Spaghetti Politics: Local Electoral Systems and Alliance Structure in Italy, 1984-2001

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This article describes the impact of the Italian electoral reforms of 1993 on the structure of local political alliances. The reform, which moved Italy from a purely proportional representation system to a mixed, largely majoritarian system, was designed to increase transparency, reduce corruption, limit the number of political parties, and create the conditions for a politics of interests rather than a politics of influence. Paradoxically, moving to a mixed electoral system had the opposite effect. In this article we demonstrate this impact by modeling the structure of political alliances at multiple levels (municipal, provincial and regional) of the Italian polity from 1984 to 2001.

This article considers the impact of a natural experiment. The experiment was the 1993 electoral reform of the Italian electoral system, a reform that moved Italy from a purely proportional representation system to a mixed first-past-the-post or majoritarian system. Drawing on data from election results for roughly 450,000 individuals representing single parties or larger coalitions elected to more than 3 million positions in local, provincial and regional elections from 1984 to 2001 (before and after reform), we model the structure of political alliances over time. To anticipate the main results, we show that electoral rules, often largely ignored, play an enormously important role in structuring the political landscape. This should not be surprising – after all, the central rationale for reform was that it would affect politics. However, in the Italian case, electoral reform designed to clarify politics, that is, designed to reduce the number of political parties and unravel “unholy” alliances, thereby increasing transparency, had the opposite affect.

The central Italian political paradox has always been the simultaneity of rapid change and stability. On one hand, foreign observers of Italian politics have routinely highlighted the instability of the Italian political system, focusing attention on the often remarkably short life of the
country’s governments (Cioffi-Revilla 1984; Partridge 1995). On the other hand, domestic observers have typically stressed the immutability of the Italian system, focusing attention on the fact that the Christian Democrats controlled the state for more than 50 years without interruption – an accomplishment no other party in any other industrialized country could claim during this whole period of time (Bufacchi 1996; Salvadori 2001). There is truth to both accounts; if governments came and went – which they did with awesome rapidity – the politicians leading them did not. This alone suggests some support for the adage: trees that bend with the wind will last longer than those that are rigid.

Local observers are strongly split as to whether, following electoral reforms in 1993, the structure of the Italian political system has changed. Some scholars argue that reform has transformed the political system, introducing both new rules of engagement and new outcomes. Here, observers stress critical changes in the alliance system, increased interest representation and concomitant declines in clientalism and corruption (Gundle and Parker 1996; Reed 2001). Other scholars suggest that the characteristic feature of politics in Italy – the more things appear to change, the more they stay the same – is never more clearly revealed than in the decade following electoral reform (Fabbrini and Gilbert 2000, 2001; Ginsborg 2003; Newell and Bull 1996).

Are both sides of this debate also right? The answer we provide is also paradoxical. Specifically, many things changed dramatically. Electoral reform induced radically new strategies for alliance formation resulting in party fragmentation, an unprecedented expansion of the number of political parties and a structure of often contradictory political alliances so deeply tangled, knotty and cyclic that it might best be pictured as a bowl of overcooked spaghetti.

These outcomes were unanticipated by both the designers and critics of reform, all of whom felt – for better or for worse – that a shift from PR to a mixed majoritarian system would bring stability, a reduction in the number of parties, increased transparency of rule, and a politics based on issues arising from civil society rather than non-ideological factional interests. While unexpected by the designers of reform, this research demonstrates that the observed outcomes arise from within the new electoral system expressed as subtle shifts in incentive structures that faced parties as they sought to mobilize votes for seats. Consequently, we consider why electoral reform worked to radically transform a political system, but failed to work in the direction first theorized.

**Building Blocks**

Our starting point is the significant literature in political science and political sociology which shows that historically, electoral systems matter
because electoral regimes provide opportunities that reward specific strategic responses on the part of parties and party fragments (Grofman and Lijphart 1986; Morelli 2004). Despite this general agreement on the importance of electoral systems for structuring politics, sociological studies of electoral systems and their consequences for social stability have largely faded from the landscape of political sociology. One idea arising from this research is that sociologists interested in political culture, the stability of political regimes and the dynamics of interest-representation may have much to gain by retaining close focus on the rules of political systems, for these rules provide the context within and through which actors strive for recognition and power.

Although there are historical examples to the contrary, it is generally the case that first-past-the-post electoral systems – such as those in the United States (and more than 50 other countries) – yield relatively stable two-party systems. This relationship, first identified by the French sociologist Duverger (1954), has been aptly termed Duverger’s law by political scientists. As Downs (1957) demonstrated years ago, in winner-take-all systems, parties have a strategic incentive to drift towards the center of the political landscape because voters with positions elsewhere on the distribution have no rational alternative but to support the party closest to their interests.

