alienated," about politics as many claim, why



have they not used their ballots to do something about this? After all, no legal bars stand in the way. Nothing in the constitution requires that the same hegemonic party, and three or four of its satellites, should control the national government eternally.

Following the local and regional elections of 1985, a leading journalist put the matter as follows:

> *The family portrait is the same as that taken forty years ago. . . . There have been some changes in proportions, but it's the same thing. Very much like the arrow of Zeno of Elea—in flight but actually standing still. . . . In effect, Italy is a masterpiece of movement without motion, a trajectory without an arrow, an arrow without a trajectory. . . . This static quality is forty years old and nothing in Europe compares with it. . . . We are the only Europeans who run en masse to the polls, establishing records that vary between 89 and 93 percent. We vote with passion, massively, repeatedly, always more in love with a democracy in which nothing changes. . . . It is true that we are a truly exceptional "case": On one side, the most vital, frenetic, epileptic society, full of rousings. On the other side, the most static, the most petrified of political structures. . . . Blocked democracy is not a sickness, it is a physiological condition. If people thought of it as sickness, they would have removed the condition long ago.*[12]

These words capture not only the most striking quality of electoral outcomes but also the frustration that many Italians experience over their apparently static quality. To get a better handle on their meaning, we need to look at elections from other angles, and within the Italian context.[13]

To begin with high turnouts, recall that politics not only permeates life; it is also the Big Spettacolo. Not just the politicians but almost everyone else (certainly everyone else who counts) is "on stage" almost all of the time. Political roles differ. Some persons give speeches while others listen. Some are active in the trade unions, the industrial organizations, or Catholic Action, while countless others will go on strike or engage in political demonstrations. Every day, in some palpable way, millions of Italians are arrayed on one side or another of many, many public issues.

And everybody votes. Not only is this expected of everyone; everyone expects to do it—as an integral part of his or her own role as citizen. Furthermore, to vote is one of the relatively few things, like written (not spoken!) Italian and the Fiat automobile, that residents of the peninsula

really have in common. Pasta, after all, is a staple food largely in the south; in the north, it is rice.

Participation in national elections is symbolically important in any democracy. It is particularly so with an Italy that experienced twenty years of dictatorship and is a still-young nation, striving on a peninsula where diversity and conflict have been the rule for centuries. To vote in national elections reaffirms the nation; it also sublimates deadlier forms of political participation that are also Italy's political heritage.

Italians not only vote in record numbers; they also take their elections in stride. Voting is a habit. School children watch their parents vie and vote for offices that relate to the governance of their schools. Residents of given *quartieri* vote for representatives to neighborhood councils. Workers elect members to factory councils. In the high schools and universities, elections take on the same political coloration (Communist, Socialist, Christian Democratic, and so on) that one finds in local and national elections for public office.

Elections are so routine and ubiquitous they do not, as in other democracies, appear to interrupt the more "normal" aspects of daily living. For most Italian citizens, to vote is as natural as it is to get up in the morning and go to school or work. Citizens may arrive at the polling place to cast a blank or invalid ballot, but they participate nevertheless.

To my mind, the act of voting does not mean in Italy what it does elsewhere. It is not just the urge to win or the fear of defeat that brings out the voters. Nor is it, as some Italians claim, the fear of communism. Of course, some vote for this reason, just as others do so out of a sense of civic duty. As I see it, the Italian citizen goes to the polls primarily to "give testimony." The difference is enormous.

When the average citizen votes here, it is "to witness," as this term is understood, for example, in fundamentalist religious groups. The polling booth is a place where the average Italian is able to assert, to reaffirm—to give testimony—as to his or her "political identity." The act of voting is not as public as the evening stroll, the ubiquitous passeggiata, but it serves a similar purpose. Both acts are intended to establish or to reconfirm, for oneself as well as for others, who one is.

This identity—who and what one is, politically speaking—extends far beyond one's membership in or support for a given political party. It is associated with the "political subculture" to which each person belongs. This act of reaffirming one's political identity (Communist, Socialist, or just plain left; Catholic or Christian Democratic; Republican, Liberal, or



just plain laical) occurs without any expectation that it will bear directly on the formation of government and the selection of a prime minister. Had voters, particularly those on the left, ever entertained any such thought, they would have abandoned the voting booth decades ago.

