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### The political systems of Italian regions between state-wide logics and increasing differentiation

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## The political systems of Italian regions between state-wide logics and increasing differentiation<sup>1</sup>

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The aim of this article is to describe the evolution of the Italian regional party systems 25 years after the establishment of 15 Ordinary Statute regions and five years after the implementation of a major Constitutional reform increasing the powers of the regions and the visibility of regional political actors. The theoretical point of departure of the article is the second order election model originally applied to European elections to highlight their dependence on the national political level. The article begins by showing that this model has been applicable for regional elections only since the mid-1990s, a finding that goes against the conventional wisdom. The article then explains the structure of regional political competition through the analysis of two phenomena, fragmentation and differentiation, and the way they are correlated, stressing the changing pattern of competition before and after the breakdown of the First Republic.

**Keywords:** Italy; regions; elections; territories; subcultures; ethno-regionalist parties

### Introduction

As institutions, regions are the basis of a new organisation for territorial governance in Italy. But they are also the framework in which democratic political competition takes place. In this article we aim to enter into the details of regional politics with a twofold scope: to understand the relevance of regional elections for Italian politics in general, and to assess the degree, nature and extent of political diversity between regions.

Before going to the core of our argument, a quick rehearsal of the main features that organise regional politics in Italy is necessary. Originally, regions (both special and ordinary) reflected the parliamentary form of the Italian state, and the electoral law, again in line with the national one, was strictly proportional. However, the political earthquake following the corruption scandals of Tangentopoli, coupled with the quest for autonomy coming from the north and backed by the electoral rise of the *Lega Nord*, has had relevant consequences also at the regional level, producing significant institutional changes during the 1990s (Mazzoleni 2009). As far as the electoral rules are concerned, the law adopted for ordinary statute regions in 1995 introduced a mixed system.<sup>2</sup> Some 80% of seats were allocated by means of proportional representation in a competition among provincial lists, while the remaining 20% of seats were allocated as a ‘majority bonus’ to the list (that is to

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say, the party or the coalition of parties) obtaining a plurality of votes on regional basis.<sup>3</sup> In the proportional part, a legal threshold for representation was also introduced at 3%, but only for parties not included in coalitions, or included in coalitions not reaching 5% of valid votes. As can be seen, a strong incentive for small parties to join the major coalitions was established, as no threshold was foreseen for parties in this case. On the other hand, even the contribution of weak parties could be precious for the main coalitions in case of a close competition, in order to earn the 'big prize' of the majority bonus. The foundations for a 'fragmented bipolarism' (Chiaramonte and Di Virgilio 2000) were thus laid.<sup>4</sup>

A further Constitutional amendment was passed in 1999, leaving to the autonomous decision of each region the choice of the electoral system and the form of government, while establishing the direct election of the President of the region (although this feature was already implicit in the 1995 electoral reform) as a default option. Since then, only four regions have taken the opportunity to modify the electoral system (Puglia, Calabria, Lazio and Tuscany). Among these, Tuscany has introduced the most notable innovations.<sup>5</sup> In any case, no region has questioned the mixed nature of the electoral system and the principle of the majority bonus as a means to guarantee stable governments.

In special statute regions, electoral reforms had been theoretically possible since the date of the establishment of regions themselves. In practice, however, all of them had maintained the original parliamentary form of government and proportional systems until the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> In 2001 the Constitutional amendment established a default option for the direct election of the executive leader also in these regions, as already determined for ordinary ones, with the possibility of further modifications. Today the president is directly elected in Sardinia, Sicily, Friuli-Venezia Giulia<sup>7</sup> and Trentino<sup>8</sup>, which also have different versions of mixed electoral systems with a majority bonus. A parliamentary system and a pure proportional law are instead in force in the Valle d'Aosta and South Tyrol.

What, then, is the impact of the creation of those regional spaces of political competition? In the next section we show, against the conventional wisdom, that the fact that regional elections can be considered as second-order elections is a recent trend in Italian politics. Then in the third section, we investigate the structuring of regional political competition, looking more closely at two of its main dimensions: differentiation and fragmentation. In the two final sections, we analyse the factors that can explain the changing pattern of competition under the First and the Second Republics. We argue that the changing relationships between fragmentation and differentiation, illustrated in the third section, should be understood as a symptom of a deeper phenomenon that characterises the critical juncture of the 1990s; it is closely linked to the decreasing strength of state-wide party organisations and to the rise of a new type of local and personal party.

### **Regional elections as second-order elections: a recent trend**

While regional autonomy was gradually growing in Italy<sup>9</sup>, to what extent did regional politics follow its own path? Before the 1992–1994 turmoil, the opinion that Italian regional politics was a minor replication of national themes and trends was widely accepted. For example, De Mucci (1987) described voting behaviour and the format of party competition in regional elections as basically anchored to a national political logic, the only differences being a lower level of participation and interest and slightly looser

party loyalties, also due to less intense efforts in electoral campaigning by party organisations. As we have just shown, a number of incisive reforms were carried out in the 1990s, so that it could reasonably be expected that regional politics would acquire greater autonomy, increasing diversification among regions and making the regional vote less dependent on national dynamics.

