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Abstract:
Since the collapse of the postwar Italian party system in 1992-3, Italian politics has been dominated by the figure of Silvio Berlusconi, undoubtedly the major politician on the political center-right and elected as prime minister successively in 1994, 2001, and 2008. The image of Berlusconi as Italy's political leader is often seen by commentators as much more positive at home than it has been abroad. Some well known foreign media, for example, have been much more consistently negative about Berlusconi's dual role as media baron and political leader than have domestic media (and considerable public opinion) in Italy. If so, then Berlusconi's exit from a central position in Italian politics may create external relief that he is gone and improved regard for Italy as a whole but at the expense of a huge "hole" that his absence may create domestically. On close analysis, however, The presumed gap between views of Berlusconi at "home" and "abroad" looks smaller, however, than conventional wisdom would suggest. At least over the recent course of his political career,

he has stimulated a similar range of increasingly attitudinal negative responses both in Italy and elsewhere, although with variations over time everywhere and from place to place outside of Italy. These responses are increasingly negative, both at home and abroad. Berlusconi's reputation is very much related to popular perceptions of his practical successes and failures as a leader and to what sort of leader he has actually been. It is not simply the result of a "battle" of media images without substantive content. This is encouraging news for those looking towards a future in which Italian politics will be less dominated by popular media such as television and its presumed manipulation of a totally pliant electorate. The exit of the "big seducer" will leave a troubling legacy of unresolved problems while also creating openings for a political future in which Italians may be more collectively invested.

Supporting material:

Appendix 1

The Big Seducer: Berlusconi's Image at Home and Abroad and the Future of Italian Politics

John Agnew

Io l'unico boss virile.
--Silvio Berlusconi

Berlusconi è incapace, vanitoso, inefficace, stanco per le feste selvagge.
--US Ambassador to Italy as reported by WikiLeaks

Since the collapse of the postwar Italian party system in 1992-93, Italian politics has been dominated by the figure of Silvio Berlusconi, previously a savvy and politically connected businessman in construction, television, and advertising, but who has become the epitome of a style of politics and government that Italy and the rest of the world will have to come to terms with now that his epoch as prime minister seems to be ending. The quintessential political survivor since first emerging as a prominent player on the Italian political scene in the early 1990s, Berlusconi scraped through the no confidence vote in the Italian Chamber of Deputies that threatened his political future most directly on December 14, 2010. But since then he has been a dramatically weakened figure dependent on a much more unstable center-right coalition than the one he had thought he had created in 2008. He has survived largely because there is as yet no compelling alternative. If continuing evidence of conflicts of interest between his roles as businessman and political leader do not finish him (*La Stampa* 2011b) perhaps only a massive financial meltdown while he is still prime minister will do so (Dinmore 2011).[1] Whatever Berlusconi's precise political future, it has become a commonplace that that there is a radical disparity between how he is perceived in Italy and what those outside the *patria* think of him. On the one hand it is argued that many foreigners, particularly educated ones, of whatever political inclination, have long been mystified by his repeated popular elevation to high office and despise his rhetorical style and scandalous lifestyle. On the other hand, Italians have been divided in their opinions, while large pluralities or even majorities, winking and nodding at his gaffes, nevertheless returned him to office in 1994, 2001, and 2008. He first found his opening during the political cataclysm of the early 1990s, when all of the ruling parties were swept away and the main opposition parties changed their names and divided. Since then, Berlusconi has managed to create a relatively more coherent and electorally attractive coalition on the center-right than has been possible on the center-left (some of whose own voters in 2008 judged the center-right more "competent") and has mobilized "swing" voters from the center (Bellucci 2008; ITANES 2008). I propose to examine the image of Berlusconi in the Italian and foreign media and in Italian public opinion so as to gain some systematic purchase on the

[1] [Editors' note: Berlusconi resigned as prime minister after the writing of this essay in a way that tends to bear out Prof. Agnew's characterization of the situation as he saw it in summer 2011.]

extent to which this commonplace division between "home" and "abroad" in fact holds up. If it does, then Berlusconi's exit from a central position in Italian politics may create external relief that he is gone and improve regard for Italy abroad but leave a huge vacuum in domestic politics. Before turning to the nature and changing character of Berlusconi's image outside and inside of Italy, I want to anchor my analysis in a summary of how Berlusconi has affected Italian politics and of what sort of leader he has been.

