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**European Parties Elections
and Referendums Network**

ELECTION BRIEFING No.25 The Italian Parliamentary Elections of April 2006

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Key Points:

- The Centre-Left alliance (*Unione*) led by Romano Prodi won the April 2006 election against the Centre-Right government coalition (*Casa delle Libertà*) led by Silvio Berlusconi.
- The election was fought under a unique electoral system, introduced by the Centre-Right government coalition just few months before the election.
- The electoral campaign revolved around economy, with taxes in particular becoming the main issue in the very last days.
- Within the winning coalition, the results of the biggest parties, the *Democratici di Sinistra* (DS) and the *Margherita* (DI), were rather disappointing in the Senate where they ran separately, while they did better in the Lower House, united under the electoral list *Ulivo*.
- *Forza Italia* remained the biggest party in the Centre-Right alliance and in the country in terms of vote share.
- The *Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e Democratici di Centro* (UDC) was the best performing party of the Centre-Right.
- As usual, the EU was not a salient issue in the electoral campaign.

Introduction

On the 9 and 10 April 2006 Italians went to the polls to elect a new bicameral Parliament¹, i.e. *Camera dei Deputati* (Lower House) and *Senato* (Senate or Upper House). winning As in 2001 the governing coalition lost the election and the government was thrown out of office. However, despite the extremely poor record of the incumbent government, the race was unexpectedly close and the electoral results were rather ambiguous, with the Centre-Left coalition the plurality of votes in the Lower House (49.8%) and the Centre-Right winning the plurality of votes in the Senate (49.9%). The 'original' electoral system, invented by the Centre-Right only

¹ In Italy the two Houses of Parliament share co-equal legislative powers (*bicameralismo perfetto*) and are always elected at the same time.

few months before the election, translated these results into a sufficiently clear victory for the Centre-Left which obtained a majority of 67 in the Lower House and a majority of 2 in the Senate. The *Unione*'s majority in the Senate was likely to be enhanced by the presence of 7 honorary senators likely to support the new majority.

The fairness of the election had to be confirmed by the High Court, as outgoing Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi denounced the 'extensive fraud' and requested a double check of those ballot papers which were not given to either coalition. In the immediate aftermath of the elections, and still in control of the government and of most television channels, Berlusconi kept the situation very unsettled, whilst pressurising the Centre-Left to accept a 'grand coalition' solution to the crisis. The Minister of Home Affairs, Giuseppe Pisanu, did not reveal for four days that the ballot papers under scrutiny numbered only around five-thousand, not enough to affect the result. In addition, Berlusconi's TV channels kept expressing doubts about the fairness of the results even after the High Court's verdict. Berlusconi refused to call Prodi to acknowledge the victory of the *Unione* and kept declaring he was the 'moral winner' of the election.

The *Unione* refused any possibility of a 'grand coalition' and, when the new Parliament was established at the end of April, succeeded in getting its candidates elected as Speakers in both Houses. Fausto Bertinotti, the leader of *Rifondazione Comunista* (RC) became the Speaker of the Lower House and Franco Marini, a leading figure of the *Margherita* (DI), was elected as Speaker of the Senate. This was crucial proof of the Centre Left's unity and strength, especially in the Senate where the Centre-Right put forward the candidature of senator Giulio Andreotti, who has longstanding and solid relationships with many Centre-Left politicians (especially within the *Margherita*) and was therefore a potential source of internal division within the *Unione*. Had Andreotti won the race, the partisan Prodi-led government would have been still-born and a 'grand coalition' government would have been brought back onto the agenda.

Three days after the election of Marini, on 2 May, Berlusconi resigned. However, the appointment of the new Prime Minister had to wait for the (indirect) election of the new President of the Republic, which was scheduled for the 8th of May. On the 10th of May Giorgio Napolitano (a long standing representative of the *Democratici di Sinistra*) who had the informal approval, though not the votes, of UDC and *Alleanza Nazionale* was elected on the fourth ballot (the first in the process that does not require two thirds of votes but only the absolute majority). The new President of the Republic asked Romano Prodi to form a new government on the 16th of May. The formal investiture occurred the following day when the PM and the other 25 Ministers were sworn in. Following the tradition of Italian coalition governments, the Ministers were shared out among the parties according to their relative weight. Romano Prodi brought in four Ministers he personally trusted, nine came from the *Democratici di Sinistra*, six from the *Margherita*, and one from each of the six minor parties. For *Rifondazione Comunista* this was the party's first time in government, and it gained the Ministry of Social Solidarity.