This notwithstanding, the interpretations based on ‘regional dependence’ on the national level have been considered largely valid by the observers of regional politics also in recent years. Chiamonte and Di Virgilio (2000, 513) claim, for instance, that ‘voters’ behaviour and forms of competition have remained anchored to a ‘general politics’ logic, while D’Alimonte and De Sio (2007, 145) underline the relevance of regional elections as a test for the national incumbent government. The particular shape of the Italian electoral calendar has helped this reading. Since the mid-1990s, in fact, the regional vote has regularly taken place on the eve of the parliamentary one, transforming it into a sort of dress rehearsal, anticipating trends and suggesting judgements that unfailingly find confirmation the following year. Thus, in the 1995 regional elections the widespread success of the centre-left parties anticipated the victory of the Olive tree coalition in 1996, and the same happened with the 2005 results, anticipating the return of Prodi as Prime Minister the following year. Analogously, the 2001 victory of the centre-right coalition was anticipated by the success in most regions one year before.

Such a configuration evokes the second-order elections model (Reif and Schmidt 1980). This was developed referring to the European Parliament and it is based on the idea that voters use these elections to express their satisfaction, or their disappointment, towards national (i.e. first-order) political actors. The central hypothesis emerging from this intuition is that governing parties will perform well if second-order elections are held soon after the national ones (while they are in a ‘honeymoon’ period with their electors); by the same token, they will perform worse if second-order elections are held later, and particularly around mid-legislature. Also, small parties should perform better than big ones, if it is true that the latter will not put all of their efforts into the electoral campaign for an arena that is perceived not to be decisive, while voters, for their part, will not feel constrained by strategic voting considerations and will be more inclined to choose a party that is closer to their preferences, even if this might imply a wasted vote.<sup>10</sup>

We claim that a closer look at the model of second-order elections and its application to Italian regional elections can nonetheless reveal some interesting evidence running *against* the thesis of a substantial continuity between the First and the Second Republics, and actually making the picture more complex than the ‘regional dependence’ thesis suggests. Table 1 provides a fairly clear picture of the nature of regional elections: *regional elections in Italy follow the second-order pattern only since 2000*.

The first column in Table 1 reports the time lag between regional and the previous national election in days.<sup>11</sup> In all cases we are far from the ‘honeymoon’ threshold (the closest case is the 1980 elections, held one year after the national elections), and in most cases we are much closer to the end of the legislature than to its beginning. The expectation is, then, that governing parties and big parties are disadvantaged, while opposition parties and small parties should perform best. Columns 2 and 3 compare the results of government and opposition parties. From the 1970s to the 1990s we cannot observe any clear pattern. Governing parties generally perform better in regional than in national elections; on only two occasions do they perform slightly worse (in 1970 and 1990). The closeness of electoral results in the two arenas is actually the most striking

Table 1. The second-order effect in Italian regional elections (1970–2005).

	Time lag (reg-nat elections)	Difference for parties in government	Difference for parties in opposition	Difference for parties in government	Difference for parties in government	Difference for parties in opposition	Difference for parties in opposition
				Small (< 10%)	Big (> 10%)	Small (< 10%)	Big (> 10%)
1970	749	2.5	-2.5	0.9	1.6	-3.5	1.0
1975	1134	-0.9	0.9	0.1	-1.0	-5.4	6.3
1980	371	1.4	-1.4	0.0	1.4	-2.5	1.1
1985	686	1.8	-1.8	-2.3	4.0	-2.1	0.3
1990	1057	-0.3	0.3	-0.4	0.1	2.9	-2.6
1995*							
2000	1456	-6.6	6.6	-6.8	0.2	4.5	2.1
2005**	1421	-7.6	9.4	4.6	-12.2	7.8	1.5

Notes: the national–regional comparison is possible only for ordinary status regions, due to the fact that autonomous regions hold elections on different dates. \*In 1995 elections were held during the caretaker cabinet led by Lamberto Dini whose ministers were entirely of non-partisan background. \*\*In 2005 the losses of governing parties do not coincide with the gains of opposition parties because the *Democratici di Sinistra* and the *Margherita* contested elections under a common list (*Uniti nell'Ulivo*) in nine regions out of 15. In those regions, a comparison with the national elections results is not possible.

Source: Our elaboration on the basis of official electoral results from the Interior Minister. See <http://elezionistorico.interno.it/>

information we get from the table. In this sense, the description of the regional political arena as overwhelmed by the national one finds a solid confirmation, while the second-order model should be rejected.

Things change when we look at the most recent results. We can only rely on two elections in this case, but on both occasions the second-order prediction is validated beyond any doubt, with a swing between governing and opposition parties that is unusually high for Italian standards and that on both occasions rewards opposition parties, as expected.

