One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand: Exploring Identity and Electoral Performance of Italian Southernist Parties

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Abstract

Despite a considerable body of literature on Italian ethnoregionalist parties, scholars of nationalism and regionalism have overlooked southernist parties. This article aims to fill this lacuna by examining Italian southernist parties' identity and electoral performance from 1945 to 2020. Firstly, it investigates southernist parties according to ideological positioning, autonomist or secessionist nature, and territorial area of origin. Then, by relying on official data, it explores the parties' electoral performance in national, European, and regional elections. The main findings of the study show that, since the end of World War II, Italian southernist parties: a) have been characterized by a more autonomist rather than secessionist nature; b) have followed the typical patterns of the catch-all party; c) have performed better in regional elections. This article provides preliminary information on southernist parties, paving the way for further research on such political formations.

Keywords

Elections; Ethnoregionalism; Identity Politics; Southern Italy; Southernist Parties

Introduction

Over the past decades, political scientists have devoted little attention to Italian southernist parties. In particular, scholars of nationalism and regionalism have overlooked Southern Italy, focusing primarily on Northern Italy (Agnew 1995; Tarchi 1998), and Sardinia (Hepburn 2009). Instead, sociologists and historians have researched such an issue and related topics with greater interest (Lupo 1998; 2004; Ivone 2003; Saraceno 2005). Relevant contributions have explored social, economic, and political phenomena in Southern Italy, highlighting patterns of social disruption (Tarrow 1967), economic marginalization (Bagnasco 1977), and amoral familism (Banfield 1958).

The peculiar nature and the multifaceted identity of southernist parties paint a puzzling picture in many aspects. This paper aims to try to disentangle such complexity. The starting point of the analysis, however, is constituted by a straightforward observation: since 1945 no southernist party has been able to represent the political reference of Southern Italy. Conversely, for a long time, the interests of Northern Italy have been represented by the Northern League (League), which was often able to gain a high vote share. After the so-called 'nationalization process' (Cataldi 2018), the League has abandoned the explicit reference to the 'North', achieving even higher electoral support, yet preserving its traditional constituency. The rise of the League primarily derived from the salience of North-South differences (Putnam 1993) and Italy's failed attempts to achieve homogenous economic development (Trigilia 1992). On the other hand, the proliferation of competing parties in the southernist galaxy resulted in lower effectiveness in representing Southern Italy's interests.

The choice of this title, which recalls one of the several Luigi Pirandello's[1] masterpieces, is an attempt to interpret the complexity that has been described so far. Southernist parties have not had and still do not have a clear and well-defined political identity. They are 'one' as only the Movement for the Autonomies (henceforth MpA) has managed to obtain electoral performance at least sufficient to reach governmental offices at the national level. In addition, they are 'no one' considering the weak electoral support gained over the years. At the national level, indeed, southernist parties' vote share has never reached 2%. Nonetheless, such political formations are also 'one hundred thousand' since the remarkable level of proliferation shown along the decades.

Unlike the League (Barraclough 1998), southernist parties have never been guided by strong leadership. No political leader has effectively established successful electoral alliances of southernist political formations. Arguably, issue entrepreneurs (Hobolt and De Vries 2015) operating in national parties have hindered the emergence of new figures, filling the representation

[1] Luigi Pirandello was an Italian prominent dramatist and poet, winner of the 1943 Nobel Prize in Literature.

gap in a traditionally disputed area (Diamanti 2009). National parties included Southern Italy as a pressing issue in their policy agendas since the post-war period, proposing economic development measures (Bianco 2021). Nevertheless, the increased external constraints deriving from the establishment of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) in the 1990s limited the policies' effectiveness and helped highlight the dualism between North and South (Gomez-Reino 2000).

This article aims to investigate the past and present nature of southernist parties. Such a preliminary investigation may bring more interest on the matter, especially from political science, which has not devoted much attention to this object, although for quite shareable reasons.[2]

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework of the analysis. The third section deals with the research questions and hypotheses. The fourth section illustrates the data and methods. Section five analyzes southernist parties' ideological positioning, varieties, and electoral performance. After identifying the party family in which this particular party type can be included, a classification aimed at providing guidelines for a detailed investigation of these political formations is presented. Specifically, southernism will be taken into account, considering its complex ideological patterns and its composition in terms of claims of self-government, diffusion and evolution over time, and positioning on the left-right scheme. The final section discusses implications for future research and concludes.

Theoretical Framework

The Center-periphery Cleavage and Ethnoregionalist Parties

While relevant research has been carried out on ethnoregionalist parties (Delwit 2005; Tronconi 2009), notably on the 'old' League (Agnew 1995; Passarelli 2012), there is still very little scientific understanding of Italian southernist parties' features and ideological positioning. In particular, research to date has not yet determined whether such political formations can be included in the ethnoregionalist party family and be considered secessionists or simply autonomists.

