

Critical election and a new party system. Italy after the 2015 regional election

Abstract

Although party system change has been widely explored, it is less so for the regional level. The article provides the first systematic attempt to discuss party system change at the regional level in Italy. Through a comprehensive overview of the five 1995-2015 regional elections, indicators of party system change, based on an original database, are explored. It will be showed that in 2013-2015 election cycle while party system fragmentation, volatility and re-composition reached their maximum high – parallel to what happened in 1995 – the level of bipolarism, one of the main features of Italian party system since the mid-1990s, dramatically dropped replaced by a three-pole configuration. These results, and their consistency with the relevant junctures at the national level in 1994 and 2013, may allow to state that a party system change at the regional level occurred and thus to consider 2013-2015 elections as critical.

Keywords

1995-2015, regional elections, party system change, critical election, Italy

Introduction

On May 31, 2015 seven Italian Ordinary Statute Regions (OSRs) voted to renew their presidents and assemblies, thus closing the regional electoral cycle that had started in 2013 and that led to polls all 15 OSRs¹. During this cycle Italian regional party system experienced

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3 deep changes in party competition, electoral dynamics, consequent results and party power
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5 relations, so that the presence of a genuine party system change may be contemplated.
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8 While party system change at the national level is widely debated and case studies as
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10 well as comparative works flourish, less attention is devoted to this change at the regional
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12 level. Although obvious (and sometimes decisive) differences among regional contexts may
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14 hinder such an exploration, the Italian case may be worth the challenge for two reasons. First
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16 because, despite regional electoral differences are present and steadily increasing, the
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18 regional patterns mainly follow the national ones and thus still allow a feasible attempt in
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20 reducing the complexity without losing too much in precision. Second because the highly
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22 consistent electoral results in 2015 and in 2013 generate the question if the 2013-2015
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24 election cycle represent an electoral landmark at the regional level such as the 2013 have
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26 been for the national level and hence solicit a more in-depth analysis.
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30 This article aims at contributing to this exploration in two ways. First by providing the
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32 first, to our knowledge, systematic attempt to approach party system change at the regional
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34 level in Italy, a perspective often neglected by contemporary scholars. We considered the
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36 period 1995-2015, i.e. all regional elections held during the Italian Second Republic². We
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38 relied on official data provided by the Italian Ministry of Interior and by the Regions in order
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40 to calculate all indexes employed in the analysis and we build an original and comprehensive
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42 database on the 15 OSRs. The database gathers data on six elections –1990 is also included to
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44 allow comparison with 1995 – in all 15 regions on ten indicators of party system change. The
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46 choice to employ standard, or even rough, indicators for measuring this phenomenon implies
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48 a loss in fine-tuning and sophistication but guarantees retrievability, computation and cross-
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50 regional comparison.
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54 Second, while looking for party system change, a more comprehensive overview upon
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56 Italian regional elections in the 15 OSRs in the last 25 years, as well as upon regional party
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3 system's de- and re-alignment across time, is provided. This portrait also allows interesting
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5 parallel with the crucial 1995 elections that signed the passage to the Second Republic at the
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7 regional level.
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10 The study of the Italian case can provide useful insights on the strand of literature
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12 considering the relationship between decentralisation of authority and (de-)nationalisation of
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14 party systems (Schakel 2013a; 2013b). This relation is disputed: decentralisation seems to
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16 favour nationalisation of party systems (Chhibber and Kollman 2004; Caramani 2004;
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18 Thorlakson 2007; 2009) or not (Swenden and Maddens 2009; Lago-Peñas and Lago-Peñas
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20 2010). The mixed evidence of the Italian case (Hopkin 2009) in this respect holds true, but
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22 the findings of this paper also allow for wider conclusion on party system change at the
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24 regional level. As well, the second-order theory for the Italian case, which is still valid
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26 although some general caveats (Schakel and Jeffery 2013), will also be confirmed.
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30 As well, this contribution may provide an asset for its replicability and
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32 generalizability in a comparative perspective. The framework employed here could be in fact
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34 applied to other European contexts with a similar institutional framework and similar
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36 region/central State interactions, as well as with comparable relevant party systems.
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39 The first section of the article will explore the concept of party system change and its
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41 fitness to the Italian case while the second argues its applicability to the regional level. The
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43 following two sections discuss the indicators of party system change, those concerning the
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45 electoral competition morphology and the competition dynamics, respectively. The last
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47 section concludes on whether the 2013-2015 regional election cycle can be considered as
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49 critical for the Italian regional party system.
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51 52 53 54 **Regional Party System: Systemness and Change** 55 56 57 58 59 60

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3 Party system (de)stabilization, (de)institutionalization and (re)alignment have traditionally
4 attracted much scholarly attention and have been largely investigated in the world, e.g. in
5 Latin America (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995) and in the Western countries (Sundquist,
6 1983; Mair, 1997; Lane and Pennings, 2003). In Europe a special focus was dedicated during
7 the 80s and the 90s (Mair and Smith 1990; Mair 1997; Broughton and Donovan, 1999) when
8 established patterns of political interaction among parties, which had been long considered
9 stable and predictable, clearly began to shatter. The same attention seems to be resurfaced in
10 the years of the recent global crisis (Casal Bértoa, 2014), both in Eastern (Rose and Munro,
11 2009) and Western Europe (Bardi et al., 2014; Katz and Crotty, 2006).

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23 Party system change has been scrutinized in different ways: concerning government
24 coalitions or access to office (Mair, 1997), as a reshaping induced by strategic incumbents in
25 parliament (Mershon and Shvetsova, 2013) or, most frequently, as a between-election
26 phenomenon.

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32 In this trend Italy has always been a case in point. Since the 1990s, Italian party
33 system has experienced transformations, which perfectly fitted this systemic change: the
34 transition from the so-called First to the Second Republic in the 1990s (Bardi, 1996;
35 D'Alimonte and Bartolini, 1997; Bartolini and D'Alimonte, 1996), and the earthquake of the
36 legislative election in 2013 (Itanes, 2013; Chiaramonte and De Sio, 2014). To these waves of
37 change the label of party system deconstruction has been applied both internationally (Bull
38 and Newell, 2005; Daniels, 1999; Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2015) and domestically
39 (Pappalardo, 2001; Pasquino, 2009). This, as it will be argued later, was mirrored at the
40 regional level.

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52 During these junctures, Italian party system has changed its *systemness* – which
53 indicates the degree of openness (low systemness)/closeness (high systemness) of a party
54 system (Mair, 2006) measured through different (dichotomous or continuous) indicators of
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3 change (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2016) among which electoral volatility. Our analysis will
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5 employ three dimensions of party system change in the electoral arena³, deeply intertwined
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7 and mutually shaping (D'Alimonte and Bartolini 1997; Oñate 2009; Chiaramonte and
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9 Emanuele 2014): a) *the rules*, that is the institutional environment such as constitutional and
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11 electoral rules (Lane and Pennings 2003); b) *the competition morphology*, that is the degree
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13 of party system fragmentation and its innovation rate; and c) *the competition dynamics* (Mair
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15 2006): low systemness of a party system (like the Italian one since the 90s) implies, on the
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17 one hand, a de-alignment between parties and electors and a remarkable fluidity in electoral
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19 behavior and, on the other hand, “frequent, volatile and indecisive amalgamations and splits
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21 among weak and internally divided parties” (Pasquino 2015, p. 304), as well as different
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23 degree of aggregation among parties (and thus how and how much votes concentrate).
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28 These dimensions will be analyzed through the indicators listed in Table 1 and
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30 presented in the next sections.
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34 [Table 1. approx here]
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39 Our main research aim is thus to observe through these nine indicators the variations
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41 in the main dimensions of party system change. Besides giving the first systematic picture of
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43 this evolution in a two-decade time span, this article aims at verifying if and to what extent
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45 the possible changes in the main structural party system features at the regional level did
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47 mirror the national trends and in particular if the 2013-2015 election cycle may be considered
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49 as critical as the 2013 legislative ones have been.
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52 53 54 **The Regional Electoral Cycle 2013-2015** 55 56 57 58 59 60

