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Anti-System Oppositions, Political Competition and Coalition Potential in Polarized Party Systems

A Conceptual Re-Framing

The article presents a critical discussion of the model of polarized pluralism formulated by Sartori (1976), and in particular of the hypothesis that a high number of political parties, together with a marked polarization of the uni-dimensional political space, will produce centrifugal drives in the party competition. Through a formal analysis, it will be argued that in a polarized or ideologized space of competition the centrifugal drives do not prevail, because even the anti-system parties are ultimately forced to some centripetal shifts. The interaction of the strategies employed by pro and anti-system parties are illustrated in a typology. Secondly, searching for a proxy indicator of the centripetal tactics employed by the anti-system parties, a revision of Sartori's index of coalition potential is further introduced. Anchoring on standards of the coalition theory, the paper puts forward a conceptual schema that allows the identification of four types of parties, with high or low coalition potential, complementary parties, and blackmailing parties.

KEYWORDS *Spatial Models, Party Competition, Anti-System Oppositions, Polarized Party Systems, Coalition Potential.*

Although polarized systems appear to be an inheritance of post WWII ideologies, the problem of the immoderate and centrifugal characters of party competition in the present days has been raised by the sudden success of populist parties all over Europe, which in contemporary times could be said to have replaced as anti-system parties the ideological oppositions of post WWII Europe. The suggestion is that by tackling again the theme of the effect of immoderate oppositions on the dynamic of party system competition we may cast some light on the contemporary challenges to democracy,

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which seem very much the same as 60 years ago, that is delegitimization of the political system and immoderate competition.

Sartori distinguished between systems based on majority rule, such as two-party systems and moderate pluralism systems, where the parties compete to become the government incumbents, and systems such as polarized pluralism in which the aim of the competition is not directly to be in government but, sometimes exclusively, to gain a quota of votes and seats to spend later on in the coalitional interplay. Deviating from the basic assumption of Downs's paradigm that parties always compete for the government (Downs, 1957), Sartori contraposed the centripetal mechanic of systems with up to four parties with the centrifugal one that occurs in systems with five or more parties ranged across a disjointed and ideologically polarized space. In these cases, the anti-system parties are permanently excluded from governmental power, prompting Sartori to ask:

> However, if some parties are perceived – and perceive themselves – as being alien and extraneous, why should they compete centripetally? (Sartori, 1976: 344).

The first aim of this article is to discuss the model of polarized pluralism formulated by Sartori (1976), and, in particular the hypothesis that a high number of political parties (five, six or more), together with a marked polarization of the uni-dimensional political space, will produce centrifugal drives in the party competition. Through a formal analysis, it will be argued that in conditions of considerable fragmentation of the party system and in a polarized or ideologized space of competition the centrifugal drives do not prevail, because even the anti-system parties are ultimately forced to some centripetal shifts. The immoderate extreme parties do resort to centrifugal drives, but only as the outcome of a re-modelling of the competition space and as a consequence of the long-term strategies of the other parties in the game. These considerations will be supported by a typology of the strategies of anti-system parties vis-à-vis the pro-system parties.

The second aim is a critical revision of Sartori's index of coalition potential. This is relevant because of Sartori's statement that

> On one hand, the centre party (or the leading party of the centre) is not exposed to alternation: Being the pivot and the very backbone of any possible governmental majority, its destiny is to govern indefinitely. On the other hand, the extreme parties, *the parties that oppose the system, are excluded almost by definition from alternation in office: Under normal circumstances they are not destined to govern* (Sartori, 1976: 138, emphasis added).

Sartori devised the coalition potential, together with the blackmail potential, in order to discriminate among the parties and to spot the relevant

ones in any given party system. Although the blackmail potential was never operationalized, Sartori made the attempt with respect to the coalition potential and advanced a relative index. His index of coalition potential is not very useful however because, by his own admission, it is not a measure of the coalition relevance of the parties but rather a measure of the fragmentation of governmental coalitions. It is, in other words, an ex-post measure with no predictive capability.

The interest in the coalition potential lies in its property of being a proxy, although rather indirect, of the competition tactics of both the pro-system and anti-system parties. If we were able to assess the coalition potential of any party, and particularly of the anti-system ones, we should be able to predict their immediate competition tactics and their propensity to employ centrifugal (moving away from the governmental area) or centripetal drive (moving toward the governmental area). Mainstream theory of coalition points out that in any coalition game the potential of each actor is directly proportional to its weight. On the other hand, the coalition potential of any actor is inversely proportional to its relative political distance from other members of any winning coalition, that is the more distant the parties are from each other the more costly is their cooperation in any winning coalition. Anchoring on these two standards of the coalition theory, a conceptual schema for the analysis and the measure of the coalition potential of parties will be put forward. Such a measure should be based on their weights (measured as % of parliamentary seats) and relative distance (measured as position distance on a cardinal space). The schema allows the identification of four types of parties, with high or low coalition potential, complementary parties, and blackmailing parties.

The Assumptions of the Polarized Pluralism Model

According to Sartori there are two causes that produce centrifugal drives in a polarized system. Firstly, they occur because there are some extreme parties that are alien to the system, and occupy relatively far positions from the centre. These parties have no interest in trying to converge towards the centre, because it is physically occupied (Sartori, 1976: 350). Secondly, the centre perceives the threat from the extremes and tends to react by pushing outwards in a centrifugal direction, and in an attempt to preserve its own confines it tries «to expand with the "oil stain" technique, that is, on both sides» (Sartori, 1976: 349-350).

To support his interpretation, Sartori combined the standard assumptions of spatial analysis (Enelow and Hinich, 1984) with others obtained from the observation of the actual working of polarized models. Sartori,

in fact, assumed the competition space as unidimensional and ideological and argued that its fundamental property is elasticity (the distance between extremes can vary not only from case to case, but also in time). The competition space is therefore disjointed, that is interrupted by the points of «no-transfer» and «no-coalition», where the former point limits the electoral choices of the voters and the latter inhibits some coalitional alliances among the parties (Sartori, 1976: 343). The presence of alien or anti-system parties and the ideological character of the disjointed space broken by the points of no-transfer and no-coalition, requires the introduction of some *ad hoc* assumptions to explain the functioning of the polarized system model:

Assumption 1: In polarized ideological spaces, the points of no-coalition limit the movements of parties along the continuum.

Assumption 2: In polarized ideological spaces, the choice of the voters is restricted to the parties located on their own segment of the political space (whether pro-system, left-wing anti-system, or right-wing anti-system), because the no-transfer points prevent them from swinging from one pole to the other, or even from one segment to the other.

Fig. 1 presents an example of a polarized system, where there are seven parties (p_{1-7}) and eleven voters (v_{1-11}), who occupy some key positions (the extremes, the metric centre, some intermediate points between these and the points of non-trasferibility and no-coalition). They were indicated because of their strategic positioning. Finally, i_{1-4} are the relative indifference points between the parties.

