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The study of Italian regional politics and the composition of the regional political class. The ITREGPARL dataset

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Abstract

One of the most persistent challenges in the study of regional politics in Italy is the lack of systematized data and information about the composition of regional legislatures and governments and the profiles of elected officials. In this paper, we describe the ITREGPARL dataset, a new comprehensive dataset of Italian regional politics comprising 6077 regional politicians from 1993 to 2020. It includes information about regional councillors, regional ministers, presidents and vice-presidents of the regional council, regional presidents and vice-presidents. Along with socio-demographic characteristics – gender, age, previous profession, education – it includes data such as experience and incumbency, number of mandates, length of service and partisanship. It also includes region-level variables, such as geographical area, type of gender quotas and the regional authority index.

Introduction

The absence of organized data and information regarding the makeup of regional legislatures and governments and the characteristics of elected politicians is one of the most enduring obstacles to studying regional politics in Italy.

Consequently, research on regional political careers typically concentrates on single elections (Cerruto, 2013; Vampa, 2015, 2021), single regions (Cerruto and La Bella, 2018) or offices (Grimaldi and Vercesi, 2018; Boldrini and Grimaldi, 2023) rather than examining variation across time, geography and offices.

This article illustrates the ITREGPARL dataset,[1] a new comprehensive dataset of Italian regional politicians comprising 6077 observations from 1993 to 2020.[2] It includes information about regional councillors, regional ministers, regional presidents and vice-presidents, presidents and vice-presidents of the regional council. Along with socio-demographic characteristics – gender, age, previous profession, education – it includes data such as experience and incumbency, number of mandates, length of service and partisanship. It also includes region-level variables, such as geographical area, type of gender quotas and the regional authority index (RAI) (Hooghe *et al.*, 2016).

The ITREGPARL dataset will enable researchers to investigate a variety of research questions. It allows, for example, the examination of longitudinal and geographical variation of the regional political class in terms of socio-demographic and ideological profile. Moreover, it will enable

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[1]The full dataset is available at http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/ipsr-risp.

[2]Data about the 11th Regional legislative term will be included as soon as the term is concluded for all regions.

scholars to study the effect of institutions and institutional reforms, such as the decentralization and presidentialization process, on the polarization or fragmentation of regional parliaments or the composition and professionalization of the political class, also in comparative terms.

This article proceeds as follows. In the next section we will present the main institutional changes that affected regional politics in the last 30 years and illustrate the importance of studying Italian politics at the sub-national level. The third section describes the data collection process and the dataset's structure. The fourth section tests our dataset by presenting potential applications. The last section concludes.

Framing the context: the strengthening of the meso-level in Italy

Throughout the 1990s, Italy implemented a series of reforms to increase regional autonomy to move beyond the high level of centralization and the national government's undisputed dominance over the meso-level (Baldi, 2020). The 2001 Constitutional Reform (*Riforma del Titolo* V), which provided regional governments exclusive competencies over a wide range of policy sectors and expanded legislative powers, marked the pinnacle of this non-linear devolution process (Salvati, 2022).

Despite the impressive push towards decentralization, adequate institutional tools to ensure coordination have yet to be planned or deployed, allowing constant tensions and intergovernmental conflicts among the various levels of government to flourish (Baldini and Baldi, 2014; Bolgherini, 2014). To further complicate matters, another major institutional reform was implemented in 1999, establishing direct elections of regional presidents and allowing each region to determine its statute and electoral law. Over the years, regional presidencies in Italy have constantly strengthened power and resources through a concentration of political and administrative functions in the presidency (Musella, 2009; Passarelli, 2013). This reform has elevated the regional executive to a supraordinate position at the expense of the legislative assembly, fuelling the presidentialization of Italian regions (Musella, 2009; Vampa, 2015).

This pattern of bolstering executive posts at municipal and regional levels is common in Europe (Guérin and Kerrouche, 2008; Stolz and Fischer, 2014; Astudillo and Martínez-Cantó, 2020). In terms of political career patterns, such a movement of decentralization in favour of meso-level institutions has made available more political positions with more authority and resources, making them more appealing to professional politicians (Di Capua *et al.*, 2022). A regional political career is no longer a simple springboard for national political venues in a unidirectional conception of career but a more interesting option *per se* for politicians (Tronconi, 2018), implying a more complex and stratified model of elite circulation. Consequently, this calls to enquire how such dynamics have transformed the profile of political professionals at the local level. In Spain, UK and France, the background of regional chief executives is growingly characterized by the rising importance of previous experience in regional parliament/government – leading to 'regionalization' of the political class – and the contextual declining relevance of prior political experience at the national level (Botella *et al.*, 2010). The climb to the apical position of the regional executive seems to be consequential to the unfolding of a successful career at the regional level, framing for these countries an alternative model of political career (Borchert and Stolz, 2011). This pattern is also confirmed by evidence from Germany, which revealed that the gain of a cabinet position at the regional level is mainly the result of a pure regional career, with the cabinet office that is often directly related to having had a regional parliamentary experience before being appointed as regional minister (Stolz and Fischer, 2014). In Spain, strengthening the regional institutions has acted as a powerful catalyst for professional party insiders (Astudillo and Martínez-Cantó, 2020).