Background

In order to fully understand both pre and post 2006 election dynamics, one has to appreciate that the campaign did not start and did not end with the general election. In spring 2005 the regional elections were held. 2006 promised a hectic institutional/electoral schedule: general election in April; (indirect) election of the President of the Republic in early May; local elections involving a significant share of the Italian electorate in late May; and a crucial referendum on the constitutional reform in June. These contests involve competition not only between the two coalitions or between parties but also (and especially when it comes to the election of the President of the Republic) between factions and personalities within the same party.

The results of the regional elections in spring 2005 were a political earthquake. It was not a 'usual' mid-term defeat for the government coalition but seemed to presage the end of the Berlusconi era. The Centre-Right lost all the regions but Lombardy and the Veneto. In addition, *Forza Italia* was the biggest loser of the coalition. The immediate consequence was the substitution, under pressure from *Alleanza Nazionale* and UDC, of the powerful Minister of the Economy Giulio Tremonti, who symbolised the iron-pact between *Forza Italia* and the *Lega Nord*. The very leadership of Berlusconi was for the first time openly questioned by the leader of the UDC Marco Follini, who asked for a change in economic policy, constitutional policy and political leadership. In order to be able to pursue a more independent political strategy, and probably thinking about a post-Berlusconi scenario, he also proposed a return to a proportional representation electoral system where each party could compete on its own. Eventually the crisis within the Centre-Right was overcome by the creation of a new Berlusconi government: the *Lega Nord* obtained the 'devolution' reform but had to sacrifice Tremonti; Gianfranco Fini, leader of *Alleanza Nazionale*, obtained the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but had to give way on policy; the UDC obtained the electoral reform but had to sacrifice its leader; Berlusconi maintained the leadership of the government and obtained Follini's head but had to concede electoral reform and give up the idea of a united party of the Centre-Right under his leadership.

Electoral reform itself was a compromise between the centre-right parties and, at the same time, an attempt to enhance the seemingly poor chances of the coalition winning the coming general election. Eventually the new law combined a formal PR system, allowing parties to present their own individual lists and stress intra-coalition differences, with a substantial bipolar logic generated by an electoral bonus awarded to the coalition winning a plurality of national votes in the Lower House, and by regional bonuses for the coalition winning a plurality of votes for the Senate in each region. The new voting system was supposed to benefit the government coalition because its parties seem to perform much better when they fight elections independently than when they campaign together. In particular, given the poor performance of the Berlusconi government, the system would allow the other centre-right parties to capture voters switching away from *Forza Italia*, the party most associated with the government. In contrast, the Centre-Left electorate seems to reward its coalition when it shows unity and to punish it when it shows division. In addition, even if the Centre-Right were to lose the election, the new system could have failed to produce a clear majority for the *Unione* in the Senate (because of the regionally based rewards). Moreover, the introduction for the first time of a 'foreign constituency' (for Italians living abroad) was expected to enhance the chances of the

Centre-Right coalition winning the majority of seats at least in the Senate, a result that would keep the Centre-Right in the game for both government formation and the election of the President of the Republic.

The 2005 regional election results also opened the way to internal fights within the *Unione*. The prospect of a relatively easy victory in the forthcoming general election and consequent possibility of prominent centre-left politicians getting elected to the Presidency of Republic kicked off a struggle between, across and within parties, which also involved the use of economic scandals to discredit political opponents. Prodi's project to create a single 'Democratic Party' to unite the mainstream centre-left parties was openly challenged, especially by the *Margherita*, and rejected after the reform of the electoral system. However, the legitimization of Prodi's leadership through the *primarie* (primary electoral contest between several candidates for the leadership of the *Unione*, held in October 2005) was a further confirmation that the Centre-Left electorate demanded unity and cohesion. Eventually, the *Democratici di Sinistra* and the *Margherita* agreed to present a united list under the *Ulivo* banner for the Lower House, while maintaining separate lists for the Senate. In contrast, the socialists preferred to create a new party with the liberal-radicals (which had fought the previous general election within the Centre-Right) called the *Rosa nel Pugno* (RnP) in an attempt to create a modernising and markedly secular pole within the *Unione*.

