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DOSSIER: FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION: STATE OF THE ART AND ANALYSIS PERSPECTIVES

Systemic corruption and disorganized anticorruption in Italy: governance, politicization, and electoral accountability

Corrupção sistêmica e anticorrupção desorganizada na Itália: governança, politização e accountability eleitoral

Corrupción sistémica y anticorrupción desorganizada en Italia: gobernanza, politización y accountability electoral

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Abstract: This paper provides, through different indicators, empirical evidence on the presumably high relevance of corruption in Italian politics and administration, providing an explanation of how this “obscure” side of Italian politics – a pervasive market for corrupt exchanges – has found its way to regulate its hidden activities within an informal institutional framework, i.e. systemic corruption. A general theoretical framework for the analysis of limits and “windows of opportunity” in Italian anticorruption policies will then be provided, crossing the degree of salience and politicization of corruption issue to explain how in different periods such variables shaped such policy arena. Finally, it will be shown how occasionally this *dark side* of Italian politics clashed with the *clean side* of politics, focusing on the reasons of the weak political accountability of Italian politicians involved in corruption scandals in the last decades.

Keywords: Corruption. Politicization of anticorruption. Electoral accountability.

Resumo: Este artigo fornece, através de diferentes indicadores, evidências empíricas sobre a presumivelmente alta relevância da corrupção na política e na administração italianas, fornecendo uma explicação de como esse lado “obscuro” da política italiana – um mercado difuso de trocas corruptas – encontrou seu caminho para regular suas atividades ocultas dentro de uma estrutura institucional informal, ou seja, corrupção sistêmica. Um arcabouço teórico geral para a análise de limites e “janelas de oportunidade” nas políticas anticorrupção italianas será então fornecido, cruzando o grau de relevância e politização da questão da corrupção para explicar como em diferentes períodos essas variáveis moldaram essa arena política. Por fim, será mostrado como ocasionalmente esse lado sombrio da política italiana colidia com o lado limpo da política, concentrando-se nas razões da fraca responsabilidade política dos políticos italianos envolvidos em escândalos de corrupção nas últimas décadas.

Palavras-chave: Corrupção. Politização da anticorrupção. Accountability eleitoral.

Resumen: Este artículo proporciona, a través de diferentes indicadores, evidencia empírica sobre la presumiblemente alta relevancia de la corrupción en la política y administración italiana, y proporciona una explicación de cómo este lado “oscuro” de la política italiana, un mercado difuso de intercambios corruptos, se abrió camino en regular sus actividades ocultas dentro de una estructura institucional informal, es decir, corrupción sistémica. Luego se proporcionará un marco teórico general para el análisis de límites y “ventanas de oportunidad” en las políticas anticorrupción italianas, cruzando el grado de relevancia y politización del tema de la corrupción para explicar cómo, en diferentes periodos, estas variables dieron forma a esta arena política. Finalmente, se mostrará cómo este lado oscuro de la política italiana ocasionalmente colisionó con el lado limpio de la política, enfocándose en las razones de la débil responsabilidad.

Palabras clave: Corrupción. Politización de anticorrupción. Accountability electoral.



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Introduction²

How widespread is the *dark side* of politics in Italy? How significant is the impact of the network of hidden practices and corrupt deals on the surface of visible politics? The "Mani pulite" ("clean hands") investigation in the 1990s is an illuminating case of the potentially unsettling consequences of the collision between two apparently distinct spheres of political activities, the *public* and the *hidden* arenas. A political scandal, generally related to judicial investigation, can in fact produce a dramatic "short-circuit" between the two. In the public dimension politicians operate overtly, since their acts, speech, programmes are aimed at being recognized – and judged – by the public. Citizens, voters, activists can express their approval or dissent to what their representatives and candidates promise and/or realizes through the competitive and "open" mechanisms of democratic participation.

In politics, there is also another context, however, to be considered. A hidden sphere that is sometimes the most relevant. As Pizzorno (1993, 286-287) explains:

it's the daily practice of individuals, politicians and their clients, entering in exchanges, agreements, transactions. In this activity they offer favours, which are repaid with other favours, or votes, or money, which is given to the politicians, to their group, faction, party, movement.

Agents must keep hidden these practices, which not always and necessarily are illegal. The spread of information beyond the restricted circles of those who are directly or indirectly involved in them would in fact imply a loss of consent, could increase the risk of political defeat, in the worst scenario it might even cause legal prosecution and conviction for those involved.

However, under certain conditions – specifically, when networks of systemic corruption play a significant role in the political system – such "hidden arena's" activities are informally tolerated,

sometimes they are even encouraged by common political morality (Pizzorno 1992). Reciprocal blackmail power – i.e. sharing compromising information – can in fact generate stronger and invisible ties among political actors, in spite of their different roles, party affiliations and political orientations (Gambetta 2018). The *dark side* of politics, through an increasing-return process, can therefore enlarge strengthening its roots.

The diffusion of corruption and other sources of informal or irregular political activities, negotiations and financing broadens the distance and amplifies an imperceptible friction between purposes, discourses, activities, programmes, policies publicly pursued in the visible political arena, and real motives and interests which come into play in the actual interaction among political actors. Mistrust in the political class and in democratic institutions, as well as lack of trust in interpersonal relationship, is a predictable by-product of scandals and generalized perceptions of widespread corruption and abuses of power, and a consequence of increasing inequalities produced by corruption itself: "Corruption is 'bad social capital.' It is dishonesty, to be sure, but it is more than that. It exploits the poor and powerless to grant more riches and power to people who already have great wealth. There is no easy way out of this inequality trap" (Uslaner 2009. See also Ares and Hernandez 2017).

The underneath tensions between what happens in visible and in hidden political arenas resembles what in geology is known as plate tectonics: when the tension between the forces below and the surface of earth is too strong, there are conditions for an earthquake. The earthquake is proportionally more disruptive the larger the energy or tension accumulated, and the longer the time-lag during which tensions accumulated. In fact, the driving mechanisms of the major political earthquakes, real "critical junctures", which hit the Italian political system have been corruption scandals, both in the early 1990s and around 2010. In the first case, the collapse of the party system

² This work was supported by Miur Prin 2017 – 2017CRLZ3F: PolitiCanti. *The politicisation of corruption and anticorruption strategies in Italy*. Sections 2, 4 and 5 of this article are a revised and updated version of the corresponding sections of Vannucci, Alberto. 2016. Between systemic corruption and anticorruption: political scandals and electoral accountability in Italy. In *Crisis as a permanent condition? The Italian political system between transition and reform resistance*, edited by Robert Kaiser and Jana Edelmann, 203-237. Baden-Baden: Nomos-Verlag.

was the main effect of judicial investigations, through a crisis which produced a transition to a presumed "Second Republic". The new institutional equilibrium is characterized by an alternation in government of competing coalitions; an informal electoral legitimization of the Prime Minister; the emergence of new prominent political actors, such as the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi and his Forza Italia party in 1992, or the Five-stars movement in 2013; the inclusion within alternating ruling coalitions of former marginalised political parties, like the post-fascist Italian Social Movement, then National Alliance/Brothers of Italy, the Northern League and post-communist parties.