Ethnoregionalist parties are defined as parties representing the interests of regionally concentrated ethnic groups which challenge a nation-state's status quo by demanding recognition of their cultural identity and a certain degree of self-government for their region (Müller-Rommel 1998). Existing literature has emphasized that ethnoregionalist parties sustain an identity anchored in the cleavages (notably the center-periphery) and issues that gave rise to their birth (Türsan 1998). According to Lipset and Rokkan (1967), all European countries have experienced two main shared

[2] One of the possible reasons concerns the southernist parties' poor electoral performances. In particular, in the election, parties, public opinion (EPOP) research, the vote share obtained by such parties is frequently below 1%.

paths. Firstly, the 'national revolution', namely the born of the nation-states in Great Britain, France, Spain, Germany, and Italy. Such a tumultuous process caused two fundamental conflicts: the 'center-periphery' cleavage and the 'state-church' cleavage. The second disruptive juncture identified by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) is the 'industrial revolution', which generated the 'labor-capital' cleavage and the 'urban-rural' cleavage.

For this article, the most insightful element of the inquiry of Lipset and Rokkan (1967) is constituted by the assumption that these conflicts, although disruptive, do not produce necessarily political parties able to exploit electoral opportunities. Therefore, the presence of a social conflict is not sufficient to give rise to a 'cleavage' and a party willing or prepared to exploit the electoral incentives deriving from it. Hence, to detect peculiarities of southernist parties in Italy, the analysis considers one of the cleavages caused by the national revolution, namely the center-periphery. This cleavage refers to a conflict between the central culture of the nation and the growing opposition of peripheries (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). For Lipset and Rokkan, the territorial, regional or center-periphery cleavage represents the crystallization of ethnic or cultural identities on the periphery of the political system (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Bartolini and Mair 1990). Specifically, the concept of 'periphery' encompasses ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities living in a social system. Along these lines, analyzing what kind of parties might emerge from this cleavage appears necessary for the conceptual clarification of southernist parties.

In the Italian context, such a cleavage, similarly to the urban-rural one, has known a substantial absorption into the state-church and labor-capital conflicts (Tronconi 2009). As an instance of such phenomena, the main Italian political parties have been a Christian-democratic party (DC) and a class cleavage party (PCI – Italian Communist Party). The emergence of successful ethnoregionalist parties, such as the League, was visible only from the 1990s. Interestingly, such a disruptive breakthrough resulted in the replacement in the public debate of the 'Southern question' by the so-called 'Northern question' (Biorcio 2016).

Ethnoregionalist parties have been studied in-depth (see in particular De Winter and Türsan 1998). Studies over the past two decades have provided important information on ethnoregionalist parties' left-right positioning (Delwit 2005), manifestos (Dandoy and Sandri 2008), and competition between such political formations and state-wide parties (Basile 2015). In particular, findings have emphasized that ethnoregionalist parties constitute a specific party family (Gomez-Reino, De Winter and Lynch 2006) and behave as 'catch-all parties' (Kirchheimer 1966; Dandoy and Sandri 2008). The catch-all party model is a consequence of a multifaceted process, concerning a stagnation in the size of membership of parties, a transformation towards a more

balanced social profile in terms of party membership, and reduced importance of membership fees in terms of the overall party revenue (Krouwel 2003).

However, ethnoregionalist parties present high levels of internal differentiation. They may pursue more autonomism or request complete independence and self-government. The following section deals with such issues.

Autonomism, Secessionism, and Ideology: Typologies for Investigating Ethno-regionalist Parties

Over the past decades, several attempts have been made to offer a fine-grained typology for investigating ethnoregionalist parties. One of the most encompassing efforts is represented by Gomez-Reino, De Winter, and Lynch (2006) typology, mainly based on parties' self-government claims, typically autonomism or secessionism, and left-right positioning. Previous works have also focused on cultural revivalism (Bugajski 1994), post-nationalism (Seiler 2005), anti-regime and authority (Ishiyama and Breuning 1998). According to Türsan (1998), there are seven elements useful to distinguish specific ethnoregionalist parties. Notably, such political actors can differ in terms of:

i. Confining conditions
ii. Clan, ethnic group, and language identities
iii. Ideology (left-right)
iv. Organisational strength
v. Popular support (link with groups)
vi. Level of influence
vii. Electoral support

To investigate southernist parties, this article draws upon Gomez-Reino, De Winter, and Lynch (2006) typology and focuses on three elements of the abovementioned classification, i.e., identity (*b*), ideology (*c*), and electoral support (*g*). Studies have highlighted the low ideological cohesiveness of ethnoregionalist parties (De Winter and Gomez-Reino 2002) and differences in their political demands (Tronconi 2009). In that respect, as ethnoregionalist parties, southernists may vary in terms of:

i. Requests for self-government
ii. Ideological positioning on the left-right scheme
iii. Territorial area of origin and ties with social groups and movements

Ethnoregionalist parties operate at the substate level, striving to represent regional and local interests (Hepburn 2009). As mentioned, they may differ in their demands on the scale of self-government. Specifically, ethnoregionalist parties can be 'autonomists' if they seek more local control over territorial resources and decision-making. If such demands are not satisfied, ethnoregionalist 'autonomy-seeking' parties could benefit from voters' disaffection with

mainstream party elites (De Winter, Gomez-Reino, and Lynch 2006). On the other hand, such political actors' demands may be also more pressing for the central government. Mainly, secessionist claims for self-determination can derive from ethnoregionalist parties seeking to represent nationalist minorities' interests. Typically, such movements have been frequent in Catalonia (Serrano 2013) and Scotland (Keating 2009).

