2 The General Election of April 1992

In the Introduction, we argued that one of the peculiarities of Italian politics is the lack of a liberal culture. Italy never fully embraced liberal democracy, and the particratic form of government that evolved is the most clear confirmation of this deficiency. Having said that, it cannot be disputed that things have started to change in Italy, indeed the chapters that follow aim to chronicle the substantial changes in Italian politics in the 1990s. In terms of explaining political change in Italy, the 1992 general election was a pivotal event. One could argue that the tremors felt in 1992 were part of the same process that provoked the real political turnover four years later. In what follows the significance of the 1992 election will be analyzed, paying special attention to two key questions. First, was the 1992 general election the equivalent of a referendum against the particratic form of government? Second, did the 1992 election suggest a shift of Italy’s political culture towards liberal values?

THE RESULTS

The outgoing four-party (DC, PSI, Italian Social Democratic Party (PSDI) and PLI) coalition managed to narrowly retain a majority of seats in both the Senate (163 out of 315) and the Chamber of Deputies (331 out of 630) but its combined share of the vote fell below the critical 50 per cent mark (48.2 per cent). For the first time in its history, moreover, the Christian Democratic party did not even reach 30 per cent. Both the treasury minister, Guido Carli, and the head of the budget committee in the Senate, Beniamino Andreatta, lost their seats. The Christian Democrat’s main coalition partner, the Socialist party, also performed poorly, failing to make any advance on its 1987 position, and indeed bringing to an end an upward trend started in 1976. With the former
Communists divided between the reformed PDS and the fundamentalist Communist Refoundation (winning 16.1 per cent and 5.6 per cent respectively, compared to the 26.6 per cent of the PCI five years before), a great many voters either abstained (more than one-in-eight) or else switched to the newer protest groupings – the Greens, the anti-mafia La Rete and, most spectacularly of all, the Northern League, spearheading the attack on particratic rule and pressing for extensive regional autonomy. The Northern League, in particular, in obtaining the election of 25 Senators and 55 Deputies, established itself as the second largest party in the North of the country, picking up support – notably among first-time and younger voters – in former Christian Democratic strongholds, and contributing to a far greater regional variation in voting patterns, accentuating the reliance of the DC and the PSI on votes in the South. Bossi received a record 240,517 preference votes in Socialist Milan-Pavia, humbling Craxi. Altogether 16 different party lists won representation in the new parliament, registering a further and substantial expansion in the votes going to non-traditional political forces.

Mobile voters, instead of moving between neighbouring parties, spurned all the established parties en bloc. According to the Cattaneo Institute, no less than one-quarter of the electorate changed allegiance, an historic shift in voting behaviour not seen since the watershed Italian election of 1948.

It is our supposition that, in view of the exceptional strength of opposition to particratic rule (the so-called ‘front of unease’), the general election of April 1992 was a deliberate rejection by a sizeable proportion of voters and non-voters – the ‘anti-party system’ vote comprised 31.9 per cent of the total electorate – of existing political rule. They were not just rejecting the governmental coalition, and all that this implied; the electoral mass were collectively spurning the governing elite, which the proportional voting system, by registering the splintering of opinion, faithfully reflected. The magnitude of popular discontent had not, as some formerly alleged, been overstated. It followed that the more volatile the voters and the more unsure the process of government formation, the more the end result could only amount to a ‘casual parliamentary majority’, representative of the uncertain and shifting state of party politics and the public mood.