The Berlusconi Effect

For the past twenty years Berlusconi has become synonymous with Italian politics at home and abroad. It is his name and what it signifies in terms of Italian politics as the pursuit of a political leader's private interests and the sidelining of a once powerful political left that has come to represent the country in a way not seen for a single leader since the days of Mussolini and his pursuit of Italian grandeur. Rather like Tony Blair in Britain and George W. Bush in the USA during the same period, Berlusconi captures in one person, and in a peculiarly Italian way, the excesses and the hopes of the era. To many Italians, he is undoubtedly "one of us" in his conviviality, Alpha-male swagger, apparent devotion to his children (if not to his former wife), capacity to ingratiate himself with whomever he is currently seducing (politically and otherwise), reckless hedonism, and (for some men, at least) ability to live out an erotic "dream life" that they can only envy. In one construction, emphasized by the man himself and his propagandists, the epoch found its man and the man found his epoch.

Yet, the Berlusconi "reality show," for all the distractions it has created, has not prevented him from having had a profound impact on the everyday practice of politics and government that will no doubt continue to have consequences long after he is gone from the scene. The first and most important of these is the questioning of and loss of faith in the judicial system and, more broadly, in the Constitution of the Republic. Although the Italian judicial system is certainly not without inherent faults, Berlusconi's single-minded use of office to defend himself against a range of charges stemming from his business dealings and purported payoffs to the Sicilian Mafia has allowed others to justify their own dubious behavior and further undermine the rule of law. Another much more positive but also singular and therefore probably irreproducible impact has been Berlusconi's ability to consolidate a rightwing coalition across disparate geographical allies, notably the populist Northern League and the post-Fascist National Alliance, whose unraveling in 2010 with the defection of Gianfranco Fini brought Berlusconi's leadership role into open crisis. Without Berlusconi as the leader it is unclear how any sort of equivalent to his political grouping on the center-right can be consolidated (Diamanti 2010a). Finally, notwithstanding assertions that he has sacrificed much of his political capital defending himself against corruption and fraud charges, Berlusconi has endorsed policies in ways that will be hard to duplicate and with results that will be hard to reverse. These include such popular if problematic policies as restricting illegal immigration, turning a blind eye to unregulated urban development, and failing to address adequately the criminal level of tax evasion (mainly by Italy's huge class of self-

employed). Internationally Berlusconi has reoriented Italy away from a simple focus on the US and NATO towards a more independent line in his distinctive, peculiarly masculinist relationships with Vladimir Putin in Russia and, until his hand was forced by the Libyan uprising of March 2011, Moammir Ghaddafi in Libya. This "personal geopolitics" garners headlines and some popular support in an era when the barrier between politics and personal celebrity has almost dissolved. If his governments have largely failed to reform the Italian economy to make it more competitive internationally and if his indifference to the moral model he sets has aroused opprobrium for "Italy" more generally, Berlusconi has at least kept Italy in the news. In a world where increasingly there is no such thing as bad publicity this could be spun in a positive light.

Imagining the Leader in the Body Politic

Although there are political regimes that can be characterized as "faceless," most polities rely at least to some degree for their continuity and renewal, particularly at times of widely perceived crisis, on the charismatic appeal of a leader. Beyond the competing policies and ideologies of different parties and factions much of the popular appeal of a given party or candidate comes down to the "image" of leadership, comradeship, and competence that can be created and communicated (on a grand scale, think of Stalin, Churchill, Franco, De Gaulle, Reagan).

What makes for a leader who is seen at the time and subsequently as the very personification of the regime? Most of the best-known of these arrived on the political scene at times of crisis in world or domestic politics. They were and are celebrated, as well as denigrated, for the radical and often painful and violent political changes that they initiated. Berlusconi arrived suddenly on the Italian political scene at precisely that moment at which the old party system had died but a new one had not yet been created. It was one of those rare moments that provide opportunities for ambitious and resourceful figures to emerge outside of the usual tracks of political recruitment to high office and to appeal to people beyond the existing social and political cleavages exposed and exploited by established parties, displaying the quality we now usually designate as "charisma."

The use of charisma as a source of authority in such circumstances has several aspects to it in practice, and all of them figure to one degree or another in Berlusconi's case. The first is an ability to stage or present the new personality as a credible leader to the public, with the background and skills needed to meet the challenges at hand. Invidious comparisons with the "existing political class" and his success in the business world served this purpose for Berlusconi: here was the antidote to the endlessly self-serving, "mere talk" of regular politicians. From this viewpoint, politics is no longer a profession but a mission with the leader as a savior who requires extraordinary powers and promises in return unflinching love of country (Zagrebelsky 2010). As Erving Goffman (1959) famously emphasized in his sociology of self-presentation, the potential leader must also convey a belief in the part he or she is called upon to play. Believability is crucial; the narcissist's belief in self against all odds and all others is an asset. Any inkling of self-doubt condemns the leader in the eyes of potential followers. Of course, Berlusconi's ability to blanket the television airwaves with his story and to put his spin

on any political crisis has given him a tremendous and longstanding advantage over possible competitors. But this would never have been enough in itself to guarantee political success. Finally, Berlusconi came to political prominence in an era in which his career as a media entrepreneur and impresario gave him unique insight into the character of contemporary charisma: its close connection to celebrity (Gundle 2010). We live in a time when many people are famous for being famous rather than for any sort of specific talent or accomplishment. Berlusconi knew this very well from his experience as a purveyor of precisely the sort of television that trades in celebrity. In his script the heroic political leader is at once a man of destiny, a celebrity, and an everyman.

