Coalitional Game and Party Coalition Potential. A Reappraisal of a Forgotten Concept

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Abstract

The purpose of this research note is a critical revision of Sartori's index of coalition potential. 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. Nonetheless, Sartori's index of coalition potential is not very useful because, in 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 mainstream of the theory of coalition points out that in any coalition game the potential of each actor is directly proportional to its weight, that is the coalition potential of any actor increases directly as its weight increases. 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, the paper puts forward a conceptual schema for the analysis and the measure of the coalition potential of parties in a predictive way. 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 helps the identification of four types of parties, with high or low coalition potential, complementary parties, and blackmailing parties.

Gioco coalizionale e potenziale di coalizione partitico. Rivalutare un concetto dimenticato

Sintesi

Lo scopo di questa nota di ricerca è una revisione critica dell'indice di Sartori del potenziale di coalizione. Sartori ha introdotto il potenziale di coalizione, insieme al potenziale di ricatto, al fine di discriminare tra i partiti e individuare quelli rilevanti in ogni dato sistema di partiti. Sebbene il potenziale di ricatto non sia mai stato operazionalizzato, Sartori ha tentato invece la costruzione di un indice del potenziale di coalizione. Tuttavia, l'indice del potenziale di coalizione di Sartori non è molto utile perché, per sua stessa ammissione, non si tratterebbe di una misura della rilevanza coalizionale dei partiti ma piuttosto di una misura della frammentazione delle coalizioni governative. In altre parole, l'indice di Sartori è una misura ex post, senza capacità predittiva. Il mainstream della teoria della coalizione sottolinea che in ogni gioco di coalizione il potenziale di ciascun attore è direttamente proporzionale al suo peso, cioè il potenziale di coalizione di qualsiasi attore aumenta direttamente con l'aumentare del suo peso. D'altra parte, il potenziale di coalizione di qualsiasi attore è inversamente proporzionale alla sua relativa distanza politica rispetto ad altri potenziali membri di qualsiasi coalizione vincente, cioè più i partiti sono lontani l'una dall'altro più è costosa la loro cooperazione in qualsiasi coalizione vincente. Facendo perno su questi due standard della teoria della coalizione, il paper propone uno schema concettuale in chiave predittiva per l'analisi del potenziale di coalizione dei partiti basato sui loro pesi (misurati come % di seggi parlamentari) e sulla loro relativa distanza (misurata come distanza posizionale su uno spazio cardinale). Lo schema consente l'identificazione di quattro tipi di partiti, con potenziale di coalizione alto o basso, partito complementare e partito ricattatorio.

Parole chiave   Potenziale di coalizione, Modelli spaziali, Competizione partitica, Partito complementare, Partito ricattatorio

1. Introduction

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 the 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.

The purpose of this research note is a critical revision of Sartori's index of coalition potential, which is operationalized by Sartori himself (Sartori 1976: 300-304), while 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». Finally, he displaces the reader and admits «that both criteria are postdictive, for there is no point in using them predictively» (Sartori 1976: 123). Therefore, the coalition potential is not a measure of the coalition appeal of the parties but rather a measure of the fragmentation of governmental coalitions (Sartori 1976, 302). The 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» (*ibidem*: 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)» (*ibidem*: 301-302):

$$n/\Sigma c_i$$

This index presents some limitations for the research (Ieraci 1992: 21-22). Firstly, it lacks sufficient analyticity 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 the parties over time and individually. 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 word, a static index, which does not say which parties are governmentally relevant; when they are relevant; and how relevant they are in comparison with each other. 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, Sartori omitted this.

What we are searching for is some kind of perspectival measure of the governing *potential* of each party, rather than of a systemic measure of the 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 and in a diachronic perspective, but they are postdictive as well as 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 of the coalition potential of the parties which should be: a) really 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 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 mere allusive way and more as a synonym of «conditioning» than in its proper meaning. It is prima facie evident that the parties are capable of influencing the 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 competition. Nonetheless, Sartori's coalition potential – as I argued above – and its complementary blackmail potential do not capture in any meaningful way these aspects. 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 encloses aspects which were to some extent captured by the two potentials of coalition and blackmail devised by Sartori although not in a conclusive and straightforward fashion. Any scientific definition of the term potential, and obviously in connection with the concept of «energy», will refer to the energy possessed or stored in a body or system and derived or due to its *position relative*

to others within a given field (electric, magnetic, or gravitational). This definition enlightens 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 over 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.

2. 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 an actor is the more likely it is that it will be part of the winning coalition, because it would be costly for the other actors to exclude it without expecting its opposition in the institutional arenas and possibly without facing its capacity to mobilize some societal 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 1: *The coalition potential of any party (or political actor) is directly proportional to its weight consistently adopted (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). Some time later, Gamson (1961; 1964) resumed Caplow's intuition, combining it with the perspective of the game theory. In the perspective of the game theory, 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 actor included.[1] 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 matter at which level of risk, makes the actors better off than being excluded from it.[2] 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

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1   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.

2   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).

the inclusion in the winning coalition, its durability over time and a share of the coalition payoff.[3]

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.

ASSUMPTION 2: *In any unidimensional space of competition, the coalition potential of any party (or political actor) is inversely proportional to its distance to the metrical axis of the coalition that would result.*

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 be determined 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 methodologic tool allows to operationalize the political conflict as a measurable distance among the «ideal positions» occupied by each actors. Preliminary to this method of operationalization is the assumption that the more distant the actors are on the political space, the greater is their potential conflict or degree of disagreement over the policies to be pursed or the decisions to be made.

