

**Still an Outlier:
Italy in a Southern European Comparative Perspective**

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Abstract

There are many superficial reasons to believe that the Italian political system does not work in a satisfactory way. In this paper, we explore three different areas: parties and the party system; the governments; and the satisfaction of Italian citizens with their politics and their personal life. We utilize a variety of data to illustrate the most important points and we do so comparing Italy with Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Practically, on all measures and indicators Italy remains quite different from the other three Southern European countries. Though there have been some improvements, especially when we compare two rather different phases of the Italian Republic: 1945-1993 and 1994 up to now, not only there are still unsolved problems, but the most important changes do not appear to be stabilized and could quite easily be reversed as we explain rather succinctly. In sum, Italy remains an outlier and the explanation for the persistent difficulties must still be looked for and can be found in the fragmentation of the party system and in the instability of the coalition governments. Hence, the dissatisfaction of Italian citizens with the working of their political system appears to be fully justified, even more so when seen in a Southern European comparative perspective.

From uncollected garbage in the region Campania to frequent governmental crises in Rome, from repeated sudden ministrikes to the high fragmentation of the party alignment, the Italian political system appears to be the odd man out in Europe as well as among Southern European democracies. To ascertain and assess whether Italian (negative) “exceptionalism” is real, and to what extent, in this paper, we will explore three main components of the political system: the parties and the party system, the governments, and the citizens. We will do so providing, whenever possible, meaningful comparisons with the political systems of Greece, Portugal, and Spain and their corresponding components.

Parties and party system.

Since 1993 Italian parties and the party system have been in a stage that we will call, for lack of a more precise term, “transition”. With respect to the 1946-1992 period, important changes have invested all individual parties; new parties have made their appearance; the format and the mechanics of the party system have been transformed, but not much seems to be solid and consolidated. It is true that significant changes had already been creeping in the previous period, especially because of the fall of the Berlin wall and the emergence of the Northern League, but it was the reform of the electoral system that dealt a massive blow to the once dominant parties of the democratic Republic. Suffice to say, because the story has been sufficiently illuminated (Gilbert 1995; Bufacchi and Burgess 1999; Pasquino 2002), that all the parties that had participated in the governmental coalition called *pentapartito* (1980-1992) have disappeared; that both the Communists and the neo-Fascists felt obliged to change their name and to revise their past; and that an important new party, Forza Italia, made its quite successful debut in Italian politics (1994).

Following Sartori (1976), party systems must be classified with reference to the number of relevant parties, that is, their format, and to the type of mechanics, that is, the type of competition among the relevant parties. As to the number, in order to make a long story short and because we are not aware of useful comparative studies (the books edited by Bosco [2006] and by Bosco and Morlino [2007] contains chapters devoted to individual parties, but no analysis of the party systems), we confine ourselves to just one general remark concerning Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Using Sartori’s terminology, it appears correct to state that they have all become limited and moderate multi-party systems having less than six relevant parties, that is, parties having either coalition-making or blackmail power, and enjoying a centripetal type of competition. As to the Italian party system, between 1994 and 2006, with reference to the number of relevant parties, it must be precisely defined “extreme”, showing much more than six, possibly about thirteen, relevant parties endowed with coalition-making power.

The transformation of the Italian Communists and neo-Fascists has made both parties relevant, indeed, decisive for the formation of governmental coalitions. It has also significantly affected the type of party competition. Italy is no longer a case of polarized pluralism. Depolarization has certainly made its appearance in her party system. However, as has been underlined by Pappalardo (2006), the depolarization of the Italian party system has been accompanied by its substantial destructuring. This means that no party is fully rooted, that mergers and splits are the order of the day, that their location along the left-right continuum is subject to change and their roles are permanently in question. At this point, we can hypothesize that, after the formation of the Partito Democratico, out of a merger between the Left Democrats (former Communists) and the Daisy (mostly, former Christian Democrats) in the future we may be witnessing an overall restructuring of the Italian party system. However, before coming to a firm conclusion, it would be wise: first, to wait for and to assess the results of the April 13-14 Italian general elections; and, second, to analyze their overall consequences on the party system and on individual parties (and party aggregations).

Looking at the Italian party system today, that is on the eve of a general election, there is at least a striking element to be highlighted. The two major Italian parties have been the product of quite hasty processes of aggregation. In less than ten months, the Left Democrats and the Daisy have produced their dissolution and then proceeded to the creation of a Partito Democratico. The decisive event was the direct popular election of the Secretary of the Party, October 14, automatically endowed with the mantle of candidate to the office of Prime Minister¹.