At the same time, however, he is also the personification of the regime, with his active, virile, and repeatedly doctored physical body serving as a stand-in for the country itself (Belpolito 2009). This is the first time since the demise of Mussolini that an Italian political leader has deliberately made so much of his physical appearance as part of his leadership "style." It is fundamentally different from the case of Mussolini, however. The Duce continued the great tradition of the "king's two bodies" (Kantorowicz 1957), whereby the ruler embodies the "invisible reality" or sacral charisma of the state as well as his mortal person; Berlusconi is a postmodern man with a "mindful body" that relies for its public impression of "freshness…[and] youthfulness, that is provided by means of lifting, liposuction, transplants" (Belpoliti 2009, 94). The weird afterlife of Mussolini's body following his assassination and burial serves to underscore the difference, as the Duce's remains became the stand-in for the lost regime and not simply the perpetual resurrection of the man himself (Luzzatto 1998). Berlusconi presents himself in the body of a serial seducer, preserved into old age by modern cosmetic surgery, symbolic of not only continuing sexual prowess but of that capacity for political seduction that has a long tradition in Italian political philosophy, from Machiavelli to Gramsci. Even so, charisma or seductive charm depends on circumstances, and Berlusconi's leadership has played into the social transition that Italy has experienced since the 1980s (Bonomi 2010). Old ties to local communities have been disrupted by the new economic fragility of a world increasingly dominated by transnational flows; immigration and, the weakening of social consensus, all of which have threatened established social mores. A politics of fear, anger, and resentment is one result. Along with the Northern League's appeal to local interests and identities in northern Italy, Berlusconi's appeal to conventional nostrums ranging from "hard work" and "family" to defending Italian society against its "enemies" (e.g. Marinelli and Matassa 2006; Maltese 2009) relies fundamentally on fear of an uncertain future that, ironically, entrepreneurs like him have done much to stimulate and from which they profit handsomely. The net effect of appealing to fear as a primary political message has been to produce a political climate of contestation, denunciation, stigmatization, character assassination, and demonization of political opponents in which all sides quickly become co-involved (Lazar 2009).

The image of a leader such as Berlusconi, therefore, is not simply a superficial means of messaging but much of the message itself. How it is observed inside and outside of Italy has important consequences for present and future prospects of an Italian political regime without the man himself. Italy's political image at home and abroad is now closely interwoven with that of this man.

The Foreign Media

Few if any polls or surveys exist outside of Italy asking for popular impressions of Berlusconi's "image." A plausible alternative source, if obviously not sufficient or conclusive, of such impressions is the foreign media. Foreign journalists, particularly those reporting from Italy, have much more knowledge of Berlusconi and Italian politics than do their compatriots. They also are more likely to have developed opinions about his persona and his political performance (in all meanings of the term). But they must slant and orient their stories towards established frames of reference for characterizing Italy and its politics including the stereotypes that are an inevitable part of reporting from exotic locales. In this respect, news accounts provide a useful overview of how Berlusconi and Italian politics of the past few years have been seen from outside.

I draw here mainly on an analysis of the figure of Berlusconi in the foreign news media over a period of nine months in late 2009 and early 2010 following the "Noemi-D'Addario" sex scandals of summer 2009 but before the defection/expulsion of Fini from Berlusconi's PdL party in April 2010 (*AnalisiPolitica* 2010). I supplement this with reference to more recent commentary since March 2010, particularly in the US and UK press. Fully forty-one on-line news media from Brazil, Canada, the US, France, Germany, Spain, and the UK provide the sources of the main analysis. The articles surveyed include all those with both positive and negative interpretations of Berlusconi.

Eight dimensions of reportage come out of the content analysis of the news media stories. The first four are critical and the second four more positive. The critical ones are as follows:

1. His role as politician/businessman. This covers the abuse of public power to pursue his own private interests, his engagement in politics to protect himself from legal challenges, his use of office to defend his media interests, and his failure to follow through on really resolving crises because of distractions from his personal and business problems.

