

## The Italian Socialist Party and the crisis of party democracy. The transformation of the Italian socialists

Pepijn Corduwener

To cite this article: Pepijn Corduwener (2023) The Italian Socialist Party and the crisis of party democracy. The transformation of the Italian socialists, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 28:2, 205-219, DOI: [10.1080/1354571X.2022.2073419](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2073419)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2073419>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 06 Jun 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 926



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# The Italian Socialist Party and the crisis of party democracy. The transformation of the Italian socialists

Pepijn Corduwener

Utrecht University, The Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

The Italian Socialist Party (PSI) is central to any history of the crisis of Italy's post-war system of party democracy. The party seemed to be in its death throes during the mid-1970s, but under the new leadership of Bettino Craxi, elected in 1976, the party made a surprisingly successful political comeback. However, in the early 1990s, the party's success quickly evaporated. It became the face of the Tangentopoli scandals as many Socialist politicians, including Craxi, were convicted for corruption. The party even disbanded itself in 1994. This article traces the transformation of the Italian Socialists through the 1980s, looking at their ideology, organization and mode of representation. It connects these changes with the party's electoral fortunes, showing how they ultimately contributed to the party's demise, which had repercussions for Italy's party system.

## RIASSUNTO

Analizzare la storia del Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI) è essenziale per contestualizzare e comprendere ogni storia della crisi del sistema dei partiti nell'Italia. Durante la prima metà degli anni Settanta, sotto la guida del suo nuovo leader, Bettino Craxi il partito fece ritorno con un sorprendente successo politico. Ma nei primi anni Novanta, il successo del partito si dissolse. Diventò la faccia degli scandali di Tangentopoli, e molti politici del partito socialista (Craxi incluso) vennero condannati per corruzione. Il partito si sciolse definitivamente nel 1994. Questo articolo segue la trasformazione del partito negli anni Ottanta, in particolare in tre ambiti: l'ideologia del partito, l'organizzazione del partito e il modo di rappresentazione del partito. Connette questi cambiamenti con il consenso che i Socialisti trovavano, e mostra come questa trasformazione alla fine contribuisce al proprio crisi nei primi anni Novanta, sia per il partito sia per il Sistema dei partiti in Italia.

**KEYWORDS** parties; democracy; Italy; socialism; Italian Socialist Party (P.S.I.); Bettino Craxi

**PAROLE CHIAVE** partiti; democrazia; Italia; socialismo; Partito Italiano Socialista (PSI); Bettino Craxi

## I. The P.S.I. and the crisis of Italian party democracy

The Italian Socialist Party (P.S.I.) is central to any history of the crisis of Italy's post-war system of party democracy. The party seemed to be in its death throes during the mid-1970s, squeezed between the electoral gains at parliamentary elections of Christian democrats (D.C.) and Communists on the one

hand the social movements on the streets on the other. But, under the new leadership of Bettino Craxi, elected in 1976, the party turned the tide. It achieved steady electoral gains, determined the political agenda on economic and political reforms, and Craxi himself was prime minister between 1983 and 1987, leading Italy's longest post-war government until then. As such, the P.S.I. became the embodiment of Italy's 'second economic miracle' and the quick modernization of society which mirrored it (e.g. Gervasoni 2010). But the party's success quickly evaporated. The P.S.I. became the face of the *Tangentopoli* scandals as many Socialist politicians were convicted for corruption. Craxi even escaped to Tunisia to avoid serving a ten-year prison sentence. The P.S.I. disbanded itself in 1994, a little over a century after it was founded as Italy's first modern political mass party (Ridolfi 1992).

The prominent position of Socialists in the final decade of the so-called 'First Republic', the exposure of widespread socialist corruption, and Craxi's own reputation explain why the party has continued to draw attention in public and academic debates alike. The twentieth anniversary of Craxi's death in 2020 sparked a debate in Italian media and in the Senate on the question how he should be remembered. A similar debate has been going on in historiography. Whereas some scholars credit the Socialists for their contribution to the modernization of Italian society, the overcoming of class conflict and their efforts to reform a blocked political system (Bedeschi 2013; Martini 2020; Di Scala 1988), others hold the party responsible for the degradation of a political system and for the eroding trust of ordinary Italians in political institutions (Gilbert 1999; Ginsborg 2003; McCarthy 1995).