The following columns disaggregate the data of governing and opposition parties by their size. Here the relevant comparison is between small and large parties on each side of the government–opposition divide, with small parties expected to perform better in regional elections than in national ones if the second-order model is to be confirmed. Again, the table shows clearly different patterns for elections before and after the mid-1990s. Up to 1990 differences are negligible for parties in government, and when more substantial (as in 1985), they go in the ‘wrong’ direction. Also, parties in opposition show a pattern that most frequently runs contrary to expectations, with small parties normally performing worse than big ones. After 1990 the results move into line with the prediction of the model, with the exception of parties in government in 2000, when the loss of votes is concentrated on small parties, while big ones (i.e. the Left Democrats) largely maintain the share of votes obtained at the national elections of 1996.

Beyond the numerical evidence, the national consequences of regional elections are probably the most striking proof that there was more at stake than just regional cabinets. Both in 2000 and in 2005, the national governments resigned soon after the elections had taken place as a result of the disappointing performance of governing parties. In both

Table 2. Lee index of differentiation and effective number of electoral parties in Italian regions (1970–2005).

	Lee index 1970–1990	Lee index 1995–2005	Effective no. of parties 1970–1990	Effective no. of parties 1995–2005
Piemonte	7.1	12.8	4.7	6.8
Lombardia	8.3	22.4	4.3	5.5
Veneto	16.1	24.4	3.5	6.6
Liguria	9.1	11.9	4.3	5.6
Emilia	18.4	19.6	3.5	4.2
Toscana	16.3	22.1	3.4	4.2
Umbria	15.9	26.1	3.5	4.6
Marche	7.8	16.1	3.7	5.4
Lazio	6.7	17.4	4.5	6.2
Abruzzo	10.4	16.6	3.4	7.7
Molise	21.8	26.9	2.9	7.8
Campania	10.6	21.4	4.2	8.9
Puglia	10.4	16.0	3.9	7.5
Basilicata	12.5	30.7	3.5	7.2
Calabria	11.5	34.7	4.0	8.8
Trentino*	30.1	37.8	3.5	7.3
Alto Adige*	64.4	73.1	2.6	2.9
Valle d'Aosta*	39.6	67.1	3.1	3.9
Friuli VG*	15.9	23.2	4.4	7.5
Sicilia*	19.8	29.3	4.6	8.8
Sardegna*	13.5	30.2	4.3	9.6
Italy – mean	17.4	27.6	3.8	6.5

Notes: \*Special Statute regions. For Trentino, Alto Adige, Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Valle d'Aosta, we did not consider the 1993 elections, held before the old party system breakdown and thus not comparable with the 1995 elections.

Source: see Table 1.

cases, it is also worth recalling that the resignation of the government did not produce an early election, but a reshuffle (and, in 2000, a new prime minister, with Amato replacing D'Alema) and a new executive supported by the same parliamentary majority.

How did the appearance of a second-order pattern of voting affect the structuring of regional party systems? Did it lead to a more uniform pattern of voting behaviour across regions, and thus to a reduction of regional distinctiveness? The analyses we carry out in the next section will show, on the contrary, that regional party systems have become more dissimilar in the last decade. The centrifugal forces implicit in the process of federalisation seem to be stronger than nation-wide pressures.

### Differentiation and fragmentation: characterising regional political systems

In order to understand the distinctiveness of voting across territorial units, an index (Lee index) has been developed, which measures the extent to which regional voting deviates from the national average<sup>12</sup> (Hearl, Budge, and Pearson 1996). In the first two columns of Table 2 the index of differentiation of pre- and post-1992 periods is compared for each region. In *all* the 20 regions this value has increased in the most recent period,



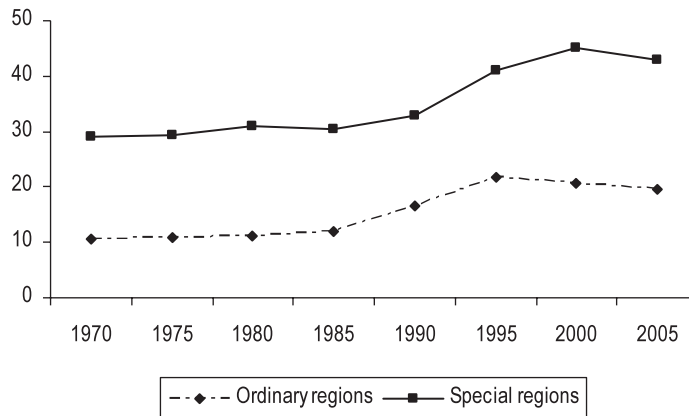


Figure 1. Evolution of voting differentiation of Italian ordinary and special regions (Lee index, 1970–2005).

Source: see Table 1.

casting aside any doubt about the direction of the trend. In some regions this change is moderate (Emilia-Romagna and Liguria, for instance); in most cases it is instead strong, up to cases where the value is now two or three times higher than it was until the 1990s (Calabria, Lazio, Lombardia, Basilicata among others).

Figure 1 allows us to look at the same story from a different perspective. Here, the distinctiveness of voting is analysed in its chronological evolution, and grouped by ordinary and special statute regions. The first element is the clear difference between ordinary and special statute regions. Throughout the period under consideration special statute regions score 20 points higher than ordinary statute regions, or even more in the last decade. If we look more closely at special statute regions (see Table 2), we can further distinguish between regions where voting distinctiveness is so high as to point to the existence of a completely different party system (Alto Adige and, especially since the 1960s, Valle d'Aosta) and regions where values are not really different from those of ordinary statute regions (Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Sardegna and Sicilia), with Trentino standing somewhere between the two groups.

