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From the Democrazia Cristiana to the Archipelago of Catholic and Centrist Parties

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The changed role of party political Catholicism and centrist parties in the so-called First and Second Republics could scarcely be greater: central, even dominant in the former (Tarrow, 1990); marginal, tending to absence, in the latter. This is far from meaning the marginalization of Catholicism’s political influence. This has remained considerable thanks to the Church’s entrenched position in society and conservative and Catholic politicians supporting it or seeking its favour (Pollard, 2011). The difference is in the party system. The Christian Democratic Party (Partito della Democrazia Cristiana, DC) dominated government throughout the First Republic. From 1945 to 1981, every prime minister (president of the council) was a Christian Democrat and, up to 1994, half of all ministers (including the prime ministers, 1987–92) were still Christian Democrats. In the Second Republic, with its fundamentally bipolar party system no longer dominated by a centrist governmental bloc, Christian Democrats were everywhere and nowhere. Mostly they were scattered among other parties.

From 1995, and especially from 2001–7, it looked as though two small post-DC parties, one on the left and one on the right, would contest elections. In 2001–2, the Italian Popular Party (Partito popolare italiano, PPI), the principal DC successor party, had fused with some other minor centrist, more or less Catholic parties to found the Margherita-Democracy is Freedom (Margherita-Democrazia è Libertà). In 2007–9, however, this party fused with the post-communist Democrats of the Left (Democratici di sinistra, DS) co-founding the Democratic Party (Partito democratico, PD), abandoning its distinct Catholic identity. On the centre-right, the Union of Christian and Centre Democrats (Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e di Centro, UDC), whose forerunners had been allied to Silvio Berlusconi since 1994, asserted their independence in 2007, refusing to dissolve themselves into Berlusconi’s new ‘fusion party’ (Arter, 2012), the People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PDL). Allied with other, largely Catholic fragments as the Union of the Centre, the UDC (the acronym remained the same) was the only political formation allied to neither the PD nor the PDL to gain parliamentary representation in 2008. It won a
precarious 5.6 per cent of the vote. From 2011, the UDC sought to boost its vote by championing the technocratic government of Mario Monti. Ideally, indeed, it sought to realign the centre-right electorate which it regarded Berlusconi as having hijacked. Whilst a formidable array of Catholic interest group leaders, some prominent business and financial leaders, and two or three ministers showed interest in the UDC’s attempt to re-establish a new, improved Catholic party, the Roman Catholic hierarchy gave only limited and ambiguous support. At the end of 2012, Monti’s decision to seek electoral legitimation as a political leader then led to his Civic Choice list allying with the UDC, now a firmly centrist party. The alliance proved fatal to the UDC. In the Senate, a single list was presented in order to overcome the 8 per cent threshold – under Monti’s name. Only two of the 19 senators elected were from the UDC, one being Pierferdinando Casini, the de facto leader of the Catholic centre-right since 1994. In the Chamber of Deputies a distinct UDC list was presented, but was squeezed to just 1.8 per cent of the vote, electing eight deputies. A distinct Catholic parliamentary presence ceased to exist, since the numbers were too small to form an officially recognised group in either Chamber (ten are required in the Senate, 20 in the Chamber of Deputies).

The proposition of this chapter is that whilst the post-DC archipelago, like the DC itself, must be understood as being a self-constituted product of political Catholicism, it is also the product of its systemic context. And in the end, that system’s structuration process ‘organized out’ the autonomous representation of Catholic political forces (Mair, 1997). That is to say, in the logic of bipolar confrontation that developed, a specifically Catholic identity became irrelevant. Contrariwise, the DC, which had been the core government party of the Cold War era, c.1947–91, whilst partly successful because of its own undoubted merits (and despite its demerits), was as successful as it was because of the nature of the then party system – ‘polarized pluralism’. In such a system the destiny of centre parties is ‘to govern indefinitely’ (Sartori, 1976: 138). Government alternation was not possible in a NATO country in which the leading opposition party was the Communist Party (Partito comunista italiano, PCI). Crucially, moreover, at the critical juncture at which the party system was formed, the DC had hegemonized the centre, becoming the anti-communist bulwark. By contrast, at the critical juncture that led to the bipolarization of the party system in the early 1990s, the post-DC parties were marginalized. Their survival was jeopardized by a ventennio (20-year period) in which the principal line of conflict was defined in terms of support for, or opposition to, Silvio Berlusconi. And that conflict was mobilized around Forza Italia (and later the PDL) and its allies on the one hand, whilst, on the other, the primarily post-communist opposition was dominated by debates over its social democratic identity, or otherwise; alternatives being, simply: ‘democratic’, or perhaps reformist or progressive – but not ‘Christian’, or even ‘Popular’, given the debacle of the East European, communist people’s parties.