The rise and fall of the P.S.I. raise however important questions on the causes of the crisis of party democracy in Italy – and beyond – that supersede the fate of the socialists. Did the P.S.I.'s remarkable recovery in the 1980s prove that parties were indeed able to reform themselves and reconnect to citizens notwithstanding evident signs of the whole model of the mass party being in crisis? Why precisely did the P.S.I., the party which seemed so well-tuned to the quickly modernizing society of the 1980s, become the epitome of party democracy's flaws a mere few years later? And until what extent did the reform of socialist ideology and organization represent, or even foreshadow, broader changes that followed in the 1990s?

This article is dedicated to these questions. It starts from the presumption that the historiographical fascination with the events of the early 1990s and the towering figure of Craxi tends to obscure the historical roots of the seemingly sudden decline of Italy's mass parties in general – and the P.S.I. in particular. It shifts the attention to the 'transformation' of the P.S.I. from the mid-1970s onwards to shed a light on these more structural factors that of the crisis of the early 1990s. The transformation of the P.S.I. was a specific response to the deep crisis of Italian democracy in the 1970s in general, and that of the Socialists in particular. In this crisis parties faced two different

and conflicting imperatives. On the one hand, they faced a 'crisis of governability': an 'overload of democratic demands' that citizens put on the state in times of growing civil unrest and economic hardship. This crisis required politicians to provide cohesive, efficient, and stable government, but it seemed unable to meet these requirements. Italy knew a tradition of weak and instable governments; an institutional outline which dispersed power across the various branches of the *trias politica* as well as between provincial, regional, and national levels. Moreover, it had a traditionally ineffective bureaucracy (Melis 1996). On the other hand, parties faced a 'crisis of legitimacy'. Not only the leading parties themselves, but also the whole notion of 'party rule' and 'parliamentary government' were challenged, both peacefully and violently, outside on the streets and intellectually in the columns of newspapers and magazines. Yet, partly due to what the historian Pietro Scoppola called the 'paradox of institutional reform' (Scoppola 1997, 430), parties were unwilling to launch reforms that could also erode their own power position, thus deepening the crisis of legitimacy.

The P.S.I.'s transformation was motivated by its attempt to respond to these two challenges. It had three dimensions, which structure this article. First, ideologically, the party sought to respond to the crisis of the 'blocked' Italian party system by making a definite rupture with its Marxist traditions and by embracing free market capitalism and political pluralism unconditionally. As such, it attempted to become an independent genuine third force and alternative to Communism that could 'unblock' the way voters voted. Second, organizationally, it countered the crisis of the heavily bureaucratized mass party model which was quickly losing members and voters. It aimed to do so by transforming into a 'lighter', 'open' and more personalized movement, which no longer strived to act as a social-integrative force for the working class alone. Third, representationally, it moved from the representation of pre-existing societal cleavages to what representation scholar Michael Saward has called 'statal' representation (Saward 2008a, 2008b), identifying with the interests of the state in times of a widely felt democratic and economic crisis. It thus emphasized its capacity as a governing party to solve Italy's problems of governability.

Whereas these changes coincided with the socialist ascent to power and electoral gains in the 1980s, in the final part of the article I aim to establish why they ultimately contributed to the decline of the party itself and Italy's party system at large in the 1990s. I will argue that this was because the party's triple transformation encouraged its entanglement with the state and its alienation from society precisely at a time when the Italian state failed in the eyes of many citizens. Moreover, its claim to reform ailing democratic institutions not only failed to materialise, but also further delegitimized existing representative institutions – including that of the party itself.

## II. From Marxism to reformism to unblock Italy's party democracy

In the dual crisis of governability and legitimacy that haunted Italian democracy in the 1970s parties were the focal point: they both suffered from decreased legitimacy and were supposed to provide increased governability. The first dimension of the P.S.I.'s transformation was therefore attempted as an answer to the challenge of the crisis of the party system. The problems of Italy's party system were according to the Socialists two-fold. On the one hand, the party system was fundamentally blocked: Italy had since the end of the War suffered from 'imperfect bipartism' (Galli 1967). It *seemed* like a two-party system centred around the D.C. and Italian Communist Party (P.C.I.), but it failed to meet the most basic standard for such a system: government alternation. Ever since they were ditched from the government in 1947, the Communists were in opposition and the D.C.s in government. But paradoxically, despite strong D.C.–Communist antagonisms on the surface, Italy was in the Socialist view a so-called consociational democracy in which there was no real opposition. Despite their different ideological roots and opposing foreign policy loyalties, D.C.s and Communists compromised on important socio-economic, cultural, and political policies. Communists and their affiliate organizations were increasingly incorporated in the political game that had been dominated by the D.C. (Giovagnoli 1996). Also, this consociationalism contributed to the lack of reform in Italy.

