

**Declining partisan representation at the sub-national level:  
assessing and explaining the strengthening of *local lists* in Italian  
municipalities (1995-2014)**

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In Western democracies political representation at the national level is still dominated by (old and new) political parties. This paper shows that, instead, the representative role of parties may have declined at the local level. In Italy, for instance, the average share of municipal seats held by non-partisan councillors has almost tripled in the last twenty years. By using an original dataset, this paper classifies different types of Italian local lists, assesses their relationship with traditional parties and explains territorial variation in their success. The results suggest that local lists have become substantially stronger in small municipalities, in regions characterised by weak or declining political subcultures and where regionalist parties are absent or irrelevant. Finally, contrary to the expectation that declining partisanship is linked to modernization processes and direct civic engagement, local lists have achieved their best results in the less developed areas of the country.

Keywords: Local List, Local Election, Italy, Representation, Partisanship, Politicisation.

## **Introduction and research question**

Vertical connections between different territorial levels of representation seem to have weakened in advanced democracies and this has posed a serious challenge to political parties. Indeed, the importance of partisanship has substantially declined in some local contexts and the emergence and strengthening of ‘local lists’, which do not rely on ‘classic’ party organisation and just focus on municipal issues, seem to be a good indicator of this phenomenon. Starting from this premise, this paper aims to explain what conditions favour the emergence of ‘non-partisan’ representative democracy at the local level.

The study of developments in local politics is fundamental if we want to understand how political representation and participation are evolving and what role political parties may still play in contemporary democracies. Moreover, a multi-level approach to the study of changing representation is rarely adopted by the literature and, even when it is, it mainly focuses on the regional rather than local level. Thus this paper aims to add a new dimension to the study of party politics, a dimension that is often neglected but, in fact, is very important, since most European citizens are more directly involved in (and affected by) local rather than regional or national politics. As underlined by Mabileau et al. (1989, 1), despite dramatic changes in global politics and economy, ‘the locality remains the arena in which most lives are conducted’ and, therefore, local political participation is ‘of central importance to the life of democracy’ (2).

Italy can be regarded as an emblematic case of declining partisanship in the local arena, since, as I show in the next sections, political parties seem increasingly unable (or unwilling) to control representation in municipalities. However, such phenomenon has not

occurred homogeneously across the Italian territory. The aim of this study is to provide a preliminary test of various hypotheses that may explain the strengthening of non-partisan representation at the local level. Additionally, I underline that non-partisan representation may assume different characteristics depending on the way it relates to more traditional forms of party-based representation.

In the next section I provide a brief literature review on the processes of organisational and electoral nationalisation and de-nationalisation of politics. This section is followed by a description of the main institutional characteristics of Italian municipalities, focusing in particular on their voting system. I then move to the conceptualisation of the ‘local lists phenomenon’ and I present some hypotheses that may explain variation in the strength of non partisan representation in Italian municipalities. The hypotheses are tested by using a quantitative analysis that aims to explain variation in non-partisan representation in more than 600 municipalities and compares results in the late 1990s to those in the early 2010s. After discussing the results of the 2015 municipal elections (not included in the original dataset), which suggest that the phenomenon of local lists is still growing, I conclude that partisan democracy has mainly declined in small municipalities, in the less developed areas of the country and where well-established political traditions (also called ‘political sub-cultures’) are absent or have disappeared.

#### The role of political parties in local and national representative democracy

Political parties emerged and strengthened in a context of nationalisation and closure of territorial boundaries in Western democracies (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Caramani 2004). To put it in Bartolini’s (2005, 250-251) words:

‘Parties provided political personnel that made for “electoral mobilizers”, “interest articulators”, and “peripheral political elite” to overlap. They did so by providing a single hierarchical order to organize from within various spheres of representation activity and to iron out the tensions that emerged from their relationships. (...) Political parties thus represented ideological-organizational alliances between economic and/or cultural agencies in the centre and local leaders and movements in the different peripheries’.

During the ‘Golden Age’ of mass politics, the organisational consolidation of political parties resulted in a process of centralisation and strengthening of the links between local, regional and central elites. Social-democratic or communist parties with their hierarchical and highly integrated organisations were seen as models of political forces that could effectively mobilise millions of activists and voters (Duverger 1972). Therefore, political parties were ‘viewed as promoters of national politics down to the local level’ (Aars and Ringkjøb 2005, 162). One important implication of this process of territorial ‘standardisation’ was an increasing politicisation of representation and citizens’ mobilisation at the local level. Indeed, it can be argued that, before the politicisation and nationalisation processes occurred, ‘voters were mainly mobilised on a local basis – on local issues, whereas after the parties had gained ground in local government, voters were more frequently mobilised on the basis of national issues’ (ibid.). In his seminal work on party nationalisation, Caramani (2004, 300) shows that electoral support for political parties became more territorially homogeneous in many European countries during the so called ‘golden age’ of mass politics. At the same time, in his conclusions he suggests that over the last decades, ‘territories might once again play a major role in European developments and shall therefore deserve a careful look in the future’.