Finally, scholars of nationalism and regionalism have also demonstrated the ideological heterogeneity of ethnoregionalist parties (Dandoy and Sandri 2008). Notably, such actors are generally deemed parties in favor of the European integration process, yet they show lower ideological cohesiveness in the left-right dimension (Hix 1999).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Drawing upon the presented theoretical framework, this contribution attempts to assess whether southernist parties (1) pursued autonomist or secessionist goals, (2) are progressive, catch-all, or conservative parties, and (3) performed better in national, European, or regional elections. The expectation concerning the first part of the research question is based on critical features of ethnoregionalist parties. According to De Winter (1998), such parties seek political reorganization of the existing national power structure, for some kind of self-government. As ethnoregionalist parties, southernist parties might move from 'soft' demands, i.e., autonomy, to 'strong' demands, i.e., secession. On this matter, studies have empirically observed several cases of both typologies (Dandoy 2010), yet no investigation on southernist parties has been offered to date. The article expects autonomist parties to be more frequent than secessionists. This hypothesis is based on the complex political viability of the secessionist option in the framework of the Italian constitution.[3] The distinction between autonomist parties and secessionist parties is far from irrelevant. Autonomist parties may not stress 'ethnic' or 'nationalist' components and be considered as state-wide parties aiming at achieving territorial reorganization policies (Strmiska 2003). Conversely, secessionist parties challenge the existing state and political-territorial order, its structure, its political systems, its boundaries and its distribution of power between the center and the periphery (De Winter 2006).

In addressing the second part of the research question, this article expects that southernist parties are mainly catch-all parties. The catch-all thesis has become a metaphor for describing transformations in political parties and the ways in which they behave vis-à-vis the electorate. In a nutshell, the catch-all party can be translated as a highly opportunistic vote-seeking party, a leader-centered party, and a party tied to interest groups (Wolinetz 2002). In that respect, previous contributions have demonstrated that ethnoregionalist parties behaved as catch-all parties

[3] In this regard, the Italian constitution states: 'The Republic shall be one and indivisible'.

(Dandoy and Sandri 2008). Thus, this article aims to verify the feasibility of established findings on ethnoregionalist parties' identity by considering southernist parties.

Finally, the contribution investigates the electoral performance of southernist parties. Specifically, the paper asks whether such parties perform better in national, European or regional elections. In addressing the third part, the article expects southernist parties to achieve higher vote share in regional and European, rather than national, elections. Such an expectation derives from existing literature emphasizing how second-order elections may offer windows of opportunity for minor parties to gain support and visibility (Lynch 1996; Swyngedouw 1992).

Data and Methods

A longitudinal and holistic approach is utilized, integrating official data, party statutes, party leaders' speeches and press conferences, and official party documents to establish the features and preferences of southernist parties[4]. Information is mainly derived from the Historical Archive of Elections of the Italian Ministry of the Interior, 'ParlGov' party identifier (Döring and Manow 2021), and parties' official websites. In this way, the article performs comparative analyses of such parties, focusing on: a) ideological positioning; b) attitudes towards secessionism; c) territorial area of origin; d) electoral performance and coalition strategy. The comparison aims to understand the varieties and performance of such political formations.

Moreover, the analysis investigates both national elections and so-called 'second-order elections' (Reif and Schmitt 1980). To this end, the information gathered concerns the general, European, and regional elections held in Italy from 1946 to 2020. Timewise, the first general election considered is the seminal election of the Constituent Assembly of 1946, and the 2018 Italian general election is the last. As for the European elections, the investigation starts from the first election held in 1979 up to the last election held in May 2019. Finally, as concerns regional elections, the period considered goes from 1947 for Sicily (1947-2017), and 1970 for the remaining regions.[5] Specifically, the regional elections studied are Abruzzo[6] (1970-2019), Basilicata (1970-2019), Calabria (1970-2020), Campania (1970-2015), Molise (1970-2018), and Apulia (1970-2015).

As for the data collection, the following criteria have been applied. First, political parties which have changed the label in different elections yet related to a defined predecessor, do not constitute new political formations. This is relevant as the emergence of new electoral alliances has often been the outcome of coalition strategies and bargaining. Secondly, since southernist parties

[4] Compared to other parties and party families, data on southernist parties are very limited. For instance, the 'ParlGov' party family identifier (Döring and Manow 2021) provides information only on few parties, e.g. Lega d'Azione Meridionale, Movimento per l'Indipendenza della Sicilia.