The two continua along which the parties (the upper one) and the voters (the lower one) are distributed have been represented with two parallel lines only for reasons of clarity, since, normally, in the spatial analysis of competition parties and voters are assumed to be distributed on the same dimension. The perpendicular lines A and B constitute the axes that cut the space corresponding to the point of no-coalition and no-transfer. Also in this case for reasons of clarity and simplicity, the points of no-coalition and of no-transfer have been imagined as coinciding, although there is a possibility of this not happening. Furthermore, the model has been enriched by introducing a hypothetical intensity curve of the preferences of parties and voters (the broken *W* line in Fig. 1) with respect to the pro-anti system cleavage. It has been assumed that

Assumption 3: In polarized ideological spaces, the intensity of the pro-anti systemic preferences of parties and voters decreases the closer they get to the points of no-transfer and of no-coalition.
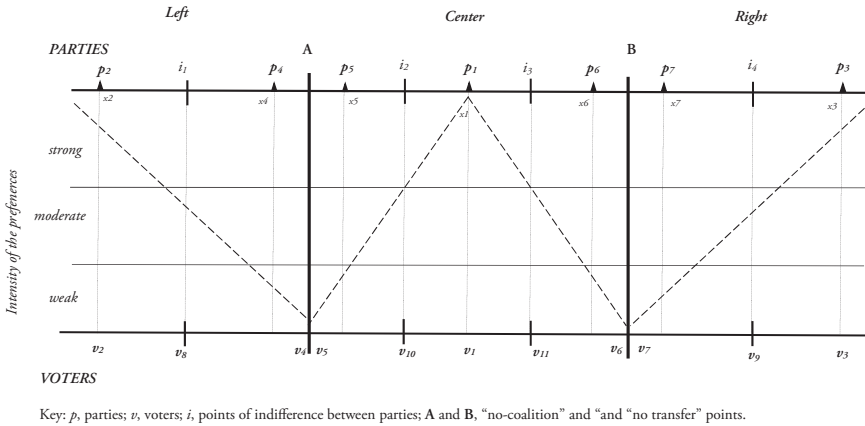
Key: *p*, parties; *v*, voters; *i*, points of indifference between parties; **A** and **B**, "no-coalition" and "and "no transfer" points.

F<small>IG</small>. 1 – The Polarized Pluralism Model.

The explanation for this assumption is relatively simple. Logically, as formulated by Sartori, the polarized pluralism model exhibits a relatively high degree of stability or – one should say – a perfect deadlock. If the voters are ideologically identified and the parties are divided by the points of no-coalition, the former would continue to vote for those parties included in their own segment of the political space, while the latter would rigidly maintain their positions refusing any alliance with any party of the adjacent block. Neither a shift of votes between the pro-anti system blocks, nor any coalition changes would be possible in such a rigidly identified system.

Centrifugal and Centripetal Drives in Polarized Pluralism

Let us return, in detail, to the model exemplified in Fig. 1. On the basis of the assumption of the model, how will the choices of the voters be oriented? V_1 will undoubtedly choose party p_1, whose position coincides exactly with his. This voter corresponds with some approximation to the type of voter identified with strong preference intensity, and similarly in cases of $v_{2,3}$ with regard to $p_{2,3}$. Furthermore, p_1 should be chosen by all the voters whose preference x is in the condition:

$$(i_2 + 1) < x < (i_3 - 1)$$

Presumably, p_1 will also get the vote of the electors $v_{10, 11}$ who have strong pro-systemic preferences and whose positions coincide respectively

with the points of indifference $i_{2,\,3}$. They would choose p_1, instead of $p_{5,\,6}$, because they are strongly pro-system and p_1 guarantees to them a more committed defence of the *status quo*, something which should unbalance their choice in favour of p_1 when confronting the offers of the two equally advantageous sets of policies from $p_{5,6}$. Similarly, we can hypothesize that the same line of reasoning is followed by the other voters with moderate-strong intensity, i.e. those characterized by x preferences such as:

$$x_5 < x < i_2 \text{ and } i_3 < x < x_6$$

Once the role played by the intensities of preferences is understood, it should not be difficult to foresee in analogy the choices of other voters.

As I have anticipated, any polarized system would maintain itself in a perpetual state of deadlock, unless one assumes that some voters are not so strongly identified as pro- or anti-system and therefore they would be prone to behave as any rational utilitarian voter. These voters can be spotted in Fig. 1 as $v_{4,\,5,\,6,\,7}$. They are very close to the A and B points of no-transfer and are characterized by very weak pro- or anti-system attitudes. They should be the least affected by the pro-anti system fracture and consequently the most inclined to transfer their vote from one party to another. The competing parties have hence only one way of exiting the deadlock, that is by winning the vote of these rational voters, considering that all the others are either pro- or anti-system identified. Which tactic would be better to adopt to gain the votes of these weakly identified voters, a centrifugal or a centripetal one?

A) *The centrifugal tactic*

Fig. 2 exemplifies the situation in which the extreme parties $p_{2,3}$ adopt a centrifugal tactic, as predicted by Sartori. By exploiting the property of the elasticity of space (Sartori, 1976: 343, 347), these two parties move to $p_{2',3'}$, accentuating the systemic polarization. It has to be observed, in fact, that

$$\overline{p_2 p_{3'}} > \underline{p_2 p_3}$$

Thanks to its elasticity, the space of competition is now (Fig. 2) more polarized than before (Fig. 1). We can easily accept that the electors $v_{2,3}$, who are identified as anti-system, will carry on voting for $p_{2,3}$ even now in their new positions $p_{2',3'}$. More interesting is the attempt to decipher the behaviours of $v_{8,9}$, whose anti-systemic intensity of the preferences has been relatively lowered by the shift of $p_{2,3}$ in $p_{2',3'}$, as it is possible to appreciate by a confrontation of the inclination of the dotted "W" curves in Figs 1 and 2). Notwithstanding that they were originally respectively indifferent to $p_{2,4}$ and
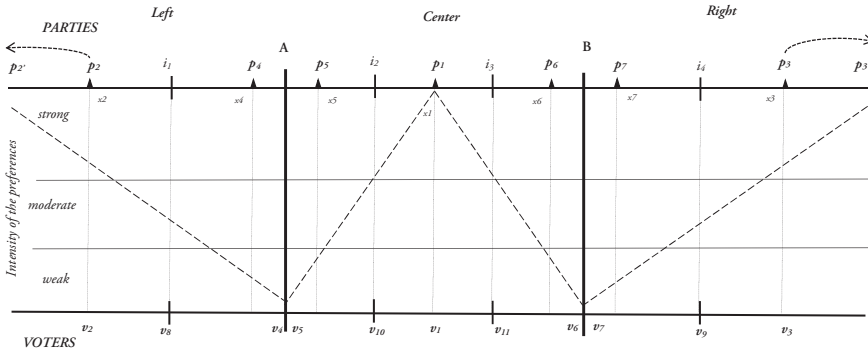
Key: *p*, parties; *v*, voters; *i*, points of indifference between parties; **A** and **B**, "no-coalition" and "and "no transfer" points.

Fɪɢ. *2* – The Polarized Pluralism Model under Centrifugal Drives.

$p_{3,7}$ (see Fig. 1), they should now be attracted by $p_{4,7}$ in $x_{4,7}$, which are in the new situation closer to them than $p_{2',3'}$. On the other hand, $p_{4,7}$ do not have any incentive to follow the centrifugal drive of $p_{2,3}$, moving for instance to $i_{1,4}$, because as we have already argued their original positions make them able to win the vote of $v_{8,9}$ regardless of $p_{2,3}$ centrifugal shifts, and one could say thanks to those centrifugal shifts. Moreover, any shift away from their original positions might imply respectively the loss of $v_{4,5}$ and $v_{6,7}$. Indeed $v_{4,5,6,7}$ have weak pro- or anti systemic preferences and their voting behaviour, as stated above by *Assumption 3*, is hardly conditioned by the points of non-transfer A and B. In other words, *the closer to A and B the less ideological the space might tend to be*, and voters might incline again towards rational (in terms of offered policies) rather than identified choices.