Scholars have argued that, since the late 1960s, partisan control of local politics has weakened. This is partly due to the fact that national party elites have moved towards the state and parties have developed new *stratarchical* organisational structures (Carty 2004; Katz and Mair 2009). According to Katz and Mair (2009, 761), ‘stratarchical adaptive strategies’ may ‘be pursued by national party leaders seeking to maintain local organizations, both for their utility in campaigns and to avoid the public perception of decay, but at the same time to free themselves of constraints imposed by those local organizations’. In general stratarchy seems to go hand in hand with *cartelisation* of political parties. Yet the stratarchical evolution within political parties did not lead to a full de-politicisation of local representation. Indeed, local political elites evolved as ‘parties in franchise’, which, despite developing an autonomous political strategy and becoming increasingly disconnected from the central leadership, still relied on the ‘party brand’ in electoral competition (Carty 2004). This paper suggests that there might be a further step in the evolution of local political representation. Political parties may lose most of their appeal in the local arena and citizens may even regard local-based politics as an alternative to traditional party politics. The emergence of *citizens’* or *local lists* can be seen as an indicator of these new types of participation and representation that *fully transcend the mediation of party structures*. According to Reiser and Holtmann (2008, 7), editors of one of the few studies on local lists in

Western and Eastern Europe, local lists ‘understand themselves as protector of a harmonious factual political style’ and ‘perceive themselves as *non-parties*’. Moreover, using Holtmann’s (2008, 11) definition, local lists are focused on *local jurisdictions* and are solely *locally organised*. This means that they are just interested in local issues and only have a town-based organisation, which is not formally linked to any provincial, regional or national political organisation.

Some studies on party (de-)nationalisation have not provided strong evidence of the declining role of parties in the local dimension. For instance, the study by Aars and Ringkjøb (2005) shows that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century political parties still dominated local representation in Norway, although things might have changed in more recent years. The paper on Austrian municipal representation by Ennser-Jedenastik et al. (2013) mainly focuses on differences in the nationalisation of local politics across the *Länder* but also suggests that there might be an over-time, general decrease in partisanship deriving from the weakening of traditional party organisations. The case of Italy, presented here, may be regarded as a much clearer example of declining strength of political parties in the local arena. At the same time, the great variation in the strength of non-partisan local lists across Italian municipalities makes it possible to test various hypotheses on the conditions that have led to less politicised local representation.

### **The voting system in Italian municipalities**

Before moving to the analysis of local lists’ success in Italy, a brief introduction to the voting system adopted in Italian municipalities is presented in this section. Since the electoral reform of 1993, mayors in the Italian municipalities have been directly elected (Baldini 2002) and the composition of municipal councils has been determined through a mixed proportional-majoritarian system. Indeed, the list(s) supporting the winning mayoral candidate obtain a ‘majority bonus’ (roughly around 60% of the seats), while the remaining seats are allocated proportionally among the losing lists. Yet, whereas in municipalities with less than 15,000 inhabitants the majority bonus is allocated regardless of the share of votes obtained by the winning candidate, in the other municipalities a two-round election is in place: if no candidate obtains more than 50% of the vote, a second election round involving the two strongest candidates takes place after two weeks. Additionally, in municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants, all parties and local movements may form autonomous lists in the first round and then form alliances in the second round. In smaller municipalities, instead,

parties supporting the same mayoral candidate must form a single list. This latter point makes it more difficult to assess changes in the composition of representation in small municipalities (Pritoni 2014, 385). For this reason, this study focuses on municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants.

Non-partisan representation in Italian municipalities: between citizens' autonomy and 'partisanship in disguise'

