I

Introduction: Berlusconi's Italy

I must obey. His art is of such pow'r.
Caliban, referring to Prospero, the unjustly deposed
Duke of Milan.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Tempest* (act 1, scene 2

*In our country we have never been truly liberated from the need for
a great commander to whom we entrust our lives and free ourselves
from the weight and responsibility of choices.*

—TONINO PERNA, *Destra e Sinistra nell'Europa del XXI
secolo* (Milan: Altreconomia, 2006, p. 11).

July 9, 2006, must have been a day of mixed emotions for Silvio Berlusconi, the former Italian prime minister. The Italian team had won soccer's World Cup with a victory over France, but Berlusconi could not politically bask in the glory of the team to which he had tied his political career. Not only had he named the political party he invented in 1994 to serve his political ambitions after the chant for the national team, Forza Italia, his supporters had also acquired the nickname *gli azzurri* (the blues) after the pet name for the players on the national soccer squad. Since 1994, the story of Italian politics has been dominated by the larger-than-life figure of Berlusconi. When the corruption scandals and investigations of the early 1990s brought down the major parties of government in Italy, Berlusconi made himself a major actor in the emerging new system by organizing a new party and setting about creating a center-right constellation of parties that had never previously existed in Italian politics. He did so partly by mobilizing his own immense resources as Italy's major media baron and by adopting an array of symbols, not the least of which was his involvement in Italian soccer as own-er of AC Milan and his connections through that to the national

team, to appeal to an Italian electorate disenchanted with old-style politicians and their political parties. However, above all, Berlusconi has provided a political magnet for those Italians less concerned with the normative propriety or probity of national politics, precisely the problem unearthed by the corruption scandals of the early 1990s, and looking to government pragmatically as a solution/barrier to resolving their private problems (see, e.g., Berselli and Cartocci 2006). From this viewpoint, Berlusconi's own career is a metaphor for what some Italians have been looking for in political leadership. What many foreign commentators, most famously the *Economist* magazine, on a number of different occasions over the years, deemed as Berlusconi's "unfitness" to rule Italy, his conflicts of interest in particular, seemed to some voters as indicating a *sagacia* (astuteness) and *fortuna favorevole* (good fortune) that they hoped might rub off on them.

Leadership versus "Followership"

Berlusconi's media ownership and performance as a businessman-politician has come to dominate many accounts, both popular and academic, of Italian politics since the break-up of the old system in 1992 (see, e.g., Novelli 1995; McCarthy 1996; Zolo 1999; Ginsborg 2004a; Andrews 2005; Venturino 2005; Campus 2006a; Stille 2006; Lazar 2007). We refer to many of these accounts more specifically in Chapters 2 and 4. Berlusconi is often seen as the master shaman or trickster of contemporary Italy, manipulating his way to the top through mafia methods (and real Mafia connections) and then by appealing to the crassest and most vulgar aspects of Italian society. We explicitly acknowledge his importance as the organizer and salesman of the Italian center-right by titling this book the way we have. But, in our view, "Berlusconi's Italy" has only been partially of his making. Some of the thrust of this book lies in showing how he has clearly recognized and shrewdly navigated politically around the socioeconomic and ideological cleavages of Italian society. But we give much more attention than is typical to these cleavages and how they operate electorally. Berlusconi may have proved necessary to

the past fifteen years of Italian politics, but it is clear that his role alone is insufficient in adequately explaining what has happened.