The international context was also important. The Berlusconi era coincided with the heyday of the neo-liberal paradigm of boundless, market-led growth – boundless, because markets were presumed self-correcting, and because, with Deng Xiaoping’s ‘capitalist turn’ in China (from c.1978) and the collapse of the USSR, capitalism was triumphant. In Italy, as elsewhere, electoral programmes became very similar (Conti, 2008). Consequently, differentiation in terms of Berlusconism could more easily dominate. But whilst states and political economy were on the back foot for most of the Berlusconi era, this changed from 2008 (Bordoni, 2012). Thereafter, the global financial and economic crisis led institutional investors and key political actors to recognize that ‘actually existing capitalism’ was undergoing a major crisis that required effective polity management at the state–national level. In this respect, Italy was found wanting. Thus party government was supplanted in November 2011 by the technocratic administration of Mario Monti. Over the winter of 2012–13, however, Monti’s electoral initiative, backed by the UDC,
was marginalized by the partial recovery of the PDL. The 2013 parliament was thus split three ways, between the PD and PDL, each with some 30 per cent of the vote, and Beppe Grillo’s anti-establishment Five Star Movement with its 25 per cent (see Chapter 19). Let us look, then, at party political Catholicism in the Second Republic, and its role in creating this failure of party government.

The crisis of Christian Democracy, 1990–4

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 was followed by the ending of Soviet suzerainty over central and eastern Europe and, in 1991, by the collapse of the USSR itself. The DC’s initial reaction was triumphalism. Its historic enemy had been defeated. The PCI, whose vote had peaked at 34 per cent in 1976, abandoned its name, which provoked a split. In the 1992 election the party’s principal successor party, the Democratic Party of the Left (Partito democratico della sinistra, PDS) gained only 16.1 per cent of the vote. Communist Refoundation obtained 5.6 per cent. The DC was also weakened, however, its vote falling to fractionally under 30 per cent, mainly because of the Northern League (Lega Nord, LN), whose success evidenced a major failure of representation by the DC. Until the early 1980s, the DC had hegemonized the north-east thanks not to its own organizational strength but to the pervasiveness of Catholicism in the area’s rich, deeply historically rooted associational life (see Chapter 13). For itself, the DC was increasingly seen as failing to represent the region’s small and medium-sized businesses. Once the communist threat was removed, voters turned to the League (Gangemi, 1997).

No longer bound to ‘hang together, or hang separately’ in the face of the communist threat, splits began to take place in the DC too. In 1990, the left-oriented Network was formed, in large part by former Sicilian Christian Democrats led by the mayor of Palermo (1985–90), Leoluca Orlando. As the so-called Tangentopoli phenomenon got under way, that is, the uncovering of systemic party corruption, the splits grew. In 1993, the tiny Christian Socials joined the PDS. More significant was the formation of the Popolari. This movement was led by Mario Segni, a backbencher who had championed the two waves of referendums on electoral reform which, in the period 1990–3, unintentionally mobilized the country against the partyocracy. Segni’s ill-defined project of state and party reform, which at a key moment flirted with the PDS as a possible ally, earned the displeasure of the Vatican and ended when the 1994 elections ushered in the so-called Second Republic. Segni obtained just 4.7 per cent of the vote and a mere 13 seats – 2.1 per cent of the total, insufficient to form a parliamentary group. The main reasons for this outcome were the new electoral system and the bipolarization of the electorate between Berlusconi’s conservative alliance and the Progressives, as the left, including the Christian Socials, was known. The PPI and Segni were left to claim a ‘centre’ ground which was no longer the anti-socialist bastion that it had been in the days of the DC. It had become a no-man’s-land. This development had not been properly anticipated.