The existence of local lists in Italy is not a recent phenomenon. In particular, as mentioned above, the 1993 electoral reform strengthened the role of mayoral candidates and this in turn produced a weakening of the role of political parties in local politics. Direct mayoral election made the creation of 'personal lists' or 'civic lists' a more appealing option in a competition in which classic party labels became less relevant (Magnier, 2004). However, until the late 1990s, non-partisan lists still played a rather limited role in sub-national politics. Parties still seemed to control all levels of government and remained the main structures of connection between centre and periphery. Even in a context of *stratarchisation* of party organisations, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian political parties were still regarded as the main channels of representation of local interests. Becoming a local councillor could be the beginning of a long political career through the different layers of government. In sum, local lists were mainly exceptions in a context in which politics and administration at all levels were still dominated by political parties.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the situation seems to have radically changed, as is shown in the following sections. However, before assessing changes in the composition of local representation, the term 'local list' needs to be specified. Indeed, only some local lists are fully independent from party politics. This is because, as mentioned above, the voting system adopted in Italy for municipalities that have more than 15,000 inhabitants, allows for the formation of coalitions of different lists in a two-round electoral competition. In this context, one should distinguish between local lists that cannot be directly or indirectly associated with mainstream party competition and those that are more inclined to establish alliances with traditional party lists. I call the former *independent* lists, whereas the latter can be defined as *politicised* local lists or partisan lists 'in disguise'. Indeed, in a context of increasing de-politicisation of the local dimension, political parties may find it convenient to 'outsource' representation to lists that are not formally recognisable as 'partisan' but, in fact,

contribute to the victory of coalitions in which political parties still play a significant role. Pritoni (2014, 390) defines this as ‘blame avoidance’ strategy, aimed at attracting the votes of those citizens, who are increasingly sceptical of purely party-based politics. Also Magnier (2004: 172) has argued that in some cases local lists may conceal old and new party affiliations.

### **Operationalisation of local lists’ representation and description of dependent variable**

Studies focusing on local representation have relied on different indicators measuring the strength of local lists. In their paper on Norwegian local representation Aars and Ringkjøb (2005) mainly refer to the number of and electoral support (in % of votes) for local lists, whereas in their analysis of the Austrian case Ennsner-Jedenastik et al (2013) also use an index of party nationalisation. This paper focuses on the changing characteristics of local *representation* in Italy and the strength of local lists is therefore measured in terms of share of seats won in the main representative institution existing at the local level: the municipal council. If, for instance, local lists control two seats out of twenty in a municipal council, their strength in terms of representation is 10%.

Table 1 provides a summary of local lists’ representation (as a percentage of municipal council seats) in 628 Italian municipalities having more than 15,000 inhabitants. Most of the data used for this study are taken from the archive of the Italian Interior Ministry (<http://elezionistorico.interno.it/>), which contains electoral data of local, regional, national and European elections. Data from some municipalities in ‘special status’ regions (Sicily, Sardinia, Friuli Venetia Giulia, Aosta Valley and Trentino-Alto Adige) are not in the Interior Ministry Archive and their results have been taken from the online archives of the two main Italian newspapers (*Corriere della Sera* and *Repubblica*). It can be seen that the average representation of local lists in the main Italian municipalities has increased from 13% in the late 1990s to 34.1% in the early 2010s. If we consider different types of local lists, it can be noted that the average share of seats controlled by *independent* lists has increased fourfold, from 2.1% to almost 10%. At the same, representation of *politicised* local lists has more than doubled, from 10.9 to 24.2%. It is also interesting to see that, as suggested by the standard deviation, today cross-municipal variation in representation of independent local lists is greater than that of politicised local lists.

[Table 1 about here]

How can such variation be explained? In which Italian municipalities have local lists been more successful in the last 15-20 years? Next section presents a set of hypotheses that consider the effects of town size, differences in the levels of socio-economic development and social capital between Central-Northern and Southern Italy, the existence of ‘political subcultures’ and regionalist mobilisation on the strength of local lists representation.

### **Theoretical framework and hypotheses**

Electoral participation and representation can be expected to become more focused on local issues and dominated by non-partisan actors as the size of municipalities decreases. Studies have proved that the ‘nationalisation’ of party systems is clearly affected by how large sub-national political entities are (Dahl and Tufte 1973; Ennsner-Jedenastik et al 2013). Indeed, party organisations are more likely to reach larger towns and recruit members and activists in broader communities. Additionally, it is strategically more important for political parties to obtain representation in regional or provincial capitals rather than in small towns and villages. Indeed, control of large municipalities may also be an asset in terms of prestige, resources, political personnel and, ultimately, votes in national electoral competitions. Therefore

#### *H1. Local lists’ representation decreases as the size of municipalities increases*

Another interesting hypothesis that can be tested is whether the phenomenon of local lists is linked to ‘social capital’ or ‘civicness’. Putnam’s (1993) study has shown that Central-Northern Italian regions are characterised by a more dynamic and integrated civil society than Southern regions. The existence of strong social capital is also accompanied by higher levels of economic development. Thus one may use the concept of ‘socio-economic development’ to highlight both social and economic *maturity* of a political system. So far the link between socio-economic development and the emergence of ‘partyless’ democracy has not been sufficiently investigated. If the crisis of partisanship is linked to processes of modernisation and to the emergence of a more *complex* society, which is less controllable by political elites due to increasing citizens’ awareness (Vampa 2015), one may expect that the phenomenon of local and citizens’ lists has been more significant in Central-Northern Italy than in Southern Italy. Moreover, local lists are often called ‘civic movements’ or ‘civic parties’ in the literature (Boogers 2008; Reiser and Holtmann 2008) and, therefore, their strength may be expected to be positively associated with levels of social capital, which ‘result in citizens

getting more involved in civic engagement and becoming active citizens within their communities' (Kapuku, 2011: 25). It follows that