The analysis a "dark" phenomenon like corruption requires specific methodological caveats. In what follows, I will provide – through different indicators – empirical evidence on the presumably high relevance of corruption in Italian politics and administration, providing an explanation of how this "obscure" side of Italian politics – a pervasive market for corrupt exchanges – has found its way to regulate its activities, within an informal institutional framework, i.e. systemic corruption (section 2). A theoretical framework for the analysis of limits and "windows of opportunity" in Italian anticorruption policies will then be provided (section 3). Finally, I will try to show how – occasionally – this dark side of politics clashes with the clean side of politics, with a focus on the issue of political accountability of Italian politicians involved in corruption scandals (section 4).

The governance mechanisms of Italian systemic corruption

In the twenty-first cantos of the Inferno of the Divine Comedy, one of the greatest literature works of all times, Dante Alighieri enters into a valley where in a black pool of boiling tar sinners are submerged, and when they try to get out of it demons thrust them down with long hooks. This is the eternal punishment for public officials of his age who sold their offices' duties, the *barattieri*, those who bartered their public power for money. In Dante's Inferno sinners are often subjected to a punishment which is synonymous with their sin: corrupt officials will pay an eternal punishment

submerged in the black lake of boiling tar because they sold their office in the darkness, hiding their actions to the public. The lake of black tar appears to Dante *mirabilmente oscuro*, that is "admirably dark". "Admirably dark" is precisely the nature of corruption as an empirical object. It cannot be easily, nor accurately estimated, because it realizes and develop under the surface of ordinary, visible political activity. The reality of corruption is dark, but also *admirable*, as Dante said, because there are always some hints or indicators of its practice and diffusion.

The persistence after the "Mani pulite" scandal of the 1990s of a presumably high level of corruption in Italy can be considered as an effect of several factors. Anticorruption policy has been politicized in the public debate, and effective measures formulated and implemented only since 2012. In the meantime, several corruption-enhancing laws measure has been introduced obstructing the judges' activity (Vannucci 2009; Della Porta and Vannucci 1999b, 2007). Moreover, the lack of significant reform of the institutional environment facilitating corrupt exchanges – both in the public administration and in the political system – nurtured a wide-range citizens' distrust towards the political class, further delegitimizing public institutions and encouraging particularistic demands.

Besides such "external" variables, another factor relates to the "internal" mechanisms, which regulate the networks of systemic corruption, guaranteeing a sufficient degree of stability to the complex web of exchanges on which they rely. In a high-corruption equilibrium, informal, non-written rules of the game regulate illegal activities. In a decision-making process where corruption has become an institutionalised practice with its own rules, enforced by individual actors or organizations – criminal mafia-like organizations among them – political, economic, and social agents are trapped when they reach mutual expectations and shared beliefs that bribes cannot be avoided, that bribes have to be paid following certain codes of conducts.

An enduring feature of the Italian systemic corruption is that "opaque" activities at both local and at national level were and still are often

connected and interrelated, in a multi-level and overlapping mechanisms of exchange of several resources – not only bribe money, but also information (and blackmailing power), consent, influence, protection. In other words, the hidden reality of corruption in Italy cannot be taken as the aggregation of an amount – presumably high – of circumscribed acts. It has become a wide and *regulated* market in many crucial areas – public contracting procedures, licensing, urban planning, financial deals, etc. – where it involves a variety of political actors, public managers, bureaucrats, control agencies, middlemen, entrepreneurs, professionals, criminal organization.

When hidden exchanges are repeated over longer periods of time, information tends to spread among participants on their past accomplishment of corrupt deals, and similarly their expectations may converge towards a common observance of more punctual and structured norms. Similar norms, codes and rituals fulfill some basic functions: the identification of trustworthy partners, the weakening moral discomfort, the socialization of newcomers; the banishment of honest actors. (Della Porta and Vannucci 2012). The “basic norm” of this invisible system sanctions the unavoidability of bribes, the rule that recourse to hidden exchange cannot be avoided in return for any “resource” of value obtainable from the public structure within the corruption network: contracts, licenses, concessions, the acceleration of procedural passages, reserved information, fiddled controls, etc. As an entrepreneur explains:

It's a system that has been going on since I started working in '50. This system has been going on forever and I never worked for the public sector because you had to pay. Then, you take a contract and pay a percentage as a bribe, all over Italy [...]. It is a mechanism that works everywhere for everyone who wants to work. In Rome, Milan, Sicily and Sardinia.³

In the Expo scandal in Milan in 2014, in a wire-taped conversation an intermediary and an entrepreneur discuss the price of corruption:

If you have won, there is a backstage agreement, you need to give back a certain percentage x”. Even with installments of the bribe, if necessary: the public contract “is given to you, because he makes the deal with you and you are the man who has to go to the general manager to give him the money, every year ... Immediately you don't have all the money ... When you have won the contract, a percentage of x... you keep your share and give him the rest ... every year when you are paid you give him by installment his quote ... for nine years”. Possible alternation of a public official shall not stop the payment of bribes, because otherwise “reputation” and credibility of corruptors would be spotted. “He goes away? Go ahead and give him the bribe, huh? ... It's always been that way”. It can be consequently explained the irritation of another mediator, when an entrepreneur delays the fulfillment of his commitment to pay a bribe of 50 thousand euro: “I simply said him: don't bring me to make a complete ass of myself ... because if you do that, you cannot imagine what you preclude to yourself... but above all, you cannot ask for favors anymore ... But what kind of person are you? I always put myself on the line ... but damn it, but do you really think you can work without us?”⁴

In Italy guarantors, i.e. enforcers of illegal deals, have traditionally played a crucial role since they provide defensive barriers against two sources of risk: the *internal* risks of quarrels and attempts at free-riding; and a shield against the *external* threat of judicial prosecution and, as consequence, also social and political sanctions. An in-depth and diachronic analysis of most relevant cases corruption shows a significant change in the balance of power among actors involved in it. To simplify, evolutionary process within this dark side of Italian politics in the last decades – in the shift from what we may call “old” (“Mani pulite” like) to “new” forms of corruption (Della Porta and Vannucci 2007) – has produced a shift in the identity of actors who play the role of leading enforcers of systemic corruption.

In the traditional model – which developed from the end of the second world war until the breakdown of “Mani pulite” – the supply of protection in systemic corruption in was almost entirely managed by political parties, as exemplified by the Ingic scandal in the 1950s,

³ La Repubblica-Milan. 2012. Il costruttore del San Raffaele. Per lavorare si pagava sempre. *La Repubblica-Milan*, 2 Jan. 2012. https://mi-lano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2012/01/02/news/il_costruttore_del_san_raffaele_per_lavorare_si_pagava_sempre-27495557/?ref=search.