By late 1993, the DC’s elites had expected to survive the turmoil as a major anti-socialist force winning seats predominantly in the centre-south. The League was expected to dominate the north, and the left the ‘Red Belt’ (which runs across central-northern Italy, south of the river Po). In January 1994, the PPI and Segni’s Pact sought an alliance with the League, affirming the primacy of the left–right conflict, with them central to it. The League, however, renounced that alliance, opting instead to back Berlusconi. Berlusconi’s entry into politics confirmed the domination of left–right conflict but did so in terms of a battle against communism which marginalised the predominantly Catholic centrists. Allying with the League and other parties, Berlusconi usurped the DC/PPI’s role as the principal anti-socialist force. Part of the DC foresaw that their party’s neo-centrist strategy was doomed and broke away to ally with Berlusconi as
the Centre Christian Democrats (Centro cristiano democratico, CCD). Later, in 2001, this party would form the core of the UDC. The CCD/UDC remained loyal to Berlusconi, at least in formal alliance terms, until 2008.

The 1994 election was disastrous for the PPI and especially Segni. The latter’s movement was reduced to a rump and wasted away; the former was forced to recognize the reality of bipolarization. There was no room for a centre party. In 1995, the PPI split. The fate of party political Catholicism was not entirely sealed, but survival could now only be as minor components of the new left and right. Had Segni accepted Berlusconi’s backing to become the core of a new anti-socialist centre-right in late 1993, then the course of the Second Republic would have been very different, but Segni regarded himself as already one of Berlusconi’s foes (Segni, 1994: 7–18).

**Bipolarization: the crisis of party political Catholicism, 1995–9**

The split in the PPI had a profound impact on the Catholic world. For half a century the myth of Catholic ‘political unity’ had dominated Catholic political thinking. Now, looming regional elections (in 1995) imposed the strategic imperative to opt left or right, for the electoral system would severely punish parties that failed to do this. More than this, opting for the right, as the party’s leader, Rocco Buttiglione planned, would guarantee Berlusconi’s victory, establishing the ascendance of a bloc of parties whose success in 1994 had shocked world opinion. The ability of a reunified Catholic party (PPI plus CCD) to ‘pull’ the right-wing bloc’s policies and style of government to the centre, as Buttiglione intended, can only be a matter of conjecture. The PPI-Left would not accept alliance with Berlusconi’s new right. The party split. Catholics were forced to acknowledge that they were politically divided to the point of rival Catholic forces competing against each other for office. The end of Catholic ‘political unity’ thus became a key theme of Italy’s political transition (Pace, 1995: 9).

In an overwhelmingly Catholic country, Catholics had, in fact, always been electorally divided. From 1946 onwards, millions had voted for the PCI or the markedly anticlerical Socialists (PSI) despite two-thirds of Catholics – though ‘only’ two-thirds, not all – believing it impossible to be a good Catholic and a Marxist, or to vote PCI (Wertman, 1982: 99). This material division had been suppressed ideationally by the myth of Catholic political unity, according to which the country’s principal electoral cleavage juxtaposed democratic Catholics (the DC) and their ‘lay’ allies against atheist Marxists. By 1985, however, barely a quarter of Italians thought Catholicism and Marxism incompatible (Segatti et al., 1999). Secularization had brought immense change. In 1974 the divorce referendum had established that ethical norms were contested within the Catholic world, and that they could be overturned by a secular state. Even more shockingly, the 1981 abortion referendum introduced a liberal regulatory regime considered genocidal by conservative Catholics. By the 1990s, nevertheless, the fear of terminal secularization had proven mistaken. The number of regularly practising Catholics stabilized at around 30 per cent (Garelli, 1991: 58–9; ITANES, 2008: 124). The abortion battle had also encouraged the diverse world of organized Italian Catholicism to recompact and, although sharp internal divisions were not overcome, the idea, at least, of Catholic unity had been reasserted. DC links with the Catholic world had been reinforced too, in an attempt to reform the party (Formigoni, 1998: 181–5). In fact, the DC’s electorate was, to the end, overwhelmingly close to the ‘Catholic world’, with some 90 per cent substantially identifying with the model of religious behaviour proposed by the Church, and high rates of regular Church attendance (Garelli, 1996a: 126). The DC, which had never been a clerical party, having itself done much to secularize Italian Catholicism, had become ‘a party of Catholics’, even though it was no longer ‘the Catholics’ party’ (Pace,
1995: 145). Catholic ‘investment’ in the DC was profound. Renewed in the party’s last years, it underlay the Church’s hostility to Segni’s reform initiatives and would help explain alleged papal support for the attempt to prevent the PPI/CCD split in January 1994 (Verucci, 1999: 110) as well as episcopal opposition to the 1995 split (Franco, 2000: 193–4). The 1995 split, in fact, much more than that of 1994, made visible the existence of rival Catholic parties. In these circumstances, Catholic unity was reformulated in terms of ‘overarching’ cultural values, ethically ‘above politics’, as well as in more sophisticated terms regarding Italian democracy and national unity. The explicit presence of Catholics on both left and right, it was argued, could reinforce national identity at a time when it was challenged by the Northern League. Equally, loyal competition, acknowledging the legitimacy of the opposition, would confirm that competitive democracy promoted a common good. This was a vitally important idea, and one that failed to establish itself as ‘common sense’ in the Second Republic.