Italy is famously divided geographically along economic and sociocultural lines. It has long had a "southern question," the problem of the South's lower level of economic development compared to the North (e.g., Valussi 1987; Barbagallo 1994). More recently, with the growth of the Northern League and its campaign against "Roman" rule because of putative fiscal bias in favor of the South, the country has acquired a "northern question." Long-standing regional differences in affiliation with the Catholic Church and in the development of municipal socialism and trade unionism, as well as in collective memory of Fascism and resistance against it have also had profound effects on political sensibilities (Trigilia 1986; Agnew 2002, Chapters 5 and 6). Italy also is famously divided among city-regions that have historically provided a more powerful source for political identities than has the "nation" as a whole. Of course, the spread of a peculiarly "diffuse urbanization" since the 1950s has weakened the cultural grip of the older geographically compact city-regions. Today, much more of the Italian population lives in the diffuse and disordered peripheries of large metropolitan complexes than in the discretely defined *paesi* of historical memory (e.g., Paba and Paloscia 1994). In this context, national electoral success does not come easily. The old electoral system (1953–1992) never produced one party with a nationwide majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (the two equally powerful national legislative bodies). Governments were always coalitions of parties put together after elections. They rarely lasted long in office and always excluded both the Communist left (PCI) and Fascist right (MSI). All of the parties had clear geographical bases in different parts of the countries, even if by 1976 the PCI and Christian Democrats (DC) had become relatively "nationalized" parties in terms of the geographical spread of their votes. Yet, there was an electoral bipolarism implicit in the old system. When voters switched votes they tended to do so within "families" of parties, moving to ideologically adjacent rather than more ideologically distant parties.

The new electoral system introduced in 1993 placed a premium on the ability of the political parties to group themselves together

into alliances so as to facilitate the election of a mix of single-member district representatives (majoritarian) and multimember district representatives (proportional). The idea was to encourage a greater bipolarism in the possibility of governments from opposite ends of a left–right political spectrum or translate the basic bipolarity of postwar Italian electoral politics into the possibility of alliances between clusters of parties that would present a common face as potential governments to the electorate before elections. In this way the blocked alternation between political "sides" and the short-lived governments of the old system would both be consigned to history. This was one of the goals of prescient observers long before the collapse of the old party system in 1992 (for example, see Pasquino 1985). In many respects this is what has happened (even with the return, under Berlusconi's hand, to a significantly proportional electoral system in 2005 as the leader and his allies feared for their political lives) (Berselli and Cartocci 2001; Berselli and Cartocci 2006; Pappalardo 2006). Certainly the 2001 election indicated a significant consolidation of a bipolar polity with "third forces" largely disappearing but with small parties still able to gain a higher degree of representation within the coalitions than their total numbers of votes would mandate (e.g., the Christian Democratic Union (UDC) on the center-right and the Italian Communists on the center-left). Overall, however, the new electoral system seemed to have begun to operate as an instrument of electoral socialization rather than as yet another failed reform simply reflecting the persistence of the political culture of the old regime (Cartocci 2004, but also see Bull and Pasquino 2007).

A downside of increased bipolarity has been an increasingly rancorous style of politics, particularly during election campaigns. Over the years 1994 to 2006, the tendency, initiated by Berlusconi but with avid response from his opponents, has been to portray political adversaries as enemies by using ever more violent and incendiary language. This violent populism borrows both from the style cultivated first in Italian politics by Umberto Bossi of the Northern League—what the DC politician, Mino Martinazzoli, memorably called "the politics of the bar"—and from the polarizing strategies used by U.S. Republican Party operatives such as Lee Atwater and

Karl Rove with their dual focus on identifying "wedge issues" to attract key voting blocs and negative advertising to insult and vilify the "other side." Hectoring and simplifying thus replace debate and complexity.[1] Berlusconi has openly borrowed both advisers and strategies from the right-wing American electoral "playbook." In this regard he is not so much a model that Americans should beware of (pace Stille 2006) as a product of the export of the very system now in place in American electoral politics.[2]

Beyond the changes in electoral system, the period since 1994 has been one of rapid and widespread change in Italian politics and society (Guarnieri 2006; Bull and Newell 2006, Chapter 3). Not only did the major parties of government, the DC and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), disappear in 1993 in the face of scandal, the PCI had already divided with the collapse of state socialism in the former Soviet Union, and a significant portion of the northern electorate was drifting toward the Northern League and its radically anti-Roman rhetoric. If in the 1980s a political inertia characterized the country, with government policies and public attitudes more like those that had prevailed in Britain and Germany in the 1970s and before—with for example, widespread popular commitment to government price controls, state ownership of major industries, protection of employment levels irrespective of market dynamism, and with limited swings in votes between political parties—all of this began to change in the 1990s. Some have put this down to purely domestic factors, such as the arrival of Berlusconi as a major political actor, whereas others have given more emphasis to the pressures and opportunities arising from the renewed burst of activity in the European Union following the Single Market and Maastricht Agreements that set Italy on course to lowering tariff barriers and joining the euro. Lurking in the background, however, along with the invocation of "Europe" (meaning the EU) as a source of discipline upon a profligate people, has been the perception of an increasingly negative impact of globalization on many of Italy's most important industrial sectors (Ferrera and Gualmini 2004). As a result, the perception of economic danger has become an important element in Italian political discourse both in terms of restricting criticism of government