⁴ Ordinanza di custodia cautelare, NO 948/2011 R.G.N.R., NO 1015/2011 R.G. G.I.P. (Tribunale di Milano 2014, 136).

with more than 1100 local politicians taking bribes redistributed to their parties; and the first oil scandal in early 1970s, with the national administrative secretaries of all ruling parties taking for years a "fixed quote" of irregular financing (i.e. bribes) from oil companies in exchange for favourable regulation (Galli 1983; Turone 1993). There is an exception, however, in Southern Italy, where mafia-like criminal organizations became enforcers of corrupt deals, especially in the building industry and public contracting. The Mafia "government" guarantees the stability of political *equilibria*, corrupt exchanges and collusive agreements, since Mafia protection – as well as incentivizing fulfilment – discourages denunciations and reinforces conspiracy of silence. As a company's area manager for Sicily observes:

the system of tender in Sicily works like it does in all of Italy. The difference is that in Sicily there is more discipline. What does that mean? It means that in Sicily, contrarily to what happens in the rest of Italy, somebody get killed and discipline is a consequence of that. I know that any tender from 10 billions lire upwards is assigned within a triangle of politicians, entrepreneurs, functionaries. Mafia is not within this triangle, but it is well above it.⁵

Both corruption and criminal organizations, in fact, nourish thanks to the weakness of interpersonal and institutional trust and the lack of norms of generalized reciprocity, when pessimistic expectations prevails on the capacity of the state and its officials to safeguard citizens' rights.

In this mono-centric model who gets control of the party, at different levels, collect also protection-money: The parties assume, that is to say, the function of guarantors of the illegal bargain, participating in those operations demanding a "certification of trust: in other words, the promises of others, requiring to be guaranteed in some way, are used to obtain a benefit" (Pizzorno 1992, 31). Everything changed with the collapse of the "old" parties. In the "new" systemic corruption it emerged a polycentric, network-like model of

protection supply. Wide-range judicial inquiries of the 1990s – with thousands of politicians involved, among them virtually all leaders of ruling parties, and their disruptive effects on the party system – produced in fact a sort of "selection process" in the environment of enduring systemic corruption. The "survival of the fittest" mechanisms can be observed both in the adaptive capabilities of new enforcers to local conditions of illegal activity, as well as in a learning process which refined skills and ability of participants to adopt safer and more effective techniques. "Clean and invoiced bribes" – as defined by a corruptor in a wiretapped conversation in the Civil Protection scandal in 2010 – have taken different forms, depending on the institutional roles and responsibilities of the beneficiaries.⁶

A list of protectors in systemic corruption is quite long: among them politicians, top-level bureaucrats, entrepreneurs who coordinate activities among several political agents using their connections, middlemen – *faccendieri* – religious organization, Masonic Grand Masters, mafia-like organization. In a case involving Italian civil defense contracting activities, the leading enforcer was the highest level bureaucrat, who had the ability "to manage his power by distributing favors among several entrepreneurs under his protection, and composing possible quarrels deriving from unsatisfied expectations on public contracts, therefore avoiding potential denunciations by disappointed entrepreneurs".⁷ The enforcement power of a middleman-enabler originates instead – in the words of an entrepreneur – from his reputation and capability to create and manage a wide net of informal and illicit contacts with several influential actors:

I know that [...] he is a very powerful and influential man that has an unlimited 'maneuvering power' over all state and semi-public articulations; more specifically [...] he actually rules over ENI [state oil company] (and not only). I believe that his enormous power [...] rests on the web of relationships that [...] he created with current leaders of the court as well as foreign states.⁸

⁵ Sentenza n. 2537 (Tribunale di Palermo 2002, 127).

⁶ D'Avanzo, Guieseppe. 2010. Quel sistema di complicità. *La Repubblica*, 22 Feb. 2010. <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2010/02/22/quel-sistema-di-complicita.html>.

⁷ Ordinanza di custodia cautelare in carcere proc. n. 1460/09 R.G.I.P (Tribunale di Firenze 2010, 64-65).

⁸ Domanda di autorizzazione a eseguire la misura cautelare n. 18 (Camera dei deputati, 2011, 196).

Italian anticorruption policy and politicization: a typology

Corruption can be defined as abuse of public power for private gain; a practice that cannot be justified nor promoted openly, therefore a high degree of political consensus could be expected on its recognition, condemnation, and prosecution. As observed by Curini (2018, 1), in non-positional policy-based valence issues voters hold identical positions, preferring more to less (e.g. economic growth) or less to more (e.g. crime rates): "corruption (honesty) is a typical example of non-policy valence issue".⁹

There is a politicization of corruption issue and scandals – i.e. evidence of involvement in irregular, illegal or criminal political practices (due to judicial and/or media exposure) – when they do not nurture a bipartisan blame and shared policy response, but a conflict along partisan lines among political actors. In this case, political actors have an incentive to campaign on political corruption. More specifically, politicization of corruption can realize along two dimensions. An extreme case is the *existential politicization*, on which I will focus in this contribution: some actors emphasize the relevance of the problem, invoking countermeasures and political response, while other actors deny or minimize its significance, and this conflict is exacerbated in the public sphere becoming a significant political cleavage. Political actors can emphasize the relevance of corruption issue in political competition following two different strategies: (a) addressing it in general terms, without any specific reference to other parties, underlining its relevance and suggesting ways to deal it; (b) targeting is against political opponents and adversaries, with a more or less explicit accusation of being corrupt (Bågenholm and Charron 2014). Occasionally, corruption becomes in political confrontation a policy-based valence issue, and voters evaluation as well as politicians' competition focus on which political actors is best-

suited and able to handle the problem through appropriate measures. In this case, we can observe a sort of *policy-tools politicization*: in spite of a wide, almost unanimous consensus on the importance of the issue, political actors oppose each other and debate on the effectiveness or dangerousness of the adoption of different anticorruption policy tools. Quite obviously, the opposition to certain anticorruption measures may also imply – and often it actually denotes – a concealed or shaded hostility to the adoption of *any* measure, i.e. an existential politicization.

Politicization has not to be confused with *salience* of corruption as political issue. The first variable measures the extension and intensity of political conflicts and public dispute concerning the issue corruption, some of them pushing and other opposing towards its entering (or progress) into the agenda-setting process. Salience indicates instead its significance in the public debate and in the media arena. There is clearly a positive-feedback mechanisms that – trough the circular interplay among information spreading from judicial inquiries, media exposure, public opinion's support to the judge's activity – can increase the salience of the issue corruption in the public debate and in the political arena (Sberna and Vannucci 2013). The two variables – politicization and salience – while distinct are clearly interrelated, as I will later explain. We could hypothesize, more specifically, that that the probability of existential politicization increases: (a) when salience is high, but not exorbitant, nor too low; (b) when the involvement of political actors in corruption cases is asymmetrical/partisan.