The so-called Popolo della Libertà has fundamentally been the product of a sudden decision made by Berlusconi and almost immediately accepted by the President of National Alliance, Gianfranco Fini. In less than a month, without having to go through complex approval procedures within the two previous political organizations, the new party was born. It may be interesting to note that the Left Democrats lost a minor fraction of their leaders and members most of whom went to create Sinistra Democratica while National Alliance lost to its right a small group called La Destra (The Right). Revealingly, neither the Daisy nor Forza Italia have suffered any hemorrhage among their members and leaders. Perhaps, in a comparative perspective, one additional curious aspect may be highlighted. At this point, the two major Italian parties find no counterpart among the major European party families. The Partito Democratico is not a socialist party. Indeed, it has pointedly avoided and rejected any identification with “traditional” European Socialist parties. On the other hand, the Popolo della Libertà is not a traditional Christian Democratic Party. However, there is little doubt that Berlusconi’s new political vehicle will continue to be part of the European Popular Party. Incidentally, this way Fini, together with his former party, will achieve what he had been unsuccessfully pursuing in the past few years: to become part of the European Popular Party thus becoming fully legitimated.

Because there is no full comparative analysis of the other Southern European party systems, at least a couple of sentences are necessary in order to capture their substance. Greek, Portuguese, and Spanish parties appear satisfactorily consolidated. Almost all the parties, especially the large ones, that have (re-)appeared when the transition to democracy took place, are still alive and well. Most of them have enjoyed the taste of governmental offices. New parties have not made their entry into the party system and, in any case, they do not play a significant political role. The format of all the party systems can be classified as limited pluralism. And, as we said above, the mechanics of the party systems has definitely taken the shape of bipolar competition with all the ensuing benefits that we will indicate below.

Concluding this section, we can justifiably state that the configuration of Italian parties and the party system does represent an important anomaly when compared with the other Southern European parties and party systems. However, though marked by several imperfections, some of them deriving from the electoral laws being used, the mechanics of the party system in the last four general elections (1996, 2001, 2006, and 2008: we leave outside the not so founding election of 1994) has certainly been characterized by a bipolar competition.² The existence of a bipolar

competition in Italy and its consequences will become more clear when exploring the dynamics of government formation.

The governments

It is well-known that, for reasons having to do with the polarized pluralism of her party system, Italy did not experience any alternation in government during the entire period 1946-1992. There have been very many governments³, but no alternation. In order to capture the essence of the minor changes taking place in the Italian governmental coalitions, Sartori has suggested the term “semi-rotation”, but it must be clear that, first, the Christian Democrats have always constituted the pivot, the central and essential component, of the government; second, only five parties have participated in the governmental coalitions; third, the last phase (1980-1992) of the period saw all five parties together in the government. Following the electoral reform, the situation changed significantly. There have been three/four alternations. If we compare the average degree of alternation in Italy in the period 1994-2008 with the cases of Greece, Portugal, and Spain, the outlier seems to be Spain that has witnessed three complete alternations while the data for Portugal and, especially, for Greece are quite similar to the Italian ones in the period 1994-2006. See Table 1.

[TAB. 1 HERE]

We have constructed the table relying on Peter Mair’s (2006, pp. 253-262) suggestive analysis and data. There are minor differences also in terms of the appearance of innovative governments, that is governments that have never been formed before. The reference to uniform swing is taken from Strøm (2003, pp. 657-658): “If at election time all cabinet parties meet the same fate (they all gain or lose votes relative to the previous general election) we score the elections as 0 (no deviation from uniform swing). If, on the other hand, at least two governing parties experience different fates (i.e. one loses and the other gains), then we score that observation as 1 (non-uniform swing).”

It is in all likelihood because of the complexity of her transition that Portugal has had more governments defined innovative, largely characterizing the 1976-1981 period, than the other three countries. Incidentally, the data concerning alternation raise an intriguing question having to do both with the quantity and the quality of alternation. How much alternation in terms of frequency is really needed in order to have and preserve a competitive democracy? And how much does the political distance between the two protagonists of alternation affect its quality, that is the nature, the importance, and the range of policies approved and implemented? Perhaps, also, how much political anxiety and citizens’ disaffection is produced by (frequent) alternations? We feel that these issues are quite important, but, at this stage of our research, we do not have enough reliable material to provide satisfactory answers. For the time being we rely on few hard data concerning the overall number of governments and the number of governments per legislature (see Table 2 and Figure 1).