The second element that can be learned from the graph is that the trend of increasing differentiation starts *before* the 1992–1994 breakdown of the party system, especially for ordinary statute regions. We can identify three periods: in the first one (1970–1985) voting distinctiveness is stable at around 10% for ordinary and 30% for special statute regions, during the 1990s it steps up to 20% and 45% respectively, and it stabilises again around those values in the most recent elections.

Another classical tool of party systems analysis – *the* classical tool, one could say – is the effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979), giving a synthetic measure of the number and weight of the subjects included in the electoral competition. The last two columns of Table 2 show this index for Italian regions for the two periods in question. Again, as in the case of the Lee index, all the regions show increased values for the most recent period and, overall, the effective number of electoral parties is not far from being doubled when we compare the pre- and post-1992 values. It is indeed more than doubled in one-third of the regions, mostly in the Mezzogiorno.



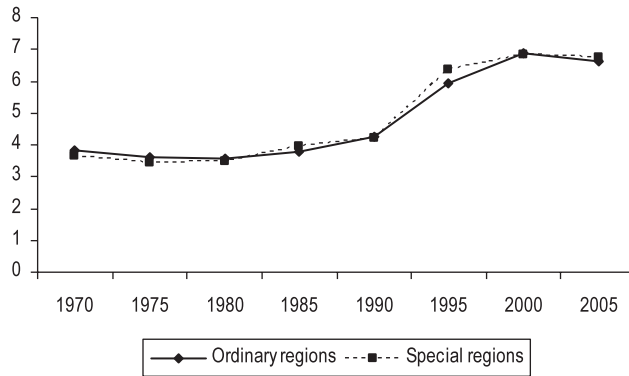


Figure 2. Evolution of the effective number of electoral parties in Italian ordinary and special regions (1970–2005).

Source: see Table 1.

A closer look at the evolution of the effective number of parties over time (Figure 2), reveals in the first place that the clear difference we observed between ordinary and special statute regions for the Lee index is not present this time. With the partial exception of 1995, when the different timing of elections could have led to significantly different political offerings, the two lines overlap perfectly. Second, and this time the pattern is similar to the one we have already observed, the trend shows the clear watershed of the mid-1990s, with the 1990 elections again partially anticipating the trend of the following years.

The descriptive analysis carried out so far has clearly pointed out two trends in the evolution of the Italian regional party systems: an increasing differentiation among regions, and an increasing fragmentation within them. The link between differentiation and fragmentation goes actually further than that. Figure 3 displays the correlation between the two indexes in the two periods of time, excluding, for reasons of graphical clarity, the two outlying points of Alto Adige and Valle d'Aosta, that would be located at the top left-hand corner of the two graphs (extremely high differentiation and lower than average effective number of parties).<sup>13</sup>

In the 1970–1990 period the two indexes are negatively correlated ( $r = -0.48$ ), which means that the more one region has a peculiar structure of party competition (a higher value on the Lee index), the *less* it is fragmented. This negative correlation would indeed get close to a perfect correlation ( $r = -0.83$ ) if we removed from the picture three more autonomous regions, Trentino, Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Sicilia. After 1990 (Figure 3b), this negative relation disappears. A correlation is still present, though a weaker one, but this time it is a *positive* correlation ( $r = 0.37$ ). In other words, if we were to explain the distinctiveness of party competition dynamics in Italian regions only through party fragmentation, we would have to accept that two different mechanisms are at work, before and after 1992. The substantial explanations of this paradoxical evidence will be addressed in the following sections, devoted to the 'First' and the 'Second' Republic respectively.

### Patterns of regional competition under the 'First' Republic

In the first period, the phenomenon to be explained is why regions that are more distinctive are also less fragmented (the upper left quadrant of Figure 3a). A first series of

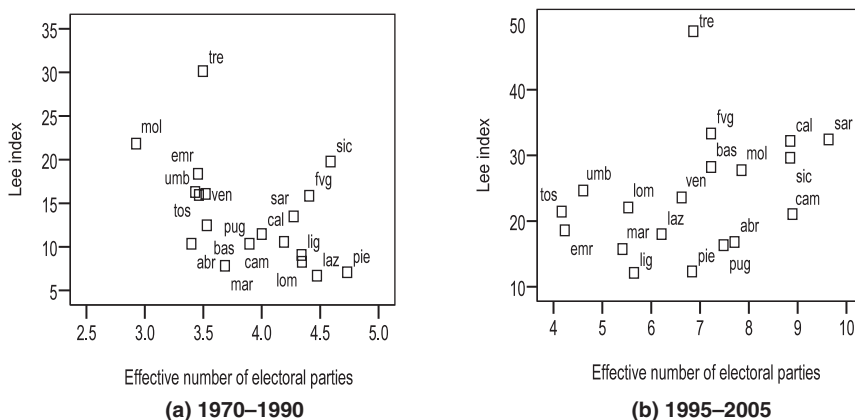


Figure 3. Effective number of parties and distinctiveness of voting in Italian regions, 1970–1990 and 1995–2005 (except in Val d'Aosta and Alto Adige).