A simplified typology highlighting four different anticorruption approaches can be built crossing two values (high and low) of the two variables considered – salience and politicization of corruption issue (see table 1). The increase of salience ultimately relates to judge's capability to prosecute – often incidentally and sporadically – corruption cases and the activation of a positive-feedback mechanism

⁹ Valence issues are those on which there is (almost) no disagreement among individuals, since they "merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate". On valence issues, political actors "are differentiated not by what they advocate but by the degree to which they are linked in the public's mind with conditions or goals or symbols of which almost everyone approves or disapproves" (Stokes 1992, 143).

of media coverage and public opinion's interest (Sberna and Vannucci 2013). The degree of politicization of corruption can vary depending upon several factors. *Ceteris paribus*, we can assume that the probability of existential politicization of corruption issue tends to increase:

- i. when issue-oriented electoral parties play a dominant role in party competition, instead of mass parties bearers of strong ideological beliefs. Pizzorno (1992) observes that before "Mani pulite" in Italy the weakness of the "state ethics" – embodied by the respectful obedience of laws and regulation – in the political class recruited by the main mass parties lowered moral as well as legal barriers against corruption practices. State ethics was in fact often supplemented or substituted by a "political ethics", morally authorizing political actors to instrumentally look at public roles and resources as a simple tool for the realization of superior ideological objectives. Bribes collected to strengthen parties were considered acceptable, and even encouraged. Corruption could therefore not be credibly flagged anymore in the public debate, since current political morals tended to justify it. Electoral parties, where ideological beliefs play a minor role and the adoption of political platforms can easily adapt to a contingent calculus – can instead more convincingly address the issue of corruption and anticorruption policy in the political arena, responding to opportunities created by inquiries or political scandals. Moreover: "a higher degree of ideological party similarity incentivizes parties to find different means to distinguish themselves before the electorate so that voters are induced to support them (and not the others). Investing in a valence campaign based on a non-policy valence issue such as corruption provides parties with that opportunity" (Curini 2018, xiv).
- ii. when salience is at an high degree, but not exorbitant, nor too low. In fact, if huge corruption scandals erupt – as during the "Mani pulite" investigations – it would be penalizing in term of consent and legitimization for political actors (even those under inquiry) to oppose to the evidence or deny the importance of what has become an overriding political issue. Consent on anti-corruption can become almost unanimous, as exemplified by the t-shirt "Mani pulite team" exhibited by an arrested politician who had just been released and still under investigation.¹⁰ On the contrary, the absence of cases or discussion on corruption in the public sphere discourages attempts and strategies of political actors to instrumentally use such issue to obtain political support. An high level of salience of corruption issue in the public can in fact allows political actors to appeal to distinct audiences in order to mobilize them in anticorruption campaign, or vice versa to denounce the selective instrumentalism of corruption inquiries or discourse.
- iii. when the involvement in scandals of political actors – and consequently the salience of corruption as an issue – develops mainly along partisan/political lines, due to scandals, judicial operations, media exposure addressed selectively and asymmetrically towards a specific segment of the political spectrum. Political actors not compromised can in this case more convincingly address the issue in the political debate, while those under pressure can adopt as a defensive strategy to minimize or to attribute their position to judges' political bias or orientation. There is clearly an incentive for actors not bearing the mark of corruption blame to use their anticorruption stance to gain consent.
- iv. the less widespread is the market for corrupt exchange. A generalized and systemic practice of corruption involving a multiplicity of political actors and parties, in fact, bind them in a hid-

¹⁰ "Once released, Mongini (vice-President of the Public Society for Airports in Milan) arrives at the Tribunal for a new interrogation with a pink T-shirt where, instead of the Lacoste crocodile, he had the words 'Mani pulite team' embroidered" (Barbacetto, Gomez, and Travaglio 2017, 92).

den and reciprocal blackmailing power. Conspiracy of silence on the one side, unwillingness to emphasize the relevance of the issue, denouncing political opponents' involvement in corruption, is a predictable strategy for all those who are involved. Any unilateral attempt to politicize corruption as an argument against political adversaries under charge would in fact obtain as expected reaction a disclosure of evidence of shared involvement in illegal practices. The credibility of "politicizing" actors is in fact a crucial issue (Bågenholm and Charron 2014). As Curini observes (2018, 11): "in a situation where all major parties are deeply corrupt and all of them benefit from the system while taking turns in office, the likelihood that any one of them would challenge the current order by highlighting corruption is quite small. Politicians may turn a blind eye to the problem, knowing that they all benefit from it or that they cannot do anything about it even if they tried". In a famous speech at the Chamber of Deputies on July 3 1992, the leader of the Socialist Party Bettino Craxi – who was then under "Mani pulite" investigation – convincingly argued that no political actor – whatever his party belonging – could stand against him and his party under judges' attack, since all of them were deliberately accomplices of an irregular or illegal mechanism of political financing. "Unfortunately" – Craxi claimed – "it is often difficult to identify, prevent and remove areas of infection in the life of parties ... Thus, under the cover of irregular funding to the parties cases of corruption and extortion have flourished and become intertwined ... What needs to be said, and which in any case everyone knows, is that the greater part of political funding is irregular or illegal. The parties and those who rely on a party machine (large, medium or small); on newspapers, propaganda, promotional and associational activities ... have had,

or have, recourse to irregular or illegal additional resources. If the greater part of this is to be considered criminal pure and simple then the greater part of the political system is a criminal system. I do not believe there is anybody in this hall who has had responsibility for a large organisation who can stand up and deny what I have just said. Sooner or later the facts would make a liar of him".¹¹ In fact, there was no counterargument to Craxi's thesis in and out of the Parliament, and in spite of the overwhelming salience of corruption in the political debate, no political party – after the first phase of "Mani pulite" – to wave to get consent. On the contrary, a constitutional reform of the mechanism for MP's investigation was approved with a bipartisan consent. In one corruption trial, Craxi testified to the long-lasting existence of corrupt exchanges:

In Italy, funding for political parties and political activities in general has involved irregularities and illegalities at least since the birth of the republic (in 1945) [...] only those who did not want to see it could not see it, and only those who intentionally turned their head the other way were not aware of its existence.¹²

- v. when an economic crisis increases both the probability of successful corruption inquiries (Arnone and Davigo 2005) – and therefore its salience in the public debate –, as well as the responsiveness of public opinion to scandals, fueling mistrust in the political class and de-legitimization of public institutions. The advantages of the adoption of a politicization strategy depend in fact on public opinion's orientation and reactivity, which are clearly amplified by the perception of harsh condition of economic stagnation.

As shown in table 1, when both salience and politicization of corruption are at a low level, the expected outcome is *missing anticorruption*. The lack of or the occasional, low-profile characteristics

¹¹ Andreoli, Marcella, Romano Cantore, Antonio Carlucci, and Maurizio Tortorella. 1993. Tangentopoli. Le carte che scottano. *Panorama libri inchiesta. Tribunale civile e penal Milano*, Feb. 1993, 87-88.

¹² See trial Cusani, December 17th, 1993. The testimony's recording is accessible at this website: <http://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/294694/processo-cusani-il-pubblico-ministero-di-pietrointerroga-bettino-craxi>.

of corruption scandals do not catalyze public opinion's consideration, while political parties and actors do not have any incentive to flaunt the issue, nor to pressure for its introduction into their political agenda. As a result, no political pressure emerge towards the adoption of any anticorruption stance. Such situation realized in the Italian republic until 1974, when no significant public debate on diffusion of corruption and potential anticorruption measures was promoted by relevant political or societal actors along even during the occasional outbreak of judicial inquiries and scandals.¹³ Coherently with the hypotheses above sketched, a shared and significant – but still hidden – involvement of predominant mass parties in illegal political financing, during a long-lasting period of economic growth, contributed to both the scarce salience of the issue, and correspondingly to its de-politicization. As Sales and Melorio (2018, 222-223) observe:

all cases of grand corruption ended with acquittals of with convictions of few scapegoats, usually not politicians [...]. All this fueled the consideration that corruption concerned isolated black sheep, which was not a crime so serious after all, due it was normal not to proceed against politicians and if those under inquiry basically remained permanently in politics.