2. His relationship to institutions, particularly his disrespect for the public prosecutors, the judiciary, and the Presidency of the Republic.

3. His populist modus operandi. This includes his dictatorial tendencies, delegitimizing of adversaries, demagogic manipulation of public opinion, and lack of interest in contradictory information.

4. His poor reputation. This covers his lack of respect for behavioral rituals, his gaffes, his embarrassing public mimicking of others (including foreign political leaders), his machismo (particularly in his greetings of women),

and his penchant for serial sexual scandals often involving charges concerning underage girls.

The more positive ones are as follows:

1. His "closeness" to the population in the sense of seeming familiarity with their "needs" and his own background as a successful self-made entrepreneur adept at providing solutions.

2. His personal authority and ability to command respect and thus to engage effectively in politics.

3. His passion and tenacity. This refers to the optimism and willpower that Berlusconi brings to his work that in turns transmits a positive outlook to those who follow him.

4. His good reputation. Here the emphasis is on his strategic intelligence, his skill as a negotiator, and his reinvigoration of Italy's relations with other countries. His informal style wins over others. Examples of his apparent managerial competence (such as his immediate man-on-the-spot responses to the Naples garbage crisis of 2008 and the L'Aquila earthquake of 2009) further this side of his image and in some cases seem to have given Italy an international credibility it hitherto lacked.

From this content analysis around 2300 expressions were found in which "Italy" and "Berlusconi" figured of which 768 strongly correlated with the eight categories (Table 1). The other 1532 are neutral and descriptive in tone or do not correlate with either the dominant themes of the content analysis or any other clear conceptual categories relating to Berlusconi's reputation. On this empirical basis, the judgments of the foreign news media taken as a whole divide almost equally between positive (47 percent) and critical (53 percent). Nevertheless, the "poor reputation" category is the single most important, reflecting perhaps the wide reporting of the summer 2009 sex scandals. Beyond this, however, the negative and positive attributions tend to alternate across sources indicating the complex image of Berlusconi beyond Italian shores.

But is this pattern equally true everywhere and across specific news outlets? Here the picture becomes more interesting and revealing. Using a factor analysis of results, different media groupings can be characterized in terms of which items or themes tend to predominate in their coverage of Berlusconi (Figure 1). Three major groups appear. North American news outlets tend to the most positive, emphasizing his general good reputation, his leadership, and his effectiveness as a politician. Canadian outlets, though,

tend to be more critical of his populism. The Brazilian and Spanish outlets are, to the contrary, almost entirely negative though with recognition of his personal authority interpreted largely in a negative light. Finally, in France and the UK, somewhat less in Germany, news media judge Berlusconi in a more two-sided manner. At one and the same time he is viewed as using his public position for private gain but also as having a rapport with a large segment of the Italian population that cannot be ignored in an effective politician (for similar findings, see, e.g. Diedrichs 2010; Chelotti 2010; and Graziano 2010, although none of these articles is concerned just with Berlusconi's image but more with Italy's image as a whole in the countries in question).

Finally, across sixteen of the news outlets data are provided for the degree to which Berlusconi is characterized in negative and positive terms (Table 2). As is evident, there is some variance, with *Sky News UK* at one extreme with an entirely negative view of Berlusconi during the period of analysis and *The Times* (London) at the other with 71 percent positive reportage. The first of these outlets is partly owned and the second entirely owned by Rupert Murdoch, like Berlusconi an important media baron, so it is hard to say that there is a consistent political agenda at work in these cases. Most British media on average have tended to the negative. Famously, of course, the British weekly, *The Economist*, has long campaigned against Berlusconi's fusion of roles as businessman and politician and the conflicts of interest this naturally engenders. This campaign may have had a long-term impact on other British media. In other countries, beyond Canada and the US where all outlets tend to the positive, news media are also somewhat divided, if not as much as in the British case. In Spain, for example, the state TV channel is largely negative as is the newspaper *El Pais*, whereas the newspaper *El Mundo* tracks more positively.