Source: see Table 1.

regions are represented by two specific outlying cases in Trentino Alto Adige (especially in the province of Bolzano) and in Val d'Aosta. Here, the strongest source of differentiation is due to the success of ethno-regionalist parties (ERPs). Though its definition is a challenging puzzle given the extreme internal variety of this party family, ERPs can be characterised by their appeal to a sub-national ethnic identity and by the territorial concentration of their electoral support (Türsan 1998, Tronconi 2009). Now, generally speaking, though Italy is said to be a country characterised by strong localism that undermines the strength of national identity, ERPs perform here rather *less* well than in other parts of Europe such as Spain, Belgium or the UK (De Winter 1998).

Good examples of this weakness are given by the limited impact of ERPs in Sicily, Sardinia and Friuli Venezia Giulia. In Sardinia, the Sardinian Party of Action (the oldest living ERP in Italy), after short periods of electoral success immediately before (1919–1924) and after fascism (1946–1948), has become a minor party well integrated and 'dissolved' into the Italian scheme of political competition, becoming from time to time an ally of Christian Democrats in the regional parliament. The only period of relative success it enjoyed was the early 1980s when, with a more radical political agenda, it led the regional government during one legislature (1984–1989) without being the main component of the left-wing ruling coalition (Roux 2006). In Sicily, only the Sicilian 'Independentist' Movement had a significant impact between 1943 and 1947 (it obtained almost 9% in the 1947 regional election), while no strong ERP exists in Friuli Venezia Giulia (Spizzo 2000). In these three regions we can find signs of mobilisation (in Sardinia, *Sardigna Natzione Indipendente* and *Indipendentza Repùbrica de Sardigna* in Sicily *Fronte Nazionale Siciliano* and *Movimento per l'Indipendenza della Sicilia*, in Friuli *Movimento Friuli* and *Slovenska Skupnost*) that are only marginal in those regional political landscapes.

An intermediate situation is given in Trentino with the *Partito Popolare Trentino Tirolese* (PPTT) and then its successor in 1987, the *Partito Autonomista Trentino Tirolese* (PATT), a party that has received increasing electoral support since the late 1960s without being able to dominate the 'regional' scene. In Alto Adige and Val d'Aosta, on the

contrary, the party systems reflect the existence of territorial tensions underpinned by the presence of large linguistic minorities whose claims have been successfully politicised during the whole republican era.

At the Austrian border, in Alto Adige, the coexistence of the Italian and German language groups was made problematic by the weight of memory of harsh nationalist conflicts, before and after the annexation of this territory to the Italian state, and the forced Italianisation the German group had to suffer under the fascist regime. The province of Bolzano (Bozen in German) within Trentino Alto-Adige represents the best example of a region marked by strong political specificities (Brunazzo 2000) that has been translated into the long-lasting domination of one single party, the *Südtiroler Volkspartei* (Popular Party of South Tyrol, SVP). This party was founded in 1945 and though it has suffered from several splits since the 1960s (Pallaver 2006: 167) – recently the challengers have been the *Union für Südtirol* (Union for South-Tyrol, created in 1989) and the *Süd-Tiroler Freiheit* (South Tyrolean Freedom, 2007) – the SVP has managed to retain its image as ‘the’ party of the German and Ladin communities in Alto Adige. It is a hegemonic party which has been able to obtain an absolute majority in the provincial, regional and general elections held in the province of Bolzano since 1948, reflecting the fact that ‘in South Tyrol ethnic loyalties are more deeply anchored than other ties’ (Pallaver 2006, 172). However, its electoral performances, though still impressive, have been slowly decreasing in the recent past (44.3% in the 2008 general election for the Chamber of Deputies), and it will be interesting to observe whether this means that the leadership of the SVP is really threatened.

As for Val d’Aosta, the main party is the *Union Valdôtaine* (Caponio 2000; Sandri 2006). Created in 1945 as a political union supposed to gather the interests of the Valle beyond the division between political parties, the Valdostan Union was not initially as successful as the SVP in the province of Bolzano. Its growth has been a gradual one and it has been described as the transformation of an opposition party into a catch-all party (Caponio 2000, 590) from the 1960s onwards, with its dominance in this small Alpine region becoming undisputed in the last decades. Indeed, it has been leading the regional government since 1975 with only one interruption from June 1990 to June 1993. At the state-wide level, the UV has participated in general elections since 1958 with positive results, obtaining 41.4% in the 2008 general election (in the House of Representatives).

Why do ERPs succeed in Alto Adige and Val d’Aosta and not in the other special statute regions? A comprehensive answer to this question would require an in-depth analysis that we cannot provide here. However, a short answer lies in the diversity of historical paths of peripheral territories in Italy. In fact, it is a striking common point between the French- and German/Ladin-speaking regions – two ‘interface peripheries’ to use Rokkanian words (Rokkan and Urwin 1983) – that they have been subject to international pressures coming from neighbouring states. French, Swiss and Austrian interests have influenced and put Italian national and local actors under constraints. It was the case for Val d’Aosta in the immediate postwar period (Sandri 2006) but it was even clearer, as already stated earlier, in the case of Alto Adige: the issue has been raised at the level of the UN and several agreements have been negotiated over the past four decades.