The hypothesis of the profitability of centrifugal competition is therefore problematic if it is analysed from a formal and logical point of view.

B) *The centripetal tactic*

If the axes A and B (no-transfer and no-coalition points which, it will be remembered, we consider as coincident for the sake of simplicity) were effective, the overall polarized space would be reduced to three relatively autonomous segments of competition, therefore each of them characterized by a bimodal and centripetal dynamic of competition. These three segments of the space – separately taken – are not indeed polarized because the number of parties in each segment is less than five and because the parties positioned in each segment belong to homogeneous and coherent ideological families (left anti-system to the left of A, pro-system in AB, right anti-system to the right of B). For these reasons, the competition in each of the three

segments should be dominated by centripetal drives. The effectiveness of A and B should be a moderating factor at the subsystem levels, inducing the relatively homogeneous party families to compete centripetally in their relative segment of space (anti-system left, pro-system centre, and anti-system right).

However, the autonomy of the segments is only relative. Let us consider, in Fig. 1, the anti-system segment to the left of A (the analysis carried out here can be easily applied *mutatis mutandis* to the anti-system segment to the right of B) and suppose that both p_2 and p_4 will converge towards i_1, which is the point occupied by v_8 who is initially indifferent to both p_2 and p_4. In fact, i_1 is the median optimal position (Black, 1958) occupying which it would be possible to capture both the electorate with strong left anti-system and with moderate-weak left preferences. Nonetheless, p_4 has undoubtedly less freedom of manoeuvre than p_2. If p_4 shifted markedly towards i_1, it would risk alienating the vote of $v_{4,5}$ and more generally that of the voters with weak anti-system preferences, which could orient their vote towards p_5. It has already been argued that the closer any actor is to the axes A and B, the weaker are its pro- and anti-system preferences (*Assumption 3* above), and hence in the case of the voters the more likely the transfer of their votes.

Party p_4 will therefore not be able to move as far as i_1, thus leaving open to p_2 the opportunity to move further towards an intermediate point between i_1 and x_4. Ultimately, at the sub-system level the centripetal drive exerted by p_2 might prove to be of greater intensity than the centrifugal drive exerted by p_4 in response. In the central segment AB, if $p_{4,7}$ have converged respectively towards $i_{1,4}$ in the attempt to contrast the centripetal shift of $p_{2,3}$, $p_{5,6}$ can now in turn move centripetally towards $i_{2,3}$, in order to capture $v_{10,11}$ and the voters with moderate-strong pro-systemic preferences. However, as in the cases of $p_{4,7}$, the centripetal shift of $p_{5,6}$ cannot be too accentuated, because of the risk of losing respectively $v_{5,6}$.

From the modelling description given here, the vote transfer from one party to the other results as a complex concatenation of tactics and takes multiple directions. It follows that the polarized systems work according to a complex mechanics that combines centripetal and centrifugal drives. The centrifugal action is not immediately rewarding. It is the centripetal action of the extremes that determines a centrifugal reaction of the centre and this in turn a new counteraction of the extremes, and so on in a situation of precarious balance. In particular, the extreme parties push centripetally as far as they meet the positions of the moderate parties. These, in turn, react centrifugally to the shift of the extreme parties and centripetally according to their opportunities. The centre is therefore pressed from both sides, the tendency of the centre to expand and its erosion or enfeeblement (Sartori, 1976) is probably due to these bilateral threats.

The Strategies of the Anti-System Oppositions and of the Pro-System Centre

From historical evidence, the anti-system parties in polarized systems have either adopted a strategy of liquidation of the system or of insertion into it (Stoppino, 1983: 220). Liquidation implies a clash against the centre pro-system parties and their allies. The main scope of the liquidation strategy is to fully de-legitimize the system, described as corrupted and as a source of privileges for the inners, to provoke a collapse of the pro-system coalition and finally to seize the power and "re-generate" the system. Insertion implies a gradual dismissal of the anti-system appeals and a conversion toward the centre, initially through a conditional offer of support to the pro-system parties. This strategy of the anti-system parties may be combined with their ideological conversion into semi-loyal parties.

Similarly, there are essentially two options open to the pro-system centre that face bilateral oppositions. The centre may try to isolate or to co-opt them. According to the strategy of isolation of the opposition, the centre emphasizes its role as a bulwark of the system and at the same time emphasizes the threat of extreme bilateral opposition. The centre tries to deepen the cleavage with the anti-system parties and to de-legitimize them. On the other hand, according to the strategy of the co-optation of the opposition, the centre emphasizes the progress and transformation of the anti-system oppositions, their conversion to positions of democratic semi-loyalty or even their full conversion to democracy, and therefore their compatibility with the system.

The combination of the strategies of the anti-system parties (liquidation or insertion) and those of the pro-system parties (isolation or co-optation) gives rise to four outcomes presented in Tab. 1.

Extremization/marginalization of the oppositions happens when the pro-system centre exacerbates the clash with the anti-system pole, in return for its liquidation strategy. There is no form of collaboration between the two blocks and the extreme parties, both of the right and the left, are perceived as a constant threat. The polarization of these systems is very high and their destiny depends on the relative strength of the pro-system centre, therefore on its capacity to reduce gradually the blackmailing and coalition potentials (Sartori, 1976) of the bilateral oppositions. If the bilateral anti-system oppositions have no room for manoeuvring, they will accentuate their centrifugal drive and will be pushed towards the borders of the system. This appears to have been the cases in post-WWII Italy with the right-wing MSI (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*) and, from the early 1950's to the 1970's, with the left-wing PCI (*Partito Comunista Italiano*).

TAB. 1 – *Party Strategies in Polarized Systems and their Outcomes*

		Strategies of the Pro-system Parties	
		Isolation	Co-optation
Strategies of the Anti-system parties	Liquidation	Extremization/marginalization	Infiltration
	Insertion	Negative integration	Positive integration

Infiltration combines the strategies of liquidation by the oppositions with the attempt and the need to co-opt them by the pro-system parties. This strategy may be developed by the pro-system centre when it finds itself in a position of relative weakness and it is forced to favour political openings at least towards some semi-loyal parties (Linz, 1974). However, these parties, whose support is decisive for the survival of the government (i.e. the Gaullists during the French IV Republic), are not deemed as fully integrated in the system, neither are they asked to revise their ideology or their general attitude to the system. In other words, infiltration does not significantly change the strategy of the anti-system parties, which remains substantially oriented towards the liquidation or at least the radical transformation of the current system. This argument entails that a party might be anti-system without being necessarily anti-democratic, as in the previously mentioned case of the Gaullists during the French IV Republic and eventually of the PCI in Italy from the 1960's. Sartori (1976) does not seem to dissolve the conceptual ambiguity between anti-system and anti-democratic parties (see, on this aspect, Zulianello, 2017).

In the case of the combination between insertion and isolation, which is labelled as negative integration in Tab. 1, the pro-system parties may resort to the anti-system ones as support to coalition governments, or to specific policies. The anti-system parties may be willing to succour the centre and the pro-system governments in consideration of the specific content of some policies, and not because they have ideologically re-oriented themselves. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Germany provides an example of negative integration, as Roth (1963) described it. Linz (1974) applied a similar concept to the case of the PCI in Italy. A negatively integrated party may provide support to coalition governments with respect to social and labour policies, for instance, without ever assuming any direct government responsibility.

