Parliament and Citizens in Italy: An Unfilled Gap

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This article analyses the current relationship between parliament and citizens in Italy, after almost two decades of change and adaptation following the collapse of the post-war party system. All the remarkable changes experienced since the early 1990s, such as the alternation in government of two opposite coalitions, the consolidation of more pronounced adversarial politics and the emergence of political personalisation, have not improved the image of the Italian parliament, which enjoys a low level of trust. The article explains the parliament's effort to become more open and transparent, the role of parties and individual MPs to represent and communicate with their voters and the mechanisms through which citizens try to raise issues directly with parliament. Finally, the main elements of change and continuity between the first and the second republic are assessed. While much is to be done to achieve a better relationship between parliament and citizens, we argue that no institutional reform can have immediate effect if not accompanied by the emergence of a new style of politics.

Keywords: *parliament; citizens; Italy*.

Introduction

This article assesses the relationship between parliament and citizens in Italy, raising considerable challenges. Not only is this a democracy traditionally characterised by a lack of trustworthiness of its central institutions, but it has also encompassed remarkable changes over the last couple of decades. Our primary objective is therefore to comprehend the extent to which this relationship has changed, after the collapse of the post-war party system that had characterised almost half a century of Italian democratic politics, until the early 1990s. Our secondary goal is to understand the linkages between these changes and the general institutional transformations of Italian democracy. We shall start by focusing on the complex phenomenon of representation, before framing the effective transformation of Italian parliamentary institutions.

Modern political representation may be conceived in different forms, depending on the predominant image one stresses: a first image envisages parliament mainly as an institution, while the second conceives of parliamentary parties as the crucial collective actors driving the political games within the parliament. A third vision, developed in the North American representative institutions, finally focuses on the role of individual MPs. No doubt, the so-called Italian 'First Republic' (1948–92) was dominated by strong and organised mass

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parties which agreed on a number of constitutional principles, but they supported rather alternative views, representing distinct sectors of a crystallised society. In that context, given an evident institutional centrality of parliament and the relatively low prominence of MPs as individual representatives, the relationship between parties and their voters has long been the only one that has mattered for the study of substantive representation in Italy.

Italy has experienced considerable changes in its party system since the 1990s and one would therefore expect these to have a notable impact. The Christian Democrat Party and the Communist Party, respectively the most important governmental actor and largest opposition party for about 50 years, have disappeared. The collapse of the party system was due firstly to the end of the ideological cleavage that divided Italy between communists and anti-communists and secondly to the corruption scandals that swept away all the parties in government. In 1993, a referendum paved the way for a new mixed majority electoral system which encouraged the formation of pre-electoral coalitions and electoral competition became bipolar. Since then, there have been five general elections, and in no case was the coalition in government confirmed by the popular vote. Alternation in government, which was once considered impossible due to the permanent exclusion from majority coalition of the large communist opposition, has thus become the rule of the (so-called) second republic.

A second important change was the emergence of a strong personalisation of politics; the rising importance of voters' and, above all, leaders' personal characteristics. Such a feature did not emerge in Italy until the early 1990s, but then it made a truly pervasive impact, perhaps even more pronounced than that observed in other established democracies.

Thirdly, we have to consider the slow but important restructuring of the 'state system' over recent decades (Bull and Newell 2005, Cotta and Verzichelli 2007). The massive changes in the central administration, the reforms of local government, the Europeanisation of policy sectors and a process of 'devolution' initiated with the 2001 constitutional amendment have all caused a series of vertical and horizontal *shifts of governance* which need to be taken into account when assessing the changes in the relationship between public opinion and central representative institutions.

The main question at the core of this article therefore concerns the extent and effectiveness of the change we observe in the multifaceted relationship between parliament and citizens. Twenty years after a crucial turning point in the Italian democratic trajectory, extensive research explains the reasons behind such critical changes,[2] but we still need to investigate the transformation of political representation and, particularly, the changes which have occurred in the fundamental link between citizens and parliamentarians. We know from the polls and day-to-day business that the reputation of the Italian parliament and, more generally, of representative institutions, is not higher than it was during the First Republic. Such difficulties in the process of modernisation of the representative link can

be related to macro-institutional variables like those mentioned above, as well as to daily parliamentary practices.