This paradox between the lack of government alternation based on D.C.–P.C.I. opposition and consociationalism based on D.C.–P.C.I. collaboration became particularly evident during the 1970s. Soon after becoming P.C.I. secretary in 1972, Enrico Berlinguer advocated a 'historic compromise' between Socialists, Communists and D.C.s to stave off any authoritarian challenge and terrorist threat posed to the Italian republic in a time of great social unrest and economic hardship. The D.C. response was lukewarm, but overall, not negative, most notably in the form of conciliatory gestures of Aldo Moro. The 'historic compromise' culminated between 1976 and 1979, when the Communists, although not in government, joined the parliamentary majority and supported a D.C.-led administration.

Although Berlinguer extended his historic compromise also to the Socialists, the Communist–D.C. rapprochement threatened to marginalize the Socialists electorally. In the general elections of 1972 and 1976, the party was unable to surpass the psychologically important threshold of 10 per cent of the vote. But, most of all, the 'historic compromise' illustrated for the Socialists that the blocked Italian party democracy impeded hard needed political and economic reforms. It exemplified the consociationalism and hampered political change. It fell upon the Socialists to break the deadlock and provide a blueprint for hard-needed political renewal and therefore triggered Socialist party elites to rethink the party's ideological foundations.

Of course, the debate on the ideological profile of the P.S.I. was far from new. Ever since the end of the War, the party had known schisms and reunions that were a result of disagreement on the ideology of the party. Yet, only now, in the mid-1970s, many people inside the party agreed that it was time to fundamentally rebrand (or, perhaps, ditch) the ideological profile as a Marxist party. Craxi was vital in this regard. To 'unblock' Italy's blocked democracy, he aimed to position the P.S.I. as a true 'third force', no longer toying with the idea of forming a left-wing government as the Communists' junior partner, but becoming a genuine alternative to communism, ideally even able to overtake it electorally (not unlike François Mitterrand was successfully trying in France at the same time) (Mattera 2010, 199; Bergounioux and Grunberg 2005). Indeed, as Craxi believed that Italian democracy needed a more conflictuous political climate, he launched a frontal attack on the communists and their lack of democratic credentials. He argued that Marxism and Bolshevism were essentially similar and that the P.C.I.'s commitment to massive state intervention in the economy was irreconcilable with democracy, because:

... the monopoly over the material resources leads to the fusion between economic and political power, which means, to total power. Far from liberating the worker, the 'state-isation' of the economy becomes the material base of the one-party dictatorship. (Craxi 1977, 13)

Unlike the P.C.I., the P.S.I. now wholeheartedly embraced parliamentary democracy and political pluralism as ends in themselves, no longer as steppingstones towards a socialist society, however vaguely defined. Also, the party's stance on capitalism clearly shifted. The ambiguity that characterized the days of the Socialist participation in the centre-left governments, when the P.S.I. advocated state participation in the economy to gradually overcome capitalism, was left behind. Craxi held that that 'the utopia of the abolition of capitalism intended as point of arrival of the socialist transformation has led to an undervaluation of the problems that are important to determine the construction of a new society' (Craxi 1978, 31). Moreover, Craxi stated that Italy could never have overcome the economic crisis of the 1970s 'without the contribution of the Italian entrepreneurship, without the dynamism and commitment of the big and small enterprises' (Craxi 1987a, 16). It also, according to some historians almost in neo-liberal terms (Sassoon 1996, 457), talked about the reform of the welfare state, which had arguably become too big. Craxi held that the state's habitude to 'want to give everything to everyone' was no longer affordable (Craxi 1983, 235).

This illustrates how 'reformism' (rather than Marxism) became the main 'ism' in the party's ideology. Convinced that both the blocked party system and the consociational nature of Italian party system impeded hard-needed political and socioeconomic reforms, the P.S.I. positioned itself as the party

that would modernize Italy, politically and economically by being different. This modernization should no longer be based on Marxist-inspired principles, but was based on hands-on, liberal, and pragmatic solutions. And the mother of all reforms was for the socialists no longer economic, but political in nature. The solution to both crises of legitimacy and governability was for Craxi institutional reform of Italy's political system because this was 'the central theme that dominated the societal crisis, the disconnection between society and the state, the problems of government ... ' (Craxi 1982). Apart from vague references to reinforcing the executive, the answer to the question how this institutional reform, referred to as the *Grande Riforma*, should look like was not very clear, but its result should have resulted in a more efficient system of government.