Since early 2010, British and US outlets as a whole seem to have drifted generally towards more negative renderings of Berlusconi. Of course, this probably reflects the increased pace of scandals of one sort or another in which he is implicated: the Antigua land deal scandal; the successful prosecution of his close friend and political ally Marcello Dell'Utri for association with the Mafia; the "Rubygate" or "BungaBunga" scandal about wild parties at his villa at Arcore outside of Milan and in residences in Rome and Sardinia; his interference in October 2010 in the arrest of one of the girls (at the time underage) who had been engaged in those parties on numerous occasions. It also reflects for some outlets, most of all those with a primarily economic and financial outlook, such as the *Financial Times*, the distraction from government that Berlusconi's seemingly constant run-ins with the judiciary and his scandalous lifestyle have brought about. By November and December of 2010 most coverage in the US and UK press was about whether or how much longer he could survive politically in the face of Italy's economic difficulties, his own declining popularity among Italians, and the defection of previous allies. Even former "friends" such as the *The (London) Times* no longer see him as an effective and formidable politician. If in the nine months between June 1, 2009 and March 1, 2010 *The Times* reported 280 stories about Berlusconi (plus forty-seven in *The Sunday Times*), between March 1, 2010 and November 30, 2010 the number of stories diminished to 134 (plus sixty-one), respectively, and the tone was increasingly negative. Few if any stories now concerned his "successful" dealings with foreign potentates or his command of the Italian electorate and most depicted him in relatively scurrilous terms as a leader in decline and suffering from delusions of grandeur. The sex scandals may have

dominated the typical narrative in comparison with all of the other potential themes thus obscuring the increasingly widespread perception of the institutional costs of Berlusconi's continued occupancy of high office. But the tide had seemingly turned in an overwhelmingly negative direction. Nothing since then would lead to a reversal of this judgment.

Domestic Currents of Opinion

From the outset of his political career, Berlusconi has been a polarizing figure within Italy. Hostility to his political agenda indeed even gave rise to a political party, Italy of Values headed by the former anti-corruption prosecutor, Antonio Di Pietro, directed almost entirely towards removing him from office. But there has still been a generally favorable consensus towards him in the years from 1994 until the present, even as he has often not been the single most popular politician in the country as whole at any particular moment. This is in a context, however, of highly fragmented political opinion. Relative to the entire electorate, Berlusconi's party has never achieved more than 20 percent of the total potential vote and his personal support, expressed in preference votes, has never been any higher than that (Ricolfi 2011).

A March 2010 nationwide poll about Berlusconi attempted to place him in the overall context of Italian politics (*AnalisiPolitica* 2010). This provides an important source of domestic opinion about Berlusconi as a political leader. As with many surveys and polls, however, the structured questions used in the poll tend to rather cryptic responses that oversimplify what may well be a more complex amalgam of opinions. Two questions from the poll seem to be particularly relevant. In response to a question about whether or not Italian politics has changed for the better, the worse, or not much, 10.6 percent thought for the best, 43.3 percent for the worse, and 38.4 percent not much (7.7 percent don't know). At the same time, and in a second question, Berlusconi was identified by the largest group of respondents (33.1 percent) as the "different" one – in the sense of "exceptional" and "distinctive" not necessarily "good" or "better" – from a list of well-known Italian politicians. His nearest competitor, Umberto Bossi, had 20.7 percent.

How can these two facets of the recent historical context and Berlusconi's "difference" be connected to one another? It seems clear that at least as of March 2010 when this poll was conducted, Silvio Berlusconi remained *sui generis* among the major figures in Italian politics. Since then his popularity has undoubtedly declined. According to the *Demos* poll, the highest rankings in terms of potential voters went from 44.6 percent in March 2010 to a high of 51.3 in May and a steady drop to 32.4 by November 18 (*Demos* 2010).This has been, in the words of one commentator, the "long autumn of the Cavaliere (Berlusconi)" (Sorgi 2010).The decline reflects a real loss of popularity that would mean the ruin of any typical political leader, and yet Berlusconi does not present himself and does not appear to many Italians as a conventional politician. He is neither the figurehead for a party run by someone else nor the representative of a patronage-based faction or of an ideological movement. In some accounts, this is because he is central to a complete reorientation of Italian politics around a totally performative model,

reflecting Berlusconi's experience in television and show business and his control since the 1980s of much of Italian private television broadcasting and his influence over the public channels during his periods in government. In the words of one foreign commentator who follows Berlusconi and Italian politics very closely:

> Berlusconi has transformed the political life of a major nation into a kind of reality TV show in which he is the star, producer, and network owner: he is the ultimate "Survivor," who will lie and cheat to kick others off the island as well as "The Bachelor," distributing roses to a beautiful group of young women.… Berlusconi has understood that contemporary politics is a permanent campaign. (Stille 2010a, 18; more generally, see Stille 2010b)

There is, of course, much truth to this. Who could deny it after a long 2010 of sex scandals involving Berlusconi personally and after many years of political gaffes (particularly in relation to foreigners who bridle at Berlusconi's modus operandi) and obvious attempts at turning Italian politics into a branch of show business by cultivating a cult of celebrity and surrounding himself with glamorous and beautiful people (above all, women)? The electorate is his audience; he never disappoints them. They are apparently enthralled.