[TAB. 2 HERE]

[FIG. 1 HERE]

Neither phenomenon is surprising nor deserving an explanation: Italian governments have been by far more in absolute numbers than the other Southern European political systems’ and their frequency has been only slightly reduced in the 1994-2006 period.

One of the best indicators to utilize in order to acquire an overall view of the functioning of a democracy remains the tenure of its governments. Between 1994 and 2008, Italy has had nine governments and five Prime ministers. Berlusconi has led three governments; D’Alema and Prodi two each. Their average tenure has been slightly more than 20 months. However, the average tenure hides Berlusconi’s all-time record government: 1,410 days (2001-2005) as well as his first short government: 266 days. It also hides the overall climate of instability, internal conflicts, and

insecurity that has surrounded all governments in this period with only one possible exception: Berlusconi II (June 2001-April 2005).

Also the nature of the government requires some attention. Table 3 and Fig 2 provide the evidence. No other Southern European political system has had more oversized governmental coalitions than the Italian one. On the other hand, Italy has had no single-party majority government. However, when comparing the period between 1946-1992 with the period 1994-2006 one can immediately detect that there have been two quite interesting and promising changes. The first one is the significant decline of oversized coalitions from 66.7 to 22.2 per cent; the second one is the correspondently increase in the percentage of minimum winning coalitions from 5.6 to 66.7.

[TAB. 3 HERE]

[FIG. 2 HERE]

The *longue durée* reveals some positive changes (suggested also in the careful overview by Bull and Newell 2005), but even in the most recent period Italian governmental coalitions have remained quite different from those prevailing in the other three Southern European countries.

There is one additional element that clearly differentiates Italian governments from those of Greece, Portugal, and Spain: the powers of the chief executive (that we will call Prime Minister). Reacting against the Fascist experience characterized by a very (though not all) powerful *Duce*, the Italian Constituent Fathers designed a weak role for the President of the Council of Ministers (this is the correct title of his office). The debate on how to strengthen the Italian head of government has remained wide open. Several proposals have proliferated, not all of them wise and constitutionally acceptable. Obviously, strengthening the powers of the head of the government does not simply consist in giving him (no “her” so far in Italy) more constitutional prerogatives. It is a political problem. Indeed, the concrete powers of Southern European Prime Ministers, as revealed by Figure 3, derive largely, if not exclusively from the type of government they lead and from the fact that they are the recognized leader of their respective parties that they themselves have guided to an electoral victory⁴ Hence, as long as Italy will have coalition governments, her Prime Minister will not become as strong as his counterparts in Greece, Portugal, and Spain.

[FIG. 3 HERE]

Among the many political and institutional criticisms addressed against Italian parties and the manner they give birth and impart death to their governments, there is the one that stresses that these processes are not sufficiently, or at all, connected with the preferences of the voters. In the best of the cases, Italian voters delegate party leaders to construct governmental coalitions. Whether they are constitutional or not, feasible or not, binding electoral mandates have no place in the Italian political system. However, the kind and the strength of the relationship that is established between the voters, the parties, and the governments have a lot of political significance and go a long way to explaining the existence and the intensity of feelings of support or of alienation. Relying on indicators suggested by Matthew Soberg Shugart, we have constructed Table 4, that contains five measures: pre-election identifiability, post-election majority approximation, electoral linkage, plurality enhancing, interparty efficient. The Italian case is always treated with reference to the two quite different periods of the evolution of the Republic that in themselves provide a rather interesting longitudinal comparison.

[TAB. 4 HERE]

As to pre-election identifiability it refers to “the regularity with which elections provide voters with clear choices of competing governments prior to elections” (Shugart 2001, p. 173). Italy records an impressive improvement from 0 to 0.76 taking a position just behind Greece and slightly above Portugal. Indeed, the nature of the competition between two opposing party coalitions has offered the 1994-2008 voters a rather clear choice. The governments formed in Italy immediately after the electoral outcome have enjoyed a clear majority of seats at least until 2001 included and, to the exception of the Senate, also in 2006.⁵ Also the electoral linkage measure, that is the correspondence between majority governance and pre-election identifiability has improved in Italy. In fact, it has doubled with respect to the 1976-1994 period without, nevertheless, reaching the levels of the three other Southern European countries. When it comes to plurality enhancement, the electoral system utilized in the 1994, 1996, and 2001, thanks to its significant plurality component in single member constituencies, has provided the winning majority with an extra number of seats. Because of the majority bonus, also the proportional electoral law utilized in 2006 and 2008 has enhanced the winning coalition. The last measure indicates that Italy has moved away from her hyper-representative system, signalled by the negative values of inter-party efficiency, to a situation approximating Greece and, to a lesser extent, Spain. The overall evidence is somewhat mixed, but if our purpose is to assess how much different Italy has been and remains from the other Southern European political systems, we may confidently suggest that there is an on-going ensemble of movements into the right direction.