The ideological re-orientation of the party meant that the P.S.I. moved beyond the model of a Marxist party. The culmination of this development came in 1982, when the party ditched the hammer and sickle and adopted the *garofano* as its party symbol. The P.S.I. no longer presented itself as a class party, but, as one prominent remarked in 1982, as a party that was 'fully in tune with European social democracy' (Covatta 1982, 13). Some historians consider the P.S.I.'s shift as the party's very own *Bad Godesberg* moment – referring to the famous conference that turned the Social Democratic Party of Germany from a class into a modern people's party in 1959 (Mattera 2010, 209; Colarizi and Gervasoni 2005, 143). In any case, by offering voters a genuine left-wing, but reform-minded, alternative for communism that was fully committed to political pluralism the P.S.I.'s ideological re-orientation aimed to 'unblock' the party system and make democracy more contentious.

### III. Reforming the party organization to battle the crisis of the mass party model

The crisis of the 1970s not only underlined the blocked nature of Italy's party system, but also called into question the model of the mass party itself. Also, this aspect of the crisis hit the P.S.I. particularly hard. The party was still organized in the spirit of Rodolfo Morandi's reforms of the late 1940s and early 1950s (Mattera 2004). Morandi, a former partisan and the right-hand of long-standing party leader Pietro Nenni, saw the party as a vehicle for the emancipation and participation of the working class. Based on the assumption that the Italian working class lacked democratic skills and cultural development, he organized the party along rigid, Leninist, lines with little opportunities for internal democracy (Degl'Innocenti 1993). The P.S.I. had strict hierarchical lines, running from the level of the factory where a handful of members could establish a so-called *Nuclei Aziendali Socialisti*

(N.A.S.), to local and regional party sections and federations right up until the Central Committee of the party in Rome. This required a strong and extensive party bureaucracy, and the party employed hundreds of party officials.

Like the question on the reformulation of socialist ideology, the debate on how to reform this organization had been ongoing in the party for a while (Boni 1982). However, it was only during the crisis of the 1970s that this need became much more widely felt. Challenged by new modes of civic participation in social movements that outdated hierarchical party models, it was evident that the 'mass party model' as conceived by Morandi no longer connected to society. The party lost thousands of members and it even admitted that many of the party's N.A.S. 'exist only on paper and many others function badly' (Tamburrano 1964, 11). This was particularly problematic for a party that, in the words of one party prominent, 'has always believed in the irreplaceable function of parties as instruments of the representation of the will of society'. Now the party seemed ever more 'isolated' and 'disconnected' from society (PSI 1971, 7).

While this was surely not merely a Socialist problem, Socialist intellectuals proved to be particularly perceptive to the problems of mass party organization. The columns of the socialist magazine *Mondoperaio* were filled with alarmist analyses on the problems of the mass party model. Angelo Panebianco, later an internationally famous party scholar, noted already that the electorate was much less loyal to parties than before and could ever less be divided in left-and right wing, which meant that citizens identified ever less with parties. The solution lay in a lighter and decentralized organization (Panebianco 1979). Socialist party officials took these warning seriously. The crisis of the mass party model (along with the ideological ones outlined above) required an end to the Marxist notion of 'democratic centralism' that had guided the party's internal organization. So, the Central Committee of the party adopted a resolution that called for more internal democracy, yearly assembly meetings, decentralization and the limitations on the cumulation of party jobs by the party cadre. The push for more internal democracy also led to the replacement of the 'Central Committee' with a party leadership more in tune with liberal democratic standards. The party leader was moreover directly elected by the party congress, rather than by delegates and party notables.

Apart from democratizing the party from within, a second solution for the crisis of the mass party model was 'opening up' the party to the outside world. This was a long-cherished ambition of Craxi himself, who already in 1966 argued that the 'political class, socialists included, are behind of their times, insensible to new trends in political culture ... the party is disconnected from the reality of civil society and closed [in itself]' (Craxi 1967, 8). Once party leader, the attempts to decentralize and de-bureaucratize the party were put in practice. Freed from the obligation to be a class party, the P.



S.I. now increasingly aimed to open to various sections of society. For Craxi, social relations could no longer be conceived in terms of 'the separation of classes and categories neatly divided: today the world of labour is a world of citizens who try to lead the same life, tend to have common customs and desires. Strong economic differences persist, but the social differences have diminished in the broad framework of common duties and rights' (Craxi 1987b, 25). By retreating from workers organizations and opening up to other social groups, the socialist party organization aimed to reflect this trend.