By contrast, in Italy, the concurrent decentralization and presidentialization processes have led to an increase in the number of chief executives with no previous political experience (outsiders) or with a national political background instead of a solid subnational political experience, with

the partial exception of mayors of capital municipalities (Grimaldi and Vercesi, 2018). The growing attractiveness of the leadership positions at the regional level, particularly the position of chief executive, has set the stage for an open competition among politicians with extremely variegated backgrounds.

Before the reform, the presidents were elected by regional parliaments, and they were strictly dependent on the confidence of a political majority within the chamber, which was in charge of defining the regional governments' policies and their implementation, resembling the model of parliamentary-party government operating at the national level (Musella, 2009). Moreover, the regional cabinet members were party members accountable more to the party than to the president for their political actions (Passarelli, 2013). Indeed, regional governments, like their national counterparts, were subject to frequent political crises that were used to produce a change in the regional president and/or in the political majority. The 1999 reform changed almost everything because: 'Regional presidents now nominate regional ministers directly and can hire and fire them. They do not have to be chosen from among the members of the regional parliament as was the case in the past, so the president is free to autonomously select ministers outside the rank and file of parties and/or the Council, determining that they are politically dependent from the president trust. Presidents are free to establish and steer the executive's policy by means of a strong team of staff (Salvati, 2022: 8)'.

Regional ministers are the apex of regional administrative offices and are in charge of ruling over sectors on which the regional governments have specific authority. Anyway, given that the regional statutes affirm the principle of collegiality of the *Giunta* (the regional cabinet) in policy-making activity, the regional ministers are called upon to implement the collective body's choices in the areas of their competence based on the portfolios' distribution made by the president. This means that regional ministers have minimal policy-making autonomy. In any case, it is impossible not to notice how, over time, the competencies granted to regional ministers, who sometimes have significant powers over sectors of primary importance for regional governments, have frequently translated into the conferral of the power to determine the substantial content of policy decisions (Fenucci, 2009).

Overall, however, it is worth noting that regional elections are now more individualized and have shifted from party-centred to candidate-centred, with political parties being marginalized, as seen by their lack of authority over regional policy-making (Vampa, 2021). The electoral system for regional elections is mixed and consists of the concurrent election of the regional president with plurality voting and the council with a proportional system with a majority bonus. The bonus ensures that the president has a solid majority in the council. However, the high level of differentiation (Vampa, 2015) between regions resulted in a cross-regional fragmentation of the details of the electoral law, which are all proportional but with different thresholds, district magnitude, majority bonuses and gender quotas.

Structure of the dataset

The ITREGPARL dataset, collecting and providing information about Italian regional councils between 1993 and 2020, offers a new tool to study Italian regions. The dataset is open access and freely available on the online repository *Italian Political Science Review (IPSR/RISP) Dataverse* of *Harvard Dataverse*, together with our coding scheme.[3] The primary data source is the *Anagrafe Amministratori*, released by the Italian Ministry of Interns and available online.[4] We collapsed the available information by legislative term, recording the names, roles and personal information of the members of the regional councils. We thus cross-checked the

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[3]https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/N0YNHG.
[4]https://dait.interno.gov.it/elezioni/anagrafe-amministratori.

information and missing data with 'Openpolis'[5] and other online sources such as official regions' websites. We then coded and transformed the raw information to make it available as data.