If we go back to Figure 3, a second cluster of regions is represented by territories such as Trentino and Veneto in the north-east, Toscana, Umbria, Emilia-Romagna in the centre, and Molise, Basilicata (and, to a lesser extent, Abruzzo) in the south. This distribution is not casual: also in these cases the main source of differentiation is

the presence of a dominant party (whether the Christian Democracy or the Communist Party), which also tends to reduce fragmentation, scoring close to or above 50% of the votes in most elections, and thus reducing the overall fragmentation of the party system. This trend is not surprising and does not deserve too much space since it reflects the well-known territorial structuring of Italian politics in ‘white’ and ‘red’ territorial subcultures (Bagnasco 1977; Diamanti 2003).<sup>14</sup> This concept refers to ‘shared ideology and moral values, high degree of identification with a political party, strong community values and the identification of a common “enemy”, which took the form of both liberalism and socialism in the “white” areas, and liberalism and Catholicism in the “red” ones’ (Cento Bull 2000, 7). These territorial features in turn produced a lower fragmentation of party systems on one side, and a higher differentiation on the other. Under the ‘Second Republic’ the picture is different.

### The transformations of competition under the ‘Second Republic’

As already mentioned, for the period 1995–2005 (Figure 3b) the main trend is reversed compared with the previous period: the more one region has a peculiar structure of party competition (i.e. the higher the Lee index), the *more* it is fragmented.

Let us mention obvious exceptions to this with the persistent specific similar configuration that is observed in Alto Adige and in Val d’Aosta. In these two special statute regions, the pattern observed under the First Republic is still valid under the Second. This is due to the fact that dominant ERPs have not been affected by the transformation of the Italian party system as a whole: the SVP and the UV have maintained their dominance in the provincial/regional party system. However, the situation is not the same as far as the other regions are concerned, even though the picture becomes more complex from one region to another and it is more difficult to provide general explanations. For this reason, we propose only preliminary hypotheses concerning the dynamics of regional politics in this period.

Regarding regions with strong territorial subcultures, now we see that the cluster of these regions is spread across the graph. This is true especially for white regions while red regions are still less fragmented. They have kept, if only in part, their peculiarity due to the fact that left-wing parties have proved to be more enduring despite the transformations that have affected the Italian left since the early 1990s (split of the PCI into PRC and PDS, evolution of the PDS into DS and merging with the *Margherita* into the PD, split of *Rifondazione* into PRC and PdCI). What can explain the resistance of the red subculture and the disappearance/mutation of the white one? Two factors can be pointed out (Diamanti 2003). First, the relationships between the party and its social basis were different. The DC was more a mirror of the Catholic organisational structure, whereas the PCI was itself the ‘motor’ for the organisation of ‘red’ regions. As a consequence, according to Diamanti, the relationship between parties and voters was more instrumental, and accordingly more fragile, in the white regions than in the red ones. Moreover, the resistance of the red subculture can be explained by the ‘positive’ effects – in a period of deep re-composition such as the breakdown of the First Republic – of the *conventio ad excludendum*: the left part of the political spectrum had been continuously excluded from governmental coalitions for several decades and so, ironically, was spared the disillusionment towards those who governed badly – which sealed the fate of the DC.

By contrast, in the other regions, and in the southern ones more evidently, the catholic diaspora has produced extremely fluid party systems, where none of the numerous contenders have been able to pick up the heritage of the '*balena bianca*'. In Figure 3b, white regions display values on the Lee index that are close to the median (Veneto and Trentino, Basilicata) or well above it (Abruzzo and Molise). As a logical consequence of the implosion of the DC, they have followed more intricate paths than the ones we see in the red regions. This has liberated a political space for a competition with no 'reference party' any more. In a number of cases, such an opportunity has been exploited by new right-wing movements born or fostered in the 1990s. Especially in some areas of the northern regions the *Lega Nord* has partially replaced the position once held by the Christian Democrats, though only occasionally reaching the shares of votes of the latter. It is interesting to note that the electoral rise of the League has not led to a dramatic increase of voting differentiation or, rather, it surely did so, but not enough to make northern regions emerge as a separate cluster on the differentiation axis. Veneto and Lombardia, the two strongholds of the *Lega Nord*, are actually very close to the median value.