Finally, the power of the party leader was strengthened. Perhaps earlier than many other European politicians, Craxi realized that the personalization of political power could (temporarily) fill the vacuum that the decline of the mass party organization left behind (Musella 2015, 211). Craxi's enormous popularity inside the party (he was re-elected by acclamation as party leader in 1984) was emblematic of the way in which the party's organization was no longer a pyramid, but rather a solar system with Craxi himself at the centre, surrounded by a circle of loyalists. With short slogans, smart media strategies and shrewd ways to highlight the importance of the leader itself, such as a fake Greek temple of the 1987 party conference, or the huge floating pyramid designed by artist Filippo Pansecca depicting live Craxi's face during his speech in four directions three years before, the party organization was made instrumental to the position of the leader – rather than the other way around.

As such, Socialists stood at the forefront of attempts to re-invent party organizations and made them fit for the more individualized and mediated society. They presented organizational reform as an attempt to battle the crisis of the mass party in the late 1970s. Initially, this seemed to be successful: new members flocked to the party, which brought the membership number over half a million in 1980. Craxi was also able to stop the electoral decline of the party. The party reached 11 per cent of the vote in 1983 and 15 per cent of the vote in 1987. This might not seem a lot, but with both the D.C. and P.C.I. in decline, the socialist modest electoral advances were enough to land Craxi at the prime minister's office. It was here, that the party's promises to counter the dual crisis of Italian democracy, those of governability and legitimacy, could be realized.

#### **IV. Statal representation and 'governability'**

The P.S.I.'s ideological and organizational shifts already indicate that the dual crisis of legitimacy and governability were intrinsically linked. Increased governability would lead to more legitimacy for the party system, at least that was the assumption, while enhanced legitimacy of the P.S.I., visible in more voters and members, would, in turn, enable the party to provide

enhanced governability. This connection was especially visible in the third dimension of the P.S.I.'s transformation: its increased identification with the state.

The shift towards statal representation was a response to the crisis of democracy in general, and that of parties, including the P.S.I., in particular. At a moment when popular dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and parties was running high, the P.S.I. re-invented itself as a governing party that solved the crisis of legitimacy by effectively governing the state. This stronger orientation towards the state of parties has been observed by many party scholars. The aforementioned Panebianco, an intellectual with sympathy for the P.S.I. but who watched the party critically, saw in this trend of parties to become more oriented towards the state even a new party type: the 'electoral professional party (Panebianco 1988). Parties of this type, just like the P.S.I., ditched their ideological baggage and old bureaucracy in exchange for an army of professionals, mainly media-experts, so that they could focus on their main role of winning elections. Selling their achievements in office was central to this. In even stronger terms, Peter Mair, who spent much of his academic career in Italy, shortly after observed (and denounced) the rise of what he called 'cartel party', whose main characteristic was the 'interpenetration between party and state (Katz and Mair 1995, 17; see also Mair 1994).

However, while Panebianco and Mair mostly focus on institutional (organizational, with Panebianco; and public funding with Mair) aspects of the migration of parties to the state, it also had an important representational dimension. Following the theoretical model outlined by one of the foremost representation theorists of our time, Michael Saward, the P.S.I. clearly shifted from a 'popular' to a 'statal' mode of representation (Saward 2008a, 2008b). Whereas the party previously represented clearly defined social groups (i.e. workers) vis-à-vis the state, the party now increasingly represented depoliticized policy issues and identified with the general interests, or the interests of the state, and represented these vis-à-vis society. This was a conscious Socialist attempt to tackle the crisis of party democracy in Italy: only by positioning itself as a force that took responsibility for the government of the weak state, the P.S.I. claimed it could solve the crisis of democracy in Italy.

Also, the shift towards 'statal representation' had longer historical roots. While originally seeing itself as a spokesperson for working class interest this mode of seeing itself had shifted somewhat, especially after the party's entrance of the *stanza dei bottoni*, as Pietro Nenni phrased it in 1962. After it entered into a government with the D.C., the party increasingly saw itself as a broker between state and society, or, as phrased at the party's 1964 congress, 'the socialist future is that of political mediation between state and workers organizations' (PSI 1966, 69).

The multiple crises of legitimacy and governability of the 1970s meant that the P.S.I. no longer saw itself as a 'broker', but that it ever more closely identified with the state. The party transformed from a force that saw its contribution to democracy in terms of its organizational and societal strength towards a force that saw its prime function as a 'governing' body responsible for making the state more efficient. Then-party leader Francesco di Martino captured this shift in 1975 when he argued that the main challenge for the party was 'rendering our organization not a force that supports the party in government, but, instead, into the instrument with which the party in government stimulates the aspirations of the popular masses that are its support base'. De Martino observed that the tasks and functions of the party had radically changed – even when the party was in opposition. Its 'function can no longer be a purely upsetting one, negating everything, contesting the societal order'. Instead, 'also when [the party] is in opposition, it should indicate no demagogic, but realistic political solutions to the big problems of national society' (De Martino 1975, 835). In other words, it should always identify with the general interest and represent the state's interest to the nation – rather than the other way around. This was the top-down representation that Saward intended par excellence.