In order to deepen and, possibly, confirm our evaluation, we have proceeded to a more complex operation. Borrowing from an analysis prepared by three scholars (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi) for the World Bank and based on six dimensions Table 5 presents the value for Governance scores.

[TAB. 5 HERE]

To understand the substance of the table, it may suffice to note that the range goes from minus 2.5 to plus 2.5. On most measures, Italy lags significantly behind Portugal and, especially, Spain. It also lags slightly behind Greece. The overall picture is, therefore, negative, though not totally depressing. But, with reference to these measures, one can indeed state that the Italian political system continues to be the odd man out in Southern Europe.

Conclusions

Few exceptions notwithstanding, all the data suggest that, indeed, Italy does not compare favourably with the other Southern European political systems. We would, nevertheless, like to conclude on a slightly more positive note making reference to three quite different indicators: the degree of satisfaction with democracy, the degree of approval of the national government, and the level of personal happiness. We have constructed the three figures adding, on the one hand, the four negative evaluations and, on the other hand, the four positive evaluations.

[FIGG. 4, 5, 6 HERE]

The Italians are in a close competition with the Portuguese when it comes both to the not very great satisfaction with democracy and with the working of the national government. However, the most depressing element is that the Italians show the lowest level of personal happiness. Only one Italian out of three declares a fair amount of personal happiness in comparison with four out of six in Greece and Portugal and one out of two in Spain. We are in the position to pass a judgment on whether politics might and should deliver happiness. Looking at some of these data, however, it

seems that we could end by suggesting that, indeed, it is possible that good politics offers a positive contribution to the happiness of the citizens.

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Tab. 1. Levels and types of alternations

Country	Number of changes	Prevailing type of alternation	Average level of alternation (%)	Cumulative alternation	Innovative governments	Innovative gov. (% for all governments)	Uniform Swing
Spagna	3	Totale	100	300	3	30	0
Portogallo	7	Mista	79.02	553.2	6	50	0.1
Grecia	6	Mista	84.72	508.3	4	22.2	0.12
Italia 1976-2006	15	Parziale	45.76	686.4	13	48.1	0.67
Italia 1976-1994	10	Parziale	25.64	256.4	9	50	0.6
Italia 1994-2006	5	Totale	86	430	4	44.4	0.75
Italia 1950-1999	31	Parziale	31.2	968.2	11	35.5	0.5

Source: following Mair (2006), elaborated by Pasquino (ed, 2005), Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (2000); Strøm, Müller and Bergman (eds, 2003), Müller and Strøm (eds, 2000).