Something else is afoot here. The impulse to vote transcends and therefore is not dampened by the knowledge that votes rarely have more than a marginal effect on government or that, whatever the outcome, it is unlikely that certain parties will be included in a governmental coalition. One welcomes the opportunity to give "public" expression to personal political identity. One prefers company in doing so; but the mere fact of being small, or outside the majority, does not lead to political apathy and absenteeism. Indeed, it may well lead in the opposite direction, especially in a setting where no one expects the next government to survive more than a few months anyway.

High tension levels can distort this pattern of giving testimony on behalf of one's party. The best postwar example would be the elections of 1948, which took place on the heels of the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia. As a result, the Italian elections degenerated into a forced choice between "Christ or communism." Millions voted "against their own identity" for the Christian Democrats in order to prevent the Communists and Socialists from winning. Later, most of these would return to "witness" their truer political identities.

A generation later, when it appeared that the PCI might become the main party and form a government, the distortion occurred again. Indro Montanelli, the distinguished editor of *Il Giornale nuovo,* keenly aware that Italians prefer to "witness" and not necessarily to win, urged the voters to "hold their noses" and to vote for the Christian Democrats. Enough of them did to muffle the PCI's knock on the door of national government. As we will see in a moment, that tactic is a wasting asset.

The political identity discussed here should not be confused with what in the United States is called "party identification."[14] We are not talking about Italian equivalents of weak, strong, or die-hard Republicans or Democrats. We are not thinking of a special category of voters who have never supported but a single party and would not think of supporting any other. Nor is there any room, in this explanation of Italian political identity, for voters called Independents, who pridefully disclaim affiliation with any party.

We refer instead to those broad, but essentially separate, divisions of Italian society that are generally described as left, secular or laical, and

Catholic. Between and among these categories there is very little overlap. In any case, the typical Italian has no trouble at all specifying in which of these he or she belongs.

With the exception of the American South, and perhaps a few large cities earlier in this century, the United States has not had any noteworthy political subcultures. Furthermore, Americans somehow prize the so-called independent voters, whereas Europeans often see them either as spineless persons who cannot make choices or as fickle ones whose choices are ephemeral. In Italy, one gains a subcultural identity at birth. To lose it, or to be without one, may well imply that one lacks culture in the larger sense.

## STABILITY AND CHANGE

Much has been written about Italy's political subcultures, and especially about how fragmented and mutually exclusive they are. For each of the major subcultures—the Marxist, Catholic, and laical—the political parties in these areas presumably represented only the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface, one expected to find families, work groups, friends and neighbors, school teachers, political patrons, and especially a large network of organizations that are integral parts of the subculture and work to reinforce it. In particular, organized groups like trade unions, religious organizations, producer and consumer cooperatives, and recreational and athletic associations were expected to provide daily reminders of the existence of each subculture. They also made it possible for members to live isolated from other subcultures.

It was a mistake to think that as Italy became more "modern," as the mass media served to shrink the size of the community and to homogenize values and tastes, as people became less isolated and more inclined to make contact across existing subcultures, the latter would gradually disappear. Today's Italians are clearly less isolated and parochial than in the past. They are more inclined to establish a wider range of social relationships with persons from different subcultures. The nature of the workplace; higher levels of education; greater travel to distant places; modified norms that apply to friendship and marriage: all of these things and more signal that once mutually exclusive subcultural compartments are today less so.

But political subcultures have remarkable staying power. This is so in part because, as noted earlier, the Catholic and Communist subcultures are "religiously" based. It is so, above all, because membership in one of the subcultures is a state of mind, a way of thinking about oneself, that makes it highly unlikely, for example, that a Christian Democrat can imagine that he or she would vote for a Communist or Socialist, and vice versa. The very high stability of Italian voting patterns, the relatively low proportion of "floating voters" who move about from one party to another, find their explanations here. It is in this setting that to "witness" in an election is more important than to "win" it.



In recent years, some scholars have challenged the idea that Italians do not change their political stripes, or that few of them shop around among parties at election time.[15] It is true, for example, that outcomes that look almost static from one election to another may hide a good deal of shifting on the part of voters. For example, in a two-party race in two consecutive elections, almost all of the voters might switch parties the second time and the latter outcome would look like the first. The new Italian information suggests that, far from marching monotonously lockstep with the same party time after time, perhaps as many as a quarter of the voters actually shift their votes from one party to another, but in complementary ways that bring about similar outcomes.