In the end, the majority (actually plurality) bonus proved to be a very strong incentive, as both coalitions tried to include all minor political parties, including openly neo-fascist parties. For the first time since 1994, the two main competing coalitions gathered together nearly 100 percent of the votes (more than 99% in both Houses). Both coalitions presented, as requested by the new electoral law, a united manifesto and proclaimed their leaders, Berlusconi and Prodi (as in 1996). While Prodi's leadership, which gained strong legitimacy from the electorate, was never challenged or questioned by the Centre-Left party leaders, Berlusconi's leadership was taken for granted only by *Forza Italia* and the *Lega Nord*. Fini and Casini (the UDC leader who served as Speaker of the Lower House during the legislature) openly challenged the Prime Minister, arguing that after the election the leader of the Centre-Right should be the leader of the party getting most votes.

The Campaign.

On 25 February the 'official' campaign was launched, in Milan for Silvio Berlusconi and in Rome for Romano Prodi, and it culminated with televised 'face-to-face' debates between the two prime ministerial candidates.

In the last five years the Italian economy had performed poorer with less industrial production within a generally negative European context (of 1.3% growth in the other Euro countries and 0.03% in Italy). For the first time the economy had created more 'flexible' (temporary) jobs than permanent ones. Hence the two coalitions had to provide credible programmes particularly on the economic and employment sectors.

The *Unione* presented a 281-page manifesto, the *Casa delle Libertà* (literally, *House of Freedoms*) 22. The *Unione* focused on the centrality of the Constitution and the defence of fundamental values, further granted by the tightening of the procedure for

constitutional reforms; the need for reform public administration; justice, which should be harmonized at European level leading to faster trials; the importance of education and poor economic performance particularly targeting reforms for flexible jobs. The *Casa delle Libertà* opened its programme with the international scenario (September, 11th) deeply affecting the domestic context. The stress was on the problems, rooted within the country that the government had to solve and the need to continue the political and economic actions already undertaken. The focus on taxes, the family, the south of Italy, justice and security at the local level seemed to be more appealing to the average elector.

The governing parties underlined their successes and the need to complete the job that had begun with the 2001 election. According to the Centre-Right, in the last five years the economic climate was adverse because of 'Prodi's Euro' and the unfavourable international scenario. The *Lega Nord* particularly attacked the Centre-Left's focus on recognising civil partnerships. In an interview released just three days prior to the election, Umberto Bossi stressed his party's opposition to this form of legal civil partnerships - arguing that it helped to legalise homosexual partnerships and would diversely transform the traditional Italian Christian family, which was also further threatened by immigration. After Pope Benedict XVI's invitation to respect 'life, family, education' to the EPP MEPs in Rome on 30 March, members of the *Casa della Libertà* and Silvio Berlusconi called for catholic votes. *Forza Italia* distributed a small booklet 'Fruits and the tree' (*I frutti e l'Albero*) on the provisions his government had undertaken according to the catholic faith. Berlusconi had always encouraged this theme - linking his image to the idea of a traditional Italian family in contrast to his personal situation (he is divorced and has children from both wives). Despite the fact that the religious cleavage is no longer as distinctive as it was in post-war Italy (the majority of the Italians are still catholic by birth, but now less and less religious), in the Centre-Left two candidates within the *Margherita*, Luigi Bobba and Paola Binetti wrote a letter explaining why a 'good catholic' person could vote for the *Unione*.