Beyond that, almost all the most differentiated regions are located in the upper right quadrant of Figure 3b – not surprisingly, given the positive correlation – and they include the already noted formerly white cases and three autonomous regions (Sicilia, Sardegna and Friuli-Venezia Giulia), to which we should add Calabria and the extreme case of Trentino. A plausible explanation, though partial, could be found in the fact that the breakdown of the postwar party system and the constitutional revisions of the 1990s have brought remarkable changes not only at national but also, as we have seen, at the regional level. In the first part of this article we recalled the presidential features that regional executive bodies gain as a result of the new electoral system (1995) and the constitutional revision (1999). The same has happened, since the local elections of 1993, at municipal level, with mayors being directly elected in a run-off competition. A side effect of these changes has been the revival of personal politics, by means of parties gathering around a single influential person, most frequently a former or incumbent mayor or regional president, which have no organisational continuity beyond the electoral process. To be sure, *in abstracto*, it was not apparent that the rise of this 'personalism' would produce a rise in political fragmentation. It seems possible for one powerful individual to obtain nationwide political influence. This is indeed what happened with the emergence and sudden success of Berlusconi's Forza Italia in 1994 at the national level. At the regional and local levels, on the other hand, the combination of personal politics *and* the increased autonomy of party structures, brought about by both institutional reforms and the decline or disappearance of the traditional parties, has led to the multiplication of local parties that vary in importance and structuring from one region to the other, adding themselves to the existing political supply of state-wide political parties. Usually, these are able to challenge national parties without being able to become hegemonic in the enduring multi-party configuration. This was particularly evident in 2005, when 'president's lists' contested elections in eight regions,<sup>15</sup> as a means of getting the highest political returns from the personal visibility this position secures. Linked to this phenomenon is a new rise of local clientelism (Piattoni 2005), especially in the *Mezzogiorno* (but examples can be easily be found elsewhere also). Here a longstanding tradition of politics made through direct and personal bonds and based on the selective distribution of material and symbolic resources has found a perfect environment in the new institutional framework.

Sometimes there are specific political parties that develop a programme based on a rather generic criticism towards policies of successive governments, stressing the urgent need to address unsolved structural problems (poverty, unemployment, administrative inefficiency and so on), with a vague territorial appeal based on the defence of the 'South' and an insistence on action, voluntarism and autonomy. But the rule is that behind formal political groups there are political leaders that lie at the heart of a system of influences. Those who once would have played this role as a party faction leader (more openly in Christian Democracy and the Socialist Party, traditionally factional parties, more underground in the Communist Party) have now turned to competing with their own list. A good example of this case is given by Raffaele Lombardo, the founder and leader of the Movement for Autonomies (*Movimento Per le Autonomie*, MPA), a pan-Southern movement that has been struggling for the interests of Sicily and the *Mezzogiorno* since 2005. Lombardo is now known for being one of the most prominent figures of the Sicilian centre-right. He became the president of the Sicilian region after his triumphal success in 2008. Within the centre-right's electoral strategy, it is supposed to mirror the Northern League: in the 2008 general election, the MPA had candidates in 10 Southern regions while the Lega Nord had candidates in the 10 Northern ones. However, Lombardo, who used to work in healthcare services – a professional background that is not uncommon for influential politicians with a locally oriented profile – started his political career in the DC in the 1970s, obtaining his first electoral successes at the local and provincial level in Catania and at the regional level in Sicily. Under the Second Republic – a period in which he is facing a number of judicial cases – he has still been a member of one of the Christian Democrat parties (CCD and then UDC) and he was elected as an MEP in 1999 and as the President of the province of Catania from 2003 to 2008. So far only journalistic accounts have studied the social basis of the political success of Lombardo,<sup>16</sup> but he is a good example of a more general trend observed in current Italian politics.

Similar stories could be told about other former Christian Democratic faction leaders like Clemente Mastella, a former member of the DC and now leader of the Union of Democrats for Europe, well rooted in the province of Benevento (Campania) and other southern regions.<sup>17</sup>

Alternatively, these leaders are powerful enough realistically to threaten their party and compete in the electoral arena under their own label. On the strength of this blackmail power, they can negotiate the composition of lists within the party from a position of strength, as is well illustrated by the cases of Antonio Bassolino, former Communist, in Campania, or Agazio Loiero, former Christian Democrat, in Calabria, now both members of the Democratic Party, or even the president of Lombardy, Roberto Formigoni, a member of Forza Italia.

In both cases anyway, the likely result is that locally influential personalities are able to control 'packages' of votes and eventually to bring into the assemblies their cohort of extra-loyal followers – another way by which personal networks increase their influence and local branches of parties gain autonomy vis-à-vis the centre of nationwide organisations.

## Conclusion

By trying to understand the impact of the territorial reforms on the regional dimension of the Italian political system, this article has highlighted several changing features of Italian



regional party systems. In the first place, and contrary to conventional wisdom, regional elections can be legitimately considered second-order elections *only* since the mid-1990s. At the very least, they have been consistent with a second-order pattern of voting in 2000 and 2005 to an extent that does not have precedents since regional elections have been held. The second main finding is that the emergence of this second-order effect did not occur in isolation, but took place in a context marked by the transformation of the national party system. We claim that this shift took place in a configuration of regional party competition that is today much more differentiated than it used to be, in the context of a party system characterised by convulsive changes and within the framework of a growing decentralisation. That is to say, the centrifugal forces brought about by the federalisation process Italy has undergone in the few last decades have proved stronger than the centripetal ones (which are a consequence of considering regional elections as a test for national governments). Even when Italian voters have used regional elections to express their disapproval of incumbent national government, they have done so by increasingly turning to local and 'personal' parties. This phenomenon is not limited to regional elections, as evidence has been gathered also concerning a trend towards 'territorialisation' of the parliamentary elite (Verzichelli 2002).