*H2. In regions characterised by higher levels of socio-economic development and 'civicness' (Central-Northern Italy), the representation of local lists will be stronger.*

An additional factor that may affect variation in local lists' representation is the existence of well-established political traditions that are *geographically concentrated* and derive from long-term dominance of one party or coalition of parties. These traditions are often defined as 'political subcultures' to underline their peculiarity and differences from the more fluid and plural political context existing at the national level. According to Trigilia (1986, 162), regions with strong political subcultures are characterised by 'the predominance of a particular political tradition, whose origins usually go back to the beginning of the century, and a complex of institutions (parties, interest groups, cultural and welfare structures) which derive from the same politico-ideological matrix'. Generally, it may be expected that in regions characterised by strong political subcultures, political parties that are linked to such subcultures are more resilient in the electoral competition at the local level (Vampa, 2015, 238). This may in turn have a limiting effect on the emergence and strengthening of local lists. On the other hand, the absence of well-rooted political traditions may make electoral competition more fluid and open to the challenges coming from non-partisan actors. Therefore,

*H3. Municipal representation of local lists is less strong in regions characterised by the existence of strong political subcultures.*

For many decades, two political sub-cultures have played an important role in different Italian regions. The first one is the so-called *red* subculture (Floridia, 2010), dominated by left-wing parties, which were particularly strong in central Italian regions such as Tuscany, Emilia Romagna and Umbria. The three regions are also called the 'red belt' (Vampa 2009). The second one is the *white* subculture (Baccetti and Messina 2009) that emerged from the political hegemony of the Christian Democratic Party (DC) and other catholic organisations in the North East of Italy, particularly in Veneto and Friuli Venetia Giulia. Such hegemony, however, was abruptly interrupted in the 1990s, when the established party system collapsed as a result of changes in the international political system, such as the end of Communism in Eastern Europe and processes Europeanisation (Golden 2004), and corruption scandals (the

so-called *Tangentopoli*). On the other hand, in the *red* regions we can find organisational and electoral continuity in the dominance of centre-left parties, which, despite undergoing a process of ideological and organisational reform, managed to adapt to the new political situation and survived.

Generally, in the *white* regions changes in the political landscape have been so dramatic that they may have seriously undermined well-established political traditions. Indeed, although subcultures are well-rooted in society and are long-term phenomena that do not immediately disappear as a consequence of (mainly) exogenous shocks, they tend to significantly weaken or transform when the *political offer* radically changes. Thus a sub-hypothesis should be formulated:

H3bis. The representation of local lists will be less strong in regions characterised by a *red* (i.e. centre-left) political sub-culture than in those where the Christian democratic tradition used to be hegemonic (*white* regions).

The last hypothesis presented in this article focuses on the connection between regionalist mobilisation and the emergence of more ‘local-focused’ politics at the sub-national level. The literature on multi-level party politics has paid increasing attention to the strengthening of *regionalist political parties* (De Winter and Tüstan 1998). Such parties, which can also be defined as *politically organised territorial movements*, are often seen as expression of ‘sub-state nationalism’ highlighting the ethnic or civic (but also socio-economic) diversity of a ‘peripheral’ region (Keating 2001) and challenging the main state-wide parties (Hino 2012, 60). This type of political mobilisation is linked to the ‘centre– periphery’ cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) and adds a territorial dimension to traditional party competition. The largest regionalist party emerged in Italy, the Northern League, supported and argued for ‘federalism’ and local democracy as opposed to national politics and the centralised State (Diamanti 2014, 7).