A number of hypotheses can be formulated in order to explain such a persistent gap. We will resume them at the end of a short but comprehensive analysis of the most relevant variables intervening in the relationship between citizens and parliamentarians. The next section explains the parliament's role in the Italian political system before and after the crisis of the early 1990s, the rather negative perceptions of citizens towards it and parliament's effort to become more open and transparent. Section three summarises the recent changes in the Italian parties and party system, and their relevance for the representation of citizens. Next, the role of individual MPs will be assessed, looking at their actual behaviour within parliament and their efforts to use the Internet to establish personal contact with their voters. The focus of the fifth section is on the two mechanisms through which citizens can directly raise issues to parliament: petitions and public legislative initiatives. In the conclusion, the changing role of the different channels of representation and the main aspects of continuity and change between the 'first' and the 'second' republic will be assessed.

A Changing Role Does Not Improve the Reputation of Parliament

A consolidated literature has stressed at length the *centrality of parliament* in the development of Italian republican democracy (Cotta 1990). However, such a central institution has never appeared particularly trustworthy to the eyes of the Italian public. In an analysis of the relationship between parliament and citizens conducted at the beginning of the transitional phase, the 1990s, Vincent Della Sala (1998) mentioned the contrast between the *palazzo* (the palace) and the *piazza* (the street), to describe the distance which traditionally divides the highest democratic institutional arenas from the demands of the citizens. This legitimacy deficit of public institutions (linked to low trust of the ruling class) is well known and has been debated by eminent historians and social scientists (for example, Banfield 1958, La Palombara 1967, Putnam 1993) focusing on long-term explanatory factors such as the short and difficult history of the state, the lack of a strong national identity, and persistent economic and social cleavages.

It is also well known that the Italian parliament has always been a crucial arena for the selection of governmental leadership: junior ministers and new members of the cabinet used to be recruited among MPs and they could be pushed towards the *ministerial inner circle* on the basis of their electoral performance, measured by the number of personal preferences. At the same time, a long parliamentary experience was also a key characteristic of the few powerful leaders of the main opposition actor – the Communist Party.

Today, some of these features have been changed or even completely lost, but this has not endangered the centrality of both parliamentary branches. An important challenge is now brought by the regional and local institutions: with the

incremental growth of the political role of the regions and, after the introduction of majoritarian devices within the local and regional systems of government, the impact of offices beyond national representatives has surely increased. Two radical reforms of the electoral system for the election of the two parliamentary branches have also determined relevant changes at the level of political representation. Namely, the mixed-majoritarian system partially based on single-member constituencies, introduced in 1993 and applied three times in 1994, 1996 and 2001, encouraged the recruitment of a number of 'territorial representatives', but the return of a ballot list in 2005 (a PR system corrected by majority bonus, applied in 2006 and 2008) has determined the return of centralised processes of candidate selection. Moreover, and differently from the system prior to 1992, the large constituencies' closed lists and the opportunity for national leaders to be candidates in all the constituencies of one of the parliamentary branches, lead to total control of the party leadership over the recruitment process, excluding party members and activists from the process.

The current parliamentary outlook resembles the classic image of a plethoric, transformational arena of the old days of the 'First Republic'. This is mainly due to the impossibility of bringing, so far, any substantial change to the symmetric bicameralism introduced by the 1948 constitution, but also because of a number of political determinants. First of all, the capacity to progress and remove the traditional perception of a closed institution (the '*palazzo*'), proved to be rather limited: notwithstanding the effort of a renovated, more technological, parliamentary bureaucracy and the impulse from the speakers of the most recent legislatures,[3] the administrative reorganisation, the push towards improving the drafting and quality of the information, and the implementation of a powerful strategy of communication (mainly via the web), do not seem to have had a significant impact on the institutional performance of the chambers.

Secondly, the internal rules of procedure of both parliamentary branches do not fit the new majoritarian and pragmatic 'vocation' of Italian parliamentary democracy: on the one hand, the role of parliament as a multiple veto power in decision-making processes continues to be seen as a useless cost. On the other hand, the capabilities of each individual MP to improve the quality of Italian democracy by employing the means at their disposal – (for instance the *connective function* – that is, the capacity for driving the information from the institutional level to the public) – did not increase sufficiently.

Given that, how can we rate the widespread perception of parliament today and the consequent level of trust on such a central institution? The data still reveal a dangerous gap between the political centrality of parliament and its reputation within public opinion. According to all the recent polls, trust in the Italian parliament is particularly low: the classic *Eurobarometer* question on institutional trustworthiness shows that only 26 per cent of Italian respondents in 2010 trusted parliament,[4] similar to 2009 (27 per cent), and following a declining trend since the beginning of the twenty-first century when it was always higher than 30 per cent. Other data stress the weakness of the national parliament in the ranking of

the most trusted institutions. According to the periodical report *Gli Italiani e lo Stato*,[5] the rate of popular trust in the Italian parliament has declined by approximately 10 per cent during the period 2005–10, now (with a rate of only 13 per cent) being among the lowest measures of trust in the democratic institutions.