spending restraint and of mobilizing groups afraid for their eco-
nomic future in an increasingly competitive and unpredictable world
economy. If this has led to a sense of an "incomplete transition"
from the old system to the new (from the First to the Second Re-
public) because no policy seems to settle much of anything, it has
also reinstated the old fear that Italy is still anomalous in all sorts of
ways, primarily in having had its main media mogul as prime minis-
ter and in not having two real parties (bipartyism), as opposed to
two coalitions of parties that simply parallel its longer-term bipolar-
ity.[3] Why can't Italy be just like an idealized Britain or the United
States? Well, as we shall see, at least with respect to electoral politics,
although there are all sorts of differences that mandate against
Anglo-Saxon bipartyism there are also some important similarities
(e.g., the way election campaigns are now run, the use of public
power for private purpose, the decline of purely ideological and the
rise of personalized politics, etc.) that suggest that Italy is not as
anomalous as often alleged (see Sabetti 2000).

The Geographical Dynamics of
Italian Politics

The political economy of Italy at the turn of the millennium is not
the theme of this book. The geographical basis to Italian electoral
politics in the Berlusconi years is our basic theme. By "geographical
basis" we do not mean that people in certain places all vote a certain
way because they have always done so and because they are all cul-
turally or economically the same. There is a venerable Italian aca-
demic tradition—at least there was before the arrival of Berlusconi
on the national political scene—of examining Italian electoral poli-
tics in terms of distinctive regions with long-standing political
"sub-cultures." In our view, when projected from the 1960s into the
1990s this approach confuses what have turned out to be temporary
regionally clustered place configurations with a permanent electoral
geography. Assuming that new place configurations must necessarily
be regional in ways that some of the old ones were, particularly the

so-called white and red zones in, respectively, northeastern and central Italy, or that there is "no geography" at all seem equally wrong headed (see Chapter 2).

There is a geographical dynamism to electoral politics. Parties pick up votes in some places and lose them elsewhere, with considerable variance in "swing" from place to place. Places change their relative political complexion with respect to who votes for whom and why. Different types of people (social classes, church members, etc.) in different places also vote differently. Rarely, if ever, is there total unanimity anywhere. But these differences among people in how they vote and how they change their votes in the aggregate over time are always refracted through the "lens" of the significant others (or reference groups) and social processes of learning and everyday experience that are geographically stretched and distributed differentially across Italy.[4]

By way of two examples, after World War II, the city of Lucca in central Italy became a stronghold of the Christian Democratic Party (DC) in a region that was at the same time overwhelmingly drifting to the left. Over the past fifteen years, however, Lucca has become more like neighboring places, as it has also moved toward the center-left (Agnew 2002, Chapter 6). The city of Varese, in Milan's northern hinterland, has seen a much more dramatic movement among locally dominant political forces, from a strong socialist and DC presence immediately after the war, to a place dominated for a while by the Northern League and now where Forza Italia and the Northern League share the largest part of the local electorate (compare Goio et al. 1983 with Agnew 2002, Chapter 7). Other tales of fairly dramatic electoral change rooted in particular places on a par with these can be told from elsewhere in Italy.