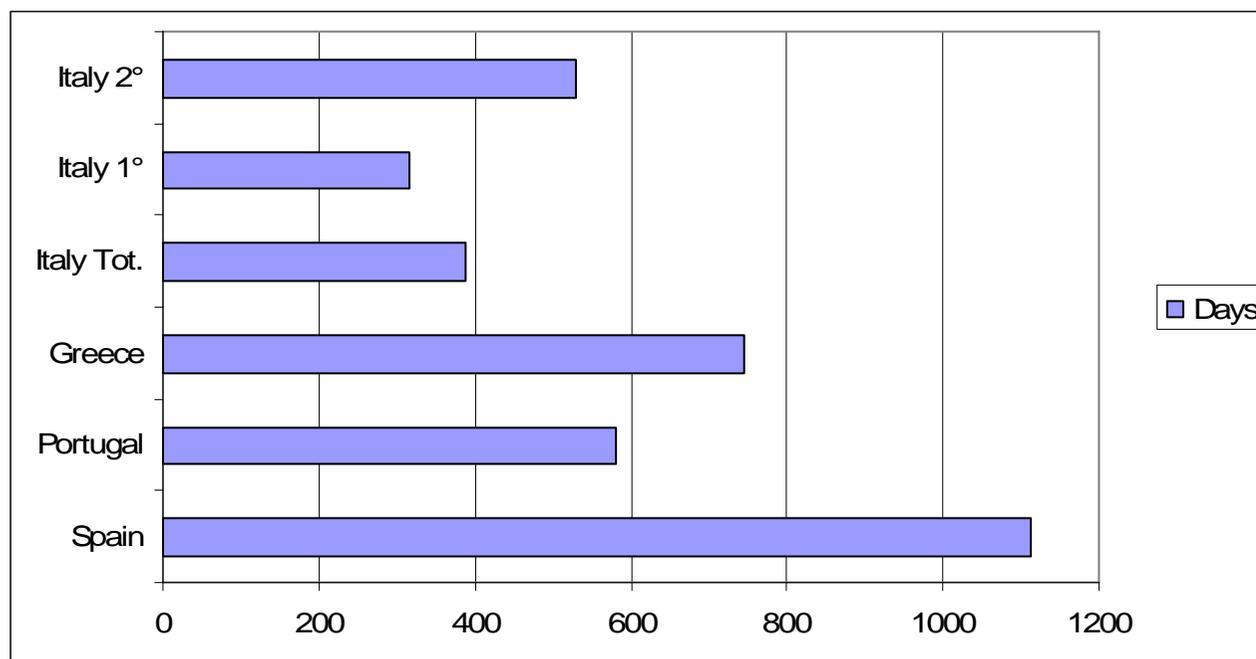
Tab. 2

Country	N° PM	Cabinets	Legislatures	Average PM/legislature
Spain	5	10	8	0,6
Greece	10	17	12	0,8
Portugal	12	19	10	1,2
Italy 1976-2008	15	27	8	1,9
Italy 1976-1994	10	18	5	2
Italy 1994-2008	5	9	4	1,2

Source: Pasquino (ed, 2005), Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (2000); Strøm, Müller and Bergman (eds, 2003), Müller and Strøm (eds, 2000).

Note: Ciampi's government has been included in the period 1976-1994.

Fig. 1. Average number of cabinets for legislatures



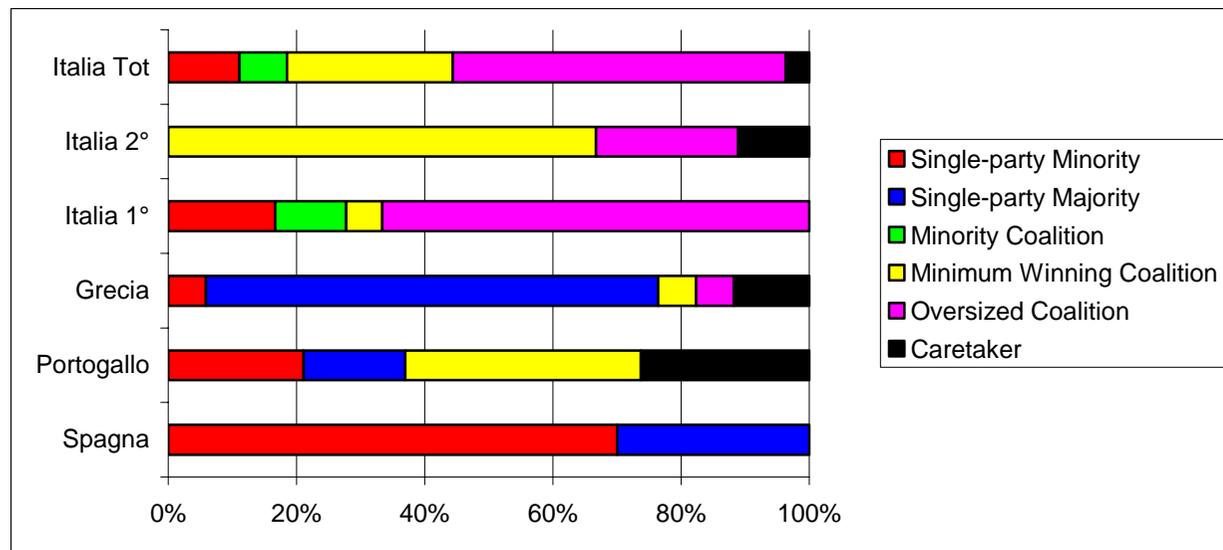
Source: Pasquino (ed, 2005), Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (2000); Strøm, Müller and Bergman (eds, 2003), Müller and Strøm (eds, 2000).