[5] In the Italian institutional architecture, the Sicilian region has a special status. For this reason, local elections were held earlier compared to so-called 'ordinary' regions.

[6] Abruzzo is included in this analysis according to a historical criterion.

have performed poorly in most elections, no minimum threshold of votes is considered for the analysis.

Lastly, coalition strategies are analyzed according to the presence or the absence of formal agreements between parties. Where available, data on pre-electoral coalitions are taken from the Historical Archive of Elections of the Italian Ministry of Interior and official parties' sources.

Analysis

Southernist Parties' Identity: Autonomists v. Secessionists

To begin with, Table 1 shows that southernist parties have been both autonomist and secessionist. Autonomist claims promote further political and administrative autonomy and request more powers to regional governments. Secessionist demands undermine the very existence of the national government's legitimacy and sovereignty.

From Table 1, it is observed that, as expected, the majority of southernist parties have adhered to the autonomist perspective. The classification is based on parties' statutes and manifestos, considering whether a party express separatist stances or 'just' self-government requests. As an instance of secessionist claims, the Movement for the Independence of Sicily (MIS) expresses in its statute the need for a 'sovereign, independent state' (MIS programmatic documents and statute 1947: 6). On the other hand, autonomist interests were evident in the statute of 'It will become beautiful – Sicily' (*Diventerà Bellissima*, the party of the current governor of Sicily), which advocates for the 'defense of the Sicilian autonomy, yet respecting the unity of the Nation' (DB Statute 2017: 1).

Overall, twenty out of thirty southernist parties are autonomist, while the remaining ten are secessionist. Interestingly, the first period considered (1945-1965) displays the higher share of secessionist southernist parties. The reasons underpinning such a secessionist spread in that period are rooted in the Sicilian statute development (Paci and Pietrancosta 2010). In detail, the main objective of Andrea Finocchiaro Aprile's secessionist formation – the Movement for the Independence of Sicily (MIS) – was to reinforce the position of Sicily vis-à-vis the Italian central government by benefiting from the post-war transition. Finocchiaro Aprile's movement has emerged as a key political actor in Sicily during the Italian institutional transition, yet playing a prominent role in achieving autonomy, rather than secession, in favor of the Island.

Timewise, southernist parties have initially known a decrease from the first period (1945-1965) to the second (1966-1989), moving from six parties (one autonomist and five secessionists) to four parties (two autonomists and two secessionists). In contrast, from the second period onwards southernist parties have increased, reaching ten parties in the last two periods. In the third period (1990-2009), eight autonomists and only two secessionists are recorded, while in the last

period (2010-2020) the share of secessionist parties further decreased to just one party (PIS, For the South). Therefore, the southernist galaxy is currently dominated by the prominence of autonomist parties.

Table 1: Party classification according to autonomist or secessionist nature

Autonomism	Secessionism
First period: 1945-1965	
Socialist Party of Sicily	Movement for the Independence of Sicily Sicilian Liberal Union Autonomist Independentist Autonomist and Independentist Concentration
Second period: 1966-1989	
People's Party of Calabria Southern Movement	Movement for the Independence of Sicily Sicilian National Front
Third period: 1990-2009	
Southern Action League Southern Alliance Southern Movement Sicilian Democracy Republican Movement Mediterranean Southern League Movement for Autonomies	Sicilian National Front Mediterranean Union
Fourth period: 2010-2020	
Mediterranean Union Democratic Movement Freedom and Autonomy – We the South Rights and Autonomy Me the South Great South Sicilian Revolution Movement for Autonomies It will become beautiful	For the South

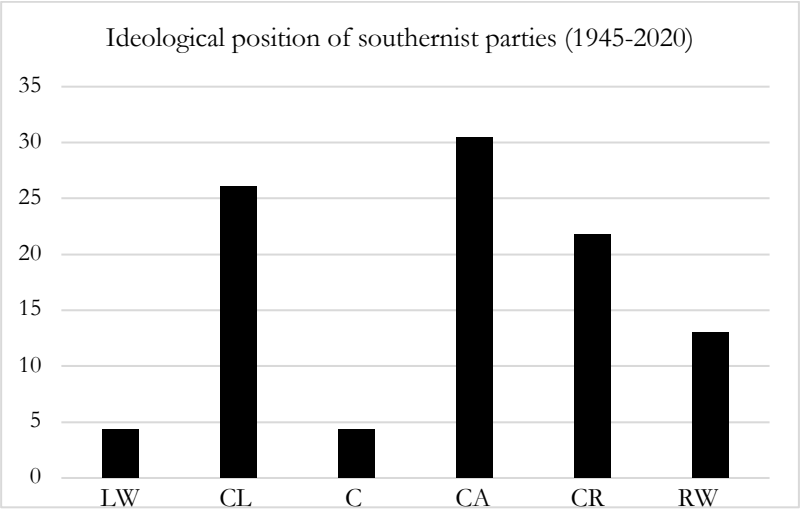
N = 30

Source: Author, based on parties' statutes.