A common view, however, is that Italy is becoming electorally homogeneous with the arrival of Berlusconi and his "videocracy." Italy is losing its internal electoral geography. The mass media are usually implicated as the main cause. From this viewpoint, it is Berlusconi's media ownership, in particular, not his salesmanship or organizational skills, which largely explains his success. *Period*. We challenge this view. Even though media of communication, above

all television and the Internet, have narrowed the national space by sending out common messages that are received by increasing numbers of the population everywhere, whether people watch the same things or react the same way everywhere is open to serious question.[5] Established everyday routines and conversation settings still mediate between message and reception. This social logic to politics challenges the idea of the isolated rational voter engaging in a calculus of voting disconnected from the rest of life. Though dominant in voting studies, this approach has recently been subjected to important theoretical and empirical critique (see Chapter 2). Moreover, beyond the social influences on voting, cumulative if differentiated across space as they are, people are faced with different "problems" depending on where they live. For example, youth unemployment is much more serious in Naples than in Como, the problem of bad roads is more urgent politically in the industrial Northeast and the hinterland of Milan than it is in rural Calabria, and increasing penalties for tax evasion will disproportionately affect those places where businesses have tighter profit margins and depend more on "off the books" or black labor. Policies that require effective regional administration, particularly those emanating from the European Union involving funds for economic development, likewise create or fail to create distinctive local constituencies depending on the capacity of the regional governments to implement the policies. Such capacities, concentrated in relatively few administrative regions (Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy and Veneto), can become issues in electoral politics: why are "we" failing to capture "our" share of available funds and develop networks with regions elsewhere in the EU? (Fargion et al. 2006). There are also longstanding differences across Italy in how the act of voting is thought of, with a relative concentration of clientelist or patronage voters in the South and more so-called identity /ideological and opinion voters elsewhere (Cartocci 1990). Party organization varies from place to place, and some parties can claim more local "notables" (who can potentially sway the votes of their co-locals) as their representatives than other parties, and often appeal to both local "issues" and to the sensibilities of certain groups whose concerns are shared by the

likeminded elsewhere. In other words, people acquire the reasons for how they choose to vote, and the menu of electoral choices available to them is provided through geographically mediated processes.

Berlusconi's political ability and capacity must be judged in this context. We do so by showing how his coalition (along with his party Forza Italia) and the new alliances on the center-left replaced the parties of the old regime through comparing the elections of 1987 and 1992 geographically with those that came after. We distinguish a number of ways in which the old parties were replaced and the new ones became grounded in the ensuing years: switching or substituting, splitting, or colonizing old voters and mobilizing new ones. These geographical processes are the subject of much of the empirical analysis of Italian national election results in Chapters 3 to 5. The specific nature of the processes we identify is discussed at some length in Chapter 3 before we embark on empirical analysis. We use recently developed methods of spatial analysis as the core of our approach in explaining party replacement and affiliation in contemporary Italy. In so many words, we are thus helping "to socialize the pixel [so to speak] by providing a geographic context for social behavior," one of the most exciting frontiers in social science, because "These new [geographic information] tools provide the ability to analyze social behavior across time and geographic scales, although their adoption by social scientists is yet to approach their potential" (Butz and Torrey 2006, 1899). The basic tenet of the approach is that not only electoral affiliations but also changes in such affiliations are best understood in a geographical context.

This is not to say that geographical or ecological methods are totally new to electoral analysis. Over the past thirty years much effort has been put into portraying elections geographically by means of various multivariate ecological models (see, e.g., Dogan and Rokkan 1969; King 2002) and models of information flow and partisanship (see, e.g., Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987; Books and Prysby 1991; Eagles 1995). Yet most of these works ignore rather than take advantage of the fundamental characteristic of geographic data that proximate observations tend to be correlated with each other, and that descriptively this can tell us a tremendous amount about how

aggregate votes are correlated geographically and shift over time. In this book we are concerned primarily with describing *how* votes shift or persist geographically in the aggregate across elections and not with making statistical inferences about *why* they do. We do pursue some ideas about why changes occur but these remain speculative if only because of the difficulty of ever definitively transcending the instability of coefficients across different theoretical models (compare, e.g., Putnam 1993 and Solt 2004).