Tab. 3. Types of government, 1974-2008 (%)

Type of government	Spain	Portugal	Greece	Italy 1°	Italy 2°	Italy Tot.
SINGLE-PARTY MINORITY	70	21,1	5,9	16,7	0	11,1
SINGLE-PARTY MAJORITY	30	15,9	70,6	0	0	0
MINORITY COALITION	0	0	0	11,1	0	7,4
MINIMUM WINNING COALITION	0	36,8	5,9	5,6	66,7	25,9
OVERSIZED COALITION	0	0	5,9	66,7	22,2	51,9
CARETAKER	0	26,3	11,8	0	11,1	3,7
	100	100,1	100,1	100,1	100	100

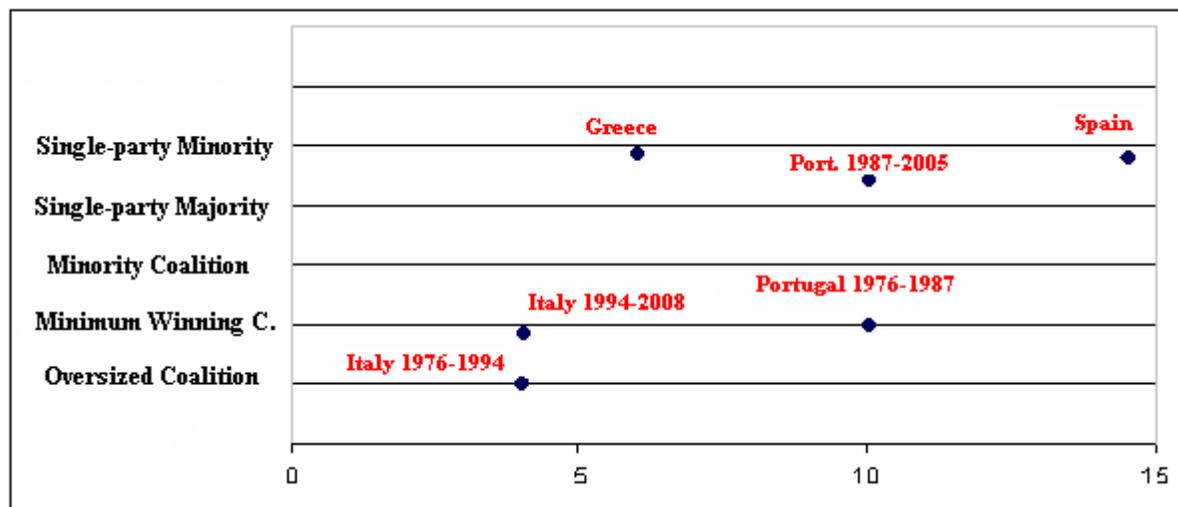
Source: Pasquino (ed, 2005), Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (2000); Strøm, Müller and Bergman (eds, 2003).

Fig. 2. Types of governments, 1974-2008



Source: Pasquino (ed, 2005), Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (2000); Strøm, Müller and Bergman (eds, 2003).

Fig. 3. Prime Ministers' Power



Source: reelaborated by Bergman, Müller, Strøm and Blomgren (2003); Pasquino (2006 and ed, 2005).

Tab. 4. Indicators of interparty efficiency

Country	Pre-election Identifiability	Post-election majority approximation	Electoral linkage	Plurality enhancing	Interparty efficiency
Spain	1	0.96	0.98	0.17	0.15
Portugal	0.67	0.95	0.81	0.12	-0.07
Greece	0.8	0.99	0.90	0.18	0.08
Italy 1976-1994	0	0.76	0.38	0.06	-0.56
Italy 1994-2006	0.76	1	0.76	0.30	0.06

Source: following Shugart (2001), reelaborated and updated by Pasquino (ed, 2005); Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (2000); Strøm, Müller and Bergman (eds, 2003).

Tab. 5. Governance Indicators

Indicator	Country				<i>Standard Err.</i>
	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>Greece</i>	<i>Portugal</i>	
<i>Voice and Accountability</i>	+ 1.14	+ 1.05	+ 1.05	+ 1.27	0.20
<i>Political Stability</i>	+ 0.28	+ 0.33	+ 0.48	+ 0.85	0.22
<i>Government Effectiveness</i>	+ 0.38	+ 1.05	+ 0.62	+ 0.95	0.18
<i>Regulatory Quality</i>	+ 0.84	+1.06	+ 0.79	+ 1.0	0.20
<i>Rule of Law</i>	+ 0.37	+ 1.10	+ 0.64	+0.97	0.14
<i>Control of Corruption</i>	+ 0.31	+ 1.18	+ 0.39	+ 1.11	0.15

Legend: Voice and Accountability measures the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association and a free media.

Political Stability and Absence of Violence measures perceptions of the likelihood that the government will be destabilized or overthrown by unconstitutional or violent means, including domestic violence and terrorism.

Government Effectiveness measures the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service, and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies.