Craxi reasoned that the state had not been able to keep up with the quick changes in society, and that the P.S.I. ensured that the state would know a higher level of governability, better law-making, increased coordination between public bodies, more political stability, and more efficiency (Craxi 1989). Their relations to the State were ever-less viewed in terms of a necessary democratization from below, as used to be the case for the Socialists in the first post-war decades, whether by means of referenda, regionalization or civic participation, but most of all as an institution that should be made 'more efficient' (and therefore more legitimate) from above. And this process that should be launched from above by the governing parties, the P.S.I. in the first place.

Governability was thus put forward as a programme that should stabilize Italian governments, stop the fragmentation of parliament, improve the running of democracy, and enhance executive efficiency. This emphasis on governability became essential to the Socialists to such an extent that it claimed that it was the core of the socialist programme, clearly indicating how statal representation had replaced any aspirations to represent specific (working class) constituencies in the political arena. As such, the party's mode of representation was a third dimension of the party's transformation. Building on the ideological (away from Marxism), organizational (new party model, symbol and leaders) and representational (from popular to statal representation), the party transformed from a force of social integration to a public entity that saw its prime function in facilitating stable and efficient government and in representing its policies to society.

## V. Conclusion. P.S.I.'s transformation and crisis of Italian party democracy

Of course, multiple causes explained both for the collapse of the P.S.I., and that of the collapse of the post-war party system at large. The revelation of massive corruption in the Clean Hands operation and the collapse of Communism were arguably the most visible ones. The P.S.I. stood at the epicentre of the corruption scandal of the early 1990s, which provided, of course, a major blow to the party's legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary citizens (Grillo di Cortona 2007). Yet corruption in the party was not new and widely known also earlier. Indeed, the causes for the crisis of the 1990s can therefore be described as a *histoire croisée* with different factors influencing each other. Historians have therefore emphasized frequently the long-term causes of the crisis of party democracy in Italy. There was a progressive progress of delegitimation of political parties that lost touch with society at least since the 1970s (Ignazi 2010; Orsina 2019).

Exactly this more recent historiographical attention for long-term roots raises the question how the P.S.I.'s transformation that has been highlighted above has contributed to crisis of the 1990s. First, the ideological shifts of the party by and large failed to produce the desired effect. The party certainly managed to mark its difference with communism and move beyond the image of a class party. Yet it failed to convince enough voters to unblock Italy's blocked democracy and render the P.S.I. a genuine third force between Christian democracy and the P.C.I. (Bull 2015). Moreover, despite all its criticism of the consociational nature of the party system and the lack of fundamental change, the P.S.I.'s participation in, and indeed, leadership of, the major political alliance of the 1980s, the *pentapartito* displayed many consociational features. Faced with declining vote shares and continued exclusion of communism only a combination of the centrist and centre-left coalition of the previous decades could provide a workable parliamentary majority. The P.S.I.'s ideological reformation as business-friendly, pro-market and politically pluralist made this coalition with liberals, republicans, and D.C. s much easier – but also this coalition failed to produce real political change. In other words, the party's ideological reorientation that was at least partly intended to break the political deadlock in fact contributed to the party system's immobility in the 1980s as it solidified the *pentapartito* coalition held responsible for the lack of political reforms.

Second, also the party's organizational reforms ultimately contributed to the P.S.I.'s decline in the 1990s. The reforms made the party's legitimacy dependent on the figure of the party leader rather than its rooting in neighbourhoods and factories or the promises made in its party programme. This initially brought the P.S.I. much success: as Craxi's star rose in the 1980s, both

within the party, and on the national and international scene, his achievements benefited the party as a whole (Ciofi and Ottaviano 1988). But once Craxi, weakened by his own complicity in socialist corruption, fell from public grace, it also immediately affected the party in a way that would have been inconceivable before the personalization of politics. In other words, the party's legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate became much more dependent on the figure of the party leader and therefore much less stable and predictable. Besides growing dependence on party leaders, also the party's attempt to become an 'open party' with a light organization proved to be a liability. Apart from the question until what extent the P.S.I. actually managed to achieve the objective to open up to society, the implicit message of the reform to weaken the party organization and 'dissolve' the party in society was, paradoxically, that parties were increasingly superfluous. So, the solution to the crisis of the mass party model seemed to render parties decentralized, fluid and small organizations that aspired to some extent to resemble precisely the various social movements that threatened the party monopoly over civic participation.