The media regularly reflects this negative image of the representative institution, reporting on the laziness of representatives and, in contrast, their eagerness to defend their status and privileges.[6] These reports often target the figure of the national MP as the most indefensible privileged actor. The problems of accountability evoked by these criticisms can be illustrated by different examples and indicators. Here, we restrict the analysis to two opposing images: one representing a situation where ministers and MPs desert the chamber, leaving an old, excessively large assembly without relevance, and, on the other hand, a situation of over-activity of MPs motivated only by the willingness to pursue their individual interests.

Question time is a good example of the first one; in particular the hearings of the prime minister, an instrument introduced in the 1990s. This institutional feature, imported from the Westminster practice, has proved a failure so far. Indeed, the prime minister and the most important cabinet members tend not to abide by this requirement, appearing in parliament only in cases of utmost need such as votes and motions of confidence (whereby the government attaches a motion of confidence to a particular piece of legislation to force coherent behaviour from the majority). Therefore Question Time, often covered by live television broadcast, becomes a desolate scene where the questioning MP is alone in the large chamber and their counterpart, perhaps a junior minister, sits alone in the central desks of the floor reserved for the executive.

An opposite – but equally negative – situation is that of over-activity of MPs motivated by specific personal benefits such as the parliamentary allowance, paid on the basis of the frequency of attendance during voting sessions. Once again, good practices introduced to improve MPs' accountability (for instance, the recent introduction of an electronic fingerprint reader to avoid plural votes of the so-called *pianists*) do not seem to be sufficient: many backbenchers keep hanging around the floor, speaking on the phone and disturbing the work of the few colleagues seriously engaged with the procedures. The case of a majority MP caught surfing a porn website during a debate (February 2011) is of course just one isolated episode, but the impact of the photo taken that day in the parliamentary floor was much greater than any other news about the work of parliament.

The New '*Partitocrazia*' and the Changing Links between Parliament and Public

The negative perception of parliamentary performance needs to be linked to the disillusionment that followed the hopes and expectations which had emerged with the waning of the traditional party-government. The political elites'

incapacity to sustain credible projects is, no doubt, the first factor explaining the persistence of a problem of institutional accountability: in less than 20 years, Italy has experienced a variety of new political parties, symbols and coalitions, and the same leadership – although very stable on the centre-right political spectrum – looks weak and uncertain. The behaviour of some litigious *peones* hidden within the parliamentary groups, in particular, has often been decisive during the last two decades, showing clear evidence of opportunism and an extraordinary rate of party switching. This makes the general image of a largely unsatisfactory *political class* even more palpable.

Among the variables explaining the negative impact of the Italian ruling class on the relationship between institutions and the public, we have to mention the excessive centralisation of the selection of party leaders, the extension and the use of party funding, and the degree of cohesion and discipline within the parliamentary parties. All of these practices, severely criticised during the 'First Republic', continue to have a negative effect on the relationship between parliament and citizens.

The consolidation of a new responsible party system was, of course, during the early 1990s, the first expectation of those who wanted to give the Italian parliamentary democracy a new and fresher outlook, after the breakdown of the old and largely corrupted *partitocrazia*. However, such an outlook did not materialise, mainly because the new parties established after 1992 suffered structural problems of organisational consolidation. From the minor parties located at the extremes and at the centre of the political continuum to the broader parties like Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (and then *Popolo delle libertà*) on the centre-right side, or the Democratic Party on the centre-left, none of the political actors have been able to consolidate a majoritarian consensus (Bardi *et al.* 2010). Paradoxically, although the electoral success of these parties is far from the stable and uncontested consensus of the main parties of the First Republic, electoral behaviour has remained extremely stable in terms of electoral outcomes, with the rate of inter-bloc volatility being relatively low. However, it is also clear that Italians are less and less interested in politics, as a great deal of research confirms.[7] As a consequence, the rate of abstention and 'protest votes' are increasingly higher, while no party is able to gain a membership comparable to that of the historical *giants* of the First Republic.