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3 Italian OSRs were established in 1970⁴ and until 2000 they voted simultaneously. Since 2001
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5 the electoral calendar started to be staggered due to snap elections: in 2005 14 and in 2010 13
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7 regions voted 'regularly', in 2015 their number sank to seven, while the other voted in
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9 different dates⁵.
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12 Regional elections and party systems are usually highly related to those at the relevant
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14 national level, with significant exception in federal or strongly regionalized countries
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16 (Germany, Switzerland, Spain) or with strong regional and ethno-regionalist parties (UK,
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18 Spain). In these countries sub-state levels often display party systems dissimilar from the
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20 national/federal level (Oñate, 2009; Linz and Montero, 2001; Poguntke, 2014). In Italy this is
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22 not the case yet (although some lists or minor parties can run in a single region), for the main
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24 parties in the regions coincide with those at the national level⁶. Hence Italian regional
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26 elections are usually considered second order elections, and the more so in the last two
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28 decades (Loughlin and Bolgherini, 2006; Tronconi and Roux, 2009; Massetti and Sandri,
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30 2013). Differentiation between regions is however increasing (Massetti and Sandri, 2013;
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32 Emanuele 2015a) and vote orientation seems to have become more region-centred since the
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34 1994 election (Mazzoleni, 2002; Magone, 2003). Nonetheless, a symmetry between electoral
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36 results at the regional and those at the national level is still largely present and some common
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38 patterns can be observed in all regions. Hence the two levels will be here approached as
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40 strictly related to one another and the regional party systems, consistently with most of the
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42 literature, will be considered as a unique sub-state party system.
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48 A consolidated body of literature states that Italian party system shifted from the
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50 polarized pluralism (Sartori 1976) of the First Republic to the polarized, then majoritarian
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52 and then fragmented, bipolarism (D'Alimonte 2005) of the Second, starting with the 1994
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54 elections. At the regional level it was the 1995 elections to sign this passage (D'Alimonte,
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56 1995; Di Virgilio, 1996).
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3 The 2013 legislative elections changed the portrait again, due to some major results:
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5 a) a new party (the Five Stars Movement – M5S) won 25% of the votes and became the first
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7 political party of the country; b) the two major parties (Democratic Party – PD and People of
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9 Freedom – PDL) suffered huge vote losses; other junior coalition partners disappeared (or fell
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11 short of) from the political scene. Critical or realigning elections disrupt stable political
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13 alignments, by introducing a new party system based upon reorganized coalitions of voters
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15 (Key, 1955; Burnham, 1970; Mair, 1997).
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19 In order to claim that the critical election label can be employed also for the 2013-
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21 2015 regional election cycle, we will undertake a long-term period analysis by taking into
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23 account the five regional elections over 1995-2015.
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26 The dimensions of party system change and their relevant indicators in Table 1 will be
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28 henceforth analysed except for the dimension of the institutional rules, which will not be
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30 addressed here into details. It must be nonetheless hinted to one of its possible indicators, i.e.
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32 the regional electoral laws, which in 2015 have been tested after some major changes. Since
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34 1999 Italian regions can choose their own electoral system and form of government but until
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36 recently most of them had maintained common basic features in their electoral laws (based
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38 on national law n. 43/1995, the so-called Tatarella law). After a national prevision in 2004
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40 obliged the regions to adopt a system securing executive stability, some attempts of electoral
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42 federalism took place: before the 2005 elections four OSRs adopted their own electoral law
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44 and three more did the same before the 2010 elections. Before 2015, most of OSRs had thus
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46 modified their electoral rules (Paparo, 2015; Vampa, 2015; Cunial and Terreo, 2016): mostly
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48 (9 regions) by adopting a majority assuring system, that is a mixed proportional system with
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50 majority bonus; but also by introducing other changes, such as different thresholds (referring
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52 to single lists, lists in coalition or to coalitions), the abolition of the split-ticket vote or the
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54 adoption of a double-alternate preference to support gender equality.
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Fragmentation and Innovation Rate

Since 1994 Italian party system experienced an increasing trend of fragmentation or even atomization (Valbruzzi, 2013). This is indeed true, also at the regional level. Two traditional indicators may be employed for showing this: the total number of lists (TL) and the Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) number of effective parties (NEP). TL indicates, from the supply side, the degree of abundance of the electoral offer and, despite its roughness, it may be useful to show the size of this phenomenon at the (rarely investigated) regional level. NEP_v and NEP_s indicate, from the outcome side, the relative strength of parties based on their votes or seats share respectively.

High values on both TL and NEP correspond to a high fragmentation of the party system and vice-versa. Italy has often displayed high values of both indicators at national level, especially from 1994 onwards (Morlino, 1996; Chiaramonte, 2015). At the regional level, TL in 1995 was 12.6 in comparison to 14.0 in 1990, but then it increased again and since 2000 it has always been higher than in 1990. In most regions the TL peak occurred in 2000 (17.5), then it decreased until 2013-2015, when it started rising again (16.4). Hence, for the whole period 1995-2015 the electoral supply in terms of TL has been remarkable with an average of 15.6 lists running in each regional election⁷.

The NEP indicators confirm this first rough evidence, providing more precise information about the electoral success of each list. The 15 regions have been grouped into three macro-areas: the North (Piedmont, Lombardy, Liguria, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna), the Centre (Tuscany, Umbria, Marche, Lazio) and the South (Abruzzi, Molise, Campania, Basilicata, Apulia, Calabria) following the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) classification⁸. As shown in Figure 1, the highest values of NEP_v were in 2000 (6.99) and in 2013-2015 (6.78). In the first case, the scattering of the Christian Democrats and the