In such systems, forming new parties is difficult. In a one-dimensional system with a left-right split, for example, new party formation on the left wing of the left-leaning party, caused by frustration with the platform oriented towards the center, would split the left vote, leading to election of the right-leaning party, a worse alternative (for those on the left) than the traditional left-leaning party. If it is difficult to start new parties on the left and right wings, it is more difficult to form parties that seek to occupy the center, for the left and right leaning parties will crowd as closely as possible to their positions, thereby eliminating any reasonable chance that the new centrist party can achieve a plurality of votes.

Consequently, in countries with first-past-the-post electoral regimes, two-party systems predominate – not because their political culture has an “x” or “y” characteristic, but because the strategic response to the payoff yields behaviors that induce two, and only two, parties. As Sartori (1972) notes, the answer to the rhetorical question: would the United States remain a two-party polity if it introduced PR would be no.

In countries with electoral systems based on PR, one observes the opposite effect: incentives for creating new parties that can occupy distinct niches (Sartori 1972). These incentives encourage parties to drift to the extremes, and if social cleavages are not cross-cutting, also lead to a hollowing out of the center. As with production markets for commodities as diverse as disposable diapers and frozen pizza, niche seeking on the
part of parties selling platforms leads to sustainable market schedules composed of five to seven parties (or firms) (Lijphart 1984).

In countries with multiple axes around which interests are shaped (left/right, religious/secular, north/south, etc.) parties seek niches where they can garner votes sufficient to return candidates who then compose coalitions with other parties to make up a government (Neto and Cox 1997; Ordeshook and Shvestova 1994). Because coalitions are needed to form governments and the center tends to be hollowed out as parties maneuver for identity, governments tend towards instability as the governing coalitions are composed of alliances between parties representing increasingly narrow interests. Consequently, the coalitions that do form are likely to be quite heterogeneous, and therefore weak. This is the theory, in any case.

Conventional wisdom then suggests that in countries moving from PR systems to systems closer to first-past-the-post we ought to observe a reduction in the number of political parties, a drift towards the center of the political landscape, less of an emphasis on coalition formation, and enhanced stability. There is some evidence from the 29 countries that have adopted mixed systems that supports these expectations (Jeffery 1999; Shugart 2001). For example, the number of parties increased dramatically following electoral reform which moved New Zealand from a first-past-the-post to a mixed majoritarian/PR system in 1993 (Vowls 2000). Likewise, in Germany which has long had a mixed system there are two large parties (CDU and SPD) each with roughly 30 percent of the seats in the Bundestag, and three minority parties (liberal, socialist and green), each with roughly 10 percent of the seats. Here, mixed systems appear to behave as expected. Specifically, in PR tiers, there is fractionalization of the party system, and in majoritarian tiers, there is consolidation through election alliances (Cox 1997; Ferrara 2004; Moser 1997, 1999; Riker 1962).

There is also evidence that mixed systems may lead to mixed results (Cox and Schoppa 2002; Ferrara, Heron and Nishikawa 2005; Herron and Nishikawa 2005). For example, Kostadinova (2002) suggests that mixed systems may stimulate moderate party fragmentation in Eastern Europe. Likewise, Ferrara and Herron (2005) show that in 14 mixed systems there is evidence of contamination effects where the strategic incentive to parties encourages them to “go it alone” and reject pre-election cooperative agreements. Where contamination effects are observed, outcomes are more variable. In the Italian case, for example, Ferrara (2004) suggests that coordination (at the national level) reflects incentives that arise from the “majoritarian character of its electoral system.” (Donovan 2002; Ferrara and Herron 2005)

In Italy, reform in 1993 shifted the electoral system away from a strict PR system towards a first-past-the-post or majoritarian system. However,
in contrast to expectations, local, provincial and regional Italian politics after reform features an explosion in the number of parties, an increased emphasis on coalition formation, and a structure conducive to a politics of influences rather than a politics of interests.

This research identifies these empirical outcomes for the first time. To do so, we obtained data on the party affiliations of the more than 450,000 individuals holding office for roughly 3 million positions at multiple levels of observation, from the smallest towns to the largest regions in Italy over an 18-year period (both before and after electoral reform). The logic for considering change at the local, provincial and regional levels is twofold. First, focusing on electoral outcomes in every region (comparable to states in the United States), provinces and comuni (counties and towns) gives us thousands of observations over time from which we can make reliable inferences. Second, the motivation for electoral reform towards FPTP systems was to make politics more transparent. Reformers believed that this would be more effective in achieving their aims at the local level, where parties and politicians are more closely tied to voters. Consequently, assessment of the impact of reform at the local level provides a strong test of the consequences of electoral reform.