Silvio Berlusconi was, as always, the candidate shaping the tone and agenda of the campaign. This allowed him to avoid some of the issues that from the outside could be perceived as salient: corruption and conflict of interests. In fact, both issues could also be difficult currently for the Centre-Left, due to recent allegations regarding the involvement of some of its political leaders with illegal bank affairs, and the inability of the previous Centre-Left government to solve Berlusconi's conflicting interests. In an attempt to bring its electorate to the ballot boxes, Berlusconi constantly raised the tone of the struggle, in particular with a striking intervention at the assembly of the Italian Business Association (*Confindustria* in Vicenza, 19th March). Only six days before he had left a television programme based on a single 30-minute interview, after having accused the journalist of being a 'red'. Romano Prodi did not attract the same attention, except for his 'communication' mistake around the death tax. While the most important newspapers supported the Centre-Left, most television channels were well in the hands of the Prime Minister. In mid-March the second national channel (*RAI2*) registered 23% of its space occupied by *Forza Italia* and 5.5% by the *Democratici di Sinistra*.

In the two televised 'face-to-face' debates Berlusconi and Prodi went through some of the most sensitive themes of the manifestos. In the first, the main points discussed

included foreign policy and Iraq, immigration, public finance and taxes. Taxes (the *big issue*), the Italian deficit, economic policies, and *Mezzogiorno* were the most salient in the second. Berlusconi underlined the deficit bequeathed by the Centre-Left government and the good management of the public finances, that had recently obtained the approval from the Ecofin. His report on the work of the incumbent government on the economic situation went hand in hand with the slogan of less taxes for citizens, stressing the introduction of the tax on the regional activities (IRAP) by the former Centre-Left government. That was used as a warning towards the possible re-introduction of the death tax by the Centre-Left, previously suspended by the Centre-Right. Prodi responded by focusing on the quality of the administration of the state and the fight against the high rates of tax evasion. It seemed more effective, however, to underline projects aiming at reducing taxes. During the last of the two meetings, the Prime Minister had the chance to use the last two minutes and, gazing straight into the eyes of the audience at home, asserted that his coalition would have suspended the 'ICI' tax (council tax, used to finance social services and assistance). It looked like match point.

Berlusconi always set the tone of the campaign, firstly at the Confindustria meeting, in Vicenza, secondly on television, and thirdly sending to 11 million families a booklet, '*La Vera Storia Italiana*' ('*The Real Italian History*', in 2001 he sent '*The Italian History*') describing the success of his government. Although the proposal of suspending the 'ICI' tax was dismissed as simply undoable by the main newspapers, the issue dominated the last days of electoral campaign, before he defined the centre-left electorate with an obscene definition. Finally, on Thursday (6th April) in a press conference he reported his documents on the Mills case, asserting that just thanks to his possibilities he could defend himself (while ordinary citizens would fail, with a reference to his long-time personal battle with an '*untrustworthy*' – and '*red*' - justice).

Opinion polls closed with the Centre-Left ahead, but between February and March increasing numbers of citizens assumed a positive evaluation of the performance of the incumbent government (up from 38.7% to 40.4%) and less considered it negatively (from 56.7% to 54.8%), according to an ISPO (*Institute for Public Opinion Polls*) survey. Moreover, 20-25% of the citizens were still undecided at the start of the campaign and the fact that in the previous elections 15% of those who were undecided made up their mind during the last three days, and 25% during the last week, suggested that victory for the Centre-Left coalition was by no means assured.

The Results.

In the previous general election in 2001 the level of turnout was 81.4%. Although, this could be easily considered a high figure compared to other Western democracies, it was actually the lowest level in the history of the Italian Republic and a confirmation of the negative trend started in 1976. However the importance of the 2006 election was expected to reverse this downward trend in turnout. Italians voted on Sunday 9th (8am-10pm) and Monday 10th April (7am-3pm) (it was only on Sunday in 2001) with 83.6% as the final turnout figure. The Minister of Home Affairs, Giuseppe Pisanu, underlined - probably too early - that the new ballots were successful - as there were less invalid votes: 1,093,277 for the Senate and 1,102,188 for the Parliament, a reduction of around 60%.