In 1995, then, Buttiglione’s proposed alliance with Berlusconi was challenged by the party’s National Council. A long legal dispute followed, becoming entangled with others, and was resolved, if then, only by a Supreme Court ruling in 2010 (Maestri, 2012). Meanwhile, the politically brokered outcome of the 1995 split was that Buttiglione et al. kept the DC’s historic symbol, a white shield with a red cross inscribed with the word Libertas, becoming the United Christian Democrats (Cristiani Democratici Uniti, CDU), whilst the remainder kept the name PPI. It is perhaps not too much to argue that the PPI’s alliance with the left shaped much of the subsequent history of the Second Republic – alongside Silvio Berlusconi, of course. To anticipate, then: in 1995, Buttiglione’s opponents proposed Romano Prodi, an industry technocrat associated with the DC, as the left’s prime ministerial candidate for the 1996 election. On this basis they formed the Olive Tree alliance with the post-communist PDS, the main centre-left party. Prodi won the election, as he did again in 2006. In 2007–8 the PPI’s successor party, the Margherita-DL, fused with the DS (Democratici di sinistra, Left Democrats) as the PDS had become in 1998, becoming the Democratic Party, the would-be catch-all, centre-left party intended to reduce party system fragmentation and consolidate the bipolar format. These aims were not achieved, the party system substantially losing its structure following the collapse of Berlusconi’s fourth government in 2011 (Ceccarini et al., 2012), which facilitated Grillo’s success in 2013. The PD, nevertheless, remained one of Italy’s major parties, and the predominant party on the left.

Meantime, the bifurcation of Catholic politics was confirmed in the 1996 elections, the CCD-CDU allying with Berlusconi confronting the PPI (in the Olive Tree). The electorates of both formations were markedly more Catholic, in terms of those regularly practising their faith, than those of other parties: perhaps as much as 77 per cent of the CCD-CDU, and 69 per cent of the PPI. The next closest was the short-lived Dini list, at 51 per cent (which became part of the Margherita-DL in 2001–2), followed by Forza Italia at 46 per cent (Diamanti, 1997: 348). Jointly, the PPI and CCD-CDU gained 12–13 per cent of the total vote, yet some 23 per cent of weekly practising Catholics. Even more, however (c. 29 per cent), did not vote (Garelli, 1996b: 891). The other half divided between left and right. In fact, whereas regular Church attendance had correlated with high participation rates in the First Republic, now it was an incentive to abstention. Catholic voters were disoriented by the turmoil and division in the political ‘supply’ made available to them. Not surprisingly, then, the idea of – the hope for – Catholic political unity did not die easily.

In February 1998 no less a figure than former President of the Republic (1985–92) Francesco Cossiga sought Catholic party reunification, allegedly to build a ‘normal’ European party system. By this he meant one based on the juxtaposition of liberal-conservatives, perhaps including most Catholics, and social democrats, free of the determining influence of the extremes: the Northern
League on the right (and perhaps the National Alliance too), and Communist Refoundation on the left. At this point, the League had been only briefly in government and was widely seen as an anti-system party, proposing the secession of northern Italy (‘Padania’), whilst its electoral support in local elections was shortly to plummet. For its part, Communist Refoundation was relatively small (8.6 per cent in 1996) and it suffered a split that autumn when it brought down the Prodi government (‘proving’ Cossiga’s concerns). To this extent, Cossiga’s project was understandable. The post-Fascist National Alliance (AN), however, had obtained nearly 16 per cent of the vote and was too big for Berlusconi to abandon if he wished to return to government. Crucially, however, Cossiga, like many people, expected Berlusconi not to continue his political adventure.