We should be clear though, that restricting our analysis to the local level limits inferences we can make at the national level. An observation of recent national elections in Italy suggests the emergence of a strong, bi-polar system. This is true, but we note that bipolarity emerged most strongly in the most recent election – ironically under new electoral rules that at the last moment returned the system to PR in a desperate effort to secure Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s re-election. Whether the sudden shift in underlying rules worked against polarizing tendencies (as theorized) or induced them to appear because of perceptions of illegitimacy is left to future research.

At the same time, it is useful to keep in mind that national parties in Italy operate at the local level just as they do in the United States. The local structure is thus constituted by a mix of national and local parties. The clean analytic distinction that one draws between levels is thus obscured in practice, because national politics is also local politics, and what parties do locally shapes their national identities.

The Electoral System

Just as the United States has multiple levels of elected bodies – federal, state, county, etc. – Italy also has multiple levels. Here we concentrate only on the three levels below the national level: the region (analogous to a U.S. state), the province (no exact U.S. context) and the commune (like a municipality or county). In contrast to the United States where,
with some notable exceptions – Louisiana, San Francisco, Cambridge, Massachusetts – local, state and national elections are governed by the same electoral rule (FPTP), the Italian electoral system, subsequent to 1993, consists of multiple electoral regimes, each quite complicated. Here we describe the gross morphology of the pre-reform and post-reform regional, provincial and communal regimes. Although we note differences across these systems, and while these differences have been the focus of Italian academics (Bartolini and D’Alimonte 1995; Chiaramonte and D’Alimonte 2000), it is critical to remember that the systems are, at their core, deeply similar. The similarity they share is that all are based on mixed logics, part FPTP, part PR.

Pre-Reform Rules in Italy

The simplest system is the pre-reform system, which assigned seats of the council (or legislative body) to parties on a proportional base using the d’Hondt method common to many European countries and (in modified form) the European Union. This allocation system works by calculating successive quotients for each list, in the quotient $V/(s+1)$, $V$ is the total number of votes that list received, and $s$ is the number of seats that party has been allocated (initially 0 for all parties).

Whichever list has the highest quotient gets the next seat allocated, and its quotient is recalculated given the new seat total. The process is repeated until all seats have been allocated. The idea is to allocate seats in proportion to the number of votes a list received. This is achieved by maintaining the ratio of votes received to seats allocated as closely as possible. In all pre-reform systems, there is a slight bias that benefits larger parties, and this is also the case for the d’Hondt approach. In Italy, this bias was not particularly significant. Prior to electoral reform, mayors and presidents of the provinces and regions were elected by the relevant councils, which were composed following the d’Hondt system – not directly by the people. Consequently, one of the elements behind the “sale” of reform was “more direct” elections. In the pre-reform period, all the various levels used the same system – PR following d’Hondt.

Reform

In contrast to the simplicity of the pre-reform system, post-reform electoral systems in Italy appear positively Byzantine, each characterized by a labyrinth of rules and conditions. Politicians understand the systems, but ordinary Italians have only a grasp of the bare essentials, and even those who are politically savvy have only a partial understanding. All of the systems at each level combine, to various degrees, proportional and majoritarian components. This is the central and most important fact, even
though the specific mix – what number of seats under what conditions are allocated proportionally – differs across each level, with the regional most distinct from the provincial and communal.

Communal and Provincial Systems

We start with the local level – the commune – for the 15 ordinary regions as established by the electoral reforms. There are five “irregular” regions with relative autonomy over education, public health, environment and so on. These regions also vary with respect to some details of the electoral system. In the autonomous regions, the proportion of local council seats allocated through the FPTP system differs only slightly. The simplest case is for the 7,455 towns with fewer than 15,000 residents. In these small towns, election of the mayor and council occurs on the same day. The candidate for mayor who receives the most votes is elected (this is a system, familiar to those in the United States) and his/her party, receives two-thirds of the council seats. The number of council seats and the size of the *giunta* (the executive branch) for each commune are largely determined by population size, so the relevant variable is the proportion of seats assigned to the leading party or coalition. The remaining seats are assigned on the basis of PR. Just as a mayor’s party gets two-thirds of all the seats, if a mayor supported by a coalition wins the election, parties within the coalition are assigned seats to the council following the d’Hondt method, with parties getting more votes rewarded accordingly.

Life becomes more complex with the larger commune. For frame of reference, the large communes are extremely important in the Italian political context, including for example, Rome, Milan, Bologna and Naples. Contests in these major urban areas for political power is intense – and given the decentralized nature of the political system as a whole – more salient than comparable American positions, perhaps with the exception of the mayoral elections in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, etc. For municipalities with more than 15,000 residents, the mayor is elected if he or she receives an absolute majority of all votes cast in the first round. The system is comparable to the American system. If no candidate – as is the norm – gets an absolute majority, the top two candidates compete in a run-off election. The winner of the run-off is elected mayor.