Our dataset comprehends five regional legislatures – from the 6th to the 10th – for the 20 Italian regions[6] and 47 variables. The unit of observation is the politician-legislature, for a total of 6077 observations. To account for politicians elected multiple times, each individual is assigned a unique ID, for a total of 4078 politicians. Thus, for each legislative term and region, we recorded members' roles – whether they are regional councillors, regional ministers, regional presidents or vice-presidents, regional council presidents and vice-presidents – gender, age, former profession, level of education, previous experience, number of mandates, length of office, incumbency, party, party ideology,[7] party ideological group, non-partisan lists (civic lists). For regional ministers, we recorded whether they are elective or non-elective. We also included region-level variables: region name, geographical area, NUTS (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) macro-region,[8] presence and type of gender quota,[9] RAI[10] and type of statute.[11] As such, our dataset covers 5055 regional councillors, 1174 regional ministers, 184 vice-presidents and 118 presidents of the regional council, 79 vice-presidents and 117 regional presidents.[12] Table 1 presents an excerpt of the ITREGPARL dataset. The full list of 47 variables is presented in the online codebook.[13]

Potential applications

The ITREGPARL dataset can be easily applied to investigate variations in the composition of the regional political class and to test hypotheses related to specific factors leading to a differentiation of regional politicians' profiles. For example, it allows replying to a series of questions related to the existence of a feminization process (Lovenduski, 2005; Beauvallet and Michon, 2010; Kenny, 2013; Kenny and Verge, 2013) in Italian regions by investigating the share of women in regional councils and the presence of different profiles for male and female councillors. Figure 1 summarizes some descriptive statistics about the gender composition of regional councils and the characteristics of male and female councillors.

Firstly, our data show that female representation in the regional councils has constantly increased since the seventh legislative term. Nevertheless, the share of women in regional parliaments only attests to 17.35% in the 10th legislature, the most recent of the terms observed. The low degree of feminization of regional councils is even more striking compared to the share of

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[5]https://politici.openpolis.it/.

[6]Not all regions vote in the same year. In particular, the five Italian regions with a 'Special Statute' vote in a different period. Val d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige and Friuli-Venezia Giulia voted in 1993, Sardegna in 1994 and Sicilia in 1996. All the others voted in 1993.

[7]Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Jolly *et al.*, 2022).

[8]https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/background.

[9]Servizio Studi del Senato, *La parità di genere nella legislazione elettorale regionale*, Nota Breve n. 220, Agosto 2020, https://www.senato.it/japp/bgt/showdoc/18/DOSSIER/0/1162021/index.html.

[10]https://www.arjanschakel.nl/index.php/regional-authority-index. The RAI is the most extensive and diffuse tool available that offers a trustworthy indicator of the authority in self-rule and shared rule exercised by regional governments. In this sense, it allows collocating individual politicians' career trajectories within the broader context – and dynamic – of authority diffusion within a complex multi-level political system. Anyway, our dataset can be successfully associated with other types of indexes or measures concerning the decentralization of power and authority towards regional governments. For example, data can be linked to the fiscal and economic autonomy of regions or to the cumulative number of competencies transferred from the central government (economic and policy capacity). Such an approach has the undeniable advantage of being a more fine-grained and nuanced way to measure the variability between regions, even if it is more difficult to apply comparatively across countries (Vall-Prat and Rodon, 2017).

[11]Whether they are ordinary or special statute regions.

[12]These categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, elective regional ministers are also coded as regional councillors.

[13]https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/N0YNHG.