On Tuesday at 4pm the results were too close to call and the counting of votes of the Italians abroad was not yet completed. More than that, during Monday night, 'Nexus', the only official agency having the monopoly of the exit polls both for Italian television and Mediaset (the three channels owned by the Prime Minister), gave up attempting to predict the polls. After a comfortable victory forecast for the Centre-Left, with a 5% margin, the gap became smaller and smaller. Finally, at 3am on Tuesday morning the definitive figures of 49,81% for the Centre-Left and 49,74% for the Centre-Right in the Lower House emerged. Despite the closeness of the competition, Romano Prodi claimed the victory in front of a crowd gathered at the headquarters of the *Unione*.

In the Lower House, the new voting system translated the tiny gap (25,000, i.e. 0.1%) of votes between the two coalitions into a considerable gap of seats, allocating 348 seats to the Centre-Left and 281 to the Centre-Right. The small difference between the two sides provoked Berlusconi to call for an overnight meeting with his political allies. His spokesperson, Paolo Bonaiuti, contested the results, asserting that none of the two coalitions had 50% of the votes. In the Senate the new electoral law turned out to be an advantage for the Centre-Left even more than in the Lower House. Indeed, the advantage of Berlusconi's coalition in terms of votes was reversed, through the perverse mechanisms of regionally based awards, in a tiny majority of seats for the Centre-Left, 158 to 156 (excluding the 7 non-elected senators) (see table 1 below).

Within the Centre-Left, the *Democratici di Sinistra* and the *Margherita* were confirmed as the biggest parties. They gained less votes in the Senate than in the Lower House (-3.6%), where they had presented themselves in the single list of the *Ulivo* (31.3%) (see table 2 below). Although that was perceived as a success by the *Ulivo*, yet a comparison with the results in the Lower House for the 2001 general election shows the limited nature of this electoral success (+0.2%). In the same coalition *Rifondazione Comunista*, increased its votes, particularly in the Senate (+1.4% in comparison with the Lower House). The novelty of the *Rosa nel Pugno* (*Socialisti Italiani* and *Radicali*) was probably decisive for the overall success of the Centre-Left, as the radicals took votes away from the Centre-Right coalition, within which they had fought the 2001 election. However, the results were very disappointing for the party which did not obtain the expected number of seats in the Lower House and failed to pass the 3% threshold in any region for the Senate. It was probably due to its aggressive campaign, in which it gave the impression of being a potential source of trouble and internal dispute for the Centre-Left. The experiment of the *Comunisti Italiani* and the *Verdi* together in the Senate did not follow the results of the *Ulivo* in the Lower House. They had 4.1% of the preferences together, but divided in the Lower House they summed up 4.4% of the votes. Overall, the Centre-Left did not increase its votes as expected, but it was clear that its electorate tended to reward the cohesion and unity of the two main political parties of the coalition.

Table 1. Electoral results for the Lower House

Political parties	Votes	%	Seats	2001 (%)*	Change (%)
Forza Italia	9,045,384	23.7	137	29.4	-5.7
Alleanza Nazionale	4,706,654	12.3	71	12	+0.3
UDC-Casini	2,579,951	6.8	39	3.2	+3.6
Lega Nord	1,748,066	4.6	26	3.9	+0.7
DC and NPSI (<i>Christian Democrats and New Italian Socialist Party</i>)	285,744	0.7	4	/	/
Others in the CDL	610,661	1,6	/	/	/
<i>Votes from the Italians abroad</i>	/	/	4	/	/
Total (CDL)	18,976,460	49.7	281		
Ulivo (DS and Margherita)	11,928,362	31.3	220	31.1 (16.6+14.5)	+0.2
Rifondazione Comunista	2,229,604	5.8	41	5	+0.8
Rosa nel Pugno	991,049	2.6	18		
Verdi (<i>Greens</i>)	783,944	2.1	15	2.2**	-0.1
Comunisti Italiani	884,912	2.3	16	1.7	+0.6
Italia dei Valori	877,159	2.3	16	3.9	-1.6
UDEUR Popolari	534,553	1.4	10	/	/
SvP	182,703	0.5	4	/	/
Autonomie Liberté Democratie	34,167	0.1	1	/	/
Others in the Union	555,231	1.4	/	/	/
<i>Votes from the Italians abroad</i>			7		
Total (Union)	19,001,684	49.8	348		
Independent (<i>Voted Abroad</i>)			1		
Turnout		83.6		81.4	+2.2

Source: Italian Ministry of Home Affairs

* the results of the 2001 general election reported in this table refer to the votes cast for party lists under PR which, in the previous electoral system, decided only 25% of the seats.