If the mayor is elected on the first round and if his or her coalition (or party) receives *more than 50 percent but fewer than 60 percent* of the votes for council seats, the coalition is allocated 60 percent of the council seats. Second, the mayor’s coalition is allocated 60 percent of the council seats if the mayor is elected in the run-off and no other coalition receives more than 40 percent of the vote in the first round. The fact that the mayor’s coalition is allocated 60 percent of the seats under both scenarios
even though they do not receive 60 percent of the vote is designed to induce stability and enable a party or a coalition to actually govern. In all cases in which there is a run-off and for the remaining 40 percent of the council seats if there was not a run-off, council seats are allocated using the d’Hondt system. As for the smaller municipalities, within the winning coalitions, seats are assigned using the d’Hondt method.

The electoral system for the Provincial President and Provincial Council is similar to the large municipalities. The only difference is that the winning party or coalition is assured 60 percent of the council seats, independent of minority coalition strength. Specifically, if the winning coalition does not receive 60 percent of the vote, it is allocated 60 percent of the seats on the council, and the balance is then allocated using the d’Hondt method.

Regional Regimes

The regional system is extremely complex, mixing multiple party slates and levels with so many possibilities that it would be difficult to exhaustively list them. The main element is that 80 percent of the seats on the regional council are allocated by the d’Hondt system, the balance allocated on the basis of absolute vote (e.g., a majoritarian system). Each region is composed of multiple provinces. The slate, or list, of candidates for seats under the PR system are organized on a provincial basis, while the list of candidates for seats under the FPTP regime are based on the whole region. The vote for both lists is cast at once on the same day. The two groups of lists must be tied. Specifically, each provincial list must be tied to a regional list, and the regional list must be tied with lists in at least half of the provinces. To be eligible for inclusion in the proportional component, a party (or coalition) must receive either 3 percent of the votes in a specific province or 5 percent of the overall regional vote.

Voters are presented with two lists of candidates, one for the province and one for the region. They tend to vote inconsistently across these lists, for example, voting for party or alliance X in the proportional provincial election, while for the majoritarian component voting for party or alliance Y. This inconsistency may either be the result of confusion or reflect a strategy whereby voters distinguish between chances of programs under different electoral regimes and shift their votes accordingly.

As with the municipalities and provinces, there are two allocation systems – a PR system for 80 percent of the seats and an FPTP system for the remaining 20 percent. The seats assigned through PR strictly follow the d’Hondt system, however the remaining FPTP seats are allocated differently, depending on the outcome of the proportional component. Specifically, if the provincial lists that are tied to the winning regional list already have 50 percent of the council seats, the winning regional list is
allocated only 50 percent of the majoritarian seats. This limits the ruling coalition to 60 percent of the seats. The remaining seats are assigned to candidates from the losing coalitions following d’Hondt. If the provincial lists that are tied to the winning regional list have fewer than 50 percent of all the votes, and the regional list that wins the regional vote wins with fewer than 40 percent, then the winning regional list is allocated all of the available seats. This brings the leading party to 60 percent of the provincial parliamentary seats. Thus, when a party or coalition receives fewer votes at the regional level, they are allocated more seats.

If the winning lists (the linked provincial and regional lists) after this allocation do not compose at least 55 percent of the council seats, the number of seats in the council is increased, and seats are assigned to the winning coalition so that the winning list will have 55 percent. The council thus expands and contracts like an accordion to ensure that the winning coalition has between 55 percent and 60 percent of the vote. This process – rewarding losing to a point – encourages party fragmentation and re-alliance. As with the mayors of the larger municipalities, regional governors are elected if they win an absolute majority of votes. If no candidate wins an absolute majority, the leading candidates participate in a run-off. The winner of that election is appointed.

In short, the post-reform electoral system is an awkward mix of competing PR and FPTP principles. While different, each system rewards parties for forming coalitions that achieve very narrow majorities. These narrow majorities are then amplified under the seat allocation system to guarantee stability of rule. Thus, each party benefits most when it is small and when the coalition victory is fragile. These micro-incentives express themselves with respect to their strategic behavior.

Data and Methods

We use data compiled by the Italian interior ministry that identifies all of the individuals elected to public office in Italy from 1984 through 2001 at the regional, provincial and municipal (comuni) levels. Italy is divided into 20 regions, five of which have special legislative powers (Valle D’Aosta, Trentino Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Sardinia and Sicily). Each region is composed of provinces, and each province is composed of numerous municipalities. At the time of data analysis, there were 103 provinces in Italy and 8,101 municipalities. Individuals are elected to five-year terms for positions at the regional level and four-year terms for provincial and municipal positions.