Occasionally public opinion's reprobation hit the Italian political class as a whole, due to judicial procedures and scandals that increased significantly salience of corruption issue in the political debate. The first "oil scandal" and the Lockheed scandal (1973-1974), the first period of the "Mani pulite" investigation (1992-1994), the Regional Councilors' reimbursement scandal and the Lombardia President involvement in a bribery affair (2011-2012) exemplify phases of very high public attention on corruption, with a limited degree of politicization. Political actors not involved in the inquiries, which could credibly invoke a dramatization of corruption cases – Radical Party in 1974, Northern League in 1992, Five Star Movement in 2012 – were then marginalized or had only a minor influence on the

political process, not sufficient to advance a strong adversarial representation of the issue. All scandals emerged during a period of economic stagnation and financial crisis – fostering public reprobation – while inquiries showed a bipartisan involvement in illegal practices and a texture of endemic corruption in the political system, with the partial exception of the 1973-1974 scandal. Also in that Lockheed and first "oil scandal", however, the main opposition party – the Communist Party – could not realistically wave the flag of anticorruption against ruling parties, due to its organizational dependence upon hidden financing from the USSR. In 1992-1993 and in 2011-2012 as a response to the combination of economic and political crisis – the latter exacerbated by judicial inquiries on political malfeasances – two technical governments led by Ciampi (1993-1994) and by Monti (2011-2013) with a large, almost unanimous Parliamentary consensus approved significant anticorruption laws: a constitutional reform of the authorization for MPs to be put under investigation (Const. Law N.3/2013); and the first wide-ranging anticorruption law (Law. 190/2012). Also in 1974 a *consensual anticorruption* policy approach prevailed: all political parties in Parliament (with the exception of the small and insignificant Liberal Party) supported the high-speed approval (only 16 days after its proposal) of the first law for public financing of political parties (Law 195/1974). Such measure was justified by an expected substitution of illegal financing from private (and public) companies with legal public funds.

In the late 1970s the leader of the Communist Party (PCI) Enrico Berlinguer (1922-1984), after having officially broken previous strict linkages with the USSR and its illegal financing scheme, raised for the first time what he called a "moral issue" – i.e., the advocacy for a strong anticorruption standpoint – into the political arena as a key programmatic point of its opposition platform. This first coherent and enduring attempt to put the issue of corruption among the priorities of the political agenda focused on the parties' degeneration as the core of the problem:

¹³ Vannucci, Alberto. 2015. La corruzione tra politica e mercato. L'Italia e le sue regioni. L'età repubblicana. *Società*, 4: 283-304. Roma, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana. http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-corruzione-tra-politica-e-mercato_%28L%27Italia-e-le-sue-Regioni%29/.

Today's parties are above all machines of power and customers [...] The moral issue, in today's Italy, overlaps with the occupation of the state by government parties and their fractions [...]. This is why I say that the moral issue is the center of the Italian problem.¹⁴

Interestingly, Berlinguer portrayed Italy as characterized by an ethical cleavage along partisan lines, with a clear-cut hiatus between communist politicians and others, the latter being morally more inclined to play "dirty games" in their occupation of the State and in clientelistic abuses of public spending. In those years, however, apart from minor, infrequent scandals, corruption was not a salient issue in the public debate, while economic growth did not contribute to nurture public opinion's and media interest towards it. Until the electoral defeat of PCI in the general elections of 1983, when the party abandoned it, this tough "moral issue" anticorruption stance did not gain significant popular support nor interlocution with the ruling political coalition. This attempt to politicize corruption (and its lack of institutional response) in a time of scarce salience can be labelled as an instance of *submerged anticorruption*, when political actors invoking it are not capable to gain enough momentum to make it enter into the political agenda. A specular case is observed when a ruling party – e.g. the Five-stars Movement in 2018 – having as one of its key programmatic points the fight against corruption successfully promotes the parliamentary approval of anticorruption measures in a period of low salience, in a context of very scarce public opinion's attention and media's resonance. Submersion of anticorruption is in this case a by-product of a more general lack of interest on the issue both among political actors and in the population.

The forth case to be considered is *polarized*

anticorruption, i.e. a situation with high levels of both salience and politicization of corruption issue. Corruption – and anticorruption – are under public opinion's scrutiny as a significant problem, usually due to undergoing investigation and significant media coverage. At the same time, scandals hit relevant political actor, but in their involvement there is a significant asymmetry along partisan lines – a factor favoring its politicization. Investigated or under trial politicians can try to defend themselves invoking the ideological prejudice of judges or opponents to disprove the evidence of corruption, while in the political system there are political or institutional actors who can plausibly address the issue of (missing) anticorruption policies. Usually the lack of consensus hinders the approval of far-reaching anticorruption reforms, therefore only limited-range measures or symbolic ones can be adopted in such polarized and conflictual political arena. A politicization of corruption issue realized in the Italian context especially in the 1994-2010 period, after Silvio Berlusconi entered in the political arena as leader of Forza Italia, and after 2013 national elections, when the Five Star Movement – having a very strong anti-corruption foundational standpoint – assumed a leading role as opposition party. For instance during the first, second and third Berlusconi governments (1994; 2001-2006 and 2008-2011) evidence of his involvement (as well as other center-right oriented high profile politicians) in several corruption cases was discharged by the Prime Minister and his political allies as a mere consequence of the prejudice of politically biased, left-wing judges, supported by his political adversaries.¹⁵ At the same time, opposition parties and public mobilization (particularly the V-Days movement, embryonal appearance of what will become in 2013 the Five-Star movement, denounced and emphasized in the public debate the profound and pervasive influence of corruption

¹⁴ Scalfari, Eugenio. 1981. Dove va il Pci? (interview with Enrico Berlinguer). *La Repubblica*, 28 July 1981, 4. https://www.enricoberlinguer.it/enrico/scritti/dove-va-il-pci-intervista-a-berlinguer/?doing_wp_cron=1594228178.0363209247589111328125

¹⁵ As an example of politically endorsed "corruption denialism" we can consider the main thesis of the 2011 report to the Parliament of the Saet – public body in charge of monitoring corruption. The fight against corruption "has a twofold cost for the State: for the State as a system, the expenditure of relevant economic and human resources with scarce or counterproductive effects [...]; additionally, the human and personal cost faced by the many people investigated, acquitted-on trial, discharged, who after having being exposed in a 'media pillory' are convicted by the 'media-judiciary circus' in spite of their presumption of innocence". Moreover: "an analysis of data - official, complete and absolutely reliable - outlines an evident, clear, unequivocal argument in favor of the overall integrity of the administrative system, otherwise from what some 'professors of the moral issue affirmed' (Saet-Servizio anticorruzione e trasparenza. 2011. Relazione al Parlamento (anno 2010). *Camera dei Deputati* - doc. XXVII, n. 30, 106-107;115 - 6 maggio, 2011.

at the highest-level political decisions.¹⁶ As expected, the Italian Parliament did not approve any significant anticorruption measure during the period of more intense politicization of the issue. Only minor

measures having a mere symbolic impact – e.g. the institution in 2003 of a High Commissar for the fight against corruption, having no effective power nor resources – were approved (Vannucci 2009).