Furthermore, most of these parties have developed a type of *majoritarian rhetoric* which includes the idea of 'clean politics', a sober approach to public office, a remarkable reduction of the benefits assured to a *caste* of professional politicians and the introduction of principles of intra-party democracy and ethics within party organisations. So far, all these propositions have clearly been contradicted by the daily practice of politics: the political elite remains excessive and costly; career politicians often seem arrogant and pretentious, and a new approach of sobriety, transparency and of responsible political professionalism still seems distant (Verzichelli 2010).

The evolution of public funding of political parties is one of the stories illustrating this contradiction: after the 1993 referendum had abrogated the 1974 law of party financing, public funding of political parties has been progressively reintroduced, above all through indirect channels such as the reimbursement of electoral expenses to parliamentary parties. The amount of funding is much higher than effective expenses for political campaigning, and public funding in Italy, comparatively, seems to be greatly inflated (Pacini 2009).

As already mentioned, another widespread practice undermining trust in parliament is party switching: this phenomenon was virtually unknown during the old days of the First Republic, when internal discipline was strong in all political parties, including those organised in factions. Many MPs from the governmental coalition, mainly the Christian Democratic Party, would occasionally vote against government, thanks to secret voting extensively used before the 1990s. However, the so called *snipers* remained loyal to their party, since the ideological distance between parties made their absorption by other parliamentary groups almost impossible. After 1994, party switching became a recurrent practice, and it has not disappeared with the return of a relatively stable party system (Heller and Mershon 2005). Whole factions, simple followers of a dissenting party leader, and sometimes isolated representatives, leave their original group to join other parliamentary fractions. In fact, small groups and single legislators are often tempted to cross the line between majority and opposition, given the weak ideological and organisational links with their own parties. The survival of the fourth Berlusconi cabinet after the critical vote of confidence of December 2010[8] was indeed based on the 'acquisition' of a handful of deputies from the opposition parties, showing further diffusion of the party-switching phenomenon. Commenting on the sudden conversion of some MPs, many observers spoke at the time of a case of a 'seat market'. In any case, party switching has become an additional cause feeding the mistrust of the political elite and, particularly, parliamentarians.

The Role of Individual MPs

Back in the 1970s Italian parliamentarians belonging to majority and opposition parties agreed at least on one issue: the Burkean dilemma between a delegate or a trustee style of representation did not make any sense, as their prevailing role was that of party delegates (Di Palma 1977). In the last two decades, two phenomena have created the opportunity for a change in the relationship between citizens and parliamentarians: the organisational decline of party organisations and the adoption of a new electoral system. The traditional parties which dominated Italian politics until the early 1990s (mainly the Christian Democrats, the Communist Party and the Socialist Party which, on average, represented more than 80 per cent of the votes) were characterised by comprehensive ideologies and binding territorial organisations. By contrast, and following a common European trend (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002), parties emerged in the so-called Second Republic

as less ideology driven and more personalised. Simultaneously, the change from an open list proportional system to a mixed system based on uni-nominal districts was meant to favour the emergence of a more genuine relationship between parliamentarians and their geographical constituencies.

Elite surveys have often attempted to measure empirically the dimension of the territorial vocation of Italian MPs. Although differences in the wording of questions do not allow an accurate comparison, some data suggest that in the last 30 years the Italian parliamentarians' perception of their representative role has changed slightly. Both in the mid-1970s (Di Palma 1977) and at the end of the present decade,[9] about half of parliamentarians see themselves as representatives of the country as a whole. However, those considering themselves primarily party representatives (that is, those for whom the party is the main focus of representation) steadily declined from 45 per cent to less than 20 per cent: conversely, according to the most recent survey, more than 20 per cent of Italian parliamentarians see themselves as representatives of their geographical constituency whereas in the mid-1970s this figure failed to reach the 10 per cent threshold. We therefore have to assess whether the actual behaviour of Italian parliamentarians demonstrates attempts to establish a more direct relationship with voters. This question can be divided into two dimensions: (1) the existing channels of communication between parliamentarians and citizens and (2) the activities developed by representatives to champion the interests of their constituency.

Italian parliamentarians have two channels through which to communicate with the general public: traditionally by maintaining a territorial office and more recently through the use of the Internet. Although most parliamentarians have some kind of territorial office, it is virtually impossible to ascertain their real effectiveness. Conversely, though, Internet usage is simpler to analyse. Determining if and to what extent parliamentarians use the Internet to communicate with citizens gives us an assessment of how they relate with citizens.