Southernist Parties' Identity: Ideological Positioning

After analyzing southernist parties based on the dichotomy autonomism-secessionism, we can now turn the attention to the investigation of southernist parties' ideological positioning. As has been previously mentioned, 'center-periphery' conflicts can be incorporated into other conflicts, i.e., labor-capital. In the case of southernist parties, labor-capital and center-periphery are strictly related, as many southernist parties have acted within the framework of the traditional left-right scheme.

Figure 1: Southernist parties on the left-right axis



Source: Author, based on ParlGov party family identifier[7] (Doring and Manow 2021) and parties' official documents.

Note: categories include: left-wing (LW), center-left (CL), center (C), catch-all (CA) center-right (CR), and right-wing (RW).

In Figure 1, it is observed the ideological background of southernist political formations. The index is built on six categories: left-wing, center-left, center, catch-all, center-right, right-wing. The classification is based on the party family identifier of the ParlGov database (Doring and Manow 2021). Parties are classified into families according to their position in the economic and cultural left-right dimensions, i.e., state versus market and liberty versus authority. Overall, eight party family categories are proposed in the database: communist/socialist, green/ecologist, social democracy, liberal, Christian democracy, agrarian, conservative, and right-wing. Moving from such a classification, the analysis includes communist/socialist and green/ecologist families in the left-wing category (LW), social democracy in the center-left (CL), liberal and agrarian families in the center (C), Christian democracy and conservatives in the center-right (CR) and finally the right-wing is maintained in its original categorization. Furthermore, a fundamental party family to consider when dealing with southernist parties, i.e., catch-all, is added.

Percentages exhibited in Figure 1 are derived from the number of parties belonging to a specific party family in relation to the total number of southernist parties investigated. As we can see, the 'catch-all' nature (Kirchheimer 1966) is predominant, reaching the highest share (30%) over the entire time span considered. However, this finding is not surprising. Southernist parties

[7] It should be noted that the ParlGov party family identifier was not available for all the parties under investigation. Where not available, the left-right position of southernist parties has been detected by analyzing different sources, such as: party statute, party leader's speeches, official documents, party manifestos. Most of these sources are retrievable from the parties' official websites.

have frequently employed catch-all strategies for many reasons (Dandoy and Sandri 2008). On the one hand, citizens' mobilization for controversial issues such as autonomism and secessionism required a widespread consensus, which goes far beyond a limited left-right-based target of voters. On the other hand, southernist parties are not associated with class conflicts. Instead, they try to exploit the 'call of unity' against Italy's sovereignty on their polities. In detail, among those parties classified as 'catch-all', MIS can be found. Such a party was founded in 1943 and has been particularly inclined to avoid 'ideological contaminations' within the party.[8]

Moreover, Figure 1 shows that 26% of southernist parties belongs to the category of center-left. Both catch-all and center-left parties show equilibrium in terms of autonomist or secessionist nature. Out of seven catch-all parties, four are autonomist and three secessionists, whilst out of six center-left parties, three are autonomist and three are secessionist. As for the center-right and right-wing categories, they respectively represent 22% and 13% of the total. Conservatives reach almost 35%. Such findings demonstrate the multifaceted identity of southernist parties. Furthermore, as we will see in the next section, conservative southernist parties were able to gain the highest share of voters' support in the elections compared to both catch-all and progressive southernists. Also, government personnel at both national and local levels have been mainly members of conservative southernist parties.

Intriguingly, considering the peripherality of right-wing parties, the share displayed in Figure 1 is remarkable. However, the most insightful element is constituted by the homogeneity of center-right and right-wing parties concerning the autonomism-secessionism divide. All the parties connected to this ideological area belong to autonomism. This is not surprising, as connecting secessionist claims to the Italian far-right's traditional nationalist perspectives might be more challenging for such parties than others (Ignazi 1992; Golder 2016). For this reason, southernist autonomists associated with right-wing party family have maintained positions firmly anchored to the protection of Italy's unity.

Finally, Figure 1 shows that southernist center parties and left-wing southernists are the least frequent over the time-span investigated (4.3% in both cases). The left-wing Marxist party was the Sicilian Socialist Party (PSS), while the People's Party of Calabria (PPC) is the only instance of southernist center party. The PSS was mainly active in 1958. The PPC contested the election only once, i.e., the 1979 Italian general election.

[8] See Battaglia (2014) on the debate between Finocchiaro Aprile and Varvaro, i.e., the two party leaders, in the MIS Third National Party Congress in Taormina, 1947.

Many Parties, Few Voters: Examining Southernist Parties' Electoral Failure

In the present section, the electoral performance of southernist parties is analyzed. As mentioned earlier, no electoral threshold for including political parties in the analysis is used.