Also, the third dimension of the P.S.I.'s transformation, the shift from popular to statal representation, is essential in understanding the erosion of the party's support base in the early 1990s. First of all, the shift from the representation of a clear-cut constituency, i.e. the working class, to that of the representation of the general interest, deprived the party of a core social support base that had always been central to the electoral success of left-wing parties all over Europe (Eley 2002). Put sharply, as the P.S.I. now claimed to represent everyone, it also represented no one in particular and this made the party particularly vulnerable to the quickly shifting electoral allegiances of voters. The 'swing voters' could flock to a catch-all party that claimed to represent them, but they could just as easily abandon it.

Finally, the representation of the 'state' towards society became a liability for the party as it became clear that despite all the talk about 'reformism', 'governability' and a *governo del fare* there were little actual reforms. In this way, the P.S.I.'s claim to be *the* party of governability that would take control of the state in order to reform it and enhance its legitimacy actually turned against it. Whether visible in the failure of the constitutional reforms that ought to have made the government more effective or the continued promises to modernize the country's bureaucracy to provide more efficient services, the P.S.I.'s assurance to reform Italy largely went unrealized: public debt soared, corruption and clientelism became excessive and the state even more inefficient than before (Mattera 2010, 217–219). And precisely because the P.S.I., much more clearly than during the first post-war decades, now identified with the state and fit the model of 'statal representation', the 'crisis of the Italian state' also became the crisis of the P.S.I. itself.

## Acknowledgements

A first draft of this article was presented at the Conference of the International Association for Political History at the LUISS Guido Carli University Rome in 2021. I would like to thank the participants for their comments. I am especially grateful for the suggestions of Paolo Mattera and the anonymous reviewers for the *JMIS*. The usual disclaimer applies.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work is part of the research programme 'The party-state in the twentieth century', project number 275-52-017, which is financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

## Notes on contributor

*Pepijn Corduener* is Associate Professor at the Department of History, Utrecht University. He is a historian of contemporary Europe, interested in questions of democracy and transformations of party systems in a comparative perspective over the course of the twentieth century. He has published in various journals including *Contemporary European History*, the *Historical Journal* and *Comparative Political Studies* and has published the monograph *The Problem of Democracy in Postwar Europe* (Routledge, 2017).

## References

- Bedeschi, G. 2013. *La prima repubblica (1946–1993). Storia di una democrazia difficile*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino editore.
- Bergounioux, A., and G. Grunberg. 2005. *L'ambition et le remords. Les socialistes français et le pouvoir (1905–2005)*. Paris: Fayard.
- Boni, M. 1982. "L'organizzazione del PSI (1959–1985)." In *I partiti italiani tra declino e riforma. Saggi e documenti*, edited by G. Valluari, 729–738. Rome: Bulzoni.
- Bull, M. J. 2015. "The Pentapartito." In *The Oxford Handbook of Italian Politics*, edited by G. Pasquino and T. Jones, 296–308. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ciofi, P., and F. Ottaviano. 1988. *Il PSI di Craxi. Partito e organizzazione dal Midas alle elezioni del 1988*. Rome: Rinascità.
- Colarizi, S., and M. Gervasoni. 2005. *La cruna dell'ago. Craxi, il partito socialista e la crisi della Repubblica*. Bari: Laterza.
- Covatta, L. 1982. "Una nuova fase nella vita del psi in continuità con la nostra storia." In *Governare il cambiamento. Conferenza programmatica di Rimini 1982*, edited by PSI, 13–16. Milan: Avanti.
- Craxi, B. 1967. *L'unità socialista. Rapporto politico organizzativo ai quadri tenuto dal Segretario della Federazione milanese del PSI 24 Settembre 1966*. Milan: Avanti.