Table 1 reports the number of positions and individuals by year for each level. Ignoring minor variation in the number of positions each year, there are slightly more than 1,000 positions at the regional level, 3,500
at the provincial level, and 130,000 at the municipal level. In total, we have data on the incumbents of roughly 3 million positions. Individuals often hold multiple positions. In the last column, we report the number of unique individuals elected at each level: 3,266 at the regional, 12,034 at the provincial, and 441,000 at the municipal level. From 1984-1987, the regional level data are missing observations from the South – consequently, we do not consider these data in all of our analyses. The sharp increase in the number of provincial positions in 1994 is caused by the addition of eight new provinces.

As implied earlier, each level the public administration is composed of a legislative council and an executive (giunta). Mayors, presidents and governors direct the giunta. Occupying multiple positions across levels is not uncommon. The same person can be, at the same time, a member of the town council and a member of the provincial council; and in small comuni one can be member of the council and of the giunta. Multiple individuals holding more than one office across levels and within the local level partly accounts for the variation in the number of positions between years for the three series.

Post reform, an increasing number of politicians have been elected as part of local political groups, known as civic lists. The name of civic list (lista civica) stems from the alleged origin of the candidates – civil society rather than the political parties. The civic list appears to be a strategy for individuals associated with small parties to achieve sufficient votes to qualify for the proportional component of the seat allocation system. Consequently, politicians from small peripheral parties are roughly 8 to 12 times more likely to appear on civic lists than politicians from larger parties.

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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with stable histories, without any further distinction. Not surprisingly, civic lists appear to predominate in small municipalities, those with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants. In 2001, for example, no individuals were identified as elected from a \textit{lista civica} from Milan, Florence or Bari, and only six individuals were elected from \textit{lista civica} in Rome. Figure 1 reports the distribution of \textit{lista civica} politicians by level over time.

By 2001, at the municipal level, more than 50 percent of the seats went to candidates running on a Lista Civica in very small \textit{comuni}, while roughly 20 percent of the seats were filled by persons elected on \textit{lista civica} in large municipality and provincial elections. Fewer than 10 percent of the individuals who served at the regional level were elected on a \textit{lista civica}. Those at the municipal level who are elected on civic lists have significantly different career outcomes than those who were elected as representatives of parties. Specifically, they are significantly ($p = .01$) less likely to experience mobility to either the regional or provincial level than those elected from within the party system. Local politics and politicians with localist orientations dominate the civic lists. Consequently, their impact on the macro-structure of the political system is limited.

\textbf{Inducing Alliance Structures}

The network strategy employed for modeling and representing party alliances is as follows. For each elected individual, there is a record of the political
party or parties under which the candidate was elected. If an individual ran under multiple parties, he or she provided a link between the parties he represented. Thus, a candidate running for office under the joint auspices of the Alleanza Nazionale and Forza Italia induces a tie between these two parties. By analogy to the United States, the alliance between Populists and Democrats at the turn of the 20th century would have been captured, using the methods employed here, by the fact that many candidates ran on both tickets simultaneously. This substantively simple framework is also technically very simple; specifically, we build bipartite graphs of parties and politicians for each year and level. Such bipartite graphs, by ordinary matrix multiplication of the original matrix by its transpose (Bearman and Everett 1993; Breiger 1974), can give rise to a party-to-party graph. Subsequent analyses focus on the structure of the party-to-party graphs, for all parties, across all levels, for all years from 1984 to 2001.

Because a party alliance means that elected individuals jointly represent the parties, the edges linking parties are composed of individuals. To eliminate the possibility that edges between two parties are the result of trivial alliances, we consider only parties that are strongly connected by multiple alliances. To establish a threshold for indicating the presence of a tie between two parties, we generate an ordered vector by number of ties between parties for each level and election for those parties with alliances. We set the bottom 3 percent of all observations to zero, indicating an absence of ties. In practice, this means that an edge between parties on the graphs of the structure of alliance at the municipal level indicates at least 20 or more cases in which the parties were connected. For the provincial and regional level, ties are not indexed unless there are at least 16 instances of alliance. Consequently, idiosyncratic alliances, or alliances that result from data entry error, are not included and only alliances that are repeatedly observed are analyzed. The ties that make up the links between parties formed by a pre-election coalition are thus not artifacts of our design. They must appear dozens of times for us to recognize them as a robust connection.

Results

We first turn to the description of data that reveal the basic demography of the system, with respect to parties and coalitions, for the pre and post electoral reform periods. These data are reported in Figure 2.

Figure 2 reports the number of active parties in the local system. It is easy to observe a phenomenal increase in the number of parties at the local level, an increase that anticipates the electoral reforms of 1993. This anticipation is due in part to the major corruption scandals and resulting trials that rocked the political system in the late 1980s, ultimately resulting
in the breakdown of the centrist governing coalition built by the Christian Democratic Party. At the local level, the ex-DC (at least those not in prison) formed their own parties, to avoid taint of association. The increase in the number of parties at all of the levels is still striking, even if the curve is not as sharp for the regional as the municipal level. But even at the regional level we observe roughly 50 identifiable parties (competing for a minimum of 3 percent of the vote). Across all levels, electoral reform designed to reduce the number of political parties had the reverse effect.