Even if this is so, it is equally clear that shifts rarely bring voters to cross subcultural boundaries. That is, voters disgruntled with the PCI may vote farther to the left, or cast blank or invalid ballots, or perhaps support the PSI. But they will not be found in the ranks of the parties of the center or the right. The same reasoning would apply to voters in the Catholic subculture who are loath to support left-wing parties. And, even among those parties that constitute the center, their supporters sometimes have to "hold their noses," when they shift to the DC. The center, after all, includes the laical parties that have their own ancient quarrels with organized Catholicism.

If the postwar vote has been cast primarily within these subcultures, it has not been entirely static. Beginning in the mid-1950s and for twenty years thereafter, the electoral ratio between parties of the center-right and those on the left was about five-to-four. From the mid-1970s to the present that ratio has shifted to one-to-one. Today, both the center-right and the left-wing groups of parties get about 45 percent of the total vote, and the remaining 10 percent goes to the right and to some minor parties.[16]

The DC remains the pivot of this system despite this shift and despite

its own gradual decline. This has been made possible because, as noted earlier, the Socialist party under Craxi decided to move right, away from the PCI, leaving the latter high and dry. Thus, whereas the electorate seems to have moved left, governments have moved in the opposite direction. Pirandello would understand.

No matter how infected one may be by the Rashomon Syndrome, certain of the changes of the past four decades are impossible to deny. In the early 1950s for example, the PCI got about 23 percent of the vote; in more recent years, it reached almost 35 percent and now hovers at about 30 percent. During this same period, the DC went from a high of 48 percent to a more recent average of under 40 percent.

Several interesting phenomena are at work here. First, on average and between any two elections during the past four decades, the net shift in the vote among parties has been an amazingly low 1.6 percent. Second, except for the relatively mild shifts already noted, party results look astonishingly static. Third, this stability persists notwithstanding monumental changes in Italian society as well as equally remarkable changes in the electoral body itself.

In 1948, there were 29 million qualified voters, of which 27 million turned up at the polls that April. Almost 13 million of these citizens voted for the DC. In 1983, the number of qualified voters had climbed to 44 million, and in June of that year 38.5 million of them voted. The DC received just over 12 million of these votes. But the broad distribution of votes into right, center, and left clusters were about the same as in earlier elections.

Quite obviously, these two electorates, separated by thirty-five years, were radically different from each other. For example, the *youngest* of the 1983 voters who also voted in 1948 would have to have been at least fifty-six years old. Also, since in the mid-1970s the minimum voting age for the Chamber of Deputies was reduced from twenty-one to eighteen years, in 1983, unlike in 1948, there were several million persons from the eighteen-to-twenty-year age group whose 1948 counterparts could not legally vote.

The point is that a majority of those who voted in the late 1940s are no longer on the electoral roles. Some may have migrated out of Italy; others may now be members of the larger pool of nonvoters. But most were removed from the electoral rolls by death. We tend to overlook this last important fact when we compare outcomes of two or more elections. In these comparisons, we are never talking about the same electoral body.



That some voters die and new ones reach minimum voting age makes the near-static nature of electoral outcomes look that much more impressive. One reason for the persistence of older patterns is the existence of the subcultures and the propensity of the voters to "witness." It would be different if Italians treated the polling place as a supermarket where they might shop around for the political party that best suits today's taste or whim.

The so-called models of electoral choice and voting behavior that treat votes as money, and parties and candidates as purchases that the voters make, are inappropriate for Italy. Supermarkets exist in the Italian world of commerce, too. Even so, Italian consumers show that, regardless of price, they prefer the small boutiques downtown and the "ma-and-pa" stores in their own neighborhoods.

The gradual change in voting patterns and electoral outcomes that has occurred is therefore best explained by the slow, generational transformation of the electorate itself. The newest and youngest voters are quite different from the oldest voters and from former voters who have died. Since 1948, the electoral body has grown by about .5 million people each year. But this is the net figure; that is, it represents the difference between those who reach the minimum voting age (about 1.5 million annually) and those others (about 1 million) who have dropped out because of death or other reasons.