Table 1. Excerpt of the ITREGPARL dataset

| term	election_date	region_code	region_name	ID	Date_of_birth	surname	name	gender	education	profession	Councillor	Reg_Minister	Non_elective_Reg_Min	Pres_council	Pres_Region
9	3/28/10	12	LAZIO	1001	10/30/46	#####	####	0	4	13	1	0	0	0	0
10	5/31/15	16	PUGLIA	1002	2/18/56	#####	####	0	4	14	1	0	0	0	0
8	4/3/05	15	CAMPANIA	1003	4/18/67	#####	####	0	4	4	0	1	1	0	0
9	3/28/10	15	CAMPANIA	1004	4/12/72	#####	####	1	4	10	1	0	0	0	0
9	3/28/10	12	LAZIO	1005	6/15/58	#####	####	0	3	2	0	0	0	1	0
10	2/24/13	12	LAZIO	1005	6/15/58	#####	####	0	3	2	1	0	0	0	0
6	4/23/95	7	LIGURIA	1006	11/6/58	#####	####	0	4	2	1	0	0	0	0
7	4/16/00	7	LIGURIA	1006	11/6/58	#####	####	0	4	2	1	0	0	0	0
8	4/3/05	7	LIGURIA	1006	11/6/58	#####	####	0	4	2	1	0	0	0	0
7	4/16/00	3	LOMBARDIA	1007	5/11/41	#####	####	0	3	27	1	1	0	0	0
8	4/3/05	3	LOMBARDIA	1007	5/11/41	#####	####	0	3	27	1	1	0	0	0
9	3/28/10	3	LOMBARDIA	1007	5/11/41	#####	####	0	3	27	1	0	0	0	0
8	4/3/05	18	CALABRIA	1008	3/29/58	#####	####	0	3	2	1	0	0	0	0
9	3/28/10	11	MARCHE	1009	6/1/62	#####	####	0	3	14	1	0	0	0	0
7	6/24/01	19	SICILIA	1010	1/11/60	#####	####	0	3	2	1	0	0	0	0
10	5/25/14	1	PIEMONTE	1011	5/25/58	#####	####	1	4	7	1	0	0	0	0
9	12/14/08	13	ABRUZZO	1012	12/4/65	#####	####	0	3	23	1	0	0	0	0
8	4/3/05	13	ABRUZZO	1013	11/9/62	#####	####	0	4	26	1	0	0	0	0
10	10/27/13	4	TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE	1014	7/4/85	#####	####	0	3	14	1	0	0	0	0
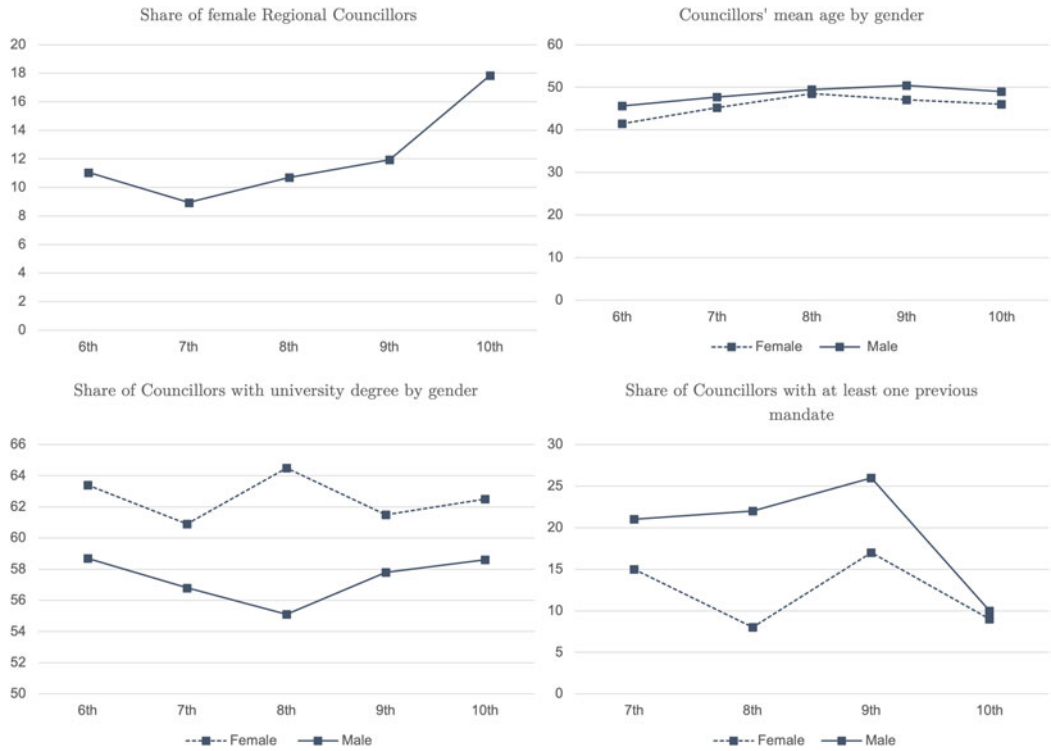
Figure 1. Feminization of Italian regional councils and the profiles of female and male councillors (percentage values).

female representatives in the Italian national parliament, which shows rates of female members of parliament above 30% since 2013. Overall, accordingly, at the regional level, gender equality is not pursued to the same degree.

Secondly, our data allow us to investigate further the personal characteristics of the members of regional parliaments. Accordingly, we observe that female councillors are overall younger and more educated than their male counterparts consistently over time, thus confirming the findings of the international literature (see Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Stockemer and Sundström, 2019).

Lastly, apparent gender-based differences emerge by enquiring into the experience in the office of regional councillors. The share of male councillors with at least one mandate in the period under study is constantly higher than their female counterparts. However, it is interesting to observe some convergence in the amount of experience in the regional council of male and female councillors in the 10th legislature. However, the convergence is not given by an increase in the share of female councillors with at least one previous mandate but, by contrast, by a sheer decrease in the share of experienced male councillors.

Further research on the feminization of Italian regional politics may rely on the ITREGPARL dataset, for example, to assess the differences in women's presence between regional councils and regional governments, to examine regional variations, or to investigate the determinants of such processes.