We now consider the proportion of candidates elected as members of a coalition over time. The 1984-87 data are sparse, but there is no obvious reason why this should artificially reduce the proportion of persons elected as a member of a coalition, so we include them. For each region Figure 3 reports the proportion of candidates elected on a coalition ticket. Prior to the reform in 1993, roughly 5 percent of candidates for regional parliamentary positions, and fewer than 30 percent of candidates for municipal or provincial positions ran as members of a coalition. Following the “Clean Hands” corruption trials of the early 1990s, the breakdown of the DC, and the consequent fragmentation of the communist party, and in anticipation of electoral reforms of 1993, we observe a striking increase in the proportion of candidates running as members of a coalition. By
1997, just a few years following reform, almost every candidate at every level represents a coalition of parties. Visual inspection of Figure 3 reveals this dramatic change: coalitions replace parties as the principle organizing element of the political sphere.

This shift – from party to coalition – should be expected as a consequence of moving from a pure PR to a mixed-first past the post system as parties move to occupy the center of the electoral space. In theory, in order to capture the center under a first past the post system, coalitions will form internally prior to each election, rather than externally after the fact. In some regards, this is what we observe. In theory, coalitions made an *ex ante* move towards the “median voter” while retaining characteristics (such as left/right, secular/lay, etc.) not to alienate traditional support.

The fact of coalitions however does not really tell us anything about their structure, or the structure of ideological differences that are refracted and organized by political parties. The next figure addresses this issue at the municipal level by reporting the structure of the pre-election alliances from 1988 to 2001. Here we exclude 1984 through 1987 because there were no alliances, and little point in reporting a graph with only nodes.

In Figure 4 each dot represents a party. Thus, in 1989, there are 50 dots. Lines connecting dots reflect robust alliances between parties. In 1989,
Figure 4. Alliance Formation among Parties Over Time, Municipal Level

1988 - 1992

1993 - 1996

1997 - 1999

2000 - 2001
for example, we observe 11 alliances between 13 parties in three small
disjoint components. By 1994 we observe almost 100 unique parties at
the municipal level – rising to 137 in 2000. Figure 4 thus reports trimmed
alliance structures from 1994 onward. We excluded from representation
(but not analysis) isolates and parties that have alliances with only one
other party, composing a disjoint dyad.

In Figure 4, the 14 panels report the structure of alliances over time
reading down, from left to right. Thus the first panel in the top left refers
to 1988, the panel immediately below to 1989. The second column
starts with 1993, the year of the electoral reform. From 1988 to 1993 we
observe few alliances connecting a minority of parties in small disjointed
components. Subsequent to electoral reform in 1993 we observe massive
structural change, resulting in the emergence of a single interconnected
component that links the majority of parties into what appears to be
a giant bowl of spaghetti. By 1995, this structure – an inversion of the
pattern observed under DC control in the pure PR period – is firmly in place.
Instead of a hollow center surrounded by small isolated peripheral parties
in perpetual opposition, there is a crowded center of overlapping and
tightly interwoven parties and party clusters. We repeated the analysis for
the other two levels, regional and provincial, observing a similar structural
change, initiated immediately after the electoral reform of 1993 and firmly
in place by 1996.

The most striking feature of the post-reform structure is the absence
of structure. Here we observe a giant jumble of overlapping parties:
secular and lay, separatist and nationalist, right and left. One can move,
for example, from the far right (Movimento Sociale Italiano) to the far left
(Rifondazione Comunista) in fewer than three steps, often in only two
and in some instances through a direct tie.

Against this background, it is useful to recall the expected outcomes
of the election reform. On one hand, reform was designed to lead to
a reduction in the number of political parties. It was also designed to
clarify the ideational space of politics by encouraging the formation of
large political parties or party coalitions whose platforms encompassed
diverse positions on issues arising in the civil society. Clarification of
the political sphere was expected to lead to increased transparency –
that is a tighter linkage between constituents with interests and the
officials who represented them. Neither of these outcomes occurred.
Instead, electoral reform led to the perverse and wholly unanticipated
amplification of the extreme tendencies of both pure PR and majoritarian
systems. Specifically, we observe an explosion, rather than reduction, in
the number of parties, massive coalition formation without ideological
foundation, and a crowding of the center. This pattern is robust and
observed for all levels, at roughly the same time.
Deep Structure

It is possible that because we pool alliances across multiple municipalities into a single graph that the core finding we report—especially for the data arising from the thousands of small municipalities across the whole of Italy—is artifactual. To address this possibility we consider whether or not electoral reform impacted alliance formation evenly across each region. Figure 5 reports as a box plot, the proportion of parties in the largest component over time, for each region.