Cossiga’s project was primarily based on the construction, at the parliamentary level, of a new party, the Democratic Union for the Republic (Unione democratica per la repubblica, UDR). Inevitably this was based on MPs abandoning the parties they had been elected in or, as in the case of the CDU, abandoning the alliance it had been elected with. Thus the CDU switched almost in its entirety, providing nearly 20 of the new party’s 50-odd MPs. Since the party was born in the (correct) expectation that it would support a centre-left government if and when Communist Refoundation brought the Prodi government down, this meant the UDR facilitated a major act of ‘transformism’, that is, opposition MPs being ‘transformed’ into government supporters. Whilst historically the practice has found some intellectual justification, given its strategic objectives, it is more routinely seen as typifying MPs’ unscrupulous office-seeking behaviour (Donovan and Newell, 2008). This mix of judgements fits this case. The fall of the Prodi government in October 1998 led to the formation of a centre-left government including the UDR. At the same time, Cossiga achieved one of his objectives, a centre-left independent of the Communist left.

The second objective, the construction of a centre-right rooted in liberal values was far more challenging (not that success with regard to the centre-left endured). A liberal centre-right required the marginalization of the League and possibly some reunification of conservative Catholics via the dissolution of Forza Italia, the latter being expected by many, in late 1997 (Repubblica, 1998; Franco, 2000: 98). None of this happened. The CCD remained loyal to Berlusconi, who, furthermore, was invited to join the European People’s Party in June 1998 despite Cossiga’s furious opposition. Berlusconi did not abandon Fini’s National Alliance and he worked hard, and successfully, to resuscitate the alliance with the League. In sum, Cossiga’s impact on the right was negligible. On the left, meanwhile, the possibility that the PPI might join the UDR resulted in Prodi forming a party – the Democrats – specifically opposing Catholic reunification lest it promote the collapse of the nascent bipolar system. This was, perhaps, a danger, given that many in the PPI, and in the Church hierarchy, felt that the PPI was far too subordinate to the DS. By early 1999 Prodi was also no longer prime minister, so the project bolstered his position as still a potential leader of a pan-left ‘pole’, whilst Berlusconi remained leader of the right. The UDR collapsed. In the 1999 European election, the Democrats’ vote (7.68 per cent to the PPI’s 4.25 per cent) ensured the PPI maintained its alliance with the DS, confirming the binary development of party political Catholicism – and of the party system.

Weak consolidation: the ‘bipolar’ party system, 2000–8

The 2001 election appeared to signal the consolidation of a bipolar party system with Catholic parties on left and right. On the right, the League had re-allied with Berlusconi in the 2000 regional elections, creating the Home of Freedom (Casa della Libertà, CDL) with Forza Italia, the National Alliance and the CCD-CDU. On the left, the four small, more or less Catholic...
parties had formed an electoral alliance: the Margherita, which competed independently for the PR seat allocation whilst confirming the Olive Tree alliance with the DS to compete for the majoritarian seats. The Margherita comprised the PPI, the Democrats, the Dini list and the Udeur (a remnant of Cossiga’s UDR). A new Catholic party, European Democracy, was formed shortly before the election by Sergio D’Antoni, the leader, 1991–2000 of the Catholic trade union confederation, the CISL. It ran as a centre party and obtained about a million votes, electing two senators. Its failure to elect any deputies confirmed the impact of the electoral system on unaligned parties and in 2002 the party merged with the CCD-CDU to form the Union of Christian and Centre Democrats – the UDC. The non-viability of Catholic centrism was confirmed. Meanwhile the unification of the Margherita allies into a party (the Margherita-DL) in 2002 left the tiny Udeur as a lone centrist fragment. By 2003, then, three Catholic parties could be identified as ‘relevant’ according to Sartori’s ‘counting’ rules (Sartori, 1976): the Margherita-DL, the UDC and the Udeur with, respectively and approximately, 14 per cent, 5 per cent and perhaps 1–2 per cent of the vote each, i.e. about 20 per cent in total. The relevance of the Udeur was entirely contingent on the closeness of the election results. In 2006, Prodi’s pan-left Union won the election with the narrowest of majorities. The Udeur could bring the government down if it withdrew its support. In fact, this became true of any two or three senators who switched to the opposition hoping to gain reward if their action led to early elections and alternation, as happened in 2008.