Why, then, if we find this geographical logic so compelling, is so much written about Berlusconi as an electoral magician as if he were all one needed to know about Italian politics? One reason of course is the fact that as well as a leading politician and party leader, he also owns Italy's three private television channels. This basic conflict of interest obviously has given Berlusconi a real advantage over his adversaries in reaching his potential electoral audience. He has also succeeded in personalizing Italian politics, in an American style, when the historic model (at least after Mussolini, and because of him) has been to have parties as the main instruments for electoral competition (e.g., Campus 2006a). However, many commentators are not willing to go beyond this, seeing his electorate as rather like pigeons undergoing operant conditioning. He feeds them; they peck at the right lever. His voters are simply bedazzled or beguiled by him. The power of celebrity is enough in itself to explain his success.

This view of voters is a highly selective one. It presumes that other voters, on the left perhaps, exhibit a greater rationality. Of course, this is an example of the intellectual trap of "false consciousness" that we use when we cannot figure out why people could have done something which we find appalling. The famous quotation, apocryphal or not, of the renowned *New Yorker* magazine film critic, Pauline Kael, is emblematic. When told of Richard Nixon's forty-nine-state landslide in the 1972 U.S. presidential election she reportedly said: "How can that be? I don't know a single person who voted for Nixon." Berlusconi is often regarded today as Nixon was by many commentators in his day. Seemingly, people who would never vote for him are incapable of understanding why others might. In our view, to understand the success of a "toxic"

leader such as Berlusconi, to use Lipman-Blumen's (2006) colorful term for leaders who have widespread appeal but whose success undermines institutions and increases collective anxiety, we need to focus on "followership" more than on leadership. Who is drawn to Berlusconi and his coalition and for what reasons?

Political Instrumentalism

Now, if we were Italian voters, we would probably never have voted for Berlusconi. But this is beside the point. Other people did. Berlusconi undoubtedly appeals to some people generally disinterested in politics and looking for a strong-sounding leader. George W. Bush has had much the same appeal. Some of this tendency among Italians is not new at all; even since the demise of Mussolini. Right after World War II a political movement based on *qualunquismo* (meaning literally "man-in-the-street" movement) or noncommitment to existing political divisions had some popular support, particularly in parts of southern Italy. But Berlusconi also is attractive to the legions of people who watch the diet of soap operas, films, and game shows on his television channels. Many of these programs present a particularly vulgar American consumerism as a model way of life. He promises its possibility to them. In this regard, he is like those generations of American politicians who have competed by promising "more." Not surprisingly, those who report watching more of this television are more likely to vote for Forza Italia. But this happens only if the television messages are reinforced and not countered through various social influences that either undermine traditional mores (and produce a more anomic everyday social environment) or work to discount or reduce the allure of the messages. Television, therefore, cannot be expected to have exactly the same effects everywhere.

Berlusconi's seemingly anachronistic "anti-Communism," a favorite theme of his election campaigns, needs understanding in this context. It draws attention to both the collapse of the actual state socialism with which some of his political enemies were once closely associated and the view of the state which he represents. If you vote

for them, he is saying, you are voting not only for the failure of central planning (as in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe) but also, and more crucially, for what Adam Przeworski (1991, 7) has termed "the project of basing society on disinterested cooperation—the possibility of dissociating social contribution from individual rewards." Berlusconi thus represents something increasingly common across the Western democracies since the 1970s: the idea that, as Ronald Reagan said, government is not the solution, it is the problem. From this perspective, there is no such thing as a public interest beyond the aggregated preferences of individual persons. Margaret Thatcher, another of Berlusconi's heroes, once said: "There is no such thing as society." This logic will draw support from those who worry about the fiscal consequences of too much government spending because of "free riding" by those who do not have to pay the bills. But it also feeds neatly into Italy's legion of self-employed businessmen and group self-regulated interests (taxi drivers, pharmacists, etc.) who want to be left alone by government except when it is to their immediate material advantage.[6] In Italy, these types of people are in much greater numbers, in relative terms, than in most other European countries—and particularly dense in all of Italy's major cities and in the industrial districts of northern Italy. They see themselves as "innocents" in a system that encourages an instrumental approach to law (Diamanti 2006a). That this is hardly totally unique to Italy is worth reiterating, particularly in light of recent corruption scandals and payoffs to political paymasters in the United States and Britain (Sabetti 2000; Sciolla 2004).

