Introduction

This Element aims to analyse the transition of the Kingdom of Italy towards a democracy based on mass integration parties and the events immediately preceding its transformation into an authoritarian regime. This topic has been tackled in millions of pages, generating extensive and diverse literature. In my opinion, however, the topic has not yet reached a definitive conclusion and it is one upon which the scholarly community is far from agreement. This Element, therefore, certainly does not set out to put an end to a debate of this magnitude but intends to make a very specific contribution to it, based on just two dimensions: an electoral and, to a lesser extent, institutional analysis. The period between 1919 and 1924 marks a critical transition phase from ongoing democratisation to its collapse and the onset of an authoritarian shift. The analysis specifically focuses on the electoral cycles that initiated this transition in 1919, when the Popular Party (Partito Popolare) and the Italian Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano) secured a majority in the lower house. This critical juncture represents a decisive crossroads, where the clash between different political visions led to the rise of Benito Mussolini. As will be demonstrated in the Element, an epilogue that initially was neither foreseeable by any of the actors involved nor, obviously, inevitable.

The Italian Political System in the Aftermath of the First World War

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Italian political system had been democratising, amidst ups and downs and gradually, but at a relatively steady pace. Since 1861, when the newly constituted Kingdom of Italy inherited the Statuto Albertino (Albertine Statute) as a constitution from the Kingdom of Sardinia, the spheres of participation had gradually widened to include growing numbers of citizens. One of the high points of this process was the approval of the 'almost' universal suffrage in 1912 for elections to the Chamber of Deputies, the only elective chamber. The 1913 elections that followed had produced a transformation that was still largely silent and not fully perceived by most. As Alessandro Schiavi (1914) reported, however, the dichotomy then ceased to be between liberal, conservative, and progressive forces but between liberal forces and Socialists, at that time the only party with a mass, national structure. The events of 1915 that led to the country's entry into the First World War, on the other hand, showed how its democratic foundations were still fragile and how, from within the country, a new social class was emerging that opposed the Socialists and parliamentarism and reverted to hyper-nationalist logic. With Italy not yet involved in the First

World War, after the street demonstrations of the 'Radiant Days of May', the Chamber of Deputies, with a neutral majority, was therefore forced to accept a fait accompli and approve the state of war, something that took place on the basis of a double pressure: on the one hand, that of the movement that aggregated various very violent interventionist forces – nationalists, D'Annunzians, and Mussolinians – and, on the other, the Crown itself and the conservative liberals who were at the head of the government. Once the war was over, a long phase of institutional fluidity opened in Italy and Europe. In a sign of great instability and the search for a new order, five electoral cycles followed one after the other, from 1919 to 1924: the legislative elections of 1919, 1921 and 1924 and the administrative elections of 1920 and 1922–3. This transition initially seemed to lead to a completion of the democratisation process and only later ended with the consolidation of an authoritarian regime. In this Element we shall focus on this period, in order to understand the electoral and institutional dynamics that allowed the transition from the first to the second part. And, to do so, we shall focus, above all, on the relationship within an imaginary triangle formed by representation, the parties, and elections. Within this triangle, the focus will be on analysing the cleavage opposing liberal formations to mass integration parties and, even more specifically, on the attempts to construct a conservative party capable of integrating the middle classes within democratic institutions. This process was particularly significant because it was a response to the evolution of the Socialist Party, which had already completed its process of affirmation and integration of the proletarian classes, both urban and agricultural.

It was necessary to adopt a multilevel approach in order to understand the deeper reasons for this long process of transformation. The First World War and its consequences on society were certainly among the causes that accelerated a process that was already underway, but behind them laid implicit dynamics, associated with the transformations that preceded the war, and explicit ones: that is, referable to the political system, such as the suffrage reform approved in 1912. The first level lay in the paradox of a democratisation process that would remain partial and unfinished and that, in fact, would never touch the Albertine Statute granted in 1848. Akin to what happened in other European countries after the First World War, a broad debate developed in Italian public opinion, in the parties and among constitutionals, which focused, above all, on the need for reform of the Senate, the upper chamber that, although not elective, retained numerous powers to intervene in the legislative process. In addition, the discussion addressed the issue of the multiple powers that the king still exclusively enjoyed, particularly in the field of foreign policy. The convocation of a constituent assembly, which could have overturned the relationship between