Regulatory Quality measures the ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations that permit and promote private sector development.

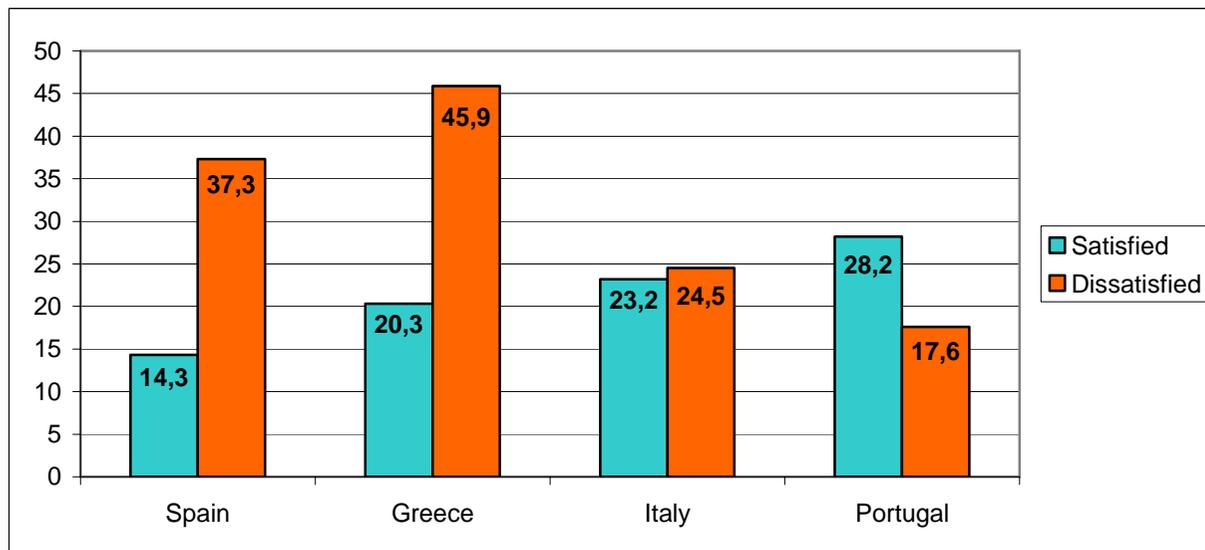
Rule of Law measures the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society, and in particular the quality of contract enforcement, the police, the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence.

Control of Corruption measures the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as "capture" of the state by elites and private interests.

Source: re-elaborated by Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi (2007). See also:

<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi2007/>

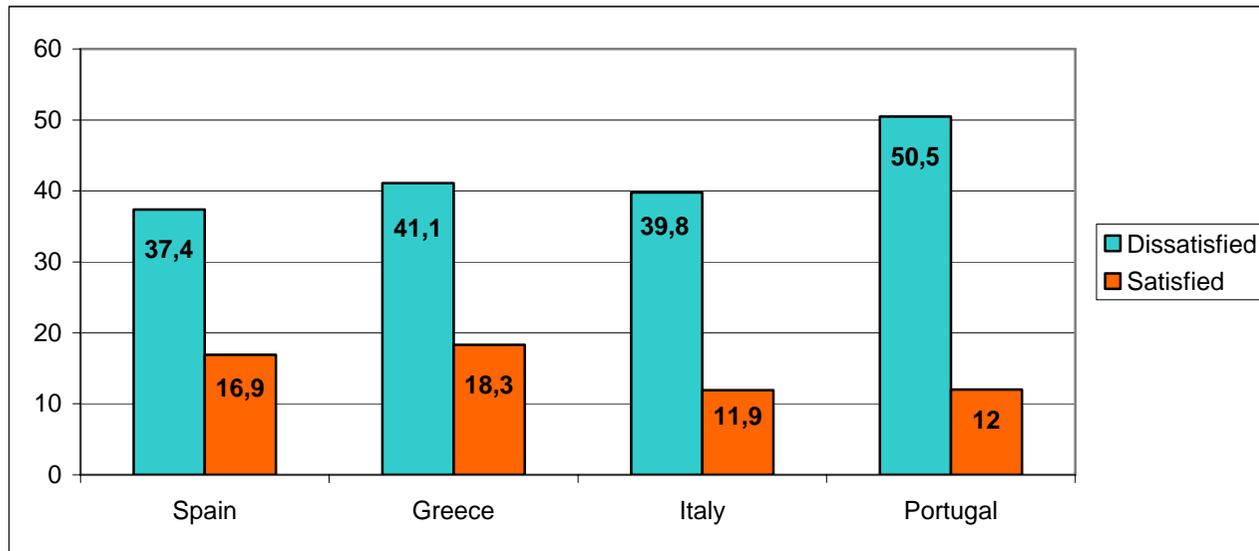
Fig. 4. Satisfaction with democracy, 2002 (%)



Source: reelaborated by R. Jowell and the Central Co-ordinating Team, European Social Survey 2002/2003, <http://ess.nsd.uib.no>.