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3 Socialists in many new lists⁹ after having survived the crash of their natural parties (DC and
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5 PSI) in the '90s, contributed to increase the number of parties. In 2013-2015 instead, this
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7 increase was due to the growing relevance of personal lists¹⁰ detected since the early 2000s
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9 (Vassallo and Baldini, 2000) and that in this election cycle rose to their maximum-high
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11 (Vampa 2015; Bolgherini and Grimaldi, 2016), and to the rise of new political forces - such
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13 as the Five Star movement and Civic Choice (SC)¹¹.
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16 Overall, the NEPv trends clearly show that the 2013-2015 election cycle represents a
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18 trend inversion for all macro-areas, for their values started to rise again after a declining
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20 period and reached in almost all cases their highest values after 2000. This is particularly true
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22 for the South, where in 2013-2015 NEPv reached its all-time highest value (8.89).
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25 The picture changes only slightly when considering NEPs. During the whole period
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27 NEPs were steadily above 5 points, with the exception of the 2010 elections when the
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29 mergers of the main centre-right and centre-left parties (see following section) led to a
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31 reduction of parties that might aspire to a seat. In 2013-2015 NEPs values showed a similar
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33 re-increasing trend (from 4.82 to 5.14) as the NEPv, with both NEP values usually higher in
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35 the Southern regions.
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38 As summed up in Figure 1, 1995 and 2010 displayed the lowest fragmentation rate,
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40 2000 and 2013-2015 the highest. If the 2013-2015 elections are not throughout the whole
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42 period those when fragmentation reached its top-high record (they are often the second-high
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44 after 2000 or 1995), they yet represent a trend inversion juncture for both its indicators (TL
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46 and NEP) that started to neatly rise again.
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51 [Figure 1. approx here]
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55 Party system innovation is related to the decomposition and re-composition of parties,
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57 which produce the entrance of new lists, labels and symbols in the electoral arena. Party
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3 novelty is multifaceted and scholarly attention has focused both on internal aspects (Litton,
4 2015; Sikk and Köker, 2015; Barnea and Rahat, 2011; Sikk, 2005) and on the conditions for
5 its emergence (Harmel and Robertson, 1985; Lucardie, 2000; Tavits, 2006). From an
6 electoral perspective, a party can be considered genuinely new if it presents a new party label,
7 a new ideology and a new electoral base (Barnea and Rahat, 2011). However, given the
8 impact of personalization of politics in Italy (Calise 2005), a new leadership seems a further
9 useful criterion to define new parties. Therefore, we chose to rely on the indicators
10 Chiamonte and Emanuele (2014) proposed in their analysis of the 2013 Italian legislative
11 elections by employing the *standard innovation rate (SIR)*, and the *effective innovation rate*
12 (*EIR*). SIR considers as new parties those with labels and symbols never used in other past
13 elections in the period under scrutiny, while EIR considers more strictly as new only those
14 parties without clear continuity with pre-existing parties neither organizationally, nor as for
15 identity and leadership features (ibidem).
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32 As shown in Figure 2, the 1995 elections represent a sort of breaking point, as in most
33 regions almost all parties changed their labels and symbols: SIR reached an astounding
34 average of 99.11 points with a peak of 99.18 in the South. These were the first regional
35 elections after the end of the First Republic and, consistently with the national level, they
36 showed a high discontinuity with the past. In 2010 (73.40 points) the high SIR value can be
37 explained by the two important party mergers, that of PD and PDL (see later), which count as
38 standard new parties.
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53 In the period under scrutiny, the electoral weight of new parties has always been
54 remarkable (over 59 points in average). Indeed, differently from the First Republic – when
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3 the use of the same labels and symbols were considered essential in the identity of a political
4 party (Epstein, 1967; Sartori, 1976; O'Connor and Sabato, 2004) and thus parties' labels and
5 symbols showed a high stability (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2014) – in the Second
6 Republic, also at the regional level, very few parties ran with the same label and symbol in all
7 elections.
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14 Interestingly, the 2013-2015 election cycle scored the lowest values of SIR (38.17) of
15 the entire period. This sharply contrasts with the trends of the other innovation rate indicator
16 (EIR), which on the contrary shows its highest values exactly in this cycle (Figure 3).
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23 [Figure 3. approx here]
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28 If considering genuinely new parties, in fact, data show how the most crucial elections
29 in terms of innovation have been those of 1995 and 2013-2015, with EIRs reaching 21.64 and
30 22.17 points, respectively.
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34 In 1995 Berlusconi's new party (Forza Italia) was able to conquer more than 20% of
35 votes alone, while in 2015 the EIR increased for mainly three reasons: first, the Five Star
36 movement's electoral success¹²; second, the remarkable performances of personal lists
37 (Bolgherini and Grimaldi, 2016); and third, the appearance of several new parties, often with
38 limited consensus but formally genuinely new. Furthermore, many local lists have to be taken
39 into account when computing the EIR rates at the regional level, despite their minor electoral
40 performances¹³. EIR thus reached very high values in the 2015 elections 2015, especially in
41 the South (26.02 points) and the Centre (23.21).
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52 From the analysis of the innovation rate, it can be claimed that the 2013-2015 election
53 cycle represents a turning point: even though SIRs sank, the EIRs – which determines the real
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3 innovation for considering the genuinely new parties and not (only) the formal changes of
4 labels – increased in 2013-2015 to a rate comparable only to that of 1995.
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11 **De-Alignment, Re-Composition and Vote Concentration**

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14 Party system change as de-alignment implies a series of features (Lane and Pennings, 2003;
15 Carreras et al., 2013) whose most used indicator is Pedersen's electoral volatility index
16 (Pedersen 1979)¹⁴. Total volatility (TV) measures party system stability through the
17 aggregated vote change between two consecutive elections. High levels of volatility are
18 symptomatic of party system instability (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995): a crucial threshold is
19 considered to be 15 percent points (Pedersen, 1979; Casal Bértoa, 2014), while it is over 20
20 percent in highly volatile regions, as Central and Eastern European countries (Gherghina,
21 2014) or Italy (Itanes, 2013). Italy has shown until the 1990s an average TV of 9.2 percent,
22 while during the Second Republic it rose to 21.3 with a peak of 39.3 percent in 1994. At the
23 2013 elections TV soared to 36.7, a tripled value in respect to previous elections in 2008
24 (Emanuele, 2015b).
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38 At the regional level, computation of TV is quite complex, due to the extreme
39 variability of lists and has therefore been rarely calculated. In Spain, a regionalized state with
40 powerful non-state wide parties, a 10-point-high volatility at the regional level is considered
41 medium high, while around 3 points extremely low (Oñate and Ocana, 2008: 15). In Italy
42 such a calculation has, to our knowledge, never been attempted elsewhere. Ministerial data
43 for regional elections were available up to a specification of 0.01%, thus allowing a very
44 precise computation of the index. The crucial issue is again when to consider a party as
45 'new': on this point we relied on the criteria set by Bartolini and Mair (1990) and
46 Chiamonte and Emanuele (2015). Hence, when two or more parties merge to form a new
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3 party, or when two or more parties merge with an existing party, electoral volatility is
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5 computed by subtracting the vote share of the new party from the combined vote share of the
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7 merging parties in the election immediately preceding the merger. As well, when a party
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9 splits into two or more parties, electoral volatility is computed by subtracting the combined
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11 vote share of the new parties from that of the original party in the election immediately
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13 preceding the split.
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17 Coherently with our previous definition of innovation rate, we have counted as new
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19 parties and hence with “full volatility”, only the effective new parties, while the votes of
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21 standard new parties, which simply changed their labels between elections, are subtracted to
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23 those of the parties in ideological or leadership continuity in the previous election [for detail
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25 see Bolgherini and Grimaldi (2016) original database].
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28 The overall picture of TV in Figure 4 shows a crystal-clear trend: the average TV in
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30 the 15 regions had its peak in the 1995 elections with over 46 points, plummeted around 15-
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32 20 points until 2010 and then rose again until over 30 points in 2013-2015 cycle.
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36 [Figure 4. approx here]
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41 Although some differences are detectable among macro-areas (with the South usually
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43 performing higher than the rest of the country), the global pattern is doubtless uniform. Two
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45 considerations are in order. The first is the remarkable high level of TV all along the
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47 considered time span: it remained, even at its lowest values (15.44 in 2005), well above the
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49 crucial threshold of 15 percent points for national elections and the 10-point for regional
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51 ones. The second consideration is that 1995 and 2015 elections are the TV’s first and second
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53 high values in the period (46.42 and 31.65 respectively).
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3 One of the recurring concerns in dealing with electoral volatility is to differentiate
4 between volatility among existing parties and that towards new parties (Birch, 2003; Sikk,
5 2005; Powell and Tucker, 2014). This second type of volatility rises more interest in new
6 democracies rather than in consolidated democracies, where TV can be a satisfying indicator
7 as the entry of new parties and the disappearance of old ones is often limited. This applies
8 also to Italy, where high levels of volatility determined by the entry of new parties – i.e.
9 volatility by regeneration (Chiaromonte and Emanuele, 2015) – occurred only twice, namely
10 in 1994 and 2013, scoring 15.85 and 18.70 respectively, thanks to the electoral performances
11 of Forza Italia and Five Star movement. Hence, the standard Petersen index here perfectly fits
12 our aim to provide a first comprehensive overview of the party system change in the Italian
13 regions.

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27 The competition dynamics may suggest a party system change also when several
28 party splits and mergers occur (Pasquino, 2015). This aspect is particularly important
29 because, in addition to high fragmentation and high volatility, the regional Italian party
30 system has been characterized also by unstable political alliances and varying power relations
31 among parties, due to the frequent re-composition of the party system. By *re-composition* we
32 mean the (possibly temporary) reconfiguration of political offer after processes of party
33 deconstruction like mergers and splits. A *party merger* occurs when two or more parties
34 contesting an election at time t become a unique new party at time $t+1$ and none of its
35 components independently exists at time $t+1$ consistently with the intention of their
36 permanent integration (Bolleyer et al. 2016)¹⁵. On the other hand, a *party split* is the
37 separation of one party at time t in two or more subjects at time $t+1$, thus forming one or
38 more new parties (ibidem).