The apparent consolidation of a bipolar party system and the Catholic parties’ place in it was deceptive. On the right, the UDC’s relationship with Berlusconi was one of rather hostile dependency. In 2005, the UDC brought the government down to demonstrate, as its leader put it, the sovereignty of parliament versus that of a plebiscitary leader, whilst Berlusconi’s attempts to reform the law on media coverage of elections in favour of the larger parties were repeatedly vetoed. More than this, the government’s constitutional reform, largely driven by the Lega Nord, was sabotaged by procrastination: eventually passed in 2005, it was overturned by referendum in 2006 following a change of government which, according to Berlusconi among others, the UDC expected and intended. Berlusconi managed to avoid taking the blame for the defeat, however, and the much-anticipated ‘post-Berlusconi’ restructuring of the right, supposedly to the advantage of the UDC and of Christian Democrats in Forza Italia, notably Roberto Formigoni, the President of Lombardy, was again postponed. The situation on the left was also uncertain. Many in the Margherita wished to reinforce the alliance with the DS at the expense of the more radical Greens and communists whilst so-called ‘theo-dems’, for whom conservative Catholic ethics loomed large, regarded the relationship with the DS as too close. When the Left won the 2006 election, it was as a pan-left alliance that put nine parties in the government with the tiniest of majorities in the Senate. Exploiting this weakness and his media strengths, Berlusconi continued his electoral mobilization, first claiming that the result was fraudulent, then claiming the government’s policies were outrageous, and then that it was illegitimate because it no longer had the backing of the people. In 2008, the government fell and early elections were held. By then, however, the party panorama had changed yet again.

**Fusion, and autonomy in vain, 2008–13**

In the period 2007–9 the two main centre-left parties, the DS and the Margherita-DL, underwent a process of fusion. There were two main reasons for this: first, to overcome the fragmentation and instability of the left by creating a party able to assert its leadership over potential allies; second, by so doing, to offer voters stable, effective government. Such an offer would, it was believed, mobilize voters who appeared to want stronger government. Thus the
Democratic Party was born. Its new leader, Walter Veltroni, sought to win the 2008 election by emphasising the prospect of a quasi-two-party system were Berlusconi to take up the challenge and similarly fuse the parties of the right. This Berlusconi partly did, presenting his allies with an ultimatum: dissolution in his new party, the People of Freedom (PDL), or compete against him. Initially, all three main allies, the League, the UDC and the National Alliance (AN), rejected the ultimatum. When an early election was called almost immediately, however, the AN switched its position, offering to ‘co-create’ the new party. The UDC, like the LN, maintained its autonomy, though losing defectors whilst gaining others, as Forza Italia and the AN reorganized. The UDC thus became the core of the Union of the Centre. The new formation’s Catholic identity was no longer explicit, but the party continued to be seen as an essentially Catholic, neo-centrist party. The UDC survived the election, the only force not allied with either the PD or PDL to do so, becoming part of the disparate opposition to the fourth Berlusconi government (2008–11).

Initially the Berlusconi government looked strong, whilst the oppositions (sic) were so divided that some feared a predominant party system might be established. A year later, however, internal disagreements were again raising concerns about government paralysis. In 2010 the PDL split. The government lost its parliamentary majority, but managed to survive as the oppositions remained divided. The UDC now joined other centrist fragments, most notably Future and Freedom for Italy (FLI), the split from the PDL, to form the Pole of the Nation, still hoping that disillusion with Berlusconi would enable reaggregation around the – ‘post-Catholic’? – ‘centre’, implicitly an alternative centre-right. A year later the centrist pole was renamed as the New Pole for Italy but local elections showed there was little interest in these superficial name changes and micro-party shufflings. Attempts to reaggregate Catholic social forces at a much-heralded summit in the Umbrian town of Todi in October 2011 foundered, moreover, over the issue of party political unity. It simply wasn’t possible. For all that the socio-economic cleavage was programatically minimal, enduring left–right perceptions prevailed among both elites and voters. What the Todi meeting did do was consolidate the sense of disillusion with the Berlusconi government and, indeed, the entire Berlusconi era. A month later, Berlusconi resigned. The continuing division of opposition forces still meant no alternative parliamentary majority could be found. Thus Monti’s technocratic government was formed, backed by the PD, PDL and the centrists. The government included some prominent Catholics, perhaps most notably Corrado Passera, Andrea Riccardi, Lorenzo Ormaggi and Renato Balduzzi, ministers respectively for the Economy, International Cooperation, Culture, and Health. These men were leaders in the worlds of banking, international peace activism and academia. As such, they confirmed the availability of an elite able to administer Italy, yet also the absence of an elite able to mobilize consensus for an economically hard-pressed nation. Nor was Mario Monti the person to galvanize such a force.