The potential Forza Italia voter knows exactly what Berlusconi means when he invokes anti-Communism. This is not at all the same thing as the anti-Communism of the old Christian Democratic Party. That was about affiliations with the Catholic Church and NATO. This is all about *me*. Talk about rationality. From this point of view, rules and laws are not absolute or normative but respected only insofar as they make sense to you in the context of your life (Bailey 2001).[7] Berlusconi is the role model sine qua non for this pragmatic or instrumental approach to politics, but it is one that

predated his appearance on the Italian political scene.[8] Clearly, however, after many years of seeing center-right governments at work in the United States, Italy, and elsewhere, none of this necessarily means the actual shrinkage of government. Indeed, as argued in Chapter 4, and notwithstanding much neoliberal rhetoric, Berlusconi and his allies became as proficient at "big-government conservatism" during their years in office as their U.S. counterpart, the George W. Bush administration. Partly this is because other constituencies with greater demands on government—pensioners, government employees, etc.—had also to be attracted into the fold. In Italy many of these people live in different relative densities in different places from those looking for government to be kept out of their pockets (Chapter 4). Thus, there is a geography to both patronage politics and tax revolt. Berlusconi has had to cater to both to win national elections.

Italian society, then, hardly appears here in the same light as it does when the focus is on devious political magicians seducing the populace or on an innocent civil society undermined by devilish political institutions (such as political parties). Such views, both academic and popular, complement that of the media obsession (e.g., Rodriguez 1994; Livolsi and Volli 1995; Sbisà 1996; Zolo 1999; Ginsborg 2004b; Andrews 2005). In 2006, and not very differently from the 2001 election (if with a different electoral system), the Italian electorate split more or less down the middle in its support for the two main political coalitions. Berlusconi, and his allies, then, do have mass appeal. It is a peculiar intellectual blindness to regard this electorate as consisting entirely of political dopes. Civil society is not always "civil" in the ways we might like; it can be remarkably uncivil even when based apparently on such "good" things as solidarity and association (Cazzola 1992; Sapelli 1997; Chambers and Kopstein 2001). The attitude toward Berlusconi voters is akin to the dismissal of poor, religious-oriented voters in the United States who vote for far-right candidates as not knowing their own interests, as if they were not entirely clear about where they stand (e.g., Frank 2005). Now, how they reach the positions they do is something else again. This can be studied and even, perhaps, understood.

Book Overview

As we shall see, there are some important continuities between past and present in Italy's electoral geography. Although Forza Italia's voters are hardly carbon copies of old DC ones, and DC voters have split up in complex ways, at an oversimplified level, the following generalizations make some sense: if the North and Sicily have become the heartland of the center-right over the period 1994–2006, central Italy has remained largely in the hands of the center-left if much weaker now than previously, as it had been since the 1950s, with the peninsula South emerging as the zone where elections seem increasingly to be decided in terms of the national distribution of seats in the Italian Parliament. Although, of course, given the closeness of the 2006 election, it was the newly given vote of Italians resident abroad that actually determined the final outcome in terms of seats. However, the regional labels are potentially misleading, if only because over the past twenty years place configurations in relation to national elections have become less compact or regionalized geographically.

This is an important theme of Chapter 2, which provides an overview of Italian electoral geography between 1994 and 2006 with respect to the potential movement from bipolarism to bipolarity (as we have defined them), a discussion of the 1993 electoral system and the major changes of 2005, and a general review of economic and social trends producing more localized electorates all over Italy but particularly in the North and South. The subsequent three chapters take up the story of the collapse of the old party system between 1987 and 1994 (Chapter 3), the emergence of Berlusconi as a major actor and his impact on the new system along with those of his allies and his adversaries between 1994 and 2001 (Chapter 4), and the ways Berlusconi prepared for but ultimately lost out in the 2006 election (Chapter 5). In the Conclusion we review the overall evidence for a geographical logic to Italian electoral politics during the Berlusconi years and speculate on Berlusconi's future role (if any) in light of his recent behavior and what the results of the 2006 constitutional referendum may tell us about emerging possibilities for the Italian center-right after Berlusconi.