A fourth case, when the strategy of insertion by the anti-system oppositions is combined with co-optation by the pro-system centree, could be labelled positive integration. Anti-system parties are gradually being involved in direct support of the coalition governments, and not only specific policies. These were the cases of the *Partito Socialista* (PSI) in Italy from the early

1960s or of the Social Democratic Party in Finland, both of which regularly participated in the coalition governments and held in them relevant ministerial portfolios. The channel of positive integration is therefore, although not exclusively, the participation in the coalition government and the taking of ministerial accountability.

The survival of polarized systems lies hence in the ability of the pro-system parties to attract some of the semi-loyal and sometimes anti-system parties and rotate them in the coalition governments (something to which Sartori (1982) hinted as «semi-peripherical rotation» of the coalition partners). In the best of cases of survival (Italy, Finland), the pro-system centre became the effective fulcrum of the system and the co-optation of the less recalcitrant extreme actors succeeded and preserved the political stalemate (Ieraci, 1999).

Compression and Extension of the Centre

Our preliminary conclusion was that, if formally and logically conceived, the disjointness of the competition space in polarized systems, should generate a status-quo or deadlock, which could only be broken once we admit that parties and voters are not really constrained into their original sub-systems (anti-system left, pro-system centre, anti-system right). What are the strategic possibilities open to the anti-system and pro-system parties to try to break this stalemate? It could be contended that they may increase their room for manoeuvring by pressing on the boundaries drawn by the no-coalition and no-transfer points, thus determining a remodelling of the competition space. The anti-system parties of the left and right may press centripetally from the outside on the axes A and B. In response, the parties of the centre may react centrifugally on the same axes. I will call these two dynamics, respectively, *compression of the centre* and *extension of the centre*.

The attempt to compress the centre (see Fig. 3) by the anti-system parties aims at reducing the centre space and at creating the conditions for an extreme bipolarization of the competition space. As already highlighted by Downs (1957: 118-120), the presence of two extreme and polarized tendencies, which would be determined by the shift of the axes A to A_c and B to B_c as presented in Fig. 3, could bring about a very high systemic instability. The oppositions oriented to the liquidation of the system may resort to the strategy of compression of the centre to drain from its space the intermediate parties $p_{4,5}$ and their voters on the cente-left axis, and $p_{6,7}$ and their voters on the centre-right axis. In fact, the double effect of the repositioning of $p_{2,3}$ respectively in $p_{2c,3c}$ should be noticed. The remodelling of the curve of the intensity of the preferences (the continuous "W" curve in Fig. 3), as a con-
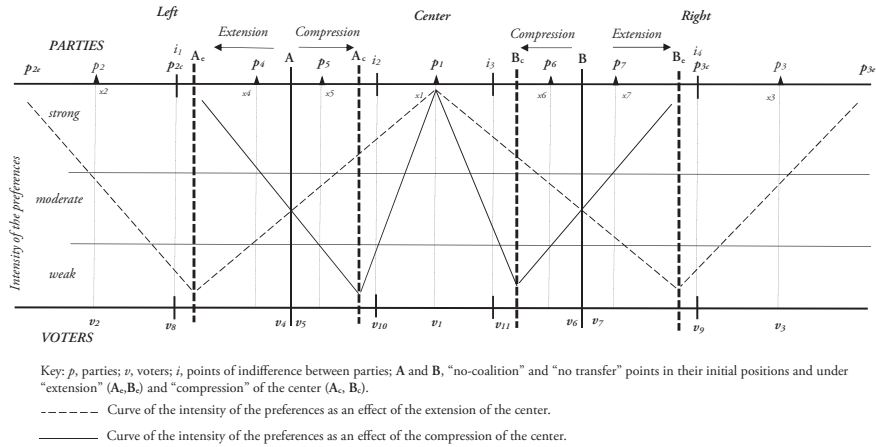
FIG. 3 – Compression and Extension of the Center in Polarized Systems.

sequence of the pressure on axes A and B, has transformed $v_{4,5}$ on the left and $v_{6,7}$ on the right from indifferent voters to voters with moderate-strong anti-systemic preferences. Similarly, pro-systems $v_{10,11}$ are now so close respectively to A_c and B_c as to risk becoming apathetic or indifferent to the pro-anti system fracture.

Secondly, the intermediate $p_{4,5,6,7}$, which were initially more open to alliances with the pro-system centre, have now been swallowed into the two segments of space occupied by the anti-system parties of the left and right. If the strategy of compressing the centre is fully successful, portions of the pro-systemic electorate might be alienated and the opportunities for the pro-system parties to weave their web of political alliances might be drastically reduced. The aim of the extreme and anti-system parties is precisely to alienate any potential coalitional partner and the voters to the centre. When the strategy of compression of the centre is fully and successfully achieved, the «enfeeblement of the centre», as «a persistent loss of votes to one of the extreme ends (or even both)» (Sartori, 1976: 136; 1982), happens as the consequence of the conquest of portions of the centre space by the extreme parties, rather than as the signal of an ideological conversion of the pro-system voters. The case of the Weimar Republic is probably indicative of this situation. The conquest of the vote of the moderate middle class by the anti-systemic left and above all right parties was the effect of the ability of both left and right extreme parties to conquer the centre of the system.

The strategy of the extension of the centre pursued by the pro-system parties is partially autonomous and partially a conditioned reflex which results from the previously described strategy of the anti-system parties aiming

at crushing the pro-system centre. When the centrifugal counter actions of the centre are effective, therefore shifting A to A_e and B to B_e (see Fig. 3), $v_{4,5,6,7}$, who were originally indifferent to the pro-anti system cleavage, have now became strongly pro-system, while $v_{8,9}$, who originally retained strong anti-system preferences, are now so close to A_e and B_e to become tendentially indifferent to them. Similarly, $p_{4,5,6,7}$, which were initially not clearly aligned with respect to the pro-anti system cleavage, have now been swallowed into the pro-system space.

This interpretation raises some questions. Firstly, what are the tactics that may favour the extension of the centre? The pressure of the extreme parties on A and B might be contrasted by p_1 with an attempt to exercise a centrifugal drive-in reaction either towards the left or the right, depending on which side is threatened. These counter actions will result in pendular movements between left and right through which p_1 attempts to stabilize its links with the "indifferent" parties on its left ($p_{4,5}$) and on its right ($p_{6,7}$) and to co-opt them in the coalition governments (Ieraci, 1999). This pendular movement of the centre parties gives field to what Sartori labelled «peripheral turnover» and lays the foundation for the «oil stain technique» of the centre (Sartori, 1976: 139, 350). With regard to the Italian case in the 1960s-70s, the peripheral turnover and the oil stain technique involved the stabilization of some smaller parties of the centre-left (the Socialist Party, PSI, the Social-Democrat Party, PSDI, and the Republican Party, PRI) and of the centre-right (the Liberal Party, PLI) in the coalition governments through the guarantee of legislative outputs which would favour their voters, as effectively described by Di Palma (1977, 1979).

Secondly, what are supposed to be the characteristics of the centre parties which manage to extend the pro-system space? This aspect too was underlined by Sartori (1976, 1982), when he referred to the centre parties in polarized systems as somehow a «two-faced Janus». These parties often exhibit a double soul, a progressive one when they turn to the left and a conservative one when they turn to the right-wing. The Italian Christian-Democrat Party (DC) is probably the clearest example of this duplicity. The presence of a pivotal party with similar characteristics seems to be a basic condition for the success of the extension of the centre (Ieraci, 1999).