The Italian parliament provides each member of parliament with an email address and an official page which includes a personal profile and data concerning their parliamentary activity; however, as far as deputies are concerned, more than one-third also have a personal webpage (Table 1). The proportion of parliamentarians with a personal webpage is low compared to European parliamentarians, 73 per cent of whom have some sort of Internet-based platform (Braghiroli 2010). In order to assess how Italian deputies use the Internet to communicate with citizens we focus on two dimensions: update and interactivity. Update, measured by a dummy variable with value 1 if the website has at least one new article in the last six months, is meant to assess the current involvement and interest of each MP in the maintenance of this channel of communication. Interactivity refers to the idea that personal websites can be used in two ways: to convey information to one's voters or to establish a dialogue with them; those websites allowing users to post comments or to have a dialogue with the representative through Web 2.0 tools (such as Facebook or Twitter) are classified as interactive.

Table 1: Deputies with a Personal Webpage by Parliamentary Group in the 16th Chamber of Deputies

Parliamentary Group	Deputies	% with a Personal Webpage	% of Updated Webpages*	% of Interactive Webpages*
Popolo delle Libertà	276	33.7	82.8	47.3
Partito Democratico	217	48.4	95.2	59.0
Lega Nord	60	13.3	87.5	50.0
Unione di Centro	36	27.8	100.0	60.0
Italia dei Valori	29	44.8	100.0	69.2
Others	11	16.7	100.0	50.0
Total	630	36.7	90.5	54.5

*Percentages calculated only on deputies with a personal webpage.
Source: Authors' own research.

Table 1 shows that Internet usage is considerably influenced by party membership: centre-left MPs (*Partito Democratico* and *Italia dei Valori*) are more likely than their centre-right colleagues to have a webpage. Furthermore, focusing on those MPs using the Internet, left-wing representatives tend to make more advanced use of the web by keeping their websites and blogs more updated and offering their voters interactive tools such as comments and social networks. However, very few parliamentarians belonging to the Northern League (probably the most territorially organised party) use the Internet to communicate. The more extensive use of websites among centre-left MPs can be explained by the socio-political profiles of these representatives: the rate of 'pure politicians' (MPs with a long and continuous background in elected office and former full-time paid party or union officers) is higher within the Democratic Party than amongst centre-right MPs. This factor, together with the greater number of MPs from the Democratic Party with a university background, is the most likely explanation of the different rates of use of Internet tools.

When it comes to parliamentarians' activities on behalf of their constituencies, written questions are a very useful indicator of activity, being virtually unconstrained by party discipline, leaving space for individual preferences and usually addressing particularistic or local issues (Caretti and Morisi 2006, Russo 2011). Table 2 shows the number of written questions tabled by Italian parliamentarians from the 7th to the 16th legislature (1976–2010). Considering that most questions address local or personal grievances, Table 2 suggests that dealing with local and particularistic issues became more important between the end of the 1980s and the mid-1990s, with a drop in subsequent years back to the levels of the First Republic. In relation to the 14th, 15th and 16th legislatures (2001–10), the information available allows us to develop a more detailed analysis, which in turn allows us to identify specifically constituency-oriented questions– that is questions specifically focusing on the region in which the questioner was elected.

Table 2: Questions for Written Answer (7th to 16th Legislature)

Legislature	Written Questions	Written Questions per Month	Constituency Oriented (%)
7th	10,293	290	-
8th	23,984	492	-
9th	25,815	541	-
10th	39,556	693	-
11th	27,752	1171	-
12th	27,703	1118	-
13th	57,328	945	-
14th	30,362	515	30.0
15th	9919	412	36.0
16th (until October 2010)	13,159	438	34.0

Source: Authors' elaboration on data available at http://www.camera.it.

Table 2 confirms that in the last 10 years about one-third of all written questions are asked in order to serve the constituency: it is striking to note that after the 2005 electoral reform this kind of constituency service has not declined, despite the abolition of uni-nominal districts. This finding suggests that responding to constituency demands and cultivating a local consensus is still useful for being reselected by one's own party. A complementary explanation is that parliamentarians may perform constituency service to pursue a career in local politics: in fact, from the 1990s onwards, the decentralisation of the Italian state has vastly increased the powers of mayors and presidents of regions, and it is not uncommon to see parliamentarians running for these offices. An individual-level analysis of the questioning activities of Italian Deputies (Russo 2011) found two additional results: first, parliamentarians belonging to opposition parties with strong territorial organisations (such as *Lega Nord* and *Alleanza Nazionale*) are more focused on their constituency than their colleagues; second, parliamentarians elected in southern regions are also more constituency oriented than their colleagues. This last result suggests that the well-known particularism (Banfield 1958) that characterises politics in southern Italy is still at work, and that southern parliamentarians may still play their role as 'brokers' between citizens and the state (Golden 2003).