**In 2001 i *Verdi* fought the election together with the *Socialisti Italiani* in the electoral list il *Girasole*.

Table 2. Electoral results for the Senate.

Political parties	Votes	%	Seats
Forza Italia	8,201,688	23.6	78
Alleanza Nazionale	4,234,693	12.2	41
UDC-Casini	2,311,448	6.6	21
Lega Nord	1,531,939	4.4	13
Casa delle Libertà	175,137	0.6	2
Others in the CDL	904,849	2.5	/
<i>Votes from the Italians abroad</i>			1
Total (CDL)	17,359,754	49.9	156
Democratici di Sinistra	5,977,313	17.2	62
Margherita	3,664,622	10.5	39
Rifondazione Comunista	2,518,624	7.2	27
Insieme con l'Unione (Verdi and Comunisti Italiani)	1,423,226	4.1	11
Italia dei Valori	986,046	2.8	4
UDEUR Popolari	476,938	1.4	3
L'Unione-SvP	198,153	0.6	3
SvP	117,500	0.3	2
Lista Consumatori	72,139	0.2	1
L'Ulivo	59,499	0.2	1
Autonomie Liberté Democratie	32,553	0.1	1
Others in the Union	1,615,324	4.6	/
<i>Votes from the Italians abroad</i>			4
Total (Union)	17,141,937	49.2	158
Independent (<i>Voted Abroad</i>)			1
Senatori a Vita			7

Source: Dossier Repubblica².

The Centre-Right retained more or less its electorate. *Forza Italia* lost almost 6% of the votes (nearly 2 million votes) compared to the 2001 general election, but most of this defection was absorbed by the other parties of the Centre-Right - the UDC in particular. Despite this massive loss, the performance of *Forza Italia* can, however, be considered positive compared to the widespread expectations based on the results of the 2005 regional elections and on the polls. Probably, if part of the undecided votes were decided during the last week or even the last three days leading up to the elections, then the promises of Silvio Berlusconi (launched from TV and radio programmes) were partly successful, but not enough to win. At the same time *Alleanza Nazionale* had to keep its 12% of the vote - if Gianfranco Fini wanted to remain the leader. The party had undergone major change during the last five years, with the Congress of Fiuggi creating different streams within the former Italian Social Movement. The younger Giovanni Alemanno ran for the election as mayor of Rome, becoming more prominent in the party. Some factions within *Alleanza Nazionale*

² At the time of writing this report the definitive data for the Senate were not available at the Ministry of Home Affairs website, www.politiche.interno.it (May 2005).

would support Alemanno himself as the next party leader and would have encouraged the changeover had the party lost votes. The party kept its electorate, but it was not as successful as Perferdinando Casini's *UDC*. The former Speaker of the Lower House, accused more than once of working for himself more than for the coalition, saw his party double its vote. The *Lega Nord* retained its faithful electorate, with a slight increase (+0.7%), leaving *Forza Italia* as the only real loser of the Centre-Right coalition.

Italians voted on taxes, jobs and welfare. According to Censis (*Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali*, Italian centre of socio-economic studies) Italian citizens asked for more protection of the State on pensions, health system and workers' rights (flexible jobs issue). 58.3% distrusted politics and relied on the manifestos more than the politicians. However, the main source of information was television, particularly '*Porta a porta*' (74%), the programme on the main national channel *RAI1*, usually considered as biased in favour of the government. Self-identification was more salient for the Centre-Left electorate (53% against the 46% of the Centre-Right), but the *Casa delle Libertà* still gained in comparison with the 2001 general election. The estimated undecided were 6.8 million, while 5.3 million changed coalition since the previous election. 4 millions of undecided voted for the *Unione*, that had 3 millions also of those shifting from the Centre-Right, resulting in a 500,000 increase for the Centre-Right among the 12 million people that did not self-identify in any of the two coalitions. Although during the campaign Silvio Berlusconi was often perceived as aggressive, *Censis* estimated that overall he was successful in moving almost 4 million undecided voters thanks only to his campaign on taxes and ICI.