Another story, however, addresses Berlusconi's political persona in a somewhat different fashion. From this viewpoint, Berlusconi is actually more of a historically and geographically contingent figure. His control over so much of Italian television is not so directly important. He has become important politically to a considerable extent because of his capacity to weld together an unwieldy coalition of political currents drawn from across the country not just by means of his role as a national impresario or big seducer but also as a political operative capable of keeping such antithetical figures as Bossi and Fini within a center-right camp that he has largely crafted. The 2010 regional elections suggest some of the real limits on his capability, not least in the rise of the League at the expense of his own PdL in the Italian North. Nonetheless, the fact that the elections turned out so well for the center-right as a whole, given the difficulties Berlusconi has faced within his coalition and with the overall lack of active policies to address Italy's economic troubles, signals the extent to which he remained the conductor of a center-right political orchestra which is still more electorally potent than any other political force in contemporary Italy. The elections and referenda of May 2011, however, with major personal defeats for Berlusconi given the losses of mayoral races in Milan and Naples for candidates he had strongly backed and overwhelming defeats in a series of national referenda issues on nuclear power, water privatization, and criminal immunity for political leaders, suggest an approaching political denouement (e.g. Panebianco 2011; Sanderson 2011).

Even though popular opinion in Italy as of March 2010 saw Italian politics as largely unchanged or changed for the worse since Berlusconi exploded onto the political scene in 1994, he is viewed as being the politician who is both more "different" from the others and, among those reporting this sentiment, more oriented to "fixing" problems than to "foreseeing" them (*AnalisiPolitica* 2010). This is evidently attractive to such people. As

Berlusconi said of himself in regard to the 2010 regional electoral competition, "Either with me, a man of doing, or with the Left of words." At the same time, he is associated by those seeing him as "different" with a lack of change in Italian politics. In other words, the one figure most central to Italian national politics of the past twenty years is identified by those who see him as different with continuity in respect to the past rather than with either change for the better or change for the worse in Italian politics. In a sense, he is identified with "politics as usual" *and* the practical politics in which such people are most invested. Critics frequently note the extent to which he is "different" in defending himself from criminal charges and tending to his business interests at the expense of his official responsibilities. Of course, all of this publicity serves to keep him in the public eye.

A judgment of "difference," then, can be based on love or admiration but also on hate or annoyance. The positive reading may account, at least in part, for the perceived extent to which Berlusconi is viewed as a problem solver (along with his obvious success as a businessman, whatever the questionable sources of his entry into a number of business ventures). But both motivations for seeing him as different, positive and negative, probably account for his overall high salience as a politician. His "difference" has at least some basis, therefore, in his notoriety. In this regard he also easily eclipses Umberto Bossi, notwithstanding the latter's obviously unsavory reputation in some quarters, particularly outside northern Italy.

This brings us to additional components of Berlusconi's "difference" from other leading Italian politicians. One is that he is truly a nationwide figure in ways that most of the others are not. Those noting his "difference" come in more or less equal proportion from across the country. One surmises that those respondents noting his "difference" coming from the more center-left redoubts of Central Italy may be of a more negative cast about the difference in question, but that can only be speculation. He is also, remarkably for a relatively old man, marked as "different" most of all by those under age thirty-five. Perhaps this is the demographic most in touch with his performative brilliance (see also the discussion of Diamanti 2010c). Finally, in this perspective of "difference," he remains very much the central figure in his center-right coalition, notwithstanding Bossi's success in the 2010 regional elections and Gianfranco Fini's longstanding expectations of possible succession (until his break with Berlusconi in the summer of 2010). Rusconi (2010) captures the chameleon quality of Berlusconi's ability to address different color-coded groups. This formula for his success as a campaigner in building a popular electoral coalition then detracts from his ability to do much beyond appeasing any of them once in office, "[becoming] more green in order to camouflage himself with the leghisti [the Northern League], he will be blue to keep around himself the…,people of liberty,' and he will always be white to calm down the Church Catholics. Whoever expects his imminent demise, must readjust their forecasts" (translation mine).

In the early years of Berlusconi's political ascension much was made of the success his party, *Forza Italia* at the time, had in bringing women voters into the fold, even in the hostile territory of central Italy. The argument ran that watching the soap operas and game shows on Berlusconi's channels softened up the audience, overwhelmingly a female one, for future electoral conquest by the king of television himself. Perhaps the recent sex scandals and the recruitment of television showgirls en masse into the political ranks of PdL have led to a backlash. Women now see Berlusconi as much less "different"

than do men (*AnalisiPolitica* 2010, supplemental tables). Both positively and negatively men much more than women see Berlusconi as a "different politician." Perhaps the TV/Silvio reality show argument can be overplayed. Berlusconi's "difference" is about much more than his television empire and the conversion of Italy into a gigantic reality program. He is much more than a *mere* performance. He has remained central to Italian national politics for so long because he knows how to create and manage a successful political coalition.

