

Because the United States has a presidential system in which the executive is elected and has a set four-year term, it is probably difficult for Americans to understand the Italian and other parliamentary orders in which the head of a government may quickly change according to shifting majorities within parliaments, parties, or coalitions.

The model of parliamentary systems is England. In theory, the parliamentary system should work in the following manner: there are two major parties, A and B. An election is held and A wins. A then formulates a program, names a cabinet, and gets a majority vote in parliament because its victory in the country has given it a majority of the seats. Unlike the United States, however, the Prime Minister does not have a set term but will be in office—more democratically—only as long as he/she retains a majority. Parliament can deny him/her a vote of confidence and he/she will have to resign, even without an election.

While the theory is simple, the practice is complicated because, in most parliamentary systems, the major parties number more than two. If there are three, for example, and none receives a majority vote, A can come to an agreement with B to get a majority in parliament; or B can ally with C. Coalitions may be constructed in different ways. If C is in the middle, it might combine with A, which is on the left, forming a center-left coalition A-C. However, C, being centrist, might decide to go to the right with B, creating a B-C center-right coalition. C, holding the balance of power, will demand posts in the government and agreement on a general program, combining greed and principle in the best political tradition. The way parties combine depends on the factions that have a majority within the individual parties.

That's with three parties. If we add another six or more parties, it becomes much more difficult for a coalition to gain a majority and, once having gained it, to keep it; this

explains why there were so many governments in Italy before 1992. After then, electoral laws favored the formation of party coalitions before elections—Silvio Berlusconi’s center-right and Romano Prodi’s center-left. In an effort to create greater stability than in the past, the laws instituted an “electoral bonus” that gave the winning coalition extra votes so that it would have a majority to run the country in case of a close election. In the April 9 elections, these mechanisms gave Prodi an adequate working majority in the Chamber of Deputies but a slim one of only 2 seats (not counting the life senators) in the Senate.

Because it is in the nature of coalitions to be fractious—and this is true of both coalitions, which include extremist elements—the crucial question is how well Prodi can manage his own coalition and pass needed reforms. His task is difficult because some leftist leaders such as Rifondazione Comunista’s Fausto Bertinotti has historically sabotaged center-left governments. This time Bertinotti has promised to behave himself, but other parties such as the Greens could make demands that may paralyze or disintegrate the coalition, while some Senators may not be present for votes or secretly vote against the government.

The first test of the center-left’s coherence will come when parliament meets on April 28 to elect its officers. The second, crucial, one will be the election of the President of the Republic, who will decide who will form a government. Given the close election, the new President will have an enhanced political role. Then the budget and necessary reforms will be considered. The Italian economy has stagnated over the past several years and the new government will have to get it going again. Ironically, the center-left governments that preceded Berlusconi did more to privatize the economy than did the center-right, which theoretically supports liberalization. In order to do this, the center-

left, in theory very favorable to workers, must curb the excessive powers of the unions and create the increased workplace flexibility and efficiency that the EU says is necessary to revive the economy.

Any close election creates problems of stability. Italian electoral laws aimed at combining the best feature of presidential systems, stability, with the best parliamentary traditions of wide and effective representation. The April 9 elections have put that theory to the severest test.

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