It should be underlined that regionalist parties significantly differ from strictly local lists. Indeed the former still rely on more or less structured party organisations, which coordinate the strategies of local branches, and often compete in state-wide elections. On the contrary, local lists are not organised along traditional lines, since they are often horizontal networks of citizens focusing on municipal issues and are not affiliated to a *cross-local* organisation controlled and coordinated by a central leadership. Yet one may hypothesise that in those areas of Italy where regionalist parties have become stronger, a more *localist*

culture focused on territorial issues may have developed. Therefore, regionalist parties may have had a *contagion effect* on the political landscape of municipalities and may have favoured the emergence of locally-focused lists. The opposite can also be true, since one may argue that the existence of regionalist parties, which already represent and incorporate local interests, has hindered the emergence and strengthening of purely local lists (*replacement effect*). Therefore, two alternative hypotheses can be formulated

*H4a. Local lists are stronger in those municipalities in which regionalist parties are stronger, due to a contagion effect of territorial mobilisation on the local political landscape.*

*H4b. Local lists' representation is weaker in those municipalities in which regionalist parties are stronger, since the latter already incorporate and represent local interests (replacement effect).*

### **Testing the hypotheses**

Table 2 provides a preliminary analysis of the conditions that have favoured the strengthening of local lists. Local lists, particularly independent ones, seem to have significantly strengthened in small towns. It is also quite interesting to see that, particularly in recent years, municipal representation of both politicised and independent local lists has been more pronounced in Southern than in Central-Northern regions. A divergence between *white* and *red* regions can also be noted. Indeed, whereas in the former politicised local lists have been particularly successful, in the latter they have failed to become a relevant actor in municipal representation. Lastly, it seems that, particularly in the 2010–2014 period, the representation of both independent and politicised lists is much smaller in municipalities where regionalist parties are strong.

[Table 2 about here]

A multivariate, linear regression model can be used to systematically test the hypotheses presented in the previous section. The dependent variable is the share of municipal seats won by local lists. The population size independent variable is measured in thousands of inhabitants. A dichotomous independent variable has been created to compare Central-Northern to Southern regions. Two dummy variables also compare red and white regions to other regions without specific political subculture. Finally, the strength of territorial and

regionalist parties is measured in terms of percentage of seats controlled by these parties in the municipal council.

The following analysis first applies the model to municipal representation of *all types* of local lists and then considers *independent* and *politicised* local lists separately. In all cases, results of the 1995–1999 period are compared to those of the 2010–2014 period, to see whether the determinants of local lists’ representation have changed in the last 20 years.

In table 3 it can be noted that, in the late 1990s, total representation of local lists was significantly lower in regions characterised by a *red* political subculture and in those areas where regionalist parties were stronger. Such results are confirmed and are even more noticeable in the 2009-2014 period, even if we control for the share of representation of local lists in the 1995-1999 period (model II). Additionally it should be noted that today the share of seats won by local lists is negatively correlated with the population size of municipalities. Interestingly, local lists are stronger in regions characterised by a *white* political subculture in both periods (in fact, the magnitude of the coefficient increases considerably if we move from 1995-1999 to 2009-2004). This may suggest that the collapse of the Christian Democratic Party, which used to be dominant in these regions, paved the way for the creation of lists that are not formally linked to any political organisation. Lastly, in the 1995–1999 period there was no significant difference in the level of representation of local lists between Central-Northern and Southern regions. Yet today the share of council seats controlled by local lists is, on average, 14 percentage points lower in the municipalities of Central-Northern Italy than in those of the Southern regions. This means that, contrary to what hypothesised, locally-focused, *partyless* representation has mainly strengthened in regions characterised by *low* levels of socio-economic development and *civicness*.

[Table 3 about here]

Similar results emerge if we just consider *politicised* local lists (table 4). Also in this case, the difference between Central-Northern and Southern Italy was negligible in the late 1990s but has become significant in recent years, even controlling for all the other independent variables. Interestingly, in the *white* regions representation of politicised local lists seems to be much stronger today than in the 1995–1999 period. On the other hand, the negative coefficients of *red* political subculture and population size are confirmed (although the latter is less statistically and substantially significant than in the previous model). Similarly,

politicised local lists are significantly weaker in those towns where regionalist parties are stronger. These results in the period from 2010 to 2014 hold even if we control for the results of local lists in the 1995–1999 period (Model II).

[Table 4 about here]

Lastly, we can consider *independent* local lists (table 5). It is interesting to notice that in the late 1990s, this type of local lists had slightly more representation in Central-Northern Italy but, today, in a context of decline of partisan politics at the local level, it has become much stronger in Southern Italy. It should also be highlighted that, unlike politicised local lists, independent local lists do not seem significantly weaker in the *red* regions or significantly stronger in the *white* regions. Therefore, in the case, the effect of political subcultures is negligible. As in the previous models, regionalist mobilisation seems to have had a *replacement effect* on the representation of independent local lists. Finally, the share of council seats controlled by independent lists decreases as the size of the municipality increases. This confirms the fact that the administration of larger towns and cities is still dominated by political parties and is generally more politicised.