The consideration of these two dimensions depicts a mixed picture: on the one hand it is clear that cultivating a close relationship with citizens is not a core component of the role of Italian parliamentarians, as two-thirds of them do not believe that it is useful to have a personal webpage; on the other hand, the practice of asking questions about constituency matters is quite common, even if these only represent one-third of the total. It is interesting to note the case of the Northern League, whose parliamentarians are among the most active when it comes to constituency service but also the least likely to use the Internet as a channel of communication; their low socio-educational profile

and close relationship with the territorial party organisation make the use of a personal webpage less relevant. Oddly, the Northern League, which emerged in the 1990s to criticise the contemporary party system and contributed to the dissolution of the First Republic, seems to replicate the typical representational linkages of the traditional post-war Italian parties such as the Communist Party and the Christian Democrats (Wertman 1988), where the territorial linkage between parliamentarians and citizens was not direct but mediated by the party organisation.

The Citizens

Focusing now on a bottom-up perspective, the Italian constitution establishes that citizens can use two different procedures to raise an issue to parliament: petitions and public legislative initiatives. Article 50 states that 'All citizens may address petitions to both Houses demanding legislative measures or presenting collective needs'. Petitions can be submitted individually or by a group of people, and should be addressed to the president of one of the two chambers. The Rules of Procedure of the Chamber of Deputies (art. 109) and the Senate (art. 141) establish that petitions are sent to the relevant committee according to the subject area. In the Chamber of Deputies, committees can either send a resolution to the government asking the needs expressed by the petitions to be taken into consideration or decide to examine the petitions together with bills already on the agenda. In the Senate, committees can either decide to dismiss the petition or to send it to the government: however, the Senate's Rules of Procedure state that any decisions must be communicated to the proponents.

Recent years have shown a growing activism by citizens (Table 3), at least when considering the Senate, for which historical data are available: the average number of petitions submitted per month has increased from 14.5 to 41.6 between the 13th (1996 to 2001) and the 16th legislatures. However, the sheer number of petitions is not a good indicator of their relevance, as a considerable number are written by a few 'specialists': in the period between 1996 and 2010, considering only petitions submitted to the Senate, the most active citizen has alone submitted 1567 petitions and the second most active submitted

Table 3: Popular Petitions Submitted to the Senate (1996–2010)

Legislature	Total Petitions to the Senate	*Of which: Collective Petitions*	Collective Petitions per Month
13th (1996–2001)	886	84	1.38
14th (2001–2006)	1430	77	1.33
15th (2006–2008)	814	40	1.67
16th (2008–Oct. 2010)	1249	50	1.67

Source: Authors' elaboration on data available at http://www.senato.it.

825. Together, their petitions account for more than half of the total submitted (54.6 per cent).[10] It is far more interesting to look at collective petitions, which are signed by groups of citizens: indeed, these are more likely to be politically significant. Throughout the period covered in this study the number of collective petitions submitted to the Senate has remained stable, oscillating between 1.33 and 1.67 per month.

Given the large numbers involved, analysing the content of the petitions is beyond the scope of the present study.[11] When evaluating their role as an instrument of relationship between citizens and parliament, and their effectiveness, it is difficult to give definitive judgements. Certainly, if individual petitions fail to have an impact, grass-roots political movements, parties and local politicians can successfully use petitions as a means to mobilise their supporters, to launch public campaigns and to move issues into the public agenda. For instance, when the Italian public debate was dominated by the possibility of legalising euthanasia, the association *Luca Coscioni*, very close to the small libertarian Radical Party, launched a petition to request a law to regulate this phenomenon; while failing to have any legislative impact, the campaign succeeded in raising awareness amongst public opinion. Another success was the petition launched in 2008 by an influential Catholic association (*Forum delle Associazioni Familiari*), signed by more than 1 million people, which asked for fiscal advantages for large families: after being discussed in the relevant committee, it was transformed into a motion and finally approved. In summary, the effectiveness of petitions is directly related to the political power of the proponents, and they are more useful for the purposes of organised groups than for single citizens wanting to signal specific issues.

Beyond the right of petition, the Italian constitution assigns to citizens the right to propose legislation to parliament. According to article 70, 'Legislation may be introduced by the government, by a member of parliament and by those entities and bodies so empowered by constitutional amendment law. The people may initiate legislation by proposing a bill drawn up in sections and signed by at least 50,000 voters'. This procedure, commonly known as 'popular legislative initiative', has been frequently used by Italian citizens despite the strict numerical requirements.