Table 1 – A typology of anticorruption approaches

		Salience of corruption issue	
		Low	High
Politicization of corruption issue	Low	<p>Missing Anticorruption (Italy 1948-1972; 1975-1979; 1984-1991) – Occasional scandals, no significant political debate nor response</p>	<p>Consensual Anticorruption (Italy 1973-1974; 1992-1994; 2011-12) – Unanimous political approval of measures aimed at facing large scandals</p>
	High	<p>Submerged Anticorruption (Italy 1980-1983; 2018-2019) – Occasional and minor scandals, failed attempts to introduce corruption issue in the public agenda by opposition political actors or approval of measures with scarce public resonance by ruling political actors</p>	<p>Polarized Anticorruption (Italia 1995-2010; 2013-2018) – Large scandals with involvement of relevant political actors in corruption, having limited policy effect or the approval of symbolic measures</p>

Source: own elaboration.

Political scandals, accountability and corruption

Since 1948 until 1992 the hidden development of the large and “institutionalized” texture of corruption described in section 2, diffused both at the level of local and central government (Della Porta and Vannucci 1994, 1999a, 2012), was not followed – especially at national level – by any effective electoral responsibility for political actors: none of the many scandals produced significant political consequences for parties and politicians involved (Turone 1993; Galli 1983). National politicians charged with wrongdoings usually passed the two-steps procedure to be re-elected: both party (internal) and electoral (external) accountability mechanisms failed, since they were normally confirmed as candidates in their party’s list; and

often they get enough votes to be re-elected. As Chang, Golden and Hill demonstrate, until 1992 members of the Italian Chamber of Deputies with serious judicial charges were as likely as other “clean” incumbents “to see their name on their party’s ballot for election into the next legislature” (Chang, Golden, and Hill 2010, 190) in the first place; and, secondly, judicial allegations of criminal malfeasance did not influence negatively their prospect for re-election. On the contrary, “when a deputy is charged with a potentially serious crime, he nonetheless enjoys greater the even reelection rates” (Chang, Golden, and Hill 2010, 180).

The apparent un-permeability of Italian electorate to corruption before 1992 – even when occasionally political scandals emerged, increasing the salience of the issue – discouraged

¹⁶ An episodic policy-tools politicization was also observed during the political and parliamentary debate that accompanied the adoption of certain measures: see for instance the fierce opposition of right-wing politicians of the Special Chamber of Deputies Commission for anti-corruption law-proposals in 1996-2001 to the institution of a National anti-corruption Authority, defined “huge-cop” during the Parliamentary debate by the vice-Minister for public administration: “Again, however, we should not be relying on the easily passing and inconclusive clamor of ‘huge cops’ – as they have been defined – equipped with special powers; but relying on the normal and competent bodies envisaged by current regulations” (Camera dei Deputati, resoconto stenografico seduta 15 gennaio 1998, 36). See also the fierce center-right opposition against the proposal of introducing “undercover agents” in the investigations on corruption crimes, supported by the former President of the National Anticorruption Authority Raffaele Cantone, as exemplified by the words of the Forza Italia senator Maurizio Gasparri: “Cantone should propose better ideas instead of advancing methods which could be used by Pol Pot. You have to punish thieves, not create a witch-hunting atmosphere”. *Il Fatto quotidiano*. 2014. Anticorruzione, senatore Gasparri: Commissario Cantone come Pol Pot. *Il Fatto quotidiano*, 18 Aug. 2014. <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2014/08/18/anticorruzione-senatore-gasparri-commissario-cantone-come-pol-pot/1093548>.

the adoption of politicization strategies by political actors. The explanation for the lack of electoral accountability must take into consideration the enduring influence of several factors. First, the high degree of polarization of the Italian party system induced a tolerance towards corrupt activities which were considered useful – therefore justifiable – for the party's activity and potential for success. Ideological polarization and strong party identities addressing a significant quote of the electorate towards the vote of identity, together with a fear for the presumably "anti-system" Communist party, determined high level of tolerance towards malfeasance especially among the electorate of the ruling parties. In the trade-off between ideological affiliation of candidates and their reputation for integrity the first element dominated electoral choices of significant quotes of citizens. This widespread and lasting attitude was firstly made explicit and rationalized during the 1976 political election campaign – after the "bad smell" of the first oil and the Lockheed scandals had spread distrust towards the Christian Democracy party – by the influential conservative Italian journalists, Indro Montanelli, who launched a public appeal to moderate electors "to hold one's nose and vote Christian Democracy" (Franco 2000, 137). The campaign was successful: in spite of the scandals Christian Democracy slightly increased their consent, remaining the first party and avoiding the feared overtaking by the Communist Party.

Moreover, policy-making in Italy during the so called First Republic has been depicted as characterized by "extreme partisan pluralism mixed with clientelism" (Furlong 2004, 265). A pervasive network of particularistic exchanges between electors and political bosses developed in Italy together with democratic institutions, guaranteeing to politicians having allocative power over public resources (jobs in the public sector, licenses, subsidies, privileged access to the state benefits, "protection" from tax collection, etc.) a stable source of electoral consent, particularly in Regions of Southern Italy (Graziano 1976; Piattoni 2001). The quantitative relevance of vote of exchange in Italy undermined electoral accountability of

political malfeasance both on a strategic and a symbolic basis (Parisi and Paquino 1977). Trapped in a prisoner's dilemma like situation, electors who have received or expect to get a personal profit from a corrupt politician's decisions find a "rational" motive to support him even if he perceive or know that his corrupt activity will produce collective costs. Moreover, the perceived diffusion of patron-client relationships at every level of government has been a powerful generator of distrust towards the institutional system and the political class, symbolically legitimizing the patrimonialistic logic and the particularistic dimension of politics underlying clientelistic exchanges. As a consequence, Italian citizens have traditionally shown very high levels of distrust and dissatisfaction towards political institutions and the political class (Morlino and Montero 1994; Morlino and Tarchi 1996). Pessimistic expectations, in turn, fostered electors' acceptance or resignation towards particularistic allocation of resources, and illegal practices as well. As a mechanism to transmit and satisfy particularistic political demands, generating political support (Piattoni 2001) – the development of clientelism in Italy is intertwined with corruption in a vicious circle (Della Porta and Vannucci 1999a). The spread of vote-buying – linked to the presence of clientelism – raised in fact the cost of politics, forcing politicians to seek material resources to invest in their political activity.