This does not mean that Berlusconi has not benefited from his control over so much of Italian television. Most Italians get the greater part of their news from television and until recently this has meant the news broadcasts on either one of Berlusconi's own channels or two of the state channels that he controls when in office. American readers might think of a cross between Fox News and Entertainment Tonight. There is now a channel, Channel 7, that actually tries to deliver real news. But for newspaper readers, Berlusconi has had more to contend with. Beyond his own subservient outlets, *Il Giornale* and *Il Libero*, he has long been challenged openly by *La Repubblica*, the paper to which his wife wrote complaining about his possible infidelity with an underage girl: a double humiliation. The other two major "quality" newspapers, *La Stampa* (Turin) and *Corriere della Sera* (Milan) have been more circumspect (Gundle 2010). Neither has been shy, however, in drawing attention to Berlusconi's conflicts of interest and his scandalous behavior. This orientation, increasingly evident since 2008, reflects the more pervasive and open discussion among Italians of Berlusconi's conflicts of interest and the costs they impose on the country in the form of reduced attention to national policy and the abuse of a parliamentary majority to ward off his legal problems amidst a deepening economic crisis (Newell 2009). The editorial pages of both *La Stampa* and *Corriere della Sera* have also recently drawn attention to the institutional problems posed by a leader with little or no respect for established canons of constitutional propriety (however often they may have been violated in the past) and the essentially self-serving nature of his role in national politics. They both reflect and reinforce the fact that Berlusconi is indeed a polarizing figure in Italian politics in which his dual role as businessman/politician, his mixed personal reputation, and his difficult relationship with various state institutions undermines what could otherwise be seen as his political virtues, particularly the consolidation of the center-right in Italian politics.

Italy's Political Future in the Aftermath of Berlusconi

It seems clear, then, that the presumed gap between views of Berlusconi at "home" and "abroad" looks much smaller than conventional wisdom would suggest. At least over the course of his political career and until recently, he stimulated a similar range of responses both in Italy and elsewhere. If foreigners were perhaps more taken with his sexual peccadilloes and personal geopolitics and Italians more with his conflicts of interest and his institutional difficulties, his notoriety in both positive and negative registers was always one of his main claims to fame. But a perception of notoriety in a negative register has become more significant. The range of opinion between home and abroad narrowed considerably over the course of 2010, as foreign media turned increasingly

hostile, negatives in polls at home increasingly eclipsed whatever positives he once may have enjoyed (e.g. *Censis* 2010). So, though he survived the denouement predicted for him by many commentators foreign and domestic in the Italian Parliament in December 2010 (as much by "buying" votes as by dint of his charisma), the endgame seems under way. With his likely exit from national politics what consequences can we expect?

On what can be construed as the positive side, one can speculate that the Italian legal system would undoubtedly receive some respite from the demand that the prime minister be shielded from prosecution and some reinforcement of the idea that the rule of law applies equally to everyone under a republican system of government. Italian foreign relations will be less likely to be based on personal affinities and the merging of a political leader's political and business roles. The neglect of Italy's role in the European Union and the Eurozone has been a major feature of Berlusconi's periods in office with the obvious consequence of a lack of Italian influence in those quarters, illustrated, for example, by the avoidable conflict over the Italian sanctioned passage of clandestine Tunisian immigrants to France in April 2011 (*La Stampa* 2011a). Institutionally, the obvious priority given to Berlusconi's private affairs (in all senses of the term) has paralyzed government. Failures include unfilled ministerial posts and unkept promises to resolve serious local problems (such as the Naples refuse/garbage crisis and the aftermath of the L'Aquila earthquake). Nor has he succeeded in reforming the slow-moving judicial system or made any headway toward adopting a serious devolution plan (as opposed to a half-baked "fiscal federalism.")[2] Whether any alternative leader would do much better is of course moot. Whether they could do much worse is not.