Thirdly, how do the anti-system oppositions react to the extension of the centre? If the extension of the centre achieves its aims, the positions $p_{2c, 3c}$ (see Fig. 3) of the extreme parties, where they had moved in the attempt to compress the centre, are no longer advantageous. In fact, when the centre has extended to A_e and B_e, only $v_{2,3}$ who are still strongly identified as anti-system voters and $v_{8,9}$ who are now in a position of relative indifference with regard to the pro-antisystem cleavage may be affected by the anti-system appeal. In this situation, any further centripetal shift of the extreme par-

ties would involve encroaching on the axes A and B and the risk of causing the alienation of the strongly anti-system identified voters ($v_{2,3}$). There is no incentive for the extreme and anti-system parties to move centripetally, but rather they have an inducement to strengthen their ties with the identified anti-system voters. Thus, as a consequence of the success of the tactic of extension of the centre, the anti-system parties are forced to compete centrifugally, either maintaining their extreme position in $p_{2,3}$ or even moving to $p_{2c,3c}$. The centrifugal drives, which according to Sartori (1976, 1982) are dominant and characteristic of polarized pluralism systems, are reduced to a conditioned reflex to the expansive drive of the centre towards the two wings. The centrifugal drives in polarized pluralism systems are therefore secondary, peripheral and temporary by-products of the systemic realignment of the parties in the space of competition.

Coalitional Game and Party Coalition Potential

It should have appeared clear from the previous discussion that the coalitional dynamic may determine the survival capacity of any polarized pluralism system. Democracies affected by the syndrome of party polarization are highly unstable, however they may succeed in overcoming their instability if the pro-system parties manage to co-opt into the government coalitions some semi-peripheral parties using the strategy of the extension of the centre that I have described. Clearly, this strategy is effective if there are such available parties, if they are relevant and characterized by high coalition potential. Let us now turn our attention to this aspect, that is to the actual capacity of the parties to attract each other in relatively stable coalition patterns.

To study the effectiveness of the above described strategies (compression and extension of the centre), different approaches could be employed. A first possibility is to measure the positioning over time of the parties on the competition space, using the known methodologies of the spatial analysis of the competition (self-collocation, textual analysis and the content of political messages, and expert judgment). Here the object of study would be parties and political elites. As an alternative to this research strategy or in combination with it, extensive surveys on mass attitudes could be used, in the wake of the tradition of studies dedicated to civic culture. Here the survey would obviously concern the distribution of the orientations of the mass electorate. A third possibility, which I intend to explore here, albeit in a conceptual way, is that of studying coalition strategies among parties. This choice is justified in a very simple way, on the basis of the analysis of political competition in polarized pluralism that was carried out earlier. If parties try to compress the competition space of other parties and to extend their own,

coalition strategies and party alliances could offer a fairly reliable indicator of the movements of the parties in the competition space.

The very first use of the notion of coalition potential dates back to Sartori (1970; 1976: 122) who employed it as a conceptual equivalent of *governing* potential. Sartori was at that time tackling the problem of the typology of party systems and he needed to establish some reliable and empirically grounded numerical criteria to discriminate among the multi-party systems in accordance with the number of existing parties. According to Sartori, a party should be counted as long as it qualifies for *relevance* in the party system relations and dynamic. Two criteria of relevance were identified, the coalition potential and the blackmail potential. With these conceptual tools at his disposal, the analyst would be able to discount as irrelevant any party that has neither coalition potential nor blackmail potential.

For his purpose Sartori devised an index of coalition potential (Sartori, 1976: 300-304), that is not a measure of the coalition appeal of the parties but rather a measure of the fragmentation of governmental coalitions (Sartori, 1976: 302)[1]. Coalition potential

> means that the "feasible coalition", and thereby the parties having a coalition potential, coincide, in practice, with the parties that have in fact entered, at some point in time, coalition governments and/or have given governments the support they needed for taking office or for staying in office (Sartori, 1976: 123).

These assumptions breed some confusion and some limitations. The confusion is mainly lexical, because Sartori chose to label *potential* what as a matter of definition is a measure of *actual* relevance. Indeed Sartori recognized that the coalition potential «demands two measures: one for the governing potential, and one for the actual governmental relevance» (Sartori, 1976: 300), but then he opted resolutely for the operationalization of the actual governmental relevance as a ratio between the number of time units (the legislatures, *n*) and the coalition units *c* «attributed to a party every time it takes part in a government or gives it decisive support (if only by abstaining)» (Sartori, 1976: 301-302):

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[1] A similar endeavor has never been attempted with regard to the blackmail potential. Sartori did specify that a party discloses blackmail potential «whenever its existence, or appearance, affects the tactics of party competition and particularly when it alters the *direction* of the competition – by determining a switch from centripetal to centrifugal competition either leftward, rightward, or in both directions – of the governing-oriented parties». Nonetheless, Sartori admits further on that «these rules may appear unduly complicated and, in any case, difficult to operationalize», and «that both criteria are postdictive, for there is no point in using them predictively» (Sartori, 1976: 123).

$$n/\sum c_i$$

This index presents some limitations for the research (Ieraci, 1992: 21-22). Firstly, it is not analytical because it signals only the degree of governmental fragmentation at the systemic level. It is no use if one aims at measuring the variations of governmental relevance of each of the parties over time. Secondly, it does not disclose the tactics of the opposition parties *vis à vis* the governmental parties and the significant changes over time in the coalitional game. It is, in other words, a static index, which does not say which parties are governmentally relevant, when they are relevant, or how relevant they are in comparison with each other[2].

What we are searching for is some kind of perspective measure of the governing *potential* of each party, rather than a systemic measure of fragmentation of the governmental coalitions such as Sartori's. The two indexes of *governmental participation* and *governmental responsibility* suggested in previous researches (Ieraci, 1992: 32) are analytical, they refer to the actual governmental relevance of each party in a diachronic perspective, but they are postdictive as well, like Sartori's coalition potential. Nonetheless, if our scope is an evaluation of the sustainability of the future or potential coalitions on the base of a given distribution of weights (i.e. percentage of seats in the legislature) among the parties, we need a new approach to the problem.

We are in need of a new index for the coalition potential of parties which should be:

a) capable of capturing the *potentiality* of the parties in relation to each other;

b) therefore, predictive rather than postdictive;

c) and finally, analytical rather than systemic, that is descriptive of the individual party's potential impact on the coalitional game or, more generally stated, on the overall dynamics of the party system.

Sartori was probably using the term «potential» in a merely allusive way and more as a synonym of «conditioning» than with its proper meaning. It is prima facie evident that parties are capable of influencing coalitions and the governmental game in various ways and with variable degrees of effectiveness, and that this capacity is shown by their participation in the government coalitions and by their ability to exercise drives on the party

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[2] Paradoxically, the conceptual foundation of the blackmail potential seems more promising because Sartori made explicit reference to the tactical conditioning reciprocally exercised by the parties in a given party system as an indication of blackmail potential. However, as we said (*supra*, n. 1), Sartori omitted this.

competition. Nonetheless, Sartori's coalition potential – as I argued above – does not capture these aspects in any meaningful way. On the other hand, if one looks at the conceptual meaning of the term «potential» in physics, as in «potential energy» for instance, one discovers that it refers to the energy possessed or stored in a body or system and derived from or due to its position relative to others within a given field (electric, magnetic, or gravitational). This definition makes evident the relative and positional property of the energy potential, and its confinement to some delimited field or system. In the political sphere, the *political* potential of any party in the coalition game would be given by both the «energy», i.e. «parliamentary weight», possessed by it (which leads to what Sartori decided to label coalition potential), and its position in relation to the other parties, i.e. the «drives» exercised over the coalition game (which in turn leads to what Sartori labelled blackmail potential).