the Crown and the representative institutions, was then also hypothesised. Whereas under the statute these were still in some way legitimised by the king by their very existence, with the constituent assembly it would be the king who would be legitimised by them, as had happened for example in Belgium, where the sovereign had been chosen by the assembly after the approval of the constitution in 1831. A paradigm shift that was not easy to accept in the House of Savoy because, although the action in the political system of the heads of state had often been silent, it was far from irrelevant (Colombo, 2010: 10–15). In this context, the elections of 1919 represented the greatest upheaval in Italian politics since the beginning of the liberal age. The mass parties then became a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, while the upper chamber maintained a majority of 'Constitutionals'. The shock brought about a substantial freezing of the debate on the reformability of the political system and an accentuation of a desire for crystallisation that would preserve it from complete disruption.

The second level was the crisis of all the political formations and the upheaval of previous balances. In the conservative camp, there was a real crisis and the inability of the right-wing leadership to adapt to the new rules imposed by the enlargement of suffrage. This made it difficult for part of the country to identify with the democratic state. The inability to constitute a viable party proposal in this field was undoubtedly partially due to the fact that a large section of the liberal world would have preferred a return to a model in which the government was not dependent on the confidence of parliament, instead returning completely to the sphere of the king; that is, they wanted a 'return to the Statute' – a more rigid interpretation of the constitutional charter. Added to this was a second dimension that upset the balance of the political system, namely the birth of a Catholic party. In 1913, in the first elections with universal male suffrage, the Catholic vote had united to support the candidates of the liberal formations. In 1919, on the other hand, Catholics stood as candidates with their own party, the Popular Party, which obtained 20 per cent of the seats in the lower house, inevitably causing a haemorrhage of votes, especially in the north, for the Constitutionals. However, the party that soon showed an intrinsic weakness, due to the contrast between different currents, some more intransigent and others more attentive to collaboration with the conservatives, and the fluctuating relations with the Vatican. Finally, there was always the seemingly unstoppable development of the socialist movement and the workers' movement: socialists who were also internally far from united and who would soon go through the split from the left of the future Communist Party and the marginalisation of the reformists.

Some Methodological Notes

Before proceeding, it seems useful to clarify some relevant methodological notes. Firstly, it is necessary to define the typology of the parties involved, aiming to reduce complexity, number, and diversity, even if at the cost of some precision. They will be grouped into two broad areas, liberal parties and mass integration parties. Liberal formations – or formations of cadres or notables – will be defined as all those formations with little or no formalised organisational structure, not dependent on a membership base, generally composed of social, economic, and intellectual elites and with that privileged negotiation between elites. Here, given the impossibility of reconstructing the extremely chaotic and volatile field of liberal parties (Democratic, Liberal, Constitutional, etc.), they will be grouped together in a dimension that, following a cataloguing model proposed by the Ministero dell'economia (1924a: 55), joins all these formations under the single definition of *Costituzionali* (Constitutional parties). On the other side of the spectrum, there were the mass integration parties. For the sake of simplicity of analysis, here we will define a mass integration party on the basis of three dimensions. The first is the organisational structure, that is, they have an organisation rooted in the territory based on militancy. The second is the mobilisation strategy: that is, they aim to mobilise broad sectors of society, often around ideologies or collective identities. The third is the relationship with voters. That is, they seek to create direct and lasting ties with their voters, often through the offer of material and symbolic benefits and through building 'party loyalty' among their members and supporters (Duverger, 1954: 63–78).

The second methodological note concerns the data considered and processed. Electoral statistics, an impressive mass of numbers, allow us to understand in depth the political balances and imbalances in their evolution. It was decided as a starting point to recount all the candidates and all those elected in all the electoral rounds considered, starting from the tables compiled at the time by the official bodies and not referring to secondary sources. Unfortunately, reading them is not always easy: the geography of the constituencies changed from election to election and so it was necessary, in order to favour comparability, to reduce their complexity. An attempt was therefore made to convert the constituency map to a single geographical scheme, summarised not on the province but on the region, or in some cases on an amalgamation of regions. The analysis of the electoral data was done by emphasising four cleavages that seemed the most effective for understanding the critical juncture: north/south, abstention/participation, local/legislative elections, and mass/constitutional parties. A separate discourse will be made for the selection of candidates for the 1924 Fascist List and elections. In this case, it was necessary to focus more on the

precise reconstruction of the biographical data of each of the individual candidates in order to bring out the relationship and transition between the old elites and the new elites.