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54 The 2013-2015 election cycle was extremely interesting from this perspective. In
55 almost all regions radical left abandoned the centre-left coalition and formed an alternative
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3 electoral offer, while center-right coalition broke apart paving the way for a new right-wing
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5 scenario led by the Northern League. Two indicators have been employed to catch the re-
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7 composition aspect: the total number of party mergers (TM) and the total number of party
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9 splits (TS) occurred per election. Looking to our data, party mergers clearly reflect national
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11 competition dynamics: mergers at the regional level are exactly the same occurred first at the
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13 national level. Until the 2005 election mergers mostly concerned parties in the former
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15 Christian democrats galaxy and center-left parties. Later two major mergers occurred,
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17 involving the most important parties of the Italian centre-right and center-left. The first was
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19 promoted by Berlusconi and concerned his party Forza Italia, as well as National Alliance
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21 (AN), Social Alternative and the New Italian Socialist Party, which formed The People of
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23 Freedom (PDL) in 2009. The second merge interested the Democrats of the Left (DS) and the
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25 Daisy, which formed the Democratic Party (PD) in 2007¹⁶. Both PDL and PD contested the
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27 election of 2010 in all regions. From 2010 to 2015 in most of the regions no relevant mergers
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29 occurred. Finally, mergers with a specific regional feature are very rare in the Italian regional
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31 system, counting only two over 20 years, one in Veneto and one in Piedmont.
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36 As far as party splits are concerned, in 2000 three splits involved left-wing as well as
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38 centrist parties. From 2000 to 2015 some centrist lists' splits occurred (mainly in the
39
40 Southern regions) but were of little significance. In 2013-2015 cycle instead, the collapse of
41
42 PDL caused the emergence of three new parties in the centre-right pole: a re-born Forza
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44 Italia, the New Centre Right (NCD) and the right-wing Brothers of Italy (FDI). Party splits
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46 are overall less homogeneous in Italian regions than mergers. Although most splits occurred
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48 as well at the national level first, some regional peculiarities are nonetheless more frequent:
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50 e.g. those splits concerning only specific regions despite they involved national parties – such
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52 as the *Lista Tosi* in Veneto as a split from Northern League; the *Lista Pastorino* in Liguria as
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54 a split from PD; *Popolari-Marche* in the same region as a split from the Union of the Centre
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3 (UDC); *Oltre con Fitto* in Apulia as a split from PDL. On the contrary, splits with a specific
4 regional feature are very common in Veneto: e.g. those from Northern League and from
5 independentist minor parties have occurred in almost every election.
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10 Figure 5 sums up graphically the opposite split and merger trends hitherto described:
11 the mean values in all regions show that the when major mergers occur, little or not
12 significant splits take place and viceversa. Party mergers and splits, and thus re-composition
13 of party system, may be indeed conceived as another facet of party fragmentation, linked to
14 volatility and with a special focus on inter-party dynamics. Indeed, when major splits
15 occurred (between 1995 and 2000 as well as between 2010 and 2015), also volatility and EIR
16 are at their highest, namely in 1995 and 2013-2015.
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27 [Figure 5. approx here]
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31 The last aspect of the competition dynamics' dimension of party system change is the
32 degree of vote concentration. Bipolarism, computed as the vote concentration on the first two
33 coalitions, essentially entails the existence of two poles (parties or coalitions) that run as
34 alternative for government (or are perceived as such) and that attract most of votes and gain
35 the majority, thus preventing eventual centrist third poles to be pivotal in the party system
36 (Bartolini et al. 2004; Chiaramonte 2007). Figure 6 displays the bipolarism index (BPL) in
37 the Italian regions for macro-areas: whilst since 1995 the index had never dropped under 80
38 percent points (peaking also over 95 points), in the last cycle this value has been largely
39 missed (75.29 points) mirroring the minimum-low 58.3 points at the national level in 2013.
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[Figure 6. approx here]

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3 From 1995 to 2010 in all 15 regions, despite some changes of labels, the two
4 alternative coalitions have constantly been the centre-right coalition, led by Berlusconi's
5 party (Forza Italia and then PDL) and the centre-left coalition led by the heirs of the former
6 Communist party (PDS then DS and lately, after the merging with the centrist Daisy, PD). In
7 2010 the centre-right pole was still robustly centred on the PDL and its alliance with the
8 Northern League, at least in the Centre-North of the country (with the exception of Veneto
9 where the Northern League was already the first party). The situation started to change with
10 the last election. In some regions – in particular Tuscany, Marche, Apulia – after the split of
11 the PDL and the re-birth of Forza Italia, the best performing centre-right coalition was not the
12 traditional centre-right Berlusconi-led coalition but instead the one formed by Northern
13 League and FDI in the first two regions and the one guided by the former regional president
14 Raffaele Fitto (who led a troop of exiting Forza Italia-affiliates in alliance with FDI) in
15 Apulia. Moreover the Northern League neatly attested in 2015 as the main centre-right party
16 also in other Northern and Centre regions (Piedmont, Veneto, Liguria, Emilia-Romagna,
17 Umbria). Should we consider the BPL in 2015 by counting the Forza Italia-led coalition –
18 that is the coalition led by the core of the former PDL – as the centre-right pole, its values
19 would plummet to 74 percent points (instead of the already top-low 75.29). The sinking of
20 the BPL in 2015 went along with the parallel surge of a third vote-attracting pole: the Five
21 Star movement (Tronconi, 2015). This was no trivial happening. Outgoing votes from the
22 traditional first two coalitions could have dispersed among a high number of minor parties or
23 converted into abstention. Instead, despite both fragmentation and abstention have been
24 remarkable in 2015, Beppe Grillo's party has become the third pole in all OSRs except for
25 Calabria (where the third pole is the centrist People's Area, formed by NCD and UDC).
26 Moreover, due to the Five Star movement non-alliance strategy - and thus its vote
27 percentages do not count minor parties, local or civic lists - the minimal difference (in some
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3 regions less than 5 points) to the second pole confirms how the emergence of this new party
4 had dramatically changed pre-existing bipolar dynamics. However, differently from what
5 happened at the legislative election in 2013, at the regional level the Five Star movement's
6 blackmail and coalition potentials (Sartori 1976) did not emerge. Indeed in all regions, also
7 thanks to the regional majority-assuring electoral laws¹⁷, the winning coalition succeeded in
8 getting enough seats to form a government without being constrained by Grillo's party.
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11 It is although undeniable that the entry of the Five Star movement changed the
12 political game in terms of party relations and distribution of electoral power. Figure 7
13 displays the bipartitism index (BPT), computed as the vote concentration on the two most-
14 voted antagonist parties that is those belonging to competing coalitions. BPT is decreasing in
15 the last election – sinking to 45.47 percent points, the second lowest after 2000 – but the main
16 interesting evidence is that the combined effects of the PDL split and of the emergence of the
17 Five Star movement led to a different combination of this index in the regions. Only in 3
18 regions out of 15 the two main parties are still PD and PDL (Lazio, Lombardy and Basilicata,
19 which all voted in 2013); in 7 regions these are PD and Five Star movement (Molise,
20 Abruzzo, Piedmont, Liguria, Umbria, Marche and Apulia), in 3 PD and Northern League
21 (Emilia-Romagna, Veneto and Tuscany), and in the other 2 (Calabria e Campania) the two
22 main parties are PD and Forza Italia¹⁸. In the 7 regions where the Five Star movement is the
23 second party, its results range from 12.2 percent points to 22.3; in the other 8 regions (except
24 for Calabria) the Five Star movement is always the third party.
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49 [Figure 7. approx here]
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53 To sum up, BPT in 2013-2015 cycle had a trend inversion after having reached its peak in
54 2010 and the second party of this index is now the Five Star movement, which, in its non-alliance
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3 strategy, is also the emerging notable third pole, thus marking the end of bipolarism at the regional
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5 level.
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9 10 **Conclusion: A Critical Election?**