A second potential application of the ITREGPARL dataset moves away from the study of politicians' characteristics and points to the investigation of the effects of the presidentialization process on the structure of regional electoral competition. The strengthening of the regional president *vis-à-vis* the regional council (Salvati, 2022) has modified political competition, leading to a tendency of the chief executive candidates to detach themselves from national parties (Bolgherini and Vampa, 2021; Vampa, 2021). As Vampa writes: 'regional leaders seem
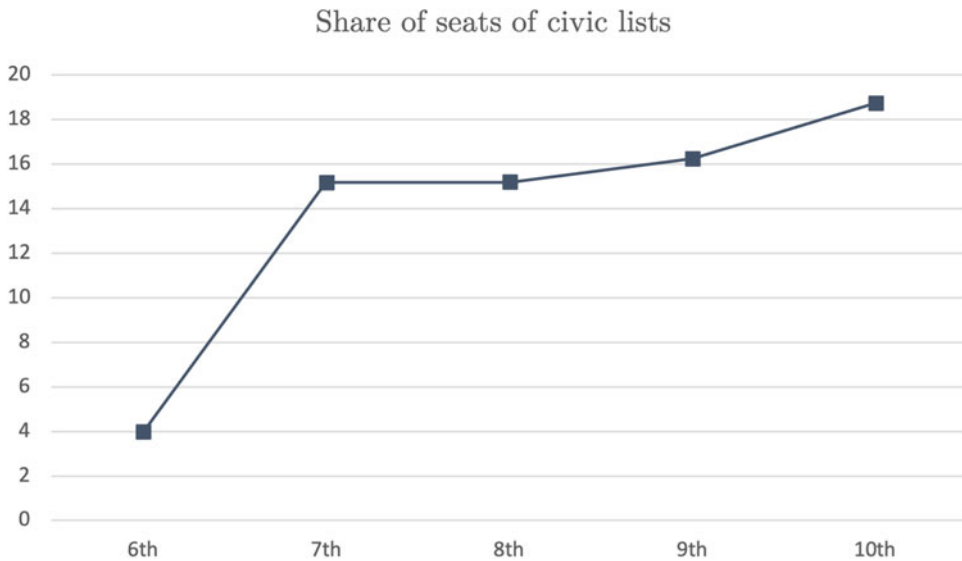
Figure 2. Share of legislative seats of non-party lists over time (percentage values).

increasingly to rely on a number of local or personal lists, avoiding partisan labels, to reach new voters and strengthen their positions and autonomy (Vampa, 2021: 179)'. The ITREGPARL dataset provides a valuable instrument to test these expectations. Specifically, it allows the investigation of longitudinal and cross-regional variations in the fragmentation of the electoral system. It can be used, for example, to assess the number and the share of seats of non-partisan electoral lists (civic lists) in regional councils.

As it emerges from Figure 2, the overall share of seats obtained by non-partisan lists as the result of regional elections has constantly increased in the period under investigation, moving from 3.97% in the 6th legislature to 18.74% in the 10th, thus confirming the effect of the presidentialization process hypothesized by the literature on the nature of regional competition. However, the most striking result is the 10 percentage points increase in seats allocated to civic lists between the 6th and the 7th legislative terms, resulting from the first regional election held after the Presidential elections reform of 1999. Accordingly, it is possible that the reform immediately affected and transformed regional electoral competition, while subsequent increases resulted from continuing adaptation to the new rules of the game.

Conclusion

This article has introduced the ITREGPARL dataset, a new dataset that collects the most extensive available data on regional politics. It covers the period between 1993 and 2020 and contains detailed information about the composition of regional legislatures and executives and the profiles of elected officials. It also provides information about the specific regional contexts in which elections are conducted. The dataset is made available to all researchers and practitioners interested in addressing substantive questions about the compositions of the regional political class, the careers of regional officials over time or the feminization of regional politics. Moreover, the dataset constitutes the privileged data source for exploring the effects of the institutional changes in the regional political system. More specifically, it enables the study of whether and how the concurrent regionalization and presidentialization processes have influenced the characteristics of the regional political class, the regional party system or the appointment to ministerial positions.

Overall, the ITREGPARL dataset constitutes a unique source of information that can also interact with other datasets. For example, it could be merged with datasets collecting information on individual Italian politicians at the national level, to explore how political careers are shaped and evolve in a multi-level system. Alternatively, it could be associated with other datasets collecting information on sub-national politics in different countries to explore regional politics from a comparative perspective. Lastly, it can interact with other datasets, presenting information about specific political roles and offices and collecting information about their socio-economic characteristics and political careers (Grimaldi and Boldrini, 2022).

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

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