

vacuum in the center of the political space and on the other hand the incentive to form new patterns of alliances.

This is the background to the decision by Berlusconi to create a new party and a new system of alliances on the right to counterbalance the same strategy pursued by the left. This, in turn, produced the kind of coalitional realignment that gave rise to a bipolar pattern of competition. In the process pre-electoral coalitions became the main actor in the electoral arena. In the past, coalitions were important too, but after the elections and not before. Voters were allowed to vote on the coalitions only retrospectively. Parties were the only actors in the electoral arena. The bipolar pattern that has emerged from the transition has changed the role of the voters as well as that of the parties in the system. Each party has to decide before the elections whether it wants to pursue office (as opposed to other goals) and with whom. Voters decide in the ballot box which coalition will gain a majority of the seats and therefore the right to form the cabinet. This is the essence of bipolar competition. And this is the way the Italian party system works today. It is remarkable that this transformation has been achieved so quickly. The new MMM system had a lot to do with it.

Diverger: coalitions, not parties

With the first election in 1994 competition shifted from parties to coalitions. From then on the most important variables for predicting the electoral outcome have been the composition, size and performance of these coalitions. Coalitions have changed over the years. As it can be seen in Table