Finally, we chose to focus on a rereading, also from the primary sources, of the main newspapers of the time. Many newspapers were consulted, but we chose to favour the detailed analysis of the liberal-leaning *Corriere della Sera*, the Italian newspaper with the largest circulation of the time. Its pages are essential to understand the climate and to grasp the point of view of those who considered themselves on the side of the ruling class and how the transition process to a democracy based on mass parties was experienced.

Inevitably, there was not space in this Element even for many relevant things. We wanted to focus almost exclusively on the electoral processes. Thus, it was impossible – and probably would not have been consistent with the specific approach chosen for this study – to delve into the events linked to the Biennio Rosso (1919–20) or Gabriele D'Annunzio's adventure in Fiume (1919–20). This is not so much because their importance and destabilising effects are not understood but because an attempt will be made here to identify the weaknesses of the Italian political system, even in what appears less visible. Thus, the events surrounding the March on Rome are only dealt with in terms of the negotiations for the formation of a new government between 27 and 30 October. We will not dwell too much on the violence of squadrism, except when it has a direct impact on institutions, such as when the assault on the municipal chambers led to their dissolution. These are all issues that have been abundantly addressed and resolved elsewhere.

1 The November 1919 Elections

The Popular Party

The 1913 elections had not ended in catastrophe for the parties of the liberal sphere only because the Catholics, not yet organised into their own autonomous party, had supported anti-socialist candidates on the basis of a specific programme. In 1919, however, Catholics entered the political arena themselves, organising themselves into a nationwide structured party, the Popular Party, founded on 18 January 1919 by the parish priest Don Luigi Sturzo, with the appeal 'To all free and strong men'. It was a party that was already born with a number of peculiarities. First of all, it was born out of the coming together of many and very different Catholic organisations. Then, since its birth, it had formed itself an organisation similar to that of the Socialist Party which, since 1892, the year of its foundation, had branched out into a dense network of parallel structures, such as trade unions and cooperatives. The birth of the

Popular Party also called into question the clear separation of Church and State and Pope Benedict XV's revocation in 1919 of the *Non expedit*, or Vatican ban on Catholics taking part in national votes, a separation that had been maintained since the taking of Rome in 1870, when Italian troops put an end to the existence of the Church State. The party, therefore, was not born out of nothing: it could already count, at its inception, on the Catholics' mature experience in parliament and government. They had managed to gather nineteen deputies in the group, and by the time of the Bologna Congress in the summer it had grown to thirty-one.

For our analysis, it is important to emphasise the effect that the birth of the Popular Party had on both the party system and the political system. On the face of it, the Popular Party was a force that at times appeared parallel and specular to the Socialist Party, sharing in part its structure and its corporatist/democratic afflatus: that is, the desire to overcome the capitalist economy (De Rosa, 1972: 24), and the demand for the transformation of the Senate. They shared, in other words, everything that Italian liberalism had always tried to avoid. In the Popular Party programme, there were three points that concerned a broad transformation of representation: the electoral law, which was to provide for proportional counting and also the proposal to grant women the right to vote; the administrative decentralisation of municipalities, provinces, and regions; and the electivity of the Senate, with the introduction of corporatist principles (Cantono, 1920).

After the challenge of the Socialist Party which, in 1913, had already obtained almost 20 per cent of the votes at a national level, concentrated mainly in the north of the country, the liberal world was now also challenged in its waning hegemony by the entry on the scene of another mass integration party that was competing for the favour of contiguous sections of the electorate. In 1913, in a system made up of uninominal constituencies, the liberals, thanks to the Gentiloni agreement, had been able to save themselves thanks to the Catholic votes, that support was now lacking (Adinolfi, 2024: 36). Sturzo, moreover, had not looked favourably on that agreement and believed, on the contrary, that the involvement of Catholics should be carried out in the first place with an autonomous force. Even the new Pope Benedict XV had shown himself benevolent towards Sturzo's initiative and, although he never openly expressed his support, this did not seem to be enough to limit the dissension in the Catholic world and within the newly formed party. The currents that formed within it immediately undermined the party in depth and, as we shall see, played a crucial role in all the salient moments of the following years. It was thus configured as a party divided between an intransigent current, headed by its leader, and a 'collaborationist' one, closer to the more conservative fringes of