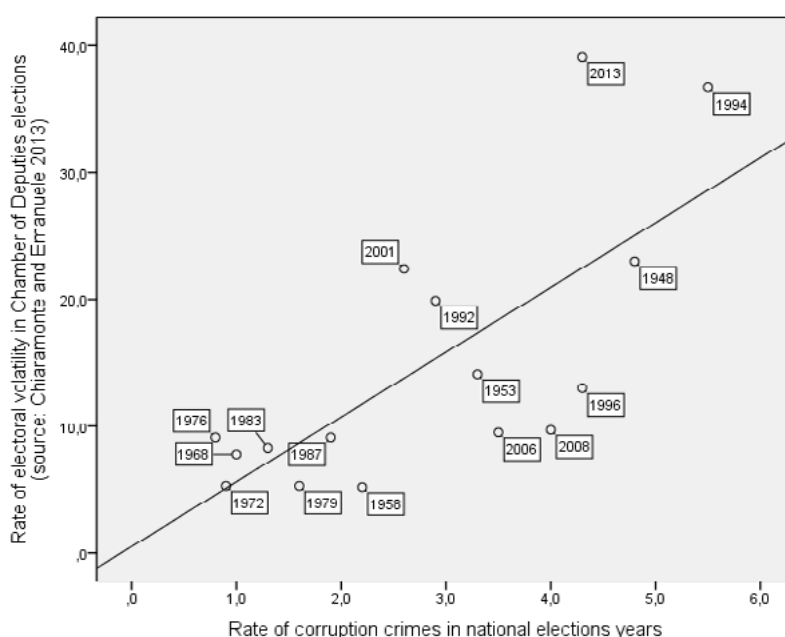
To explain its scarce impact in the political sanctioning of scandals until 1992 another variable has to be considered: the amount and perceived reliability of information provided by the media system. The apparent indifference of Italian voters to charges of malfeasance, according to Chang, Golden and Hill (2010, 206), was due to an information environment which did not provide any adequate media coverage on news about corruption: "Efforts to expose networks of political corruption that led to the highest echelon of power were inevitably frustrated [...]. In addition, the newspapers that publicized the investigation were sued". The Italian model of interaction between political and media system – akin to the pluralist polarized – was in fact traditionally characterized by low newspaper circulation, politically oriented

press, high political parallelism, government broadcast governance, large role of the State as owner, regulator or financer of the media, weak professionalization and limited autonomy of journalism from the political power. The crucial role played by the State – Hallin and Mancini (2004, 122) observe – “has historically limited the tendency of the media to play the ‘watchdog’ role so widely valued in the prevailing liberal media theory. The financial dependence of media on the state, and the persistence of restrictive rules on privacy and on the publication of official information have combined with the intertwining of media and political elites”. Since journalists were reluctant about reporting information on politicians involvement in corruption scandal, judicial inquiries could produce only a limited impact, mainly through an “elite reaction” of the well-informed and politically interested citizens.

The “Mani pulite” inquiry in 1992 changed the Italian paradigm of a traditionally almost nil electoral accountability of political malfeasance in Italy. Several hypotheses have been formulated, emphasizing among others the role of a presumably “new” media environment (Chang, Golden, and Hill 2010; Kenny and Crepaz 2013), the end of the “fear

of communism” following 1989 events, which made moderate electors less sensitive to ideological appeals (Cafagna 1993), the mutated role of internal mechanisms of “party accountability”, with parties shaping the candidate pools as to minimize electoral losses deriving from the charges (Asquer 2013), the economic crisis which exacerbated electors’ aversion towards political malfeasance (Arnone and Davigo 2005). The above mentioned and other contingent factors may have influenced the successful development of the “Mani pulite” inquiry and its impact on the political system, but their ultimate source was the capability of the Italian judges – never experienced before – to prosecute politicians effectively, activating a “snowball effect” which attracted the attention of the media and finally caused a reaction of the public opinion. The crucial role of judicial input for electoral accountability in Italian political election since 1948 until 2013 is confirmed by the correlation between the rate of electoral volatility – taken as an indicator of the structuring of the party system, which depends also on its popular legitimization – and the average rate of prosecution for corruption crimes in the year before and in the year of general election.¹⁷

Figure 1 – Correlation between rate of electoral volatility in general elections and rate of corruption crimes in the same years in Italy (1981-2013)



¹⁷ Pearson correlation coefficient between rate of electoral volatility in general elections and rate of corruption crimes in the same period in Italy between 1948 and 2013 is 0,717, significant at level 0,01.

As shown in figure 1, in 1992-4 the rate of prosecution for corruption and other "political malfeasance" crimes reached in quantitative terms an unprecedented level, and also the "qualitative" status of most politicians involved, as we have seen, was extraordinarily high. An increased degree of judicialization of Italian politics – to be intended in general terms as the "expansion of the province of the courts or the judges at the expense of the politicians and/or the administrators" (Vallinder 1994, 91) – favored an effective prosecution of corruption crimes which in turn, trespassed a critical threshold, triggered a self-fuelling process of increasing media coverage and citizens interest, whose final output was an ephemeral phases of electoral accountability (Sberna and Vannucci 2013). Besides producing a broad (even if transitory) popular reaction against "rotten politics", the premises were put for the subsequent institutional conflict between the political power and the magistracy. A politicization of the "anti-corruption issue" stalled again the potential for electoral accountability of political malfeasance.¹⁸

The unparalleled success of the "Mani pulite" inquiries was caused also by internal "positive feedback" mechanisms which fostered the action of judges. Obviously, the underlying reality of a widespread, systemic corruption was a necessary condition, offering potentially ample judicial evidence on criminal activities which would later become the propellant for the inquiries' development. As soon as the first politicians and entrepreneurs in jail – deliberately put by the Milanese judges into a prisoner's dilemma like situation – started to collaborate with judges, the whole mechanism was set in motion. The amount of information gathered by prosecutors on illegal activities of political actors grew

exponentially, with a domino effect, when new episodes of corruption emerged by confessions and – following the exposure of the flows of bribes – also national-level politicians were prosecuted. The amount of politicians, bureaucrats and entrepreneurs arrested or investigated and their institutional relevance could not be ignored, concealed or disguised by the media system: in some cases journalists were "used" by the judges to build support for their investigation (Pizzorno 1998; Hallin and Mancini 2004, 123). Moreover, corruption revenues were used mainly to consolidate parties' oligarchies – only marginally for personal enrichment – and the involvement of political parties in collusive sharing agreements of bribes had virtually no exception (Della Porta and Vannucci 1994, 1999a). As a consequence, when evidence was exposed, the scandal did not hit only singular actors, but parties as such and the party system as a whole. Therefore the media system –whatever the political bias of journalists – could not disregard such widespread "bipartisan" malfeasance. Before any individual accountability, a "systemic" accountability mechanism sanctioned the conjoint responsibility of all "old" parties in systemic corruption: a strong demand for "newness" emerged in the electoral market, intercepted in 1994 by Silvio Berlusconi's brand-new party, Forza Italia. Deeply shaken by the scandal and further de-legitimized at the eyes of citizens, political parties and their leadership could simply not effectively "protect" – as in the past – their members from the menace of judicial actions. In 1993 and 1994 two clumsy attempts to obstruct the inquiries with two law-decrees which de-criminalized illegal party financing were blocked by the "Mani pulite" judges' resistance. The astonishing amount of evidence on corruption