Thus, 50 percent of the observations for each region are found within the box, the solid line marks the median, and outliers are indicated by dots. Prior to electoral reform in 1993, far fewer than 20 percent—and more typically fewer than 10 percent—of parties were in the largest component. In fact, we observe pre-election alliances only in the North—Lombardia, Veneto and Piemonte—where separatist regional parties joined together to compose what would later emerge as the Northern League. After 1996, more than half of all parties are located in a giant central component. It follows that pooling observations across small disconnected municipalities from different regions is not inducing the macro-structure we observe.

It is possible that the variation we do observe in Figure 5 reflects long-standing regional differences in Italy that are often thought to be associated with different political cultures, arising in part from different underlying social structures. In the industrial North and center, politics is thought to be more clearly aligned with class cleavages, whereas in the agrarian South, clientalism remains a powerful force (Putnam 1993; Riley 2005). To consider this hypothesis, we consider the structure of alliances in one northern region where we observe pre-election alliances (Lombardia) and one southern region (Campania). While no direct comparison captures all of the meaningful dimensions, by analogy to the United States, this would be akin to comparing Illinois (industrial) and Louisiana (agrarian and with a long tradition of corruption). Under PR, the left (PSI) dominated local politics in Lombardia, whereas in Campania, and most forcefully in Naples, the DC was hegemonic.

For both Figure 6 (the structure of alliances in Lombardia) and Figure 7 (the structure of alliances in Campania) we report the historical pattern of party alliances for the pre- and post-reform period. As before, reading down the columns from left to right, one can see for both regions a strikingly similar pattern. By 1996 in Lombardia and 1995 in Campania, the majority of all political parties become interlinked within a single giant component which progressively increases in both size and density over time. This occurs despite quite striking differences in political culture (Gobetti 1996; Hazelrigg 1970; Misra and Hicks 1994; Weakliem 1991).
It appears from these two case studies that structural isomorphism is thus not artifactual – rather it is the result of the logic of politics. The electoral reform of 1993 affected each region in the same way, instituting new rules that provided the context for similar strategic responses on the part of parties.

Of course, the two cases may be outliers. To assess this possibility we calculate Newman-Girvan modularity scores for each region over time, from 1997 to 2001, that is for the five years where we observe the vast majority of parties in a single, fully connected component (Girvan and Newman 2002). The Newman-Girvan algorithm seeks to identify natural breaks in graphs to reveal “communities” of nodes, or more precisely, densely connected subgroups. The algorithm iteratively removes edges with high between-ness and seeks to identify the most parsimonious partition of nodes to induce disjoint sub-components. The quality of the partition is reported by the modularity score. In general, modularity scores for social networks appear in the .4 to .7 range. Scores lower than .4 indicate that it is not possible to achieve a meaningful partition, that the graph under consideration is substantively an integrated component (Newman and Girvan 2004).

Reported in Figure 8 are box-plots for modularity scores (Q) for each of the 20 regions over time. Results for Lombardia (indexed by a star) and
Figure 6. Alliance Formation among Parties over Time, Municipal Level, Lombardia

1988 - 1992

1993 - 1996

1997 - 1999

2000 - 2001
Figure 7. Alliance Formation among Parties over Time, Municipal Level, Campania
1988 - 1992

1993 - 1996

1997 - 1999

2000 - 2001
Campania (indexed by a circle) are highlighted. Despite the traditional social and political differences between these regions, after the electoral reform, in 1996 in Lombardia and 1995 in Campania, the majority of all political parties become interlinked within a single giant component which progressively increased in both size and density. This can be seen by noting that their modularity scores are always relatively close to each other, and within the .2 to .4 range.

The electoral reform of 1993 affected each region in the same way, instituting new rules that provided the context for similar strategic responses on the part of parties. Investigation of Figure 8 shows that Lombardia and Campania are typical regions: the alliance structures we observe there are also present in each of the other regions. Second, only in a few cases are modularity scores reported in substantively acceptable ranges. From 1997 to 2001, a meaningful partition of the political alliance structure is impossible.

Finally we can consider what specific parties are interlinked. Here, we have 20 regions and 14 years across three levels to consider, resulting in 840 possible graphs to look at it. For Campania, we select the one year where polarization is greatest (2000), and where Campania is an outlier with respect to the typical pattern observed – that is we show the worst
case for the argument we advance. In Figure 9, we report the major named parties that compose the main component for the regional level. Unnamed are 10 other smaller parties, some of which cross-cut the left-right divide that organizes this particular political ecology.