The European Issue.

The European issue has never been a contentious issue in Italian politics. As a founding Member State with a Euro-enthusiastic public, small sectors of opposition find voice in the fringes of the political party system and there is little space for Europe in the electoral debate.

On several occasions the *Casa delle Libertà* government displayed 'soft' Eurosceptic stances, a novelty in Italian foreign policy. The Ministry of Defence, Antonio Martino, and the Ministry of Economy, Giulio Tremonti, never hid their criticism to Maastricht, while Umberto Bossi, the *Lega Nord* leader, was probably the most Eurosceptic Ministry in Italian history. Issues such as the pan-European consortium on the Airbus 400M, the debate on the common European arrest warrant, the headquarter of the EU Food Safety Authority, comments on the Euro and the Stability and Growth Pact signalled the rugged path of the Berlusconi government at EU level. However, considering the markedly pro-EU attitudes of the Italian electorate, the doubts and hesitations of important sectors of the Centre-Right towards certain EU policies were circumscribed to the issue of the single currency. Two ways to express the lack of enthusiasm towards the EU were either never mentioning it at all or never mentioning it without speaking of the importance of the Italian relations with the USA too. In the manifesto of the Centre-Right coalition Europe and the USA went hand in hand. They supported a more united Europe linking together different peoples but advocating themselves as the defenders of the Christian roots of Europe based upon religious and moral values, the protection of the family and European common roots.

The programme of the *Unione* was more articulated, and dedicated more space to Europe and ‘the others’: the United Nations, Iraq, the Mediterranean and the international dimensions. In the debates, Europe was used by Romano Prodi, as former President of the European Commission, to counterbalance the open support of the Berlusconi government for the American mission in Iraq. He also talked about the stabilizing and democratization process of the European Union in Central and Eastern Europe. The Centre-Left Europe was more concerned with common decisions made by the EU, looking to Europe for the solution of issues and problems. The Centre-Left aimed to reinforce the process of co-operation and openly supported enlargement to Romania and Bulgaria. It was additionally largely in favour of opening negotiations with Turkey, conditional on further reforms in the political sphere, human rights and respect for minorities. It was also strongly supportive of potential and future enlargement towards the western Balkans – regarding the opening of negotiations with Croatia as positive and stressing European peace-keeping and conflict-prevention. In its programme the *Unione* further supported Italian foreign policy within the European context, stressing a greater Italian role, not least with regard to development. They supported the Lisbon agenda arguing that it enhanced the role of research and competition.

Future prospects

The domestic context

The post 2006 general election situation left three main interrelated questions. The first and most pressing one concerned the government’s stability and capacity to propose and implement important reforms. The two main problems were the ideological heterogeneity within the *Unione* and the lack of a ‘safe’ majority in the Senate. This situation could expose the government to the blackmail power of individual parties (including the small ones) leading either to stagnation of the government activity or to a *do ut des* logic that would spoil the whole reforming programme. Both the (s)elections of the three main institutional positions and the process of government formation seemed to display the power of parties. On the other hand, the ‘partycratic’ logic followed in the allocation of institutional and governmental posts might prove to be crucially beneficial for the new government’s stability and duration. In addition, most important ministerial posts (Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Economy, Health, and Economic Development) went to high profile figures leaving some hope for a good performance. Finally, the small majority in the Senate could be used by Prodi in certain situations to impose his view and his programme on reluctant individual parties, whose reluctance to co-operate would automatically mean the fall of the government.