¹⁸ A small sample of public statements issued by Berlusconi – covering the whole time span of his political career – is sufficient to describe this process. In 1998 as leader of the opposition he said: "the Minister of Justice is conditioned by the pressure of judges, organs of the Left, who in trying to implement a precise political project using judicial mechanisms to eliminate their political opponents, treading on the law, judicial procedure and reality with false inquiries, inventing witnesses, contradictory accusations, show-trials and hideous". Testa, Vittorio. 1998. Ecco le mie condizioni. Il ritorno di Berlusconi. *La Repubblica*, 5 Sep. 1998. <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1998/09/05/ecco-le-mie-condizioni-il-ritorno-di.html?ref=search>. In 2009 as Prime Minister he declared: "The Italian anomaly is not Silvio Berlusconi. The Italian anomaly is communist prosecutors and communist judges in Milan". *L'Avvenire*. 2009. Berlusconi: "La vera anomalia sono i giudici comunisti". *L'Avvenire*, Oct. 28, 2009. https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/berlusconi-ballarogiu-dici_200910281013049970000. When he was found guilty of tax fraud by a Milan court in 2012 and sentenced to four years in prison, Berlusconi retorted that the decision was "a political sentence, the way so many other trials invented against me have been political" *Corriere della Sera*. 2014. Berlusconi: Napolitano aveva dovere morale di assegnarmi la grazia. *Corriere della Sera*, 28 Apr. 2014. https://www.corriere.it/politica/14_aprile_28/berlusconi-napolitano-aveva-dovere-morale-assegnarmi-grazia-83737a00-cee4-11e3-b1ed-761dab5779b9.shtml.

cases revealed to the combined action of judge's investigations and media reporting produced a profound reaction in the public opinion, which initially backed almost unanimously judges' activity. As a "Mani pulite" judge states: "Without any doubt we received a strong support from the public opinion, a diffused consent towards our activity" (Davigo 1998, 96).

With the vanishing of the actual risk of judicial punishment due to the bipartisan approval of several "corruption-enhancing" measures (Vannucci 2009) – along time in Italy corruption crimes have been informally almost de-criminalized (Vannucci 2012) – also the role of the media system changed. The political conditioning over the media environment worsened since 1994, as Silvio Berlusconi – in his alternating roles of Prime Minister and leader of the opposition – never ceased to own and control his media empire. Moreover, the three channels of the state-owned broadcaster have remained under the indirect control of the executive, fostering self-censorship and political interferences on the editorial lines. Given that television traditionally is the main source of news for a large majority of the population, the control of media have had a noteworthy effect over electoral choices, public debate, and the formation of political agenda. The substitution of corruption with an "anti-corruption issue" was therefore reflected by the state of permanent tension between the political and judicial branches of the State: a central issue on the political agenda become the constantly asserted need for a reform of the administration of justice to reduce the allegedly arbitrary power of judges, who – it is claimed – are politically biased and influence politics without any democratic legitimization.

In the 2010s a new wave of political scandals for corruption, extortion, misappropriation, embezzlement crimes hit the Italian party system. Similarly to the "Mani pulite" inquiries, high profile representatives of all leading parties were charged. As in 1992, moreover, the economic crisis exacerbated the popular discontent towards the political class, while

further investigations on embezzlement of public funds in Regional Councils unveiled a pervasive scenario of political illegality involving all political groups. With a domino effect, judges started all over Italy to scrutinize regional budgets, while media emphasized the wide amount of politicians involved and the "bipartisan", collusive nature of misappropriation. In November 2011 the financial crisis and the popular discontent forced the Prime Minister Berlusconi to resign, leaving the premiership to Mario Monti, who led a "technical" government until the subsequent national election of February 2013. As in 1992 again, ballots produced a political earthquake hitting the party system. Another brand-new party – the "Five-stars movement", led by the comedian Beppe Grillo – obtained one fourth of votes with a political program focused on its irreducible diversity from "old" corrupt politics, embodied other parties. Electoral volatility reached the huge 39,1 rate, the highest in the history of Italian republic: "these figures give an idea of the scope of the historical change taking place, as well as of the dismantling of the party system (Chiaromonte and Emanuele 2013, 99)." The political climate induced party leaders to increase their consideration of candidates' criminal records: only 10 convicted candidates were elected (9 for center-right, 1 for center-left).¹⁹

Some conclusive remarks

Using again the geological metaphor of the dark side of Italian politics offered in the introduction, the hidden forces of systemic corruption are still creating an increasing tension, and the underneath friction could in every moment, even suddenly evolve into a new "political earthquake" shacking previous equilibria. This could happen when judicial inquiries occasionally reveal the widespread, interconnected nature of illegal activities: a positive feedback mechanisms prevails (as in 1994 and 2013 elections) when a strong input from the judiciary – due to the quantity of cases of corruption exposed, or the high-profile of those

¹⁹ Patrian, Riccardi. Elezioni 2013 – Non pulito, ma meno sporco: ecco il nostro nuovo Parlamento. *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 14 Mar. 2013. <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2013/03/14/elezioni-2013-non-pulito-ma-meno-sporco-ecco-il-nostro-nuovo-parlamento/529709/>.

involved, or both – crosses a critical threshold triggering media and public opinion interest, and therefore parties' and electors' reaction. We cannot anticipate if and when these conditions will realize, and where the shacking will hit – after the scandal for bribery in public contracting for Expo in Milan and Mose in Venice of June 2014. But due to the new “polycentric” nature of systemic corruption, with a variety of local enforcers of its hidden rules, it is very unlikely the start of a snowball effect as in the 1990s, when judicial inquiries smashed and progressively weakened precisely those actors – main political parties and their leaders – who managed the centralized organization of systemic corruption, encouraging a generalized collaboration with judges.

Media shows a cyclical interest towards issues of corruption, following occasional inquiries and denounce. But there is a further reason why the issue of anti-corruption is generally missing from the public agenda, with the exception of brief “windows of opportunity” which may follow, as a side-effect, bigger scandals. In fact, in Italy corruption as a pervasive practice has a strong collusive, unifying effect in the hidden sphere of politics, while involvement in corruption is still a divisive issue on the visible arena. A cyclic, unstable, ephemeral phase of judicial exposure, media coverage and electoral accountability of political malfeasance may be a likely outcome of an unstable political environment where judicial activism coexist with an enduring “visible” polarization on issues of corruption and judicialization of politics – even when collusive under-the-table agreements still prevail – in the political and media system. The price to be paid in this context, however, is a politicization of the anti-corruption issue which, if followed by consistent corruption-enhancing measures like those approved after “Mani pulite”, might finally weaken the role of judicial inquiries as an input for political accountability processes.

In a similar context of systemic corruption, the impact of any incremental anticorruption reform will probably be almost nil. A more vigorous approach is needed here (Rothstein

2007; Della Porta and Vannucci 2012), which cannot be limited to top-down approval and implementation of new regulation. A far-reaching reform of formal institutions has to be supported and complemented by a bottom-up involvement of civil society and empowerment of watch-dog actors and social groups. This is a necessary, even if not a sufficient condition to break down the structure of convergent expectations which fosters systemic corruption, to dismantle the governance mechanisms of corruption and its guarantors.

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