Figure 2: Origin areas of southernist parties

Source: Author. Note: No southernist party originated from Abruzzo, Basilicata, and Molise.

Before investigating southernist parties' electoral performance, it is worth observing the territorial origin of such political formations. The share of southernist parties by origin areas is calculated by considering the number of southernist parties originated from a specific region in relation to the total number of southernist parties studied over the entire time frame, i.e., 1945-2020. To gauge the parties' territorial origin, the article adopted primary sources (e.g., party statutes).

Figure 2 shows a clear predominance of Sicily-based parties (58.33%). In contrast, no southernist parties were originated from Abruzzo, Basilicata, and Molise. Thus, southernist parties operating in such regions are Sicily, Campania, Calabria, or Apulia-based formations, striving to maximize their influence by contending elections in multiple areas of Southern Italy.

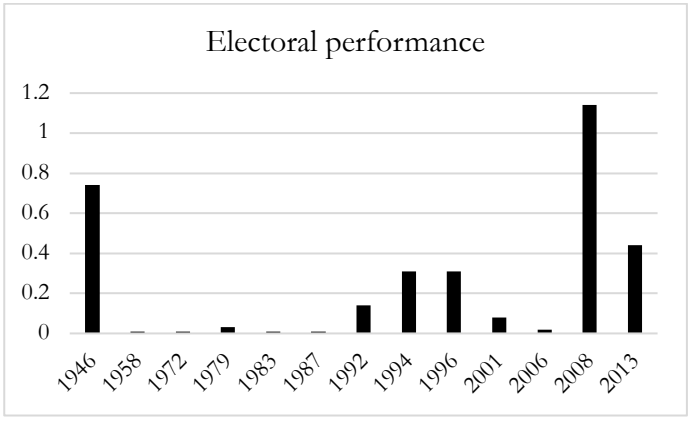
Campania-based southernist parties consist of 16.67% of the formations investigated. However, the main southernist political actor in Campania is We the South (NS). Such a party was

a former faction of the Sicilian MpA. Therefore, the most rooted southernist party in Campania is still somehow related to Sicily. Similarly to Campania, Rights and Autonomy (DeA), one of the parties originating from Calabria, was born in 2013 from an internal split from the Sicilian MpA. Southernist parties deriving from the Calabria region are about 12.5%.

Finally, in the case of Apulia, the main political formation in the region is Me the South (IS). Such a party was founded on February 2009 by Adriana Poli Bortone, a former minister in one of the four Italian cabinets led by Silvio Berlusconi. Differently from the cases of Campania and Calabria, IS has constantly been tied with the Apulian region. Southernist parties originated from Apulia consist of 12.5% of the total sample.

As for the general elections' results, the picture emerging from Figure 3 confirms the electoral failure of southernist parties. For this inquiry, the elections considered cover the 1946-2018 period. Overall, the elections studied are nineteen. However, in 1948, 1953, 1963, 1968, 1976, and 2018 no southernist party has contested the elections.

Figure 3: Performance of southernist parties in general elections (1946-2013)



Source: Italian Historical Archive of Elections. Note: mean vote share is 0.25%.

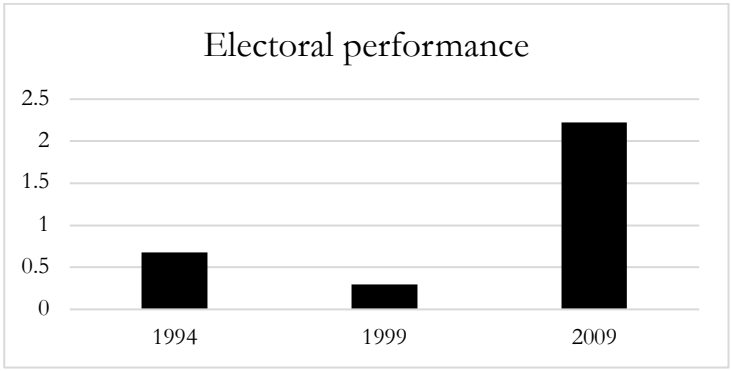
Figure 3 depicts a painful situation for southernist parties, suggesting an excess of supply in the context of the Italian electoral market. Specifically, the mean vote share over the investigated time frame is 0.25%. Consequently, the poor electoral performance has resulted in a limited parliamentary representation. Only in 1946 and 2008 did southernist parties manage to elect representatives in national assemblies. In 1946, four MIS members participated in the Constituent Assembly as the party obtained 171.201 total votes. More than sixty years later, the Sicilian MpA elected eight representatives in the Chamber of Deputies and two in the Senate[9].

[9] It should be noted that the parliamentarians of the Movement for Autonomies were not relegated to Sicilian districts, yet they contested the election in all Southern Italy's districts.