Given that some of the practical appeal of Berlusconi is that he has been a successful businessman, why should he have been such a terrible public manager? The problem is that the trope of "running government like a business" is completely misleading. Governments do things that businesses cannot. They provide goods and services that cannot be made to "pay" in a way analogous to business. What Berlusconi brought to government was a massive facility with PR. Having been fooled by propaganda on this scale once before, Italians might be expected to be a little more circumspect about matching promises to outcomes the second time around. But political memory is fickle. Finally, absent Berlusconi, a more conventional politics of ideological and policy competition forged in the heat of popular debate could return. This would at last end the perpetual transition to a "new" politics based on competing approaches to addressing Italy's many public problems that many believed was possible following the collapse of the "Cold War" party system, but that was hijacked by Berlusconi for his own purposes. Of course, this remains very much to be seen. Elections in many countries are more and more often simply about campaigns and the marketing of candidates (e.g. Shea 1999). Berlusconi is hardly unique in his shrill negative caricatures of his adversaries and his determination to win at all costs.

On the downside, perhaps, the disintegration of the center-right without Berlusconi's leadership will further undermine the drift towards bipolarity in Italian electoral politics, thus increasing the likelihood of post-election party coalitions, division of the spoils, and subsequent instability. This would be all the more likely if there is no more coherent

[2] This "fiscal federalism," which involved devolving some governmental powers and revenue collection to administrative regions, bears no relationship to any known federalism in theory or in practice (Maltese 2009).

electoral system than the one in place since 2006, with its preposterous "topping up" of seats to the winning coalition, seats that do not represent actual constituencies but enable the leaders of the coalition to select friends and neighbors as voting fodder in parliament. More specifically, the unbundling of the center-right coalition will likely exacerbate the North-South tension in Italian politics because Berlusconi has long managed to draw into his orbit elements of the center-right with distinctive constituencies in the various regions of Italy (Shin and Agnew 2008; Ricolfi 2010; Diamanti 2011). In fact, centrist party systems are both more typical and more often successful in making policy than are bipolar ones, particularly in countries such as Italy that are strongly divided socially and geographically (Mastropaolo 2008). Italy's current bipolar arrangement in fact has encouraged constitutional meddling and elite polarization at the same time as it has exacerbated the North/South political-economic divide.

A "new project of centrist restoration" (Mastropaolo 2008, 412) organized around a reborn centrist coalition such as operated in Italy from the 1950s until 1992 could very well provide a replacement for what Berlusconi has wrought. A poll in late 2010 suggested that the two major parties on the center-right (PdL) and center-left (PD) between them would now garner only 55 percent of potential votes compared to 70 percent in 2008 (Diamanti 2010b). If much of the decline on the center-right can be put down to the diminishing attraction of Berlusconi, the center-left suffers from a deficit of "personality" because of the overall influence of Il Cavaliere (and Bossi) on the contemporary Italian political scene and the shape-shifting and politically illegible character of the main party on the left ever since the demise of the old parties that provided its "base" in the early 1990s. Yet, at the same time, much Italian public opinion is also increasingly polarized between right and left. What is more, there is trend among younger Italians, particularly the less well educated in the historic "red" regions of central Italy, to become more conservative than their parents. This is particularly true of young men relative to their fathers (Smargiassi 2010) and contributes another feature to the legacy of Silvio Berlusconi: an increasingly apparent gender divide in Italian politics. Berlusconi's "charisma" has worn off more completely with women than with men. A strengthening of the center would not address such continuing pressures to left-right polarization, even in the absence of Berlusconi.

Conclusion

As the easy victories are replaced by difficult problems and the system of supports begins to collapse, so does the image of the leader. This is what seems to be happening to Berlusconi, whatever his successes in buying votes and time in office over the next months or even years ahead. While he is still around in an active role, however, there will be scope for both increased political alienation at home and deepening derision abroad. In both settings Berlusconi now faces a major credibility problem that is largely new since 2009. I see no prospect of his rehabilitating his foreign media image and his standing in Italian public opinion even to the levels of late 2009. His continuation in office will see only continuing damage to the reputation of Italy and its political institutions. Berlusconi no longer controls the national narrative. The accumulation of personal scandals and

policy failures erodes his capacity to spin himself out of any one of them. Condemning all of his enemies as "Communists," for example, no longer works when some of his new biggest enemies are former (and former neo-Fascist) allies. Yet, the aftermath of his rule is not likely to bring instant relief from all of Italy's myriad political, social, and economic problems. His influence will be felt for years after he has gone from the scene. On the 150th anniversary of Italian unification it is perhaps timely to consider how to move beyond the sort of commercialized and personalized politics symbolized by Berlusconi and the Italy he represents (Ginsborg 2010). More immediately, the question remains: when will he will finally go and under what conditions? Will he step down only if protected from prosecution from offenses committed before as well as during the period when he was in high office? And will Italians come to see that every seduction, perhaps especially a political one, is usually followed by a betrayal? Let us hope in any event that they can finally bring themselves to believe in a political future in which they may become more collectively invested.

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