In the spring 2012 local elections the Five Star Movement of Beppe Grillo became a significant political force, taking 12–13 per cent of the vote in the Red Belt and northern Italy, if only 3 per cent in the south. By the summer, the movement had overtaken the PDL in the polls to become the second party, at some 15 per cent, only some 10 per cent behind the PD, the largest party. By December, the PD was polling at c.30 per cent. It was against this background that Monti entered the electoral fray. However, in November Berlusconi had reasserted his leadership of the PDL/the centre-right. In the following three months he remobilized some 10 per cent (in absolute terms) of the PDL vote. Between the PDL’s partial recovery and the emergence of Monti’s Civic Choice, the UDC was marginalized. The Vatican and Catholic Church, which appeared to back Monti in early January, rapidly reasserted their more traditional, neutral stance. In the election, the UDC, only a junior partner in Monti’s alliance, all but
disappeared. Together with the FLI it took 1.8 per cent of the vote. And whilst it perhaps took nearly double its share of the regularly practising Catholic vote (3.3 per cent), abstention probably remained above the national average (25 per cent). Of those who voted, 20 per cent swung behind the Five Star movement, below the national average (also 25 per cent), but confirming Grillo’s ability to mobilize voters across the spectrum and nationwide. About a half divided roughly equally between the PD and PDL (Guarasci, 2013).

**Conclusion**

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the two main mobilizing forces in Italy were Catholicism and socialism. By mobilizing Catholics, including even some social Christians on the myth of Catholic unity, the DC was able to align a large bloc of the electorate against the ‘Socio-Communists’, as the Socialists and communists were known. The DC was, thus, the anti-socialist party as much as it was a Catholic party. Yet it was that too; or at least it was a party for Catholics, and it remained thus into the 1980s. When the parties of the First Republic disintegrated in 1992–3, the Catholics began to split, fragmenting in all directions, though those who split leftwards were initially only a tiny minority. In 1994, the DC split sharply, between the centre (the PPI) and the centre-right (the CCD). Both forces saw themselves as alternative to the left, but the centrists saw themselves as opposed also to Berlusconi’s right (rather as the DC had also opposed the neo-Fascist right). These events largely sealed the fate of Catholic party representation, since the nature of the electoral system effectively precluded the survival of a centrist pivot party.

The disappearance of the DC and the lack of a single successor party or one with a similar role and status also meant that abstention became a prominent trait among practising Catholics. Given the limited visibility of the CCD-PPI split, the much more high-profile split of the PPI in 1995 encouraged relatively high abstention rates among regularly practising Catholics. At the same time, the majority of such Catholics who did vote were split more or less equally between the centre-left which, led by Romano Prodi, a Roman Catholic technocrat, won the election, and the centre-right. Subsequently, victory for the right in 2001 saw a preponderance of such Catholics voting for the centre-right and this was confirmed subsequently, including in 2006, despite Prodi winning again for the centre-left. Despite this imbalance, most analysts agree that these ‘Catholic’ voters are voting largely for the same reasons as others, whatever they may be. Nevertheless, in the period to 2008, such voters could still vote for a party with a significant Catholic identity, whether on the left or on the right. That particular bipolar format, with Catholic ‘twins’ either side of the principal cleavage, did not survive. The reasons for this were probably more contingent than structural. The immediate cause of the disappearance of the Margherita-DL was the attempt to reduce political fragmentation and instability by an act of political volition, the construction of the would-be, catch-all Democratic Party, perhaps because appropriate institutional reforms were negated by mutual vetoes. Initially, the UDC avoided subsumption within Berlusconi’s PDL, but in 2013 it was overwhelmed by the rise of Grillo, the continuing bipolar confrontation between Berlusconi and the left, and Mario Monti’s capture of the ‘centre’ ground. Party political Catholicism had been ‘organized out’ of the party system.

**Bibliography**


From DC to Catholic and centrist parties


