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Introductory Note to Dott. Vito Cozzoli's
Parliamentary Groups in the Evolving Italian Political System

Dante Figueroa*

This article authored by Dott. Vito Cozzoli, general counsel for the Chamber of Deputies at the Italian Parliament, concerns the role of parliamentary groups in the current Italian political system, and comes at a meaningful time in the development of parliamentary democracies in the Western Hemisphere. In effect, the post-World War II reconstruction of Europe occurred through political regimes centered around the prominent role of parliaments, as opposed to the former regimes based on the unmatched domination of the executive branch. Italy's most recent political and constitutional upheavals illustrate this reality.

In this context, Dott. Cozzoli's article clearly identifies the current political debate and its constitutional ramifications in Italy: namely, whether the parliamentary system in vogue should be centered in disciplined and solid political parties or directly on the political representatives of the people. The response to this conundrum does not seem to emerge in a clear manner from Italy's current parliamentary scheme. In fact, the current debate, as the author points out, delves into the question of the extent to which the role of parliamentary groups should be protected, increased, or diminished, in order to provide a stable and functional development for the Italian political system. In this sense, neither the Italian nor the American paradigms offer a panorama of full political discipline within their legislative deliberative bodies. However, as the author notes, the Italian structure, which extends meaningful protections to parliamentary groups, goes far beyond the

* Dante Figueroa is a law scholar in comparative corporate and constitutional law. He is an Adjunct Professor at the Georgetown Law Center and the Washington College of Law. He has written or co-authored four books, and his articles are available at http://ssrn.com/author=1015723. He is a member of the bar associations of D.C., NY, Chile, the U.S. Supreme Court, and the Court of International Trade, and served as the elected Secretary General of the Inter-American Bar Association for the 2012-2013 period. He is fluent in Spanish, English, French and Italian and can be reached at: df257@georgetown.edu.
perceived legislative autonomy witnessed at the United States Congress.

In turn, the author draws comparisons between the fragmented parliamentary system currently found in Italy and the somehow unified semi-presidentialist scheme ("semi-presidentialist" is a standard jargon in comparative constitutional law, mainly in Europe) reigning in the United States. Consequently, the author clarifies that the parliamentary "caucuses" in the United States bear no resemblance to the fractured Italian parliamentary groups; the difference resides in the strength of the former as opposed of the nearly unchecked freedom of action benefitting the latter. In a sense, the author conveys the notion that even though both the United States and the Italian forms of government rely on the principle of majoritarianism, over the years the Italian scheme has created a series of mechanisms that have attenuated an overwhelmingly influential majority. Those majority-tempering mechanisms include the assignment of important parliamentary roles to minority political movements and actors through the formation of autonomous parliamentary groups, which are recognized and validated through internal parliamentary regulations.

The author also asserts that the Italian parliamentary system based on parliamentary groups is to be regarded as a "transitional phase." Doubtless, such description would be deemed politically unrealistic if applied to the United States political system, where the principles of checks and balances award, in theory, an equal role to the three branches of government. Ultimately, that is not the situation in Italy, where the legislative branch constitutionally holds the upper hand in the government of the country. This year's political crisis in which Italy was without a government for about two months is an example of the risks inherent to that system.

The comparatively younger American democratic experiment has not (so far) yielded to a multiparty system; in fact, without the support of one the two traditional parties, election to legislative office is extremely unlikely and difficult. The commanding position of the established political parties determines the internal organization of legislative leadership within the United States Congress. In the Italian case, as the author demonstrates, a convoluted internal regulatory framework built upon a push-and-pull scheme secures relevant leverage for parliamentary minorities
and individual parliamentary members in ways which would be unthinkable and unachievable in the current U.S. system.

Furthermore, the landmark institution of the "Mixed Group" existing in the Italian legislative arrangement does not find an equivalent in the United States congressional organization, where such a "melting pot" scheme would simply imply a destruction of the present strict bipolarity defining it. Said differently, while in Italy electoral laws seem to include an intense focus on the internal organization of the legislative branch, in the American model, such laws pivot around the definition of electoral districts and thus center on the composition itself of the legislative body.

The current "transitional" Italian parliamentary modus responds to the complex realities of a seasoned political society that has gone through different forms of government throughout its long history. In turn, the American society has known only two political systems, both of them enjoying a high degree of centralization: namely the British monarchy, and the current superseding democratic experiment, which has lasted for a little over two centuries. In sum, Dott. Cozzoli's well-versed article clarifies concepts about the functioning of the Italian democratic system that are difficult at first to grasp for the average American reader. The author wisely and generously has opened a rich venue for research on the topic of the role of parliaments in Western democracies, and in that way—we hope—he is pioneering more fruitful exchanges between the American and Italian experiences.