the country. The centrifugal force exerted by these two currents, even in the face of a Holy See that was more inclined to support the collaborationist strategy, played a decisive role in causing the Catholic party project to collapse. Already in 1919, when Sturzo found himself having to construct lists for the elections, he felt obliged to take into consideration all the various souls of the party, from the clerical moderates to the nationalist Catholics. One of the first clashes came as early as 1920 over the formation of lists in the local elections, characterised by a majority law that had led to the aggregation of a poll whose only glue was anti-socialism (De Rosa, 1972: 97). Therefore, the Popular Party suffered from being both a governmental force and a sort of anti-system party at the same time and was hindered by these divergences in its project to take a central role in the political scenario in a country that had always been profoundly anti-clerical.

Towards a Conservative Mass Party

At the appointment with modernity the conservatives presented themselves without adequate answers. This is a fundamental aspect of Italy in 1919: on the right of the political quadrant there was a lack of credible proposals for the electorate, and this fragility would play a fundamental role in the following years. The question of creating a conservative party had, in fact, been dragging on for decades, without an effective solution ever having been found.[1] Since the 1911 war against the Ottoman Empire to gain control over Libya, nationalist ideals had enjoyed some success among students and the middle classes (Nardi and Gentili, 2009), and the idea of forming a Fascio Liberale,[2] a bloc to unify the conservative and liberal forces, began to make headway. The government crisis that followed the defeat at Caporetto in 1917 led to the presidency of the council by Vittorio Emanuele Orlando and the formation of a new group in the chamber that took the name of the Fascio Parlamentare di Difesa Nazionale (Parliamentary Fascio of National Defence). Initially, the Parliamentary Fascio was not intended as a party, but as an aggregation of parliamentarians of multiple political sensitivities with the sole purpose of supporting the new government in the context of the war. However, some MPs soon decided to give the new formation a permanent character, seeking to give it both a ramified organisation and a unitary statute binding on all members. The group, which met at a conference in Milan in early 1918, already counted on 158 deputies and

[1] *Corriere della Sera*, 7 April (1914).

[2] At the beginning of the twentieth century in Italy, the term *fascio* was frequently employed to signify the need for political parties or people to come together or unite. This usage highlighted a widespread sentiment towards unity and collective action within the political landscape of the time.

122 senators in May. The mass integration model aimed to bring together not only individual militants but also associations that could gravitate around the future party.

Yet, despite the conventions, conferences, and proclamations, the whole project struggled to take off as a structured party. On 25 May at the Argentina theatre in Rome, the Parliamentary Fascio, meeting with 300 associations, decided to give itself a unitary and federative structure.[3] On 20 November, it was Antonio Salandra who emphasised the importance of the new formation, given that 'great bold reforms were needed and it was necessary above all that the nation's supreme representatives could no longer be manipulated in an old church' and that 'the Fascios needed to survive the war'. On 21 January 1919, a more detailed programme came out calling for the vote for women and the demand for reform of the Senate. The experience of the Parliamentary Fascio, however, was soon shattered, overwhelmed by the very logic of that old world to which many of its adherents belonged: that of a policy based on old patterns and dialectics anchored to liberal dynamics, which saw the electoral constituency as a sort of possession of the deputy himself and, as such, not subject to party dynamics. The ultimate crisis began when the Fascio decided, on 14 July, to vote against the Nitti government:[4] a wrong that was never forgiven.

Despite its short duration, the significance of the Fascio's experience was remarkable both for the Italian political system as a whole and for the history of the organisation of liberalism. A significance rooted first of all in its numerical size and in the fact that the organisation was able to embrace both the chamber and the Senate and, further still, in the discipline required and the subordination of individual parliamentarians. And, finally, in how, once the war was over, it was able to exercise a degree of control over the Orlando government that would have been hardly conceivable in the pre-war parliamentary context (Ulrich, 1996: 497). With its failure, the possibility of rebalancing the Italian party system, orphaned of a conservative right wing capable of aggregating an important part of society, was also definitively closed, making available, to those capable of occupying it, all the political space left unoccupied by the contraction of the Liberals.