The center-right parties are located at the top of Figure 9: the CDU, Forza Italia (Berlusconi’s Party), the Alleanza Nazionale (the proto fascist ex-Mussolini group) and the Christian Democrats. The left occupies the bottom of the spectrum, represented by the PDF, Rifondazione Comunista and the Partito Liberale (a liberal faction). The left and right are connected through multiple ties jointly with the Social Deomocrats, the Partito Popolare and Dini (a clientage party surrounding Lamberto Dini, former director of the national bank) originally elected with Forza Italia. Clearly there is some polarization on a left-right spectrum. However, note that the Comunisti Unitari is one step away from Forza Italia, and that there are multiple independent pathways linking in one step the left and right blocks. This is a polarized structure, Italian style, in the mixed system.
Discussion

In Italy, from 1948 to 1992, governments formed and collapsed with astonishing frequency – lasting on average less than one year. Despite this, or more accurately, because of this, the Christian Democratic party was able to maintain control of the polity without interruption. Material rather than ideational interests determined political outcomes. Likewise, mystery and intrigue rather than clarity and transparency characterized the political process. One indicator of an absence of accountability is corruption. From 1948 to 1992, for example, just considering the lower house (Camera dei Deputati) the judiciary charged 1,588 of the 2,923 (or 54 percent) of the members of parliament with some crime. Considering only serious crimes (including murder), the judiciary brought charges against 1,192 individuals, or 41 percent of those who ever served. With the exception of elections in 1976 and 1992, those charged with corruption were as likely or more likely (from 1948 to 1956) to be re-elected as those not charged (Chang and Golden 2006). Perhaps most significantly, from 1972 to 1992, the vast majority of deputies charged with serious corruption served in the ruling coalition.

It is possible that Italian voters like corrupt officials and set out to elect them. This is not the case. Italian voters dislike crooks at the same modest rate that other voters dislike crooks. In the United States, for example, officials convicted of corruption lose somewhere between 6 and 11 percent of their support. In Japan, 62 percent of officials convicted of corruption are reelected, compared to 51 percent of Italian deputies (Chang and Gooden 2006). Despite similarly modest penalties, the proportion of corrupt officials in Japan and the United States never approaches 50 percent. Thus the rate of corruption cannot be tied to greater indifference on the part of Italian voters. It was, and is, the product of a structure of rule that rewards clientalism. In this paper we suggest that both the traditional DC-dominated prism structure that appeared under PR and the post-reform, center-crowding structure that we identify here reward the politics of clientalism and corruption. In both, transparency of interests and ends is masked by a vipers-tangle of knotted and intertwined alliances.

This insight was the insight of the Italian reformers who called for local electoral reform. Noting that a specific structure of rule – a structure best characterized as an intertwined clique of parties strung together on the basis of post-election instrumental deal making in order to retain power – was associated with corruption, electoral reformers set out to transform the rules of engagement to break that structure. Local electoral reform was thus designed to open the system to a politics based on ideal rather than material interests. In this article we show that electoral reform produced outcomes wildly unanticipated by reformers and theorists. Instead of a
diminution in the number of political parties, we observe an explosion. Instead of clear factions, we observe the formation of a giant, knotty, cyclic and intertwined cluster of parties formed on the basis of local and ideologically contradictory, pre-election alliances.

The central empirical finding of this research is, of course, that the mixed electoral system in the Italian case amplified the perversities of both the PR and majoritarian systems at the local level. Parties and party fragments split apart; new parties were formed, and all raced to form alliances with other parties in order to exploit small incentives in the electoral system. These incentives rewarded small parties in fragile coalitions with small majorities. Rational parties were thus encouraged to make irrational deals in advance of each election. These deals, when aggregated, reveal a system in which communists are as close to post-fascists as they are to separatists, where separatists are as close to religious conservatives as they are to nationalists, and where nationalists are as close to the corrupt remains of the Christian Democrats as they are to the socialists.

We started this article by noting that in Italian politics there always seems to be a peculiar irony – the more governments failed, the stronger the governing system became. This gave rise to the idea that the more things change, the more they stay the same. This article suggests a deeper irony. Electoral reform designed to generate a bi-polar system profoundly changed how local governments were put together. But it had no effect on polarization per se. The reform now means that strange governing coalitions will last out their terms. They may be replaced by other equally strange governing coalitions. But oscillation of rule is not exactly the same thing as bipolarity if it turns out that the oscillators are more often than not just two sides of the same fan.

As political sociologists, we are concerned with opinions and interests, parties and politics, institutions and outcomes. In this article, we suggest that an old concern of political sociology, electoral regimes, not be forgotten in the mix of important factors that structure the political experiences of individuals and their representatives (Linz and Stepan 1996). For the structure of electoral systems, as suggested by the Italian case – at least at the local level – can in often quite profound ways change the rules of engagement in politics, and thus transform the possibilities for democratic renewal, the fair representation of interests, and the sweeping away of corruption that provide a rationale for our concern with how those who rule really do it. For this reason, political sociologists would be well advised to bring electoral systems back into their analytic frameworks.
References