Looking back on the past forty years, we know that the newer generations of voters have tended to be somewhat more left-wing than earlier generations. An important consequence of this has been, on one side, the gradual erosion in the vote for the Christian Democrats and, on the other, an equally gradual gain in the vote for the left, particularly for the PCI.

The existence of this pattern refutes the old saw that as people age they also grow more conservative. Were this the case in Italy, in view of marked increases in longevity, we would expect to see a conservative drift in the electorate. But, as we have seen, the opposite is the case. A much more powerful idea is that people tend to vote for the party, or among the parties, that are represented by one's particular political subculture.

It is primarily the younger voters who have brought about some of the interesting electoral transformations of recent years. For example, they account for the reemergence of the Radical party in the 1970s, just as it is they who will determine whether a strong Green, or ecological, party finds roots in Italy. It is also these younger voters who may someday be more inclined than their predecessors to vote on the basis of issues,

as opposed to parties. They have already demonstrated less tolerance than their elders for high-flown and vacuous political rhetoric and more openness toward those outside their individual subcultures.

This does not imply that the younger voters will be less partisan or less likely to develop political subcultural identities and political party choices that endure throughout life. We find, in this regard, that today's younger Italians are entirely and even fiercely clear about who they are and where they stand politically. This seems to be truer of younger Italians than of their counterparts in most other democracies. Thus all of the factors we have touched upon that contribute to distinctive subcultural identities and lifelong identification with parties of the left, center, or right remain quite prominent.

This being so, we should expect the overall results of Italian elections to change quite slowly, and only at the margins. Even if the latest group of newest and youngest voters turns out to be much more radical—to the left or right—than is true of the rest of the electorate, their impact would be minimal at first. It would become more prominent over time, but only if additional new voters were to share similar radical views. Barring catastrophic economic or military events, it would require a generation to feel the full effects of a radical shift in the electorate.

I am aware that this particular way of looking at things may also suffer from the Rashomon Syndrome. For example, it may imply the dubious assumptions that only the young get radical ideas or that their views will not infect their elders. However, I intend here only to stress that the sharp increase in the PCI vote in the mid-1970s was the direct and apparently one-time-only effect of a drop in minimum voting age that brought over three million new voters into the electorate at the same time. Most electoral changes move much more slowly.

What of the sharp drop in the DC vote in 1983? It may be that among those older voters who died between 1979 and 1983, there were disproportionate numbers of lifelong supporters of the DC. It may also be the case, as some DC leaders themselves claim, that the increase in both the number of nonvoters and of blank and invalid ballots hurt the DC more than others. It is also apparent that when newer small parties recruit primarily among those persons who are retired from work and/or on pensions, the votes they attract are disproportionately at the DC's expense.

Whatever the reasons for the sharp drop, the DC's decline should level off. Even more than the Communist party, the DC has a hard core of "true believers" who have never voted for any other party and probably never will. A recent upsurge in Catholic mass movements and organizations among the young suggests that this hard core is getting a new infusion. A burning question for the PCI is whether it can do as well with younger voters. The evidence so far is not very impressive on that score.



More than is true of most other democracies, then, we can anticipate that Italian elections will continue to produce relatively static results. Italians know this, and I believe that deep down they do not mind it. Is this a sign of weakness or instability in Italian democracy? Is the country really paralyzed, frozen into a pattern of politics labeled "polarized pluralism" that is dangerous for democracy?[17]

I don't think so. The polarization is more apparent than real; much of it is largely rhetorical—entirely in keeping with the model of Italian politics that I have been describing. Words and rhetoric are of course also the stuff of politics, and it would be silly not to pay attention to them. But we need to go behind the words as well, and especially behind those fire-eating ideological phrases that are the staple of political discourse. Behind them, at the operating level, we find much more collaboration among the politicians and political parties than anyone looking only at surface behavior might imagine.

In the Big Spettacolo of Italian politics, communication is marked by inflated rhetoric. When the words turn virulent, many of them are directed at the institutions of government and, above all, at la classe politica. Were we to accept the words at face value, this class would appear to be the main problem, indeed the bane, of Italian politics.

As a matter of fact, it is nothing of the kind. A closer look will tell us why.