[Table 5 about here]

Table 6 summarises the main findings of this paper. The size of municipalities seems to have mainly affected the strengthening of independent local lists, whereas it has had a negligible effect in the case of politicised local lists. The hypothesis that local lists are stronger in more socio-economically developed regions of Italy does not seem to be true. In fact, in Central-Northern regions the representation of all types of local lists has been much lower than in Southern regions. The effect of political subcultures has not been homogeneous. In *white* regions, politicised local lists have significantly strengthened. On the other hand, the same type of local lists has been considerably weaker in regions characterised by a *red* political subculture. At the same time, no significant correlation has been found between the existence of political subcultures and strength of independent local lists. Lastly, regionalist and territorial parties seem to have limited, rather than encouraged, the formation and success of all types of local lists (*replacement effect*).

[Table 6 about here]

### **The 2015 election: even stronger local lists**

The trend towards declining partisanship at the local level seems to have even accelerated in the last election (May 2015), the results of which were not considered in the original dataset used for the main section of this paper. As shown in Table 7, in the 84 municipalities voting in 2015 and for which comparable data are available, all local lists won, on average, 46.2% of the seats. This is an increase of more than 15 percentage points from the previous election in these municipalities. Yet whereas representation of politicised local lists has moderately increased in the 84 municipalities (to around 27%), the share of seats obtained by independent local lists has skyrocketed from 8.3% to 19.1%. This seems to point to the further decline of partisanship in local politics. Even politicised local lists, which have also been defined as ‘partisan lists in disguise’, are no longer sufficient means to compensate the weakening appeal of traditional parties.

Looking at the characteristics of the municipalities it is noticeable that the phenomenon of local lists has boomed in medium-sized municipalities and in those ones where regionalist parties are absent. Interestingly, independent local lists have significantly strengthened in the municipalities of the red regions whereas politicised ones have achieved important results where the white political subculture used to be dominant. Finally, the gap between North and South has remained very significant. In fact, it has even widened. In the Southern municipalities involved in the 2015 election, local lists (politicised plus independent ones) have come to control, on average, more than 50% of the council seats. Therefore, for the first time since 1945, lists that are not directly identifiable with political parties have become the main representative force in the main Southern municipalities participating in a local election. In Central-Northern Italy, instead, they have won slightly more than 30% of the seats, increasing their average share of representation without challenging the primary role of political parties. This confirms the existence of ‘two Italies’, one where parties are still important mediators between national and local politics and another where they seem to play an increasingly marginal role.

[Table 7 about here]

## Summary and conclusions

In recent years, both independent and politicised local lists seem to have become important sources of representation in the less socioeconomically developed areas of Italy (the South), in smaller towns and, to a lesser extent, in regions that were once characterised by a Christian-Democratic, *white* political subculture.

Contrary to what initially hypothesised, municipalities in socio-economically developed regions have not experienced an increase in non-partisan political representation as significant as that of Southern municipalities. This seems to suggest that political parties have maintained a more relevant role in those regions where, according to several studies, not only economic development but also social capital and civic involvement are stronger. Therefore, *civicness* and more complex and modern networks of social relations may be a support, rather than a challenge, to party-based democracy.

In Southern Italy, party lists have been mainly replaced by *politicised* local lists, which are created by local party leaders in order to attract a larger share of personal votes and meet citizens' demands for a more locally-based, rather than partisan, electoral competition. This seems to point to the weakening of party organisations in this area of the country. Although local *caciques* were already very powerful and enjoyed some political autonomy in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at that time they still relied on the organisational support of organised political parties. In fact, in the 1995-1999 period, there was no substantial difference in the representation of local lists between Southern and Central-Northern regions. Today, however, the fragmentation and weakening of cross-territorial party organisations has significantly accelerated in the South and political representation has been 'outsourced' to local lists. Floridia (2014) has defined this phenomenon as *micro-notabilato* to underline the increasing disconnection between state-wide party organisations and the political actions of local notables. Thus, a society characterised by more fragmented and family-based relations may be more affected by the decline of partisanship than a highly civic, integrated and economically developed society.

It is also interesting to compare the two areas of Italy in Central-Northern Italy that are characterised by strong political 'subcultures'. The organisational survival of left-wing political forces, which are linked to the so-called *red* political subculture, seems to have prevented the strengthening of non-partisan politics in central regions, such as Emilia Romagna, Tuscany and Umbria. Even though Profeti (2014) has underlined that in recent elections the number of local or citizens' lists competing in the *red* regions has increased,

they do not seem to attract enough support to undermine the hegemony of centre-left parties and, in any case, their success is much less significant than in other areas of the country. On the other hand, in those regions characterised by a *white* political subculture, the collapse of the Christian Democratic Party seems to have resulted in the multiplication of local lists (particularly politicised ones).