In the following sections, I will try to approach the concept of party coalition potential in a new fashion, taking into account its positional character and its effectiveness within the boundaries of a given party system. The main suggestions will be drawn from the coalition theory and the spatial approach to party systems (next section), which offer plentiful insights into the dynamic of coalition formation. The coalition theory of the «first generation» (Caplow, 1956; Gamson, 1961; Riker, 1962) pointed at the weight of the party as one of the main factors influencing its capacity to enter in coalition. The weight of the party could be conceived as a functional equivalent of the stored energy of a body in physics. To the coalition theory of the «second generation» (Downs, 1957; Axelrod, 1970; De Swaan, 1973) we owe another crucial conceptual tool, that is the concept of political space and the idea that the position of each party influences the others in the competing dynamic.

Coalition Theory and Coalition Potential in Unidimensional Spaces of Competition

The mainstream of the theory of coalition points out that in any coalition game the potential of each actor is directly proportional to its weight. The bigger the actor the more likely it is that it will be part of the winning coalition, because it would be too costly for the other actors to exclude. Excluding it would mean incurring its opposition in the institutional arenas and possibly provoking it to mobilize social opposition. Therefore, the coalition potential of any actor should increase directly as its weight increases. In the institutional arenas, which mostly concern us here, such a weight can be measured for instance in terms of parliamentary seats. On the other hand,

the coalition potential of any actor is inversely proportional to its relative political distance from other potential members of any winning coalition. If the political distance between any two or more actors is assumed as an indication of the potential conflict of interest between them (Axelrod, 1970), then the more distant they are from each other the more costly is their inclusion in any winning coalition. Let us scrutinize these two assumptions in turn and in depth.

Assumption 4: The coalition potential of any party (or political actor) is directly proportional to its weight (i.e., percentage of seats in an assembly, votes, and similar).

Caplow (1956; 1968) was probably among the first scholars to formalize this assumption in his studies on the coalitions in the triads. Caplow adopted a psychological approach and emphasized that the propensity of the actors to form coalitions depends on the perception of the mutual «threat» they exercise in any given situation. In a triad, the two weaker actors will try to coalesce to face the foreseeable threat of the strongest third actor and reduce his hegemonic claim. Caplow's conclusion was that in a triad only coalitions between equal or potentially equal actors are likely because the actors rationally want to avoid being subjected to any hegemonic player (Caplow, 1956: 490). Sometime later, Gamson (1961; 1964) resumed Caplow's intuition, combining it with the perspective of the game theory, and showing how a utilitarian incentive to form coalitions is offered to the actors by the payoff of the gaming situation (i.e., control over political offices, acquisition of social or economic advantages, ability to exercise power or influence, and so on). Therefore, if the actors are rational, each of them will try to secure the largest portion of the payoff for himself. From these assumptions two consequences could be logically drawn. Firstly, each actor has an interest to be included in the winning coalition because this is the only way to secure for himself a share of the payoff. Secondly, each actor has an interest in excluding as many actors as possible from the winning coalition, because the less numerous the winning coalition is, the bigger will be the share of the payoff for each of the actors included[3]. To some extent, combining Caplow's and Gamson's perspectives, it could be argued that in the coalition game the foreseeable threat arising from the alliance with a quasi-hegemonic actor is balanced by the prospect of a secure win and by the guarantee of enjoying a share of this victory. In other words, to be included in a winning coalition, no

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[3] Since Riker (1962) we are accustomed to refer to this implication as the *size principle*: rational actors would form only *minimum winning coalitions*, which are coalitions that would become losing by the defection of one and only one actor.

matter at which level of risk, makes the actors better off than being excluded from it[4]. These observations lead to limiting Caplow's conclusion. While it is true that the smaller actors can fear the alliance with the larger ones, on the other hand, the latter are able to attract the smaller ones precisely because they can guarantee the inclusion in the winning coalition, its durability over time and a share of the coalition payoff[5].

We can conclude this brief review by observing that in the formation of coalitions the weight of each actor counts and that, despite some psychological constraints, the larger actors are able to attract the smaller ones to them by awarding prizes, winning odds and by guaranteeing the durability of the coalition.

The perspective outlined above met with strong criticisms from the coalition theories of the so-called «second generation» (Axelrod, 1970; De Swaan, 1973). These theories emphasized that the self-interest of the actors would be balanced by the need to control the conflict within the winning coalition. Each coalition, in fact, pursues decisions or policies, as well as being a machine to procure offices, therefore the actors have to reduce the conflict and opposition that can occur within the coalition when it comes to pursuing policies and making decisions, if they are concerned with the effectiveness of the decision-making process. The coalition theories of the «second generation» focused on the policy pursuing character of the coalitions, rather than on their office-seeking character. Since Downs (1957), the most effective way of representing political conflict over decisions has been through the use of political or competition spaces. Leaving aside for now the controversy of whether the political space is one-dimensional (represented as a line) or multidimensional (represented as a system of coordinates), the employment of a political space as a conceptual and methodological tool allows us to operationalize the political conflict as a measurable distance among the «ideal positions» occupied by each actor. Preliminary to this method of operationalization is the assumption that the more distant the actors are on the po-

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[4] The implications of this argument with regard to the coalition theory were clearly pointed out by Butterworth (1971; 1974). Butterworth argued against Riker (1962) and Shepsle (1974) that if tradeoffs among the actors are possible, the incentive to be included in the winning coalition would encourage some actors even to pay a compensation to the winning actors in order to be included. Indeed, in a zero-sum game the payoff of the winners equals the loss of the losers and if the latter were eventually included in the winning coalition they would benefit by reducing their share of the negative payoff. For a presentation of the Butterworth-Riker controversy, see Ieraci (1994: 40-43).

[5] Ieraci's Governance Index (Ieraci, 1992) showed that some minor parties obtained a payoff rate disproportionately higher than their relative strength. This observation would reinforce the hypothesis that in the perception of the smaller parties the potential hegemonic threat of the large parties is offset by their ability to guarantee a reward and perhaps even to offer to their allies a «bigger slice of the cake» than one would expect.

litical space, the greater is their potential conflict or degree of disagreement over the policies to be pursued or the decisions to be made.

Assumption 5: In any space of competition, the coalition potential of any party (or political actor) is inversely proportional to its distance from the metrical axis of the coalition that would result.