Note: *Question: "And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?"*. Cases weighted by DWEIGHT (No. cases: 9445).

Fig. 5. Satisfaction with the working of national government, 2002 (%)

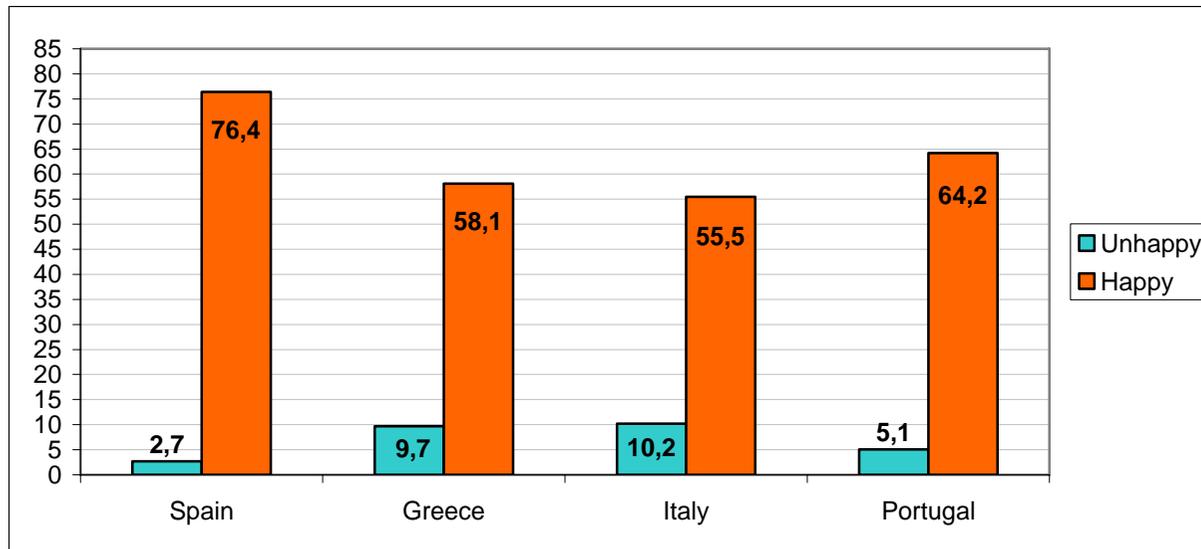


Source: reelaborated by R. Jowell and the Central Co-ordinating Team, European Social Survey 2002/2003, <http://ess.nsd.uib.no>.

Note: *Question: "Now thinking about [country] government, how satisfied are you with the way it is doing its job?"*.

Cases weighted by DWEIGHT (No. cases: 9674).

Fig. 6. Personal happiness, 2002 (%)



Source: reelaborated by R. Jowell and the Central Co-ordinating Team, European Social Survey 2002/2003, <http://ess.nsd.uib.no>.

Note: *Question: "Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?".* Cases weighted by DWEIGHT (No. cases: 10017).

¹ How much the simultaneous presence of a partyless Prime Minister, Romano Prodi, and a secretary of the largest party of the governmental coalition, repeatedly stating his own platform and his party's, has affected the life (and death) of the government, seems to us a legitimate question. What we consider a satisfactory answer formulated well before the events can be found in Pasquino (2007)

² The Italian bipolar competition has often been defined "primitive", "ferocious", "harsh", "brutal" because of the political distance between the two coalitions and their uncompromising behaviour. We surmise that there is a lot to be studied and assessed with reference to the policies and parliamentary votes

³ For the data see Cotta and Verzichelli 2007.

⁴ We have proceeded to rank the respective powers utilizing the suggestions by Bergman, Müller, Strøm, and Blomgren (2003, p. 191)

⁵ In the light of the performance of the 2005 electoral law, that most, not only Italian, scholars would, somewhat lazily, define "mixed", one may legitimately question, contrary to the opinion of Shugart and Wattenberg 2001 and their contributors, whether mixed-member electoral systems really constitute the best of both worlds..