A question remains open regarding the reasons for this revival of a locally oriented style of representation. Institutional incentives (federalisation and the adoption of 'presidential' forms of local and regional government) may well have provided incentives in this direction. From the organisational point of view, local political parties or parties based on autonomous bodies loosely connected to the centre may be more suitable to the new institutional environment, and more able to respond to the needs of local communities.

On the other hand, we suggest that a more contingent explanation plays a role as well. The break-up of the main party organisations (and the Christian Democratic diaspora in particular) has turned a number of former faction-leaders with a territorially concentrated base of support into local leaders loosely connected to the central organisation of the party, and capable of credibly threatening to use their local power *against* the centre, as happened in 2005 with the issue of the lists of the presidents. Furthermore, some local notables have been successful in founding their own locally or regionally based organisations, as in the examples of Lombardo and Mastella. Future elections will tell us if this is just a temporary effect of the never-ending Italian transition, leading at some point to a re-structuring of strong centripetal party organisations, or whether it might have become a permanent feature of regional party systems.

## Notes

1. This article is the result of a joint reflection; however, Filippo Tronconi is particularly responsible for the final draft of sections 2 and 3, Christophe Roux for the final draft of sections 4 and 5. The introduction and conclusions have been written jointly.
2. It would become, 10 years later, the model followed for the state electoral system that is currently in use.
3. The system is actually more complicated than this, as the majority bonus can be variable in special cases. See D'Alimonte (1995) for details.
4. The experience of the 2008 general election suggests, though, that fragmentation is not a *necessary* consequence of an electoral system providing a majority bonus.



5. The most innovative part of the electoral law is the introduction of regulated 'primary' election for the selection of candidates to the regional assembly and the presidency of the region. In the other cases (and in Tuscany as well), changes have mainly concerned a different gradation of the majority bonus, legal threshold and representation of women. See Fusaro and Rubechi (2005) and Pacini (2007).
6. One should mention the case of Sardinia whose regional reform of the electoral system (a power granted with the special status) tried in vain to introduce mechanisms that could have led to the direct election of the president; on this experience see Venturino (2000 and, for its adaptation to national trends, 2004).
7. In Friuli-Venezia Giulia an attempt to go back to indirect election of the president was blocked by a popular referendum in 2002.
8. According to the same Constitutional law, the regional assembly of Trentino-Alto Adige became an indirectly elected body, made up of the members of the two provincial assemblies of Trento and Bolzano (capitals of Trentino and Alto Adige/South Tyrol respectively). These two assemblies and the respective executive branches, which already enjoyed special autonomy on the basis of a revision of the autonomous statute in 1972, are now the places where real power is exerted, while the region mostly acts as a coordinating body. In the following, we will refer to the two provincial assemblies of Trentino and South Tyrol, which are the politically relevant arenas.
9. This sentence must be understood in a medium-term perspective, considering the shift from centralisation to regionalisation and from regionalisation to federalisation. Indeed a number of scholars have pointed out the limits of Italian decentralisation in ordinary regions until the late 1980s (Baldi 2006).
10. A further hypothesis, firmly supported by empirical evidence, concerns the lower level of turnout for second-order elections. As this is the subject of the article by Legnante and Segatti (2009), we will not consider it here.
11. As is widely known, in Italy the duration of governments rarely coincides with the duration of the legislature. This leads to the problem of considering the time lag as the distance between the date of regional elections and the date of the last national elections, or instead the date of the last government formation. We opted for the first solution, as in most cases a new government means a reshuffle of ministerial allocations and (sometimes) a new prime minister, but rarely a major change in party coalition and a visible turn in policy priorities, at least in the perception of public opinion.
12. The formula employed for the index is:  $Lee = \sum |v_{i(r)} - v_{i(n)}| / 2$ , where  $v_{i(r)}$  is the percentage of vote of party  $i$  in each region and  $v_{i(n)}$  is the average percentage of vote of the same party in all regions, dividing by 2 to eliminate double counting. The index is logically similar to the Pedersen index of volatility, the difference being that in the latter each party score is compared with the party score in the previous election, instead of the national average.
13. As we will discuss in the following pages, both these features are the result of the presence of dominant parties.
14. However, one should note that, as far as the regional level is concerned, red and white areas only roughly coincide with the limits of existing administrative regions: we can find red marks in white regions (such as Venice), and white marks in red regions (such as Lucca in Tuscany) (see Diamanti 2003 for a global appraisal).
15. Including Friuli-Venezia Giulia, where elections were held in 2003 and Sardinia, where elections were held in 2004. The other regions where a 'president's list' was competing were Piemonte, Veneto, Calabria, Liguria, Lazio and Puglia. In the last three cases both centre-right and centre-left candidates headed their own list. For a detailed account, see Di Virgilio (2007, 140–43).
16. See, for instance, Gomez (2008).
17. Though this party (temporarily?) disappeared from the national parliament in the 2008 elections (after having withdrawn its confidence in the Prodi Cabinet, leading to an early end of the legislature), it is still well rooted and active in many southern local and regional councils and executives.

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