The increase in vote share for the MpA was the result of an effective coalition strategy. However, coalition strategies adopted by southernist parties were mainly unsuccessful. In particular, from 1945 to 2020, only about 15% of these political actors have established pre-election coalition agreements with other partners. In the remaining 85%, southernist parties preferred to participate in the election independently. As it is shown in Figure 3, such decisions have proved to be electorally ineffective. Conversely, the autonomist and secessionist parties of Northern Italy followed different strategies and could establish one single political formation, i.e., League. Since the 1990s, the League was influential in forming coalition agreements with national parties.

In the election of 2008, the MpA established a coalition with Silvio Berlusconi's People of Freedom (PDL), nominating candidates in the electoral districts of Southern Italy. Similarly, the League of Umberto Bossi nominated candidates in the Northern districts. The ballot box provides the MpA with enough support to obtain governmental offices. The role of the MpA in government was far from marginal as the turbulence in the legislature allowed such a Movement to exploit their 'blackmail potential' (Sartori 1976).

Figure 4: Vote share of southernist parties in European elections

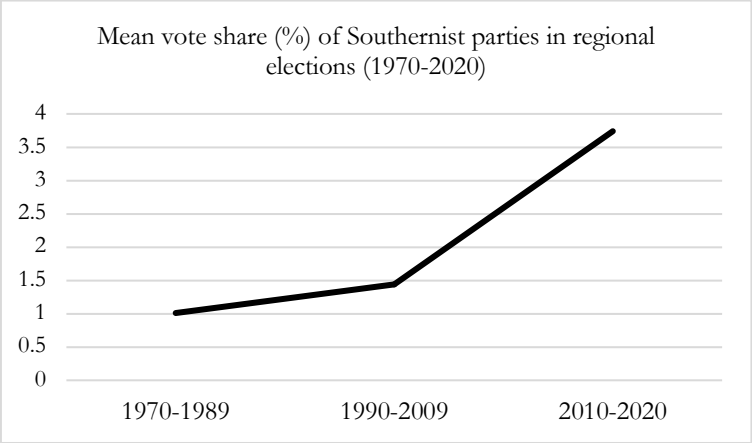


Source: Italian Historical Archive of Elections.

Looking at second-order elections, Figure 4 exhibits the poor southernist parties' electoral participation in European elections. From 1979 to 2019, only two southernist parties, i.e., the Southern Action League (LAM) and the MpA, contested the elections. The former party was founded two years before the 1994 European election and represented an instance of the 'personal party' (Calise 2000). The LAM was and is still today a right-wing party able to establish coalition agreements with larger right-wing state-wide parties such as Tricolor Flame (FT) and New Force (FN). However, the LAM constantly failed in obtaining seats in the European parliament. In the 2009 European election, by forming a coalition with other national parties such as the Alliance of the Centre (AdC) and the Right's Francesco Storace (LD), the LAM has been on the verge of reaching the 4% electoral threshold, despite securing just 2% of the vote.

In order to effectively detect peculiarities in regional elections, the overall temporal period was divided into three different periods for the 'ordinary regions' and four periods for the Sicilian elections.[10] Starting from the ordinary regions, in Figure 5 it is observed the temporal variation in vote share from 1970 to the elections of January 2020.

Figure 5: Mean vote share of southernist parties in regional elections (1970-2020)



Source: Italian Historical Archive of Elections. Number of elections: 65.

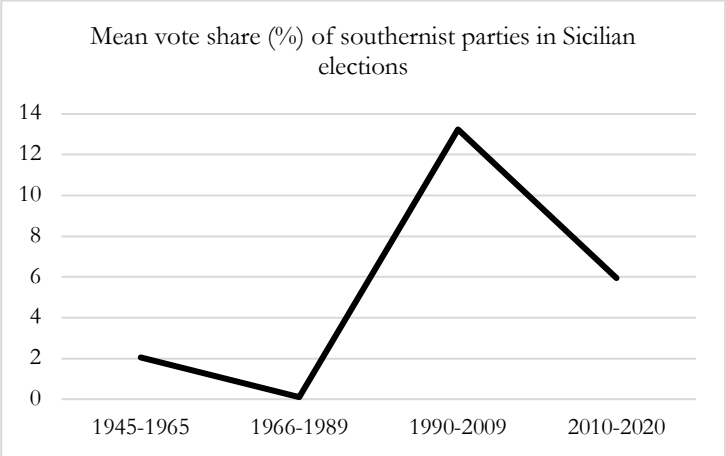
Temporal variation in Figure 5 displays an increase in southernist parties' vote share, concerning the transition from the first to the second and from the second to the last period. Such an increase is caused by the electoral support obtained by three specific parties: the Great South (GS) in Basilicata and Molise; the MpA in Abruzzo, Basilicata, and Campania; and We the South (NS) in Campania. Specifically, in the last period, the mean vote share almost reached 4%. This is a remarkable growth compared to general and European elections. Nevertheless, southernist parties' vote share remains poor, particularly if compared to national parties' support. However, in some cases, southernist parties' consensus is higher than national parties', specifically in the context of Sicilian elections.