The rules adopted in both houses in 1971 state that popular legislative initiatives introduced in the preceding legislature that have not finished being examined do not need to be presented again, remaining on the agenda (this provision is known by a French term, *repêchage*). However, the standard procedure must start afresh and the bill must be referred again to the appropriate committee. This rule gives popular legislative initiatives two legislative periods to be examined. The Rules of Procedure of the Chamber of Deputies does not provide other special procedures for bills initiated by citizens beyond *repêchage*. The Rules of the Senate, however, have separate procedures for these bills (art. 74). Firstly, before announcing the bill to the Senate, the president must order that the signatures of the sponsor are checked to make sure the bill is legally valid. Secondly, the committee to which the bill is referred has to begin its examination within one

Table 4: Popular Bills Introduced in and Passed by the Parliament (1996–2010)

	13th Legislature	14th Legislature	15th Legislature	16th Legislature (until October 2010)
Popular Bills on the Agenda	31	34	20	15
– *Newly presented*	25	14	7	8
– *From repêchage*	6	20	13	7
Approved in the Original Formulation	0	0	0	0
Absorbed and Approved	6	4	0	0

Source: Authors' elaboration on data available at http://www.camera.it.

month. Finally, one of the first 10 signatories can be invited by the committee to defend the bill.

Table 4 shows that in the period considered none of the bills initiated by citizens were approved in their original form, although 10 were approved after being merged with similar bills of parliamentary or governmental origin.[12] Most bills initiated by citizens do not survive the committee stage, but occasionally the relevant committee decides that some parts can be used to enrich other bills. In recent years the procedure has lost some of its attractiveness both for citizens and for parliament itself: indeed, after the 13th legislature the number of newly presented bills declined, and in the last two legislatures not even part of a bill initiated by citizens has become law.[13]

Amongst the public legislative initiatives approved after being merged with other bills in the 14th legislature, one aimed at maintaining the public ownership of the main Italian energy production and distribution company (ENEL) despite the liberalisation of the sector (presented in July 1997). Another attempted to introduce a new two-round electoral system for the Italian parliament similar to that used for the French National Assembly (presented in July 1998). Two others, presented in July 1999 and July 2000, were promoted by the Northern League and proposed to adopt more restrictive rules on immigration. These examples suggest two final considerations: firstly, public legislative initiatives are often employed by political entrepreneurs to mobilise citizens on salient issues; secondly, even when they are absorbed in a private or governmental bill, as in the case of the bill requesting a two-round electoral system, there is no guarantee that their original aim is actually pursued.

Conclusions

The previous sections have highlighted the persistent problems in the link between representatives and those they represent in Italy and have explored some attempts made by citizens and parliamentarians to overcome them. The

second section showed that trust in parliament is very low, with a negative public image of the parliamentary institution, while the third section focused on the responsibilities of political leaders and political parties in consolidating a stronger representational linkage. We then highlighted two points: although there is a relationship between citizens and their districts, constituency service does not seem to be a crucial component of the parliamentary mission; secondly, those MPs willing to establish a more direct link with their voters through the Internet are only a large minority. Finally, the last section showed that petitions and public legislative initiatives, despite being widely used by Italian citizens, usually fail to have any impact if they are not sponsored by political parties or other influential actors.

All in all, the established perception of a considerable distance between the work of parliament and ordinary people has not been reduced in almost 20 years of discussion. On the contrary, many factors still contribute to make this link ever more obscure and complicated. Among them, one must bear in mind the lack of coherence between expectations, achievements and the regulations settled by different normative sources. Particularly, the ongoing discussion about institutional reform has not brought a clear outcome: the executive now has a reasonable increase in its effective power, while parliament so far has been unable to find a new role. Yet the conventional view is that it continues to play the role of an excessively large, effete arena full of egoistic politicians. Moreover, the development of internal parliamentary rules and the synchronisation between these and a general 'pattern of democracy' does not seem to convince the Italian public. Finally, the beginning of the alternation phase created an expectation for the emergence of a more accountable class of elected representatives. However, the numerous politicians who populate the Italian parliament are much criticised by the media and are still seen as 'surviving off politics' without taking responsibility for their actions or offering any specific contribution to the improvement of the political system.