These preliminary observations lead to the conclusion that the minimum winning character of the coalitions is linked to the spatial extension of the coalition itself, namely to its ideological diameter. If the ideological dimension of party politics and the structure of the political cleavages are taken into consideration, it would seem unlikely that parties not belonging to the same ideological family would coalesce or that parties aligned on a given political continuum would cross over each other. Therefore the winning coalitions are normally minimal and ideologically connected (*minimal connected winning coalitions*, Axelrod, 1970). De Swaan (1973) resumes Axelrod's formulation and re-states the principle of ideological connectedness as the principle of policy distance minimization:

a. Each actor (i.e. political party) aims at being included in a winning coalition that pursues policies as close as possible to those it prefers.
b. Consistent with the theory of the median voter (Black, 1958), if in a given policy space all the policies are aligned and connected, an actor will be *pivotal* if its weight is not less than the absolute difference among the total weights of the actors to his left and right (De Swaan, 1973: 93-94). Consequently, although the notion of *pivotal actor* does not coincide with that of median voter devised by Black, its position on the policy space is such that it overlaps and includes that of the median voter[6].
c. Each actor will seek to be included into the winning coalition and to occupy the pivotal position within it. In fact, this position is the one that minimizes the distances between his ideal policy position and those of the other players on his left and right included in the winning coalition[7].

Assumptions 4 and 5 attempt to combine two aspects that can make a party coalition-relevant or not. These aspects are the political weight of the party in the parliamentary arena and its policy or ideological proximity to the other members of the coalition[8]. This approach to the analysis of the party

[6] This argument is developed by Ieraci (1994: 73-76).
[7] For further developments of the debate, see Van Deemen (1989; 1991) e Van Roozendaal (1990) who substitute the notion of pivotal actor with that of dominant actor.
[8] Remy (1975: 295-298) classified the pivotal parties according to their weight, their position in the parliamentary spectrum and their position in the coalition, identi-

Tab. 2 – *A Conceptual Scheme for a New Approach to the Analysis of the Party Coalition Potential*

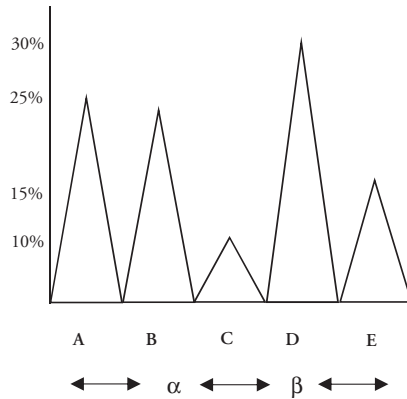|		Party parliamentary weight	
		Low	High
Party position with regard to the axis of the coalition	Near (strong drive)	*Complementary party*	Party with HIGH COALITION POTENTIAL
	Far (weak drive)	Party with LOW COALITION POTENTIAL	*Blackmailing party*

coalition potential is summarized by the conceptual schema sketched in Tab. 2, which identifies two other cases apart from the two polar situations (parties with either low or high coalition potential).

The complementary party, as suggested by Remy (1975)[9], is a small party positioned around the coalition axis, which is not decisive for the formation of winning coalitions but which can be systematically included in them by virtue of the ideological connectedness principle. The blackmailing party resembles very closely Sartori's conceptualization of the blackmailing potential (Sartori 1976: 123-124, 344). An example can help to clarify the point, as shown in Fig. 4:

In Fig. 4 a hypothetic multi-party system is sketched, in which the weights of the parties as percentage of parliamentary seats are distributed as such: A=25%; B=24%; C=7%; D=31%; E=13%. The three connected coalitions allowed by this distribution of weights and positions are A-B-C, B-C-D, and C-D-E. If it is assumed that B-C-D results as the Winning Connected Coalition (62% of the parliamentary seats), B and D would be Coalition Relevant Parties. Indeed they control a winning majority (55%) on their own. Nonetheless, the Complementary Party C would be included in this winning coalition to respect the principle of ideological connectedness. Finally, A and E would result as two Blackmailing Parties, excluded from the

fying the complementary party (relatively small, does not occupy a central position in the parliamentary spectrum, can occupy various positions in the coalition spectrum), the buffer party (almost majoritarian, not necessarily central in the parliamentary spectrum, but essential for the formation of coalitions, central to the coalition spectrum), the balance party (almost majoritarian or dominant, central in the parliamentary spectrum but placed at one of the ends of the coalition spectrum, indispensable for the formation of a coalition), and the wing party (dominant but not central in the parliamentary spectrum, occupies the extremes of the coalition spectrum). Remy's proposal is full of interpretative insights, but remains qualitative and above all it seems that the criterion of the party's position in the parliamentary spectrum is redundant with respect to its position in the coalition.

[9] See note 8 above.

Weights of the parties as % of parliamentary seats: A=25%; B=24%; C=7%; D=31%; E=13%.

If B-C-D were the Winning Connected Coalition, *then*:

A and E: Blackmailing parties.

B and D: Coalition Relevant Parties.

C: Complementary Party.

FIG. 4 – An Hypothetical Multi-party System with One Complementary party and Two Blackmailing Parties.

winning coalition but capable of conditioning (in Sartori's terms) the «direction of the competition».

Coalitions in Multidimensional Spaces of Competition

The mainstream of the coalition theory has dealt with unidimensional spaces of competition, following the tradition inaugurated by Downs (1957) and moved forward by Sartori's analysis of the dynamic of competition in multi-party systems (Sartori, 1976). The principle of ideological connectedness has been either implicitly or explicitly adopted by any interpretation of party competition in unidimensional spaces, and *Assumption* 5 above introduced and discussed evidently bows to that tradition.

Nonetheless, the reliability of the unidimensional paradigm has been recurrently questioned, particularly since the beginning of the twentieth Century when the economic and class-centred ideologies of the nineteenth

Century and early twentieth Century (for instance, capitalism, liberalism, communism, socialism, and fascism) have been fading away and the European party systems have been experiencing turbulent phases of realignment along new structures of cleavages. The difficulties are increased by the multiple use of the metaphor of space competition. It is indeed possible to spot at least three different uses of it.

As a *policy space*, the space of competition can be treated as a position space and it can generate cardinal measures of the ideal policy points of the actors. On a policy space the actors may incline towards negotiation over their relative positions and policy ideal points. As an *ideological space*, the space of competition becomes a valence space (Stokes, 1963) and the position of the actors are more rigid and unnegotiable. Finally, as *party-defined space* (Budge and Farlie, 1977; 1978) it retains the rigidity of the ideological alignments, because party identification implies the establishment of some bonds between parties and voters which are based on relatively rigid factors such as socialization, political culture and socio-economic class. On one hand, flexible (over policies) and rigid (over ideology and/or identifications) dimensions might interfere, therefore making the interplay of the actors more difficult[10]. On the other hand, even if a *positional* policy perspective is adopted, policies cannot be aligned on a single dimension and they tend to interfere with each other or to combine in variable ways (Ieraci, 2006; 2008; 2019; Ieraci and Pericolo, 2021), particularly when the left-to-right simplifying ideological criterion is missing.

In multi-dimensional spaces the principle of ideological connectedness is no longer effective, because parties may freely rally around a single policy or sets of policies. Ideological connectness does not make much sense because in multidimensional spaces of competition parties are aligned if, and only if, their relative positions on each policy dimension happen to be perfectly symmetrical, an unlikely occurrence. In multidimensional spaces of competition position issues might be predominant over valence issues (Stokes, 1963). Although crossing over positions among parties is strictly forbidden by any spatial modelling of party competition, this does not seem to be necessarily the case in systems with multilateral distribution and no dominant party[11], particularly in multidimensional spaces where parties exploit any opportunity to cross over each other and to establish coalitional links with non-adjacent parties. This would be another deviation from the traditional spatial analysis, which allows only «ideological connected coalitions» (Axelrod, 1970). If there are no ideological cleavages and no disjoints

[10] A similar criticism with regard with to Sartori's polarized pluralism theory was made by D'Alimonte (1978).
[11] For the definition of multilateral distribution, see Ieraci (2012).

on the space, why should the parties not coalesce freely? The standard assumption that parties cannot cross over each other depends on the preliminary adoption of a unidimensional space of competition. Nonetheless, if the parties are not bound any more to the nineteenth Century ideological continuum left-to-right and the space of competition becomes multidimensional, based on a plurality of policy positions rather than on a single valence issue, there is no reason why it should not be possible for the parties to move freely on the space and to link with each other in terms of shared visions and perspectives over issues.