The second question concerned the survival of the bipolar party system. This issue was, in the short run, linked to the fate of the new government. Should the latter collapse in a moment of economic crisis and emergency, the President of the Republic could well choose to form a new government with a wide parliamentary majority rather than call for new election. This would open the way to closer co-operation between the parties of the centre which could develop further in the creation of new political subjects (parties or alliances). The possibility of a ‘return of the centre’ also depended on the third question: Berlusconi.

Berlusconi's permanence in politics was unlikely to create a climate for co-operation between the two poles and even between their centrist components. However, predictions on Berlusconi's future decisions go deep into speculation, exceeding the scope of this paper.

The European context

The new President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, celebrated a memorial day for Altiero Spinelli in Ventotene the 21st of May. Together with the new Ministers of the Prodi government, Giuliano Amato, Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa and Emma Bonino, he launched his call for a united Europe beyond national interests. During the celebration, Padoa-Schioppa referred to Spinelli's speech to the European Parliament in September 1983 when, presenting a parliamentary project in favour of a federal Europe (with the MEPs of the 'Crocodile Club'), he had quoted Hemingway, reinforcing the need for concerted action.

As Europe was central in the Centre-Left manifesto, it is likely to be central throughout the duration of this government. Indeed, Prodi announced that Europe is going to be the *Polaris* of his government. The aim was to regain an active role within the EU, as also explained by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Massimo D'Alema, at the Meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Ministries at the Klosterneuburg Abbey, near Vienna (27th-28th May). At the EU level the new government planned to revive the Constitutional Treaty, to enhance re-inforced cooperations and support further enlargements, as already listed in the programme. The invitation to revive the Constitution should be strengthened after the June European Council and during the 2007 German presidency (celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome), because the period of reflection should not become an endless process. The choice of Germany was not accidental. France was going to hold the presidential election, and Italy needed another founding Member States to give more strength to its projects. Strictly linked to the idea of progress, the process of enlargement was openly supported. Not only towards Romania and Bulgaria that, notwithstanding the latest problems arising, should join in 2007 as scheduled, but also towards Turkey and especially Croatia. The membership of Croatia was interpreted by the *Unione* as the door to European integration acting as the means to stabilise the Western Balkans. Finally, as in the existing Treaties, Italy would support enhanced forms of cooperation in the field of research and innovation, salient issues during the campaign. Massimo D'Alema asserted his divergence from the French proposal of introducing the 'capability of absorbing' on the EU side in the process of further enlargements. The notion, he said, seemed to be too abstract and used more as a blocking device. The reform of the Common Agriculture Policy should answer any concern regarding this capability.

Romano Prodi went to Brussels the 29th of May to confirm the guiding lines of Italy in the EU, and a meeting with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel had already been scheduled for the eve of the June European Council. As in the manifesto, the EU and Europe in general are likely to be at the centre of the Italian foreign policy, indeed it will be a return to normality.

Conclusion

After the 2005 regional election, Italy expected a sound victory of the Centre-Left in the 2006 general election. Berlusconi and his party, *Forza Italia*, had been losing

support with time, due to the poor performance of the centre-right government. The new electoral system ensured closer alliances and very few small political parties did not join the two coalitions, led by Silvio Berlusconi and Romano Prodi, gathering for the first time more than 99% of the votes. The Centre-Left won, without gaining the 50% in any of the two chambers and a lower percentage in comparison with the Centre-Right in the Senate, but more seats thanks to the electoral reform. Berlusconi gained on the 2005 regional election, but still lost almost 6% of its electorate since the previous 2001 parliamentary election, asserted he was the moral winner, and denounced frauds. The two main parties of the Centre-Left, the *Democratici di Sinistra* and the *Margherita*, were more successful in the Lower House, united in the list of the *Ulivo*. Yet, their project of a single democratic party seems to remain more popular in their voters than its political ranks.

Berlusconi's party remains the biggest party of the opposition and in the country in terms of votes share. If this election had to mark the opportunity of taking a decisive endorsement of the first full Berlusconi government or a rejection of it, the new electoral system and Italian voters lost this occasion, without a definitive statement from the electorate about the key issue of its contemporary politics, Silvio Berlusconi, still strongly supported in the provinces of Northern Italy.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>