11 The article dealt with the Italian 2013-2015 regional elections, the fifth after the beginning of
12 the so-called Second Republic in the 15 OSRs. A time span ranging 1995-2015 has been
13 considered.
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17 Our analysis showed that Italian regional party system changed from a bipolar to a
18 three-pole configuration, along with the highest variations in the main dimensions of party
19 system change.
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24 The 2013-2015 election cycle displayed a rising fragmentation, both in terms of
25 number of lists (TL) (with a growth also of personal lists) and of effective parties (NEP) in
26 comparison with the previous elections and its indicators scored at their highest in 2013-2015
27 and 2000. Innovation rates had in 2013-2015 the lowest values of standard innovation (SIR)
28 of the entire period, but the effective innovation (EIR) scored at its highest. Indeed, if
29 considering genuinely new parties, the effective innovation rate increased in 2013-2015 to a
30 rate comparable only to that of 1995. In the same 2013-2015 election cycle, volatility (TV)
31 reached respectively its first and second high values, after having sunk from 2000 to 2010.
32 Major splits (TS) occurred in 1995 and 2013-2015 with an opposite merger (TM) trend.
33 Indeed, when re-composition in terms of splits occurred, also volatility and innovation scored
34 at their highest, namely (again) in 1995 and 2013-2015. Finally in 2013-2015 cycle the Five
35 Star movement became the third pole in all 15 regions thus determining the end of regional
36 bipolarism – whose index (BPL) plummeted to its lowest in the whole period, followed by
37 the 1995 elections – and shaping a new three-pole configuration. The Five Star movement is
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3 also the second party in half of the regions and that determined both a decrease and
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5 (primarily) a different composition of the bipartitism index (BPT).
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8 These features for 2013-2015 regional election cycle show similar patterns to the
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10 2013 national elections and, even more interestingly, confirmed the parallel with the whole
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12 critical junctures occurred at the national level since the 1990s. Hence, if our analysis holds
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14 true, then the 2013-2015 regional elections do present the feature of a party system change.
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16 Structural features, measured by the nine indicators of party system change employed in our
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18 analysis, radically changed.
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21 If, two decades before, 1995 regional election represented a turning point for the
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23 regional systems, paralleling the critical national election in Italy of 1994, then 2013-2015
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25 regional election signed a landmark in Italian political history at the regional level as well. It
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27 seems therefore plausible to consider it as *critical election* because of the radical change in
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29 the main structural party system features and of the sharp discontinuity with the past in terms
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31 of parties (re)alignment.
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34 Continuity in time will therefore be an issue for the future: only if the current fluid
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36 situation will evolve towards a consolidation of the trends started with the 2013-2015
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38 elections – and thus towards their persistence also in the next electoral cycles – it will be
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40 possible to assume this electoral appointment as a critical juncture in Italian regional electoral
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42 history.
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46 ¹ Non-simultaneous elections could in principle be a problem in assessing the regional party system change.
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48 Nonetheless, also in 2010 two regions voted with a different calendar (Abruzzo in 2008 and Molise in 2011) and
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50 they are usually computed in the 2010 election. Moreover, starting with the 2008-2011 and then increasing with
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52 2013-15 cycle, the Italian regional elections calendar progressively moved out of step and will now continue
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54 this way. That means that the non-contextual election will be a permanent feature of Italian regional system.
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56 This should not however lead to conduct only punctual case studies, thus hindering the advantages of a
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58 systematic comparative approach in the long run.
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² The so-called First Republic (1948-1992) ended when the judicial inquiry Clean Hands brought to surface huge political scandals and bribes and caused the implosion of the previous party system; the so-called Second Republic followed (1992-2013) and its end in 2013 is still disputed. Both labels refer to the radical change occurred to the political and party system, and not to a formal constitutional change.

³ Although the chosen dimensions and relevant indicators are mostly focused on the result side of the electoral competition and thus have no pretension of being exhaustive of the whole concept of party change, also in their application to the Italian case, they are yet broad enough to cover the main aspects of change during these junctures.

⁴ Italian regions count 15 OSRs plus other 5 Special Status Regions (Aosta Valley, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Sicily and Sardinia).

⁵ In the 2013-2015 cycle 4 regions voted in 2013, other 4 in 2014.

⁶ Personal and local lists - and in general lists that do not have any reference to party labels - have always been present in Italian regional elections. But either they have a limited electoral success or they lasted only for one electoral event. With the consequence that usually they did not change the party system at all. This is true also for 2015, notwithstanding their remarkable surge and success (Vampa 2015, Bolgherini and Grimaldi 2015, 2016).

⁷ Countries with strongly differentiated regional party systems like Spain display average TL values ranging 13 to over 22 lists in the last five elections in the most regionalist regions (Catalonia, Basque, Andalusia) (data from electoral official sites).

⁸ For the North, we grouped together the two ISTAT areas North West and North East. See: <http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/6789>. Traditional electoral studies (e.g. Corbetta et al. 1988; Itanes 2001) usually grouped regions in four/five areas according to their dominant political culture: the North-East or “Catholic white belt”; the “Socialist/Communist red belt”; the North-West; the Others (or the South and the Center). We opted instead for the mere geographical ISTAT subdivision as the findings of the most recent studies on Italian subcultures claim their death (Caciagli 2009) or at least their ineluctable decline (Ramella 2005).

⁹ Such as: The Democrats (*I democratici*), Christian Democratic Centre (Ccd), United Christian Democrats (Cdu), Dini List–Italian Renewal, Italian People’s Party-Populars (Ppi-Pop) or Italian Social Democrats (Sdi), Socialists-Socialdemocrats, The Clover (*Il trifoglio*), etc...

¹⁰ By personal list it is referred to those lists running labeled by the name of a single candidate (for the regional presidency or, simply, for a seat in the case of local notables). Their surge in 2015 is surely an indicator of

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4 disaffection for traditional parties (Vampa 2015), and even though some of them have been very successful in
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6 the quasi-presidential context of the Italian regions, their survival is questionable and their presence did not alter
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8 the whole party system.

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10 ¹¹ The Five Star movement is the populist and anti-establishment party founded in 2009 by the former comedian
11
12 Beppe Grillo; SC is the centrist and liberal party founded in 2013 by the former European Commissioner and
13
14 later Italian (technician) Prime Minister Mario Monti.

15
16 ¹² For the sake of accuracy, the Five Star movement has been considered genuinely new in the 2015 cycle only
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18 in 9 regions out of 15 for in the other 6 (Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Molise and Campania)
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20 this party had already run in 2010.

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22 ¹³ In the computation of indicators, all personal lists and all local/civic lists that could not be related to any
23
24 existing party are considered and counted as effective new parties.

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26 ¹⁴ In line with e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg (2002: 38ss.) we employ TV as the simplest measure of de-alignment
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28 between voters and parties, that is also for the *net shifts* of the aggregate change between party vote shares (and
29
30 not only for the individual vote shifts).

31
32 ¹⁵ Accordingly, parties alliances or cartels are not considered genuine party mergers, as each component still
33
34 autonomously operates at time $t+1$.

35
36 ¹⁶ In both cases several other minor components (10 and 6 respectively) participated in the merge.

37
38 ¹⁷ Most of the 15 OSRs have a majority-assuring electoral law. Exceptions are: Basilicata, Lazio, Piedmont,
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40 Molise (which don't have any majority premium), and Marche (which has a majority premium but still not a full
41
42 majority-assuring system). For details see Cunial and Terreo (2016).