Finally, in any multilateral distribution with no dominant party or pole the drives of the competition are similarly multidirectional (shown by the pointed arrows in Fig. 4). This depends on the previously discussed properties (multidimensionality and absence of constraint to the movements of the parties), that is it depends on the propensity of the parties to find shortcuts through the space and to link with each other with regard to sets of issues. At the same time, although no party dominates the game, the relative weight of some of them (like the parties B and D in Fig. 4) might exercise attraction drives in the coalitional game over the smaller parties. The system would work as a set of subsystems (α and β in Fig. 4) where some *complementary parties* are orbiting around some *coalition relevant parties*, functioning as anchor points of the system. Therefore, the overall picture would show a complex interplay of centripetal and centrifugal drives.

Conclusion

Starting from some assumptions that integrate the understanding of party competition in polarized spaces (*Assumptions* 1, 2 and 3 above), and according to the indications of Sartori (1976), I have drawn the formal conclusion that the prevalence of centrifugal drives is not an inherent characteristic of polarized systems. I then turned to the study of competition strategies in these contexts and to the theme of anti-system oppositions, advancing some conceptual schemes.

There have recently been two attempts to refine Sartori's analysis, one conducted by Capoccia (2002) and another more recently by Zulianello (2017; 2019). Capoccia (2002: 22-23) advanced a typology of "anti-system" parties by crossing two dimensions. The «relational anti-systemness» would indicate the capacity of a party to trigger polarization and centrifugal drives, and it «consists in its high distance from the other parties on the ideological space», in its isolationism and «refusal to enter coalitions» (Capoccia, 2002: 23-24). The «ideological anti-systemness» in turn would indicate the opposition of a party to any property of the democratic system, or rather «the

incompatibility of its ideological referents [...] with democracy» (Capoccia, 2002: 24). Apart from some conceptual ambiguities[12], the main problem with Capoccia's scheme is that it assumes that the relative distance between parties (relational anti-systemness) is independent from their ideological anti-systemness, that is, from their ideology. However, as we have seen, in polarized spaces the ability of parties to relate to each other is conditioned by their belonging to ideological families. In these cases, a party can develop a relational capacity if it has redefined its ideology. This does not prevent anti-system parties from collaborating with pro-system ones, as in the case of the negative integration described above. Nonetheless, these forms of collaboration do not reduce their ideological anti-system character, their incompatibility and the polarization of the system. Capoccia's analysis is certainly interesting, but it fails to grasp the problem of competition strategies and how these impact on the probabilities of stabilization and survival of the polarized system.

Zulianello tackles the problem of the identification of anti-system parties along two dimensions, after having clarified that «anti-system» does not necessarily coincide with «anti-democratic» (Zulianello, 2019: 17-18). Firstly, an anti-system party is not simply an «anti-incumbent and policy-oriented opposition», but it also questions «one or more established metapolicies». Secondly, «it has not taken part in very visible cooperative interactions at the systemic level» (Zulianello, 2019: 29). Therefore, an anti-system party is both ideologically antagonistic and non-integrated at the systemic level.

Zulianello's analysis offers innovative and stimulating solutions and one relevant question is that of the definition of anti-system. The critical points in Zulianello's perspective are the operationalization of the variables and the study of their condition of relative independence. Following Cotta (1996), «metapolicies» are defined as «crucial values and/or practices of the political, social, or economic system that are enshrined by the existing order, and are so salient that play a powerful role in the structuring political competition». Zulianello makes it clear that parties that «question specific policies for tactical reasons at specific points in time» are not taken into consideration, but those «for which such an antagonistic orientation [towards metapolicies] is a consistent and long-standing feature» (Zulianello, 2019: 31). Zulianello is aware that this option presents ambiguities for the implication of different levels of analysis, so he argues that it is preferable «to focus on the core ideological concepts of a party» (*ibid*.).

The critical point here, however, is again that policies and ideology are two different things. A party can have a distinctly antagonistic attitude

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[12] Some conceptual criticisms to Capoccia (2002) are advanced by Zulianello (2017).

in terms of policies and a perfectly systemic ideology. Conversely, another party could have an attitude to compromise and to cooperate at the policy-making level but be inspired by a totally anti-system ideology (i.e. the Italian Communist Party in the early post World War II phase, as pointed out in our previous discussion). Furthermore, referral to the ideological dimension is problematic in the case of populist parties, since populism is not a codified ideological doctrine. If a policy is conceived as a set of decisions for problem solving with their correlated implementing tools, that is if it is admitted that any policy encompasses various subsets of policies, it becomes hard to distinguish among meta, meso or micro policies. Take for instance an education policy, involving school reform, which one would judge a good example of a meso-policy. Yet, in the perceptions and attitudes of the receiving actors (social groups, opposing parties and even parties involved in the coalition game) that "meso" policy may be perceived as a policy that has an impact on the "regime" or "system", because of its impact on political culture, and on the shaping of political attitudes. What appears as a meso-policy to some, results as a meta-policy to others.

These aspects cast shadows on the assumption that «ideological orientation towards established metapolicies» and «systemic integration» are independent typological dimensions (see Zulianello, 2019: 38). In fact, the degree of antagonism of a party acts on the propensity of the other parties to seek cooperation with it, and therefore on the possibility of its systemic integration. Moreover, systemic integration evidently depends on the relationships of power and force between parties, that is, on the dynamics of the party system. If the mainstream parties are sufficiently strong to oppose the anti-system parties, their integration can be postponed, regardless of the ideological orientation of the anti-system parties themselves. Conversely, if the mainstream parties are weak and do not control a parliamentary majority, it is probable that they will be forced to seek dialogue with the anti-system parties, thus facilitating their integration and forcing them to an ideological revision or at least to an accommodation over policies.

It was these concerns that suggested a reappraisal of the very promising concept of «party coalition potential». A combinatory index of the parties coalition potential based on their weights (i.e., measured as percentage of parliamentary seats) and relative distance (i.e., measured as position distance on a cardinal space) would allow us to classify and distinguish among parties with high/low coalition potential, on the one hand, and complementary and blackmailing parties, on the other hand. The measure of the coalition potential we are searching for should be a relative measure of each party potential with regard to any given coalition composition and in different historical phases. Such a measure could be a useful tool as a proxy indicator of the strategies of the parties in any relatively fragmented party system. Of the two

conceptual dimensions of the coalition potential (*party parliamentary weight* and *party relative distance*), the former is easily available and reliable. The latter is more controversial. Indeed, systematic surveys of party distances are multiple, but there is no homogeneity of method in the surveys so that the results produced are sometimes incongruous. However, this should not be an impediment to proceeding in the direction of a country-based analysis on a comparative scale. Composition of the coalitions, coalition diameters (i.e., party distances) and parliamentary party weights are the three sets of data we require. The study might prove fruitful in so far as it implements a relative measure of the coalition potential and it has some predictive power of the startegies of the parties in polarized systems and beyond.

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