- Craxi, B. 1977. *Marxismo, Socialismo e Libertà. Discorso pronunciato a Trevieri il 4 Maggio 1977*. Rome: Biblioteca Rossa.
- Craxi, B. 1978. *L'alternativa dei socialisti. Il progetto del PSI presentato da Bettino Craxi*. Milan: Avanti, 1978.
- Craxi, B. 1982. "Governare il cambiamento." In *Governare il cambiamento. Conferenza programmatica di Rimini 1982*, edited by PSI, 264–268. Milan: Avanti.
- Craxi, B. 1983. "Nell'interesse della nazione. Dichiarazioni programmatiche del Presidente del Consiglio alla Camera dei Deputati e al Senato della Repubblica, 9 agosto 1983." In U. Finetti ed., *Il socialismo di Craxi. Interventi e documenti del PSI*, edited by U. Finetti, 227–239. Milano: MB Publishing.
- Craxi, B. (1987a). *Una responsabilità democratica. Una prospettiva riformista per l'Italia che cambia. Relazione introduttiva al 44 Congresso, Rimini 31 marzo–5 aprile 1987*.
- Craxi, B. 1987b. *Una responsabilità democratica. Una prospettiva riformista per l'Italia che cambia, Relazione introduttiva al 44 Congresso di Rimini*. Milan: Avanti.
- Craxi, B. 1989. "L'Italia verso L'Europa. Relazione e replica al 45. Congresso di Verona, 13–19 maggio 1989." In *Relazioni e repliche congressuali 1978–1989*, edited by B. Craxi, 1–108. Milan: Avanti.
- De Martino, F. 1975. "Rafforzare l'organizzazione del partito (1975)." In *I partiti italiani tra declino e riforma. Saggi e documenti*, edited by G. Valluari, 832–839. Rome: Bulzoni.
- Degl'Innocenti, M. 1993. *Storia del PSI. III. Dal Dopoguerra a Oggi*. Bari: Laterza.
- Di Scala, S. 1988. *Renewing Italian Socialism. Nenni to Craxi*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eley, G. 2002. *Forging Democracy. The History of the Left in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Galli, G. 1967. *Il bipartismo imperfetto. Comunisti e democristiani in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Gervasoni, M. 2010. *Storia d'Italia degli anni ottanta. Quando eravamo moderni*. Venice: Marsilio.
- Gilbert, M. 1999. *The Italian Revolution. The End of Politics, Italian Style*. London: Routledge.
- Ginsborg, P. 2003. *Italy and its Discontents. Family, Civil Society, State, 1980–2001*. London: Penguin.
- Giovagnoli, A. 1996. *Il partito italiano. La Democrazia Cristiana dal 1942 al 1994*. Bari: Laterza.
- Grillo di Cortona, P. 2007. *Dalla Prima alla Seconda Repubblica. Il Cambiamento politico in Italia*. Rome: Carocci.
- Ignazi, P. 2010. "The Three Ages of Party Politics in Postwar Italy." In *Political Parties and Democracy. Vol. II Europe*, edited by K. Lawson, 47–69. Oxford: Praeger.
- Katz, S., and P. Mair. 1995. "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party." *Party Politics* 1 (5): 5–28.
- Mair, P. 1994. *Party Democracies and Their Difficulties*. Leiden: Leiden University Press.
- Martini, F. 2020. *Controvento. La vera storia di Bettino Craxi*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino.
- Mattera, P. 2004. *Il partito inquieto. Organizzazione, passioni e politica dei socialisti italiani dalla Resistenza al miracolo economico*. Rome: Carocci.
- Mattera, P. 2010. *Storia del PSI 1892–1994*. Rome: Carocci.
- McCarthy, P. 1995. *The Crisis of the Italian State. From the Origins of the Cold War to the Fall of Berlusconi and Beyond*. London: St. Martin's Press.
- Melis, G. 1996. *Storia dell'amministrazione italiana 1861–1993*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

- Musella, L. 2015. *Il Potere della Politica. Partiti e Stato in Italia (1945–2015)*. Rome: Carocci.
- Orsina, G. 2019. "Party Democracy and its Enemies: Italy, 1945–1992." *Journal of Modern European History* 17 (2): 220–223.
- Panebianco, P. 1979. "Una risposta alla crisi del partito di massa." *Mondoperaio* 4: 85–90.
- Panebianco, P. 1988. *Political Parties: Organization and Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PSI. 1966. *Costituente Aperta. Le nuove frontiere del socialismo in Italia*. Florence: Vallecchi.
- PSI. 1971. *Il PSI e I movimenti di base e di quartiere. Seminario della sezione organizzazione del partito nella società. Genova 21–22 maggio 1971*. SETI: Roma.
- Ridolfi, M. 1992. *Il PSI e la nascita del partito di massa in Italia, 1892–1922*. Bari: Laterza.
- Sassoon, D. 1996. *One Hundred Years of Socialism. The West European Left in the Twentieth Century*. London: Tauris.
- Saward, M. 2008a. "Making Representations: Modes and Strategies of Political Parties." *European Review* 16 (3): 271–286.
- Saward, M. 2008b. *The Representative Claim*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scoppola, P. 1997. *La repubblica dei partiti. Evoluzione e crisi di un Sistema politico*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Tamburrano, G. 1964. *Per un partito socialista moderno. Contributo al Convegno di organizzazione del PSI (Roma 28–29 Giugno 1964)*. Milan: Avanti.