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44 ¹⁸ It is worth noticing that in Lazio in 2010 and in Veneto in 2000 and in 2015 the most voted party list has been
45
46 the personal list of a candidate for the regional presidency: *Lista Polverini* in Lazio, *Lista Cacciari* and *Lista*
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48 *Zaia* in Veneto. In the computation of the bipartitism index, however, for consistency and comparability
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50 reasons, it had been considered the vote percentages of the corresponding parties (PDL in Lazio and in Veneto
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52 in 2000 and Northern League in Veneto in 2015). Personal list have in fact a contingent, election-driven nature
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54 and very rarely become an autonomous political party at any level.
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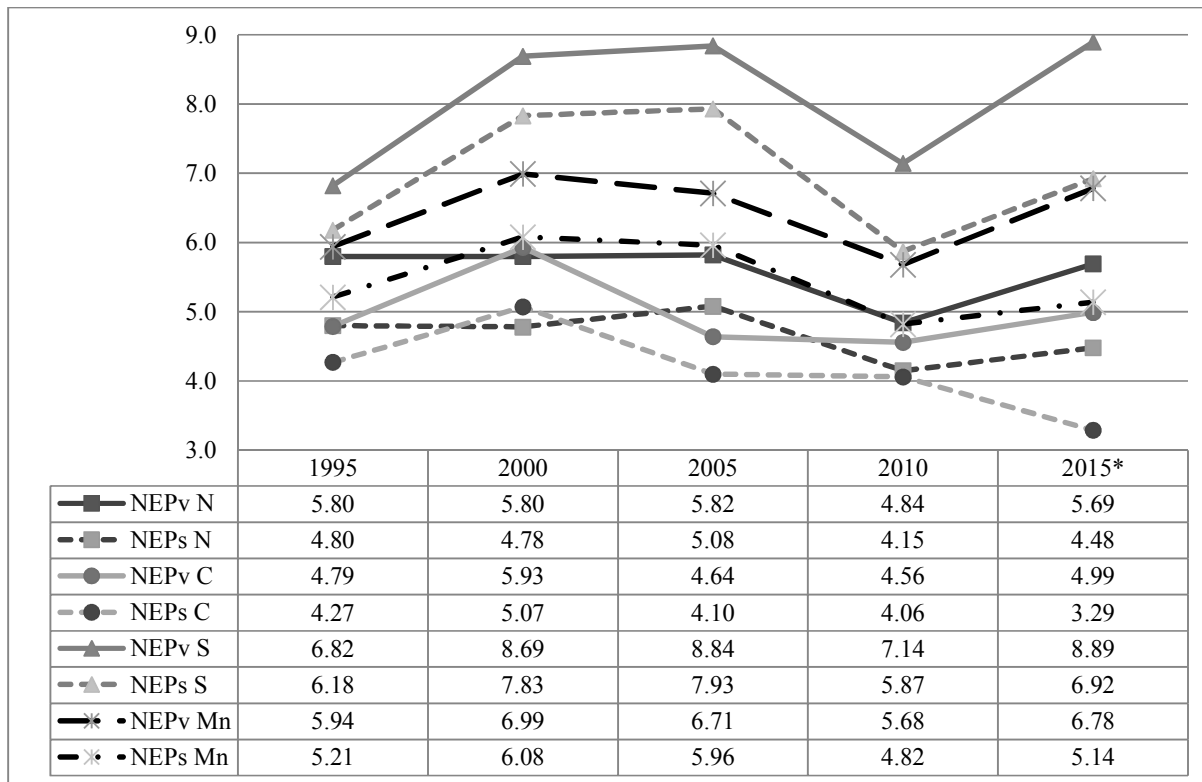
Table 1*Dimensions of Italian party system change in the electoral arena and relevant variables and indicators*

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>Indicators</i>
Rules	Institutional rules	Change in Electoral Law (Y/N)
Competition morphology	Degree of fragmentation	N of lists N of Effective Parties (NEP)
	Innovation rate	Standard Innovation Rate (SIR) Effective Innovation Rate (EIR)
Competition dynamics	Degree of De-alignment	Total Volatility (TV)
	Degree of Re-Composition	N of Mergers (TM) N of Splits (TS)
	Degree of vote concentration	Bipolarism index (BPL) Bipartitism index (BPT)

Source: Authors' compilation.

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Figure 1. Number of effective parties in terms of votes (NEPv) and seats (NEPs) in the 15 OSRs and per macro-area (mean values). 1995-2015

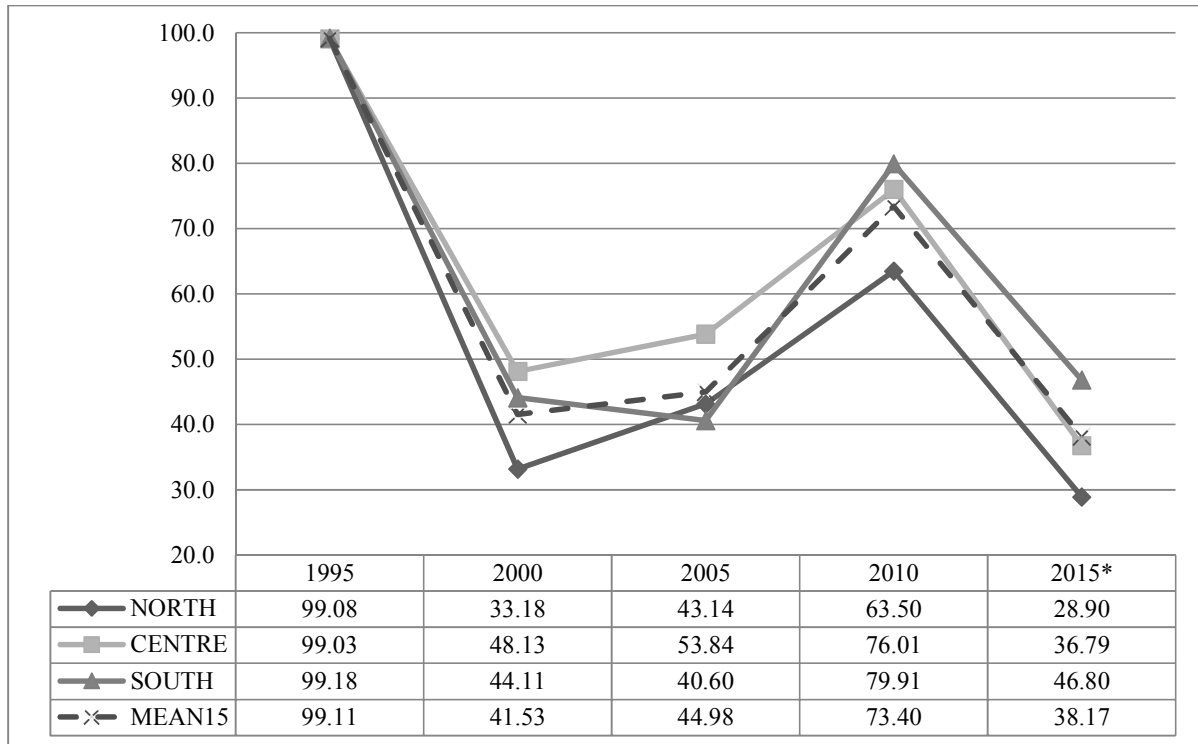


Note: NEPv N and NEPs N refer to the Northern macro-area (N); NEPv C and NEPs C to the Centre (C); NEPv S and NEPs S to the South (S); NEPv Mn and NEPs Mn refer to the mean values for the 15 OSRs.

*Data refers to the entire 2013-2015 regional election cycle.

Source: Author's compilation based on official data of the Ministry of Interior and of the Regions.