Figure 6 shows a differentiated trend compared to other Southern Italy's electoral contexts. Before 1990, no southernist party obtained more than 2.6% of votes. In the 1990-2009 period, the emergence in the electoral arena of the MpA resulted in impressive increases in southernist parties' vote share. In detail, the MpA reached almost 13% in 2006 and 14% in 2008. In these two regional elections, such a party has overcome national parties' vote share, including the National Alliance (AN) and the center-left coalition 'The Daisy', i.e., *La Margherita*, predecessor of the Democratic Party.

[10] Note that this is a consequence of the Sicilian region's peculiar status. Sicily is a special administrative area, according to Italian constitutional architecture.

Moreover, Figure 6 illustrates a decrease in the last period considered. Despite this, parties such as GS, MpA, and 'It will become beautiful – Sicily' (*Diventerà Bellissima*) still gained high electoral consensus. Therefore, the paper's third hypothesis is partially confirmed, as data showed the poor electoral performance in national elections and the greater support obtained in regional elections, particularly in the Sicilian region. However, the article expected a higher southernist parties' participation and consensus in European elections, yet data disproved such an assumption.

Figure 6: Mean vote share of southernist parties in Sicilian elections



Source: Italian Historical Archive of Elections. Number of elections: 17.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present article has been to investigate southernist parties' identity and electoral performance in the Italian republican era (1945-2020). This contribution represents the first effort devoted to the analysis of southernist parties from a political science perspective. Although descriptive in nature, inferences that emerged from the analysis has shown interesting elements that may pave the way for further research on the matter.

First of all, the analysis highlighted that southernist parties had been mainly 'autonomy-seeking' rather than 'secession-seeking'. Perhaps, the former self-government was deemed to be more viable compared to the latter solution. In addition, consistently with existing literature, it has been observed that southernist parties mainly followed the typical patterns of the catch-all party.

Secondly, the paper showed the existence of weak voters' response to southernist parties' electoral supply. The story of southernist parties is a story of failure. Albeit frequent participation of southernist parties in national elections, vote share has been lacking across the board. Similarly, in the European elections, such parties were both unsuccessful and unlikely to participate. However, when it comes to regional elections, the support increases. This is due mainly to the Sicilian peculiarity. Notably, such a region has been the main territorial area of origin of southernist

parties and provided such parties with vote share frequently higher than national parties. In addition, southernist parties originated from Sicily gained electoral support in different southern areas, such as Campania, Basilicata, and Apulia. Overall, the picture emerging from this article discloses tough times for southernist parties. In contrast, League's Salvini has been effective in replacing the traditional prominence of the DC in northern regions, e.g. Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia (Diamanti 2009), and attracting new voters in the South by exploiting its societal malaise in terms of pessimism about the future and declining levels of trust towards people (Albertazzi and Zulianello 2021).

Political representation provided by southernist parties is absent. Therefore, state-wide parties have tried to fill the gap in this electorally unstable and volatile area. As has been shown in previous works (Emanuele and Marino 2016), Southern Italy's party system institutionalization is weak and mainly based on personal vote and voters-candidates interactions. Over the decades, state-wide parties have conquered such an electorally unstable area. Firstly, the DC during the First Republic (1945 to 1992), then Forward Italy (FI, *Forza Italia*) from 1992 to 2013. Finally, the Five Star Movement (M5S) from 2013 to 2018. The Covid-19 pandemic will not improve the prospects of southernist parties, especially because of the rise of Brothers of Italy (FDI, *Fratelli d'Italia*) and the League, as well as because of the relative hold of FI (Albertazzi, Bonansinga, and Zulianello 2021). Still, such parties are not grounded in Southern Italy, and their relationship with the territory is not comparable with other Italian political formations' ties with specific areas of the country. As has been noted (Emanuele 2015), the main parties of the First Republic (DC and PCI) experienced a process of territorial concentration, relying on their strongholds: the South for the DC and the 'red belt' for the PCI. In particular, the latter area has guaranteed electoral success to PCI for an extended period, although such a 'red belt' is recently experiencing higher uncertainty. Conversely, Southern Italy has always been characterized by high levels of volatility and political uncertainty. Thus, the emergence of a party able to obtain stable support in Southern Italy remains unrealistic.

In conclusion, the article is a preliminary effort to study southernist parties and, therefore, has several limitations. First, the paper focused mainly on the supply side, emphasizing southernist parties' weaknesses in obtaining electoral support. However, the demand side would benefit from a thorough investigation aimed to understand citizens' preferences beyond the elections. Therefore, future research avenues could provide a more fine-grained analysis of the citizens-parties relationship in the context of Southern Italy. For instance, one may ask whether a demand of southernist parties really exists, and if it is the case, why such parties are so marginal. Also, the issue would benefit from both further quantitative and qualitative analyses. On the one hand, quantitative contributions may help disclose significant factors explaining the southernist parties'

electoral failure. On the other hand, qualitative research may focus on a single southernist party or few cases of southernist parties to effectively trace and study party specificities.

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