Our analysis shows that the controversial evolution of the 'electoral regime' is a fundamental variable in the difficult process of revitalisation of the relationship between parliament and the public; not just the electoral systems but also the larger set of norms around it (for instance, the rules about reimbursement of electoral expenses). Of course, this survey is a first attempt to bring together the potential factors which have an impact on this crucial relationship. However, some impressionistic suggestions are emerging: if the macro-variables have been relevant, since they have produced a confused framework of 'stop and go' in the process of institutional adaptation, the resilience of the Italian parliament and its persistently negative image have to be connected to the specific strategies employed by the individual actors in the use of their prerogatives, as well as to the inadequacy of some internal practices. This article has touched on at least three key points that clearly illustrate such disappointing practices: the use of hearings and questions, the limited impact of petitions with the rare interaction

between voters and representatives via the web, and the opportunistic use of public resources by groups and single parliamentarians.

Future research will need to explain such a persistent gap: the hypotheses can ideally be ordered along a continuum between an interpretation based on the structural problems of Italian parliamentary democracy, to another interpretation which focuses on the inadequacies of the single actors populating the political system. Until such supplementary analysis, we have to report a rather disturbing conclusion: 150 years after the beginning of Italy's unitary history, 60 years after the new democratic constitution and 20 years after the breakdown of the republican *partitocrazia* the relationship between the Italian parliament and its citizens is yet to be built.

However, we know that a deep and cultural change in the relationship between citizens and parliament may take time. The illusory expectation of an immediate and positive effect of a given radical institutional reform after a period of missed opportunities is now clear, and this may help those who seek an incremental but effective adaptation of the parliamentary image. According to this approach, the Italian parliament is already able to reach its institutional goal, which has not changed much over the years. Nevertheless, this achievement is subordinated to the adoption of internal rules which are coherent with a majority model of parliamentary democracy and, on the other hand, to the maturity of a new generation of parliamentary actors, from the speaker to the last backbencher, whose pro-active and transparent actions are needed in order to make the Italian parliament more responsible and more directly connected to its citizens.

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Notes

1. Although the article is the result of a collective effort, sections four and five have been written by Russo and sections two and three by Verzichelli. Introduction and conclusions have been written by both authors.
2. Comprehensive interpretations of political change, focused mainly on the last decades, can be found in Cotta and Verzichelli (2007) and Newell (2010).
3. All the recent speakers of the two parliamentary branches, and particularly the Chairmen of the Chamber of Deputies, have been important leaders of their respective political camps. They have often represented a minority actor in coalitions (for instance, in the case of Speakers Casini, Bertinotti and Fini), and this has made them strong defenders of the parliamentary prerogatives. In any case, their drive to give parliament a stronger role, especially in terms of institutional communication, has been evident (De Rosa 2009).
4. Eurobarometer website offers only a summary of the main results: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb73/eb73_first_en.pdf (accessed 11 May 2012). The data were analysed

through the GESIS archive: http://zacat.gesis.org/webview/ (accessed 11 May 2012). Compare *Eurobarometer* 73 (spring 2010).

5. Compare the records of this well-known report at http://www.demos.it
6. The attention of the media on some degenerates of the political elite is surely not limited to the Italian case. However, the perception of a political class which seems to be even less responsible and more immoral than the old rulers of the First Republic is particularly diffuse in Italy. A book published in 2007 by two journalists (Stella and Rizzo 2007), reporting a number of stories and anecdotes about clientelism, abuses and more generally unearned privileges of politicians, has sold more than 2 million copies, thus giving rise to a genre of books and reportages about the modern *caste*.
7. On the decrease of political participation see Maraffi (2007). For a comprehensive analysis of data concerning electoral behaviour and attachment to politics see Bellucci and Segatti (2010).
8. Berlusconi had to pass a difficult no-confidence motion in the lower chamber, which had been requested by the recently formed group *Future and Liberty*. Before the decisive vote, however, two deputies from this parliamentary group and, above all, some from the two centre-left opposition groups, decided to support the government, thus avoiding a governmental crisis.
9. Data on the current period come from a 2009 survey of 70 Italian members of the Chamber of Deputies, from the IntUne project (Integrated and United: A quest for Citizenship in an ever closer Europe) financed by the Sixth Framework Programme of the European Union.
10. These two record petitioners are respectively a local politician and a political activist who use this instrument to draw the attention of the local media.
11. Unfortunately the assignment of petitions to committees does not always correspond to the subject area of each committee, and therefore an analysis of the committees to which petitions are sent proved inconclusive.
12. Of these 10 bills, four were approved after being unified with similar bills, while six became part of broader bills.
13. However, it should be noted that the 15th legislature only lasted 24 months, and the 16th is still current.

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