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

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3   Ieraci's Governance Index (1992) showed that some minor parties obtained a payoff rate disproportionally 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.

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. Consistently 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.[4]

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.[5]

The assumptions 1 and 2 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.[6] This approach to the analysis of the party coalition potential is summarized by the conceptual schema sketched in Tab. 1, which identifies two other cases apart for the two polar situations (parties with either low or high coalition potential).

4   This argument is developed by Ieraci (1994, 73-76).

5   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.

6   Remy (1975, 295-298) classified the pivotal parties according to their weight, their position in the parliamentary spectrum and their position in the coalition, identifying 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.

		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*

FIGURE 1 – A hypothetical multi-party system with two coalition relevant parties, one complementary party and two blackmailing parties (Multilateral distribution with no dominant party)
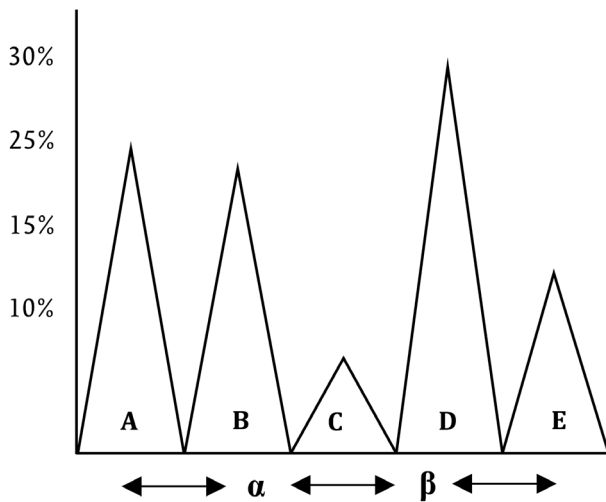
Weights of the parties as % of parliamentary seats: A = 25%; B = 24%; C = 7%; D = 31%; E = 13%.
If B-C-D were the Winning Connected Coalition, *then*:

      A and E: Blackmailing parties.

      B and D: Coalition Relevant Parties.

      C: Complementary Party.

←——→ Drives of the competition.

α and β: «Coalitional Subsystems».

The complementary party, as suggested by Remy (1975),[7] 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 very closely resembles Sartori's conceptualization of the blackmailing potential (Sartori 1976, 123-124, 344), as above recalled in the Introduction section. An example can help to clarify the point, as shown in Figure 1.

In Fig. 1 a hypothetic multi-party system is sketched, in which the weights of the parties as % 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 winning coalition but capable of conditioning (in Sartori's terms) the «direction of the competition».

3. 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 pushed 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 2 above introduced and discussed evidently bows to that tradition.

Nonetheless, the reliability of the unidimensional paradigm has been recurrently questioned, particularly since the turn of the XX Century when the economic and class-centred ideologies of the XIX Century and early XX 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 the «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

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7   See note 6 above.

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.[8] 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), particularly when the left-to-right simplifier ideological criterion is missing.

In a multi-dimensional space the principle of ideological connectedness is not effective anymore, because the parties may rally around single issues or sets of issues. The case might not be particularly relevant when the number of competing parties is limited to two (two-party systems, two-and-a-half-party-systems), but it is when we are observing a «multilateral distribution» of parties either with a dominant party or without it.[9] In such case, the political space might result polarized and it is hard to identify any clear ideological cleavages on it. Position issues are now 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. This does not refer to crossing the floor by MPs, a practice historically widespread among the Italian political class for instance, but to the opportunity for the parties to cross over each other and to establish coalitional links with parties that are not adjacent to them. This would be another deviation of the traditional spatial analysis, which allows only «ideological connected coalitions» (Axelrod 1970). If there are no ideological cleavages and disjoints on the space, why should the parties not coalesce freely? The standard assumption that parties could not cross each other depended on the preliminary adoption of a unidimensional space of competition. Nonetheless, if the parties are not bound any more to the XIX century ideological continuum left-to-right and the space of competition becomes multidimensional, based on a plurality of position issues 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.

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8   A similar criticism with regard with to Sartori's polarized pluralism theory was set by D'Alimonte (1978).

9   For the definition of multilateral distribution, see Ieraci 2012.

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. 1). 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. 1) 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. 1) where some *complementary parties* are orbiting round some *coalition relevant parties*, functioning as sort of anchor points of the system. Therefore, the overall picture would show a complex interplay of centripetal and centrifugal drives.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to reappraise a very promising concept, that of «party coalition potential», which has been neglected through the years and never properly developed. It should be possible to put forward a combinatory index of the parties coalition potential based on their weights (i.e., measured as % of parliamentary seats) and relative distance (i.e., measured as position distance on a cardinal space). Such an index would allow us to classify and distinguish among parties with high\low coalition potential, on one hand, and complementary and blackmailing parties, on the other hand (see Tab. 1). Finally, 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. 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, the systematic surveys of the 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 this direction if the researcher is animated by sufficient stubbornness and he is able to use the main available findings in a selective way. The analysis should be country based and subsequently developed 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 are in need of. The study might prove fruitful in so far as it implements a relative measure of the coalition potential and it has some predictive power.

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