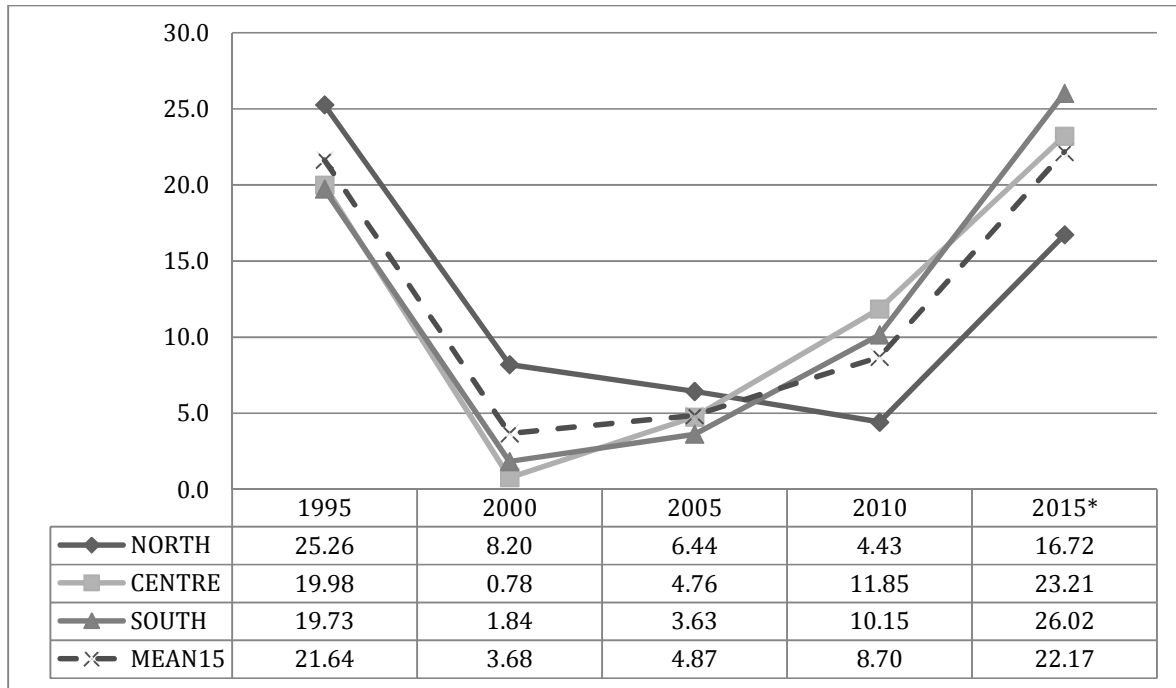
Figure 2. Standard Innovation Rate (SIR) in the 15 OSRs and per macro-area (percent points; mean values). 1995-2015



* Data refers to the entire 2013-2015 regional election cycle.

Source: Author's compilation based on official data of the Ministry of Interior and of the Regions.

Figure 3. The Effective Innovation Rate (EIR) in the 15 OSRs and per macro-area (percent points; mean values). 1995-2015

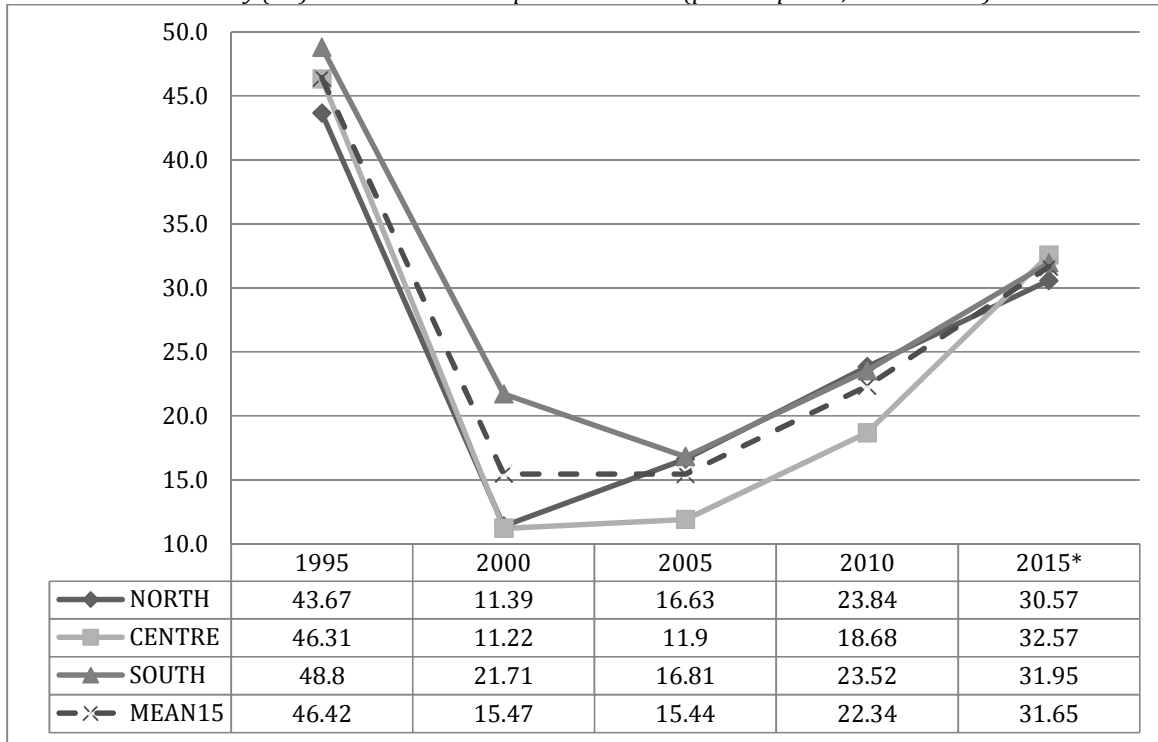


*Data refers to the entire 2013-2015 regional election cycle.

Source: Author's compilation based on official data of the Ministry of Interior and of the Regions.

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Figure 4
Total volatility (TV) in the 15 OSRs and per macro-area (percent points; mean values), 1995-2015

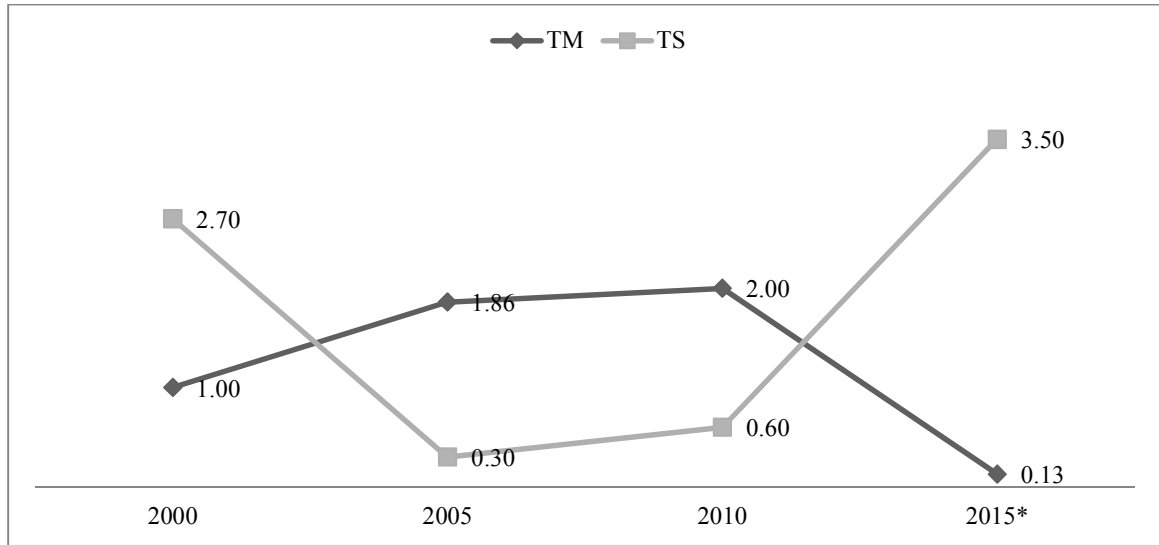


*Data refers to the entire 2013-2015 regional election cycle.