Senate Reform

The transformations of the political system had never touched the Albertine Statute: the major reforms of those years had only concerned suffrage and electoral law. The practice, however, had changed considerably: generally, the

[3] 'Salandra's speech', *Corriere della Sera*, 21 November (1918).
[4] 'Il Fascio', *Corriere della Sera*, 4 October (1919).

executive depended on the confidence of parliament. However, it should not be forgotten that the House of Savoy, at crucial moments, could and did use its powers, as had happened in 1915 with the First World War (Colombo, 2010). To these de facto transformations, a series of profound transformations in the party system, as seen so far, had been added, generating an anomalous situation in the functioning of parliament. Until 1913, the majorities in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies were largely consistent, not least because senators were appointed in large groups. This was due to 'waves of appointments' proposed by the government and accepted by the king. The Senate's approval of what had already been discussed in the chamber was not at all taken for granted, and it also had a conditioning effect. The measures were generally negotiated between the two branches of parliament. In a mass integration-party system that emerged from the 1919 elections, however, this mechanism generated different majorities in the two branches of parliament that blocked the political decision-making process. The elections had highlighted a major contradiction that had hitherto mattered little: the problem of the non-electivity of the Senate.

After all, even at a European level, the transformations taking place were profound, and all went in the direction of greater democratisation. The problem of the 'constituent assembly', that is, of an elective chamber with the task of drawing up a new fundamental charter, was firmly in the background of the debate at the time as the reform of the Senate. An article by Senator Tommaso Tittoni (1918), published in the pages of *Nuova Antologia*, offers insight into some of the proposed reforms that were being considered at the time: a Senate term of nine or twelve years with partial renewal to ensure continuity of the office; reduction of the royal appointment to a limited number of senators, creating an electoral college made up of universities and high culture associations; and second-tier regional election. Outside the Senate, the ideas in this regard were obviously much more radical. As early as February 1919, Claudio Treves, a socialist deputy from the reformist faction, advocated for the need for a constitutional assembly to review the entire institutional framework and to abolish a Senate that was 'the powerful reserve army for supporting the will of the king and the ruling political class against the will of the people'.[5] The Popular Party also recognised that the state's crisis was a crisis of its institutional form, and that this crisis concerned, above all, the lifelong assembly (Lanciotti, 1993: 300). However, the Catholics' idea was to establish an elective Senate as a direct representation of national, academic, administrative, and trade union bodies, offering an alternative model to both the socialist and liberal models. The former was based on the idea of class, and the latter was based on

[5] *Critica Sociale*, 3, 1–15 February (1919), 2.

individualism. The popular model, on the other hand, provided for a strong organic inspiration (Antonietti, 1985: 260).

The senators tried to survive in what was becoming a hostile environment for them. They discussed a reform that, in reality, failed to inspire enthusiasm among both the advocates of popular sovereignty and those of a political body that, in the liberal tradition, was supposed to defend the institutions from the very idea of that sovereignty. To study how to introduce elective elements into the upper chamber, a twenty-five-member commission was established. One of its proposals was to create a specific electoral constituency for the Senate, characterised by an electoral body distinct from that of the House. In August, the Senate reform bill was submitted to the offices. The bill proposed that the upper chamber would consist of 60 members appointed for life by the king, 60 elected by the Senate, 60 elected by the Chamber of Deputies, and 180 elected by constituencies. The commission largely favoured the introduction of an elective element, with only a minority opposing it, seeking instead to significantly limit the scope of this reform. The majority report justified the reform with the need to establish criteria of popular sovereignty to the second branch of parliament, a representation that had to be of both voters and interests. In this sense, therefore, the new Senate was to incorporate the principles of representation and, at the same time, counterbalance the Chamber of Deputies, which, with universal suffrage, became a chamber representing the interests of the majority classes of society, that is, the lower classes. Hence the need for its reform in order to remedy this paradox.

Changing the direction of these debates came with the November 1919 elections and the affirmation in the Chamber of Deputies of the Socialist Party – with 156 deputies – and the Popular Party with 100 (256 out of 508). The political climate altered abruptly and the Senate became the bastion of defence for the liberal political class.

Electoral Law Reform

In April 1918, the government had extended the parliament elected in 1913 by one year and, after a series of relatively complex steps between the chamber and Senate, on 16 December 1918, the right to vote was extended to all male citizens aged twenty-one and older (Ballini, 2011: 4). In March 1919, socialist leader Filippo Turati proposed a proportional electoral reform to the chamber. The underlying idea of the reform project was to channel anti-system or opposition forces within the institutions (Ballini, 2011: 6). The proposal for the new law was accepted, but not with the broad agreement that had characterised the approval of the ‘almost’ universal suffrage in 1912. At the time,