Yet in some Northern regions the emergence of local lists has also been counterbalanced by the strengthening of regionalist parties – in particular the Northern League – that have developed a more locally-focused political agenda and have aimed to incorporate local interests in their organisation. Indeed, regression results suggest that there might be a ‘replacement effect’ of regionalist parties on local lists’ representation, that is, wherever regionalist parties are stronger, purely local lists are weaker.

It should also be added that the phenomenon of local lists seems quite different from what has been defined as ‘protest politics’. The Italian case is noticeable not only for the local crisis of traditional parties but also for the emergence of new ‘anti-system’ parties. The Five Star Movement, founded by the former comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo initially emerged at the municipal level (Natale 2014; Turner 2013) but then achieved an unexpected success in the 2013 general elections (25 per cent of the total vote). Its campaign was mainly based on opposing the established political elite and introducing forms of direct and web democracy (Biorcio, 2014; Hartleb, 2013). Yet a recent paper by Vampa (2015) clearly shows that the Five Star Movement has achieved better results in those municipalities in which local lists have been weaker (in Northern Italy and in the red regions).

To sum up, this study has underlined the increasing importance of non-partisan representation at the local level in Italy and has tried to detect the conditions that favour the emergence and strengthening of local lists. The framework used in this paper can be adapted and applied to other countries to see whether the phenomenon of non-partisan local representation is common to all advanced democracies and is growing at the same rate in Europe. More generally, future research should further investigate within-country and cross-country differences in the characteristics of local representation. Thus, by complementing the already rich literature on national and regional politics with new insights on the local dimension, the multi-level character of political participation and representation will be fully acknowledged.

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Table 1. Summary of local lists' representation (as percentage of municipal council seats) in 628 Italian municipalities (comparing the 1995-1999 period to 2010-2014 period)

<i>Type of lists</i>	<b>1995-1999</b>				<b>2010-2014</b>			
	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
<b>Total local lists</b>	0	85	13	15.6	0	100	34.1	22.3
<b>Independent local lists</b>	0	65	2.1	7.4	0	100	9.9	19.2
<b>Politicized local lists</b>	0	85	10.9	14.2	0	90	24.2	17.7

Source: Italian Interior Ministry (<http://www.interno.gov.it/>). Author's own calculation.

Table 2. Mapping the strength of local lists representation in Italy (average percentage of municipal council seats controlled by local lists)

	1995-1999			2010-2014		
	Total	Politicized	Independent	Total	Politicized	Independent
<b>Population Size of Municipality</b>						
Small (<50,000 )	14.3	12.1	2.2	36.2	24.8	11.4
Medium (between 50,000 and 100,000)	7.8	6.3	1.5	29.8	24.1	5.7
Large (>100,000)	9.8	8.8	1	21.3	18.2	3.1
<b>North-South Divide</b>						
Central-Northern Regions	12.3	9.3	3	25.4	18.6	6.8
Southern Regions	13.7	12.6	1.1	43.1	30	13.1
<b>Political Sub-Culture</b>						
No subculture	13.6	12	1.6	37.3	26.2	11.1
Red	8.4	5	3.4	17.5	11.5	6
White	16.8	13.2	3.6	37.2	30.6	6.6
<b>Regionalist Party</b>						
Non existing	13	11	2	38.9	25.9	13
Weak (<10%)	13.5	10.8	1.7	28.6	22.1	6.5
Strong (>10%)	12.7	11	1.7	25.3	21.4	3.9

Table 3. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model predicting share of municipal representation of all local lists (percentage of municipal council seats)

	Coefficients (1995–1999)	Coefficients (2009–2014)	
		Model I	Model II
<i>H1. Size of Municipality<sup>1</sup></i>	-0.006 (0.004)	-0.18 (0.05)***	-0.016*** (0.005)
<i>H2. Central-Northern Regions<sup>2</sup></i>	1 (1.7)	-14.5 (1.9)***	-14.4 (1.9)***
<i>H3. Political Subculture<sup>3</sup></i>			
1. Red subculture	-6.3 (2.1)***	-12.4 (2.5)***	-10.7 (2.4)***
2. White subculture	4.4 (2.5)*	13.3 (3)***	12.2 (3)***
<i>H4. Regionalist Parties<sup>4</sup></i>	-0.1 (0.05)**	-0.6 (0.09)***	-0.6 (0.09)***
<i>Local lists (1995-1999)</i>	---	---	0.3 (0.05)***
<i>Constant</i>	16 (1) ***	46 (1.2)	41.6 (1.3) ***
N	628	628	628
Adj. R-squared	0.02	0.25	0.3

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Standard error in brackets.

<sup>1</sup> Thousands of inhabitants.