Source: Author's compilation based on official data of the Ministry of Interior and of the Regions.

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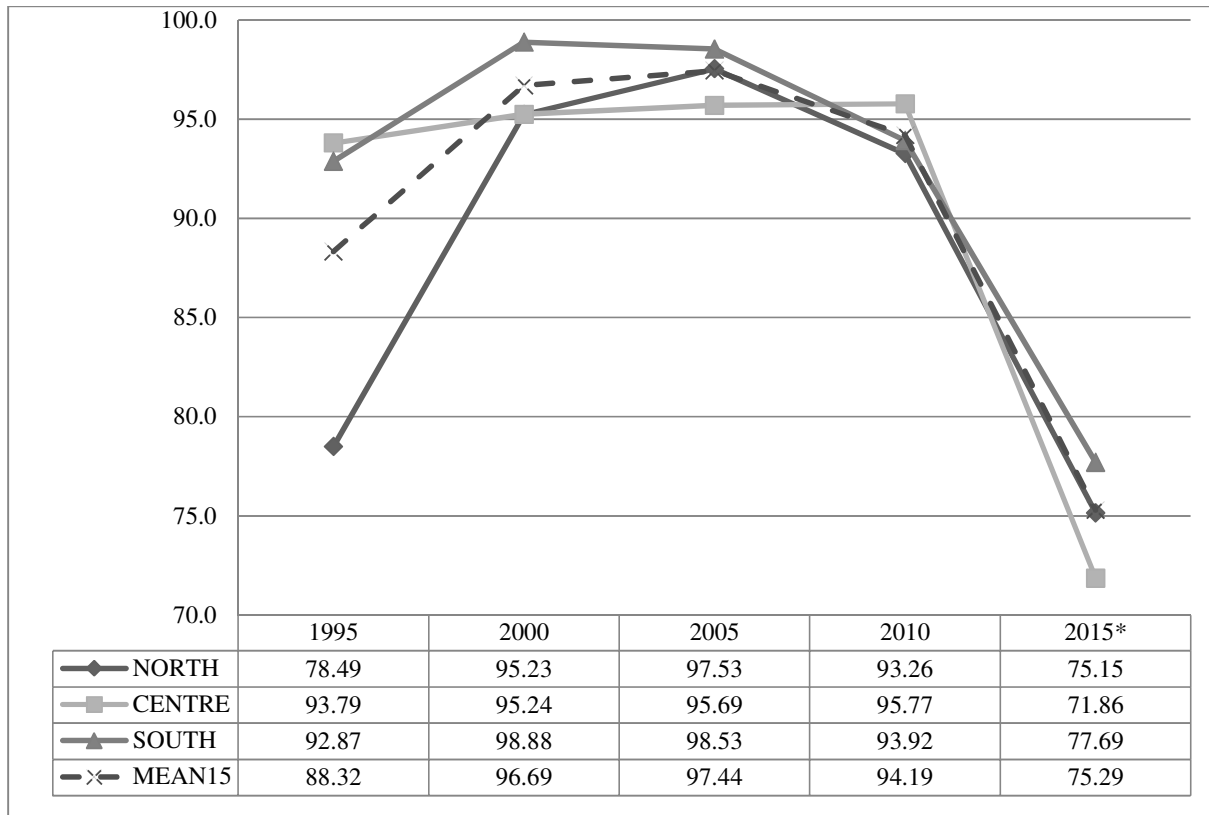
Figure 5. Number of party mergers (TM) and splits (TS) in the 15 OSRs (mean values). 2000-2015



*Data refers to the entire 2013-2015 regional election cycle.

Source: Author's compilation based on official data of the Ministry of Interior and of the Regions.

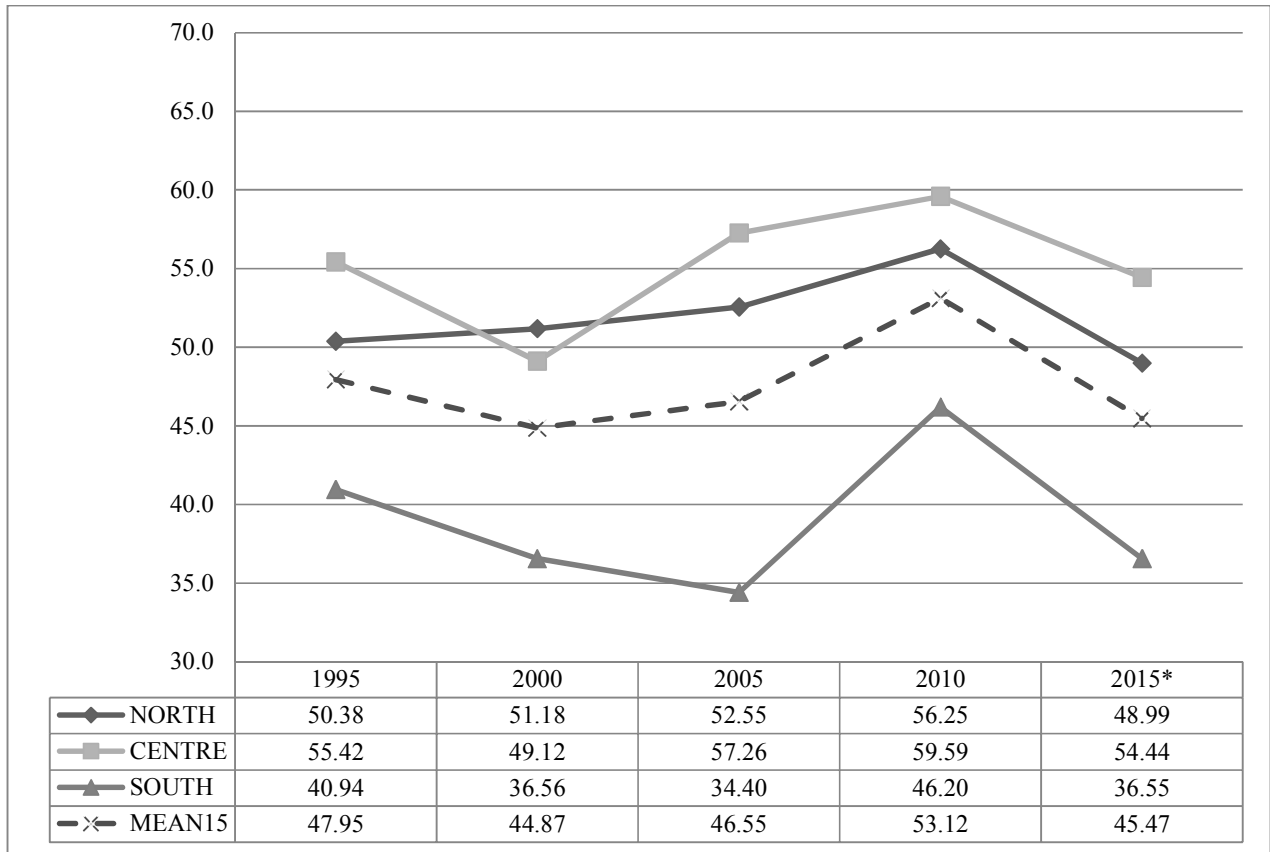
Figure 6. Index of bipolarism (% votes) (BPL) in the 15 OSRs and for macro-area (percent points; mean values). 1995-2015



*Data refers to the entire 2013-2015 regional election cycle.

Source: Author's compilation based on official data of the Ministry of Interior and of the Regions.

Figure 7. Index of bipartitism (% votes) (BPT) in the 15 OSRs and for macro-areas (percent points; mean values). 1995-2015



Note: Votes to personal lists have not been added to those conquered by their relevant parties.

*Data refers to the entire 2013-2015 regional election cycle.

Source: Author's compilation based on official data of the Ministry of Interior and of the Regions.