<sup>2</sup> Here centre-northern regions (Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli Venetia Giulia, Trentino Alto Adige, Liguria, Tuscany, Emilia Romagna, Umbria, Marche) are compared with Southern regions (Latium, Campania, Abruzzi, Molise, Apulia, Molise, Basilicata, Sicily, Sardinia).

<sup>3</sup> Reference category: regions with no specific political subculture. Red regions: Tuscany, Emilia Romagna and Umbria. White regions: Veneto and Friuli Venetia Giulia.

<sup>4</sup> Measured as a share of municipality seats controlled by regionalist parties.

Table 4. OLS model predicting share of representation of *politicized* local lists (percentage of municipal council seats)

	Coefficients (1995–1999)	Coefficients I (2009–2014)	
		Model I	Model II
<i>H1. Size of Municipality</i>	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.009 (0.004)**	-0.008 (0.004)*
<i>H2. Central-Northern Regions</i>	-1.6 (1.5)	-9.9 (1.6)***	-9.8 (1.6)***
<i>H3. Political Subculture</i>			
1. Red subculture	-6.9 (1.9)***	-9.2 (2.1)***	-8.6 (2.1)***
2. White subculture	3.2 (2.3)	12.7 (2.6)***	12.5 (2.6)***
<i>H4. Strength of Regionalist Parties</i>	-0.1 (0.05)**	-0.26 (0.08)***	-0.3 (0.08)***
<i>Local lists (1995-1999)</i>	---	---	0.09 (0.05)**
<i>Constant</i>	12.4(0.9)***	31.4(1)***	30.2 (1.3)***
N	628	628	628
Adj. R-squared	0.04	0.18	0.19

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Standard error in brackets.

Table 5. OLS model predicting share of representation of independent local lists (percentage of municipal council seats)

	Coefficients (1995–1999)	Coefficients (2009–2014)	
		Model I	Model II
<i>H1. Size of municipality</i>	0.001 (0.002)	-0.009 (0.005)*	-0.009 (0.005)*
<i>H2. Central-Northern Regions</i>	1.7 (0.08)**	-4.5 (1.8) **	-4.8 (1.8)**
<i>H3. Political Subculture</i>			
1. Red subculture	0.6(1)	-3.2 (2.4)	-3.4 (2.4)
2. White subculture	1.1(1.2)	0.6 (3)	0.04 (3)
<i>H4. Strength of Regionalist Parties</i>	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.3 (0.09)***	-0.3 (0.09)***
<i>Local lists (1995-1999)</i>	---	---	0.2 (0.1)*
<i>Constant</i>	1.9 (0.3) ***	14.7 (1)***	14.4 (1)***
N	628	628	628
Adj. R-squared	0.01	0.04	0.05

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Standard error in brackets.

Table 6. Relationship between independent variables and municipal representation of local lists (results of OLS analysis)

	<b>All local lists</b>	<b>Politicized lists</b>	<b>Independent lists</b>
<b>Size of Municipality</b>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Negative</i>
<b>Socio-economic development (comparison between Central-Northern and Southern regions)</b>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Negative</i>
<b>Political Subculture</b>	<i>Positive – White</i> <i>Negative – Red</i>	<i>Positive – White</i> <i>Negative – Red</i>	<i>Not significant</i>
<b>Regionalist mobilization</b>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Negative</i>

Table 7. Share of seats (%) won by local lists in 2015 (84 municipalities). Difference with previous election in brackets.

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Politicized</b>	<b>Independent</b>
<b>Size of Municipality</b>			
Small (<50,000)	48.1 (+14.1)	25.8 (+1.4)	22.2 (+12.5)
Medium (between 50,000 and 100,000)	41.7 (+20)	31.1 (+14.8)	10.6 (+6)
Large (>100,000)	34.5 (+15.5)	29.7 (+13.7)	4.8 (+1.8)
<b>North-South divide</b>			
Central-Northern Regions	31.6 (+11.6)	19.8 (+6.4)	11.8 (+5.6)
Southern Regions	55.6 (+17.8)	31.8 (+3.5)	23.7 (+14)
<b>Political Sub-Culture</b>			
No subculture	46.8 (+14.8)	27.3 (+4.3)	19.3 (+10.3)
Red	38.1 (+21.6)	11.9 (-0.1)	26.3 (+21.3)
White	46.9 (+22.5)	41.4 (+17.7)	5.5 (+4.8)
<b>Regionalist Party</b>			
Non existing	58.1 (+19.1)	32.5 (+5)	25.4 (+13.9)
Weak (<10%)	33.7 (+8.4)	28.6 (+5.1)	5.1 (+3.3)
Strong (>10%)	30.5 (+4.5)	17.7 (+1.3)	12.8 (+3.3)
<b>Total Average</b>	46.2 (+15.6)	27.1 (+4.8)	19.1 (+10.8)