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To cite this article: Davide Vampa (2021): The 2020 regional elections in Italy: sub-national politics in the year of the pandemic, Contemporary Italian Politics, DOI: [10.1080/23248823.2021.1912301](https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2021.1912301)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2021.1912301>



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Published online: 15 Apr 2021.



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The 2020 regional elections in Italy: sub-national politics in the year of the pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on eight regional elections held in Italy in 2020, the year of the Coronavirus pandemic. It looks at both the January and September rounds. Even though these two sets of elections took place, respectively, at the end and at the beginning of two distinctive ‘phases’, separated by the Covid-19 outbreak, they share some important characteristics. The discussion starts from a short overview of the events leading to the polling days, looking in particular at pre-election coalition building, the electoral campaigns and the positioning of key leaders. It then moves onto the analysis of the election results. It considers changes in political participation, support for the major parties, the strengthening of local and non-partisan lists, volatility and shifts in political representation. The overall pattern is one of increasing territorial complexity and fragmentation: regional elections now clearly follow a logic of their own, dominated more by local leaders than by national parties.

KEYWORDS

Italy; regional elections;
Covid-19; sub-national
politics; party politics

There is little doubt that 2020 has been a watershed in world politics. Italy was one of the epicentres of a global earthquake and became the first major European country to experience the dramatic (and traumatic) effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. Since the end of February 2020, the Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19), has dominated Italian political debate. Terms like ‘test’, ‘mask’, ‘social distancing’, ‘lockdown’ and ‘quarantine’ soon became part of the mainstream political vocabulary. This was certainly a sudden and unexpected turn of events. In retrospect, not even the crisis hitting the Italian economy between 2008 and 2011, which had been widely regarded as a systemic shock, had led to a similarly dramatic transformation in political dynamics and discourses. Between March and June Italian politics was *de facto* frozen, suspended, overwhelmed by the emergency. At the start of 2020, political commentators could not have predicted that they would spend the whole spring counting the thousands of deaths caused by Covid-19 instead of analysing the votes cast by millions of citizens in the main electoral test of the year: the 2020 regional elections.

Nine of the twenty Italian regions were expected to go to the polls between January and April. In the end, only two regional elections, in Emilia-Romagna and Calabria, took place on the planned date, 26 January. They were supposed to be a sort of ‘general

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rehearsal' before a more extensive round of local and regional elections in April. Yet they ended up being the last major political event of the pre-Coronavirus era. The other regional elections would be postponed to the end of September, once the first wave of the pandemic had subsided (and shortly before the start of the second wave). However, although these two sets of elections took place, respectively, at the end and at the beginning of two different phases, they share some important characteristics. The January elections marked the end of the four-year winning streak of Salvini's new Lega (League) and this was confirmed in September. At the same time, both electoral rounds were affected by the rise of another right-wing competitor: Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) (see also the article by Albertazzi, Bonansinga and Zulianello in this special issue). On the other hand, the other winner of the 2018 general elections, the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s), experienced an important electoral setback at the beginning of 2020, which would be even more evident eight months later. The elections also saw the re-emergence of a clearly 'bipolar' dynamic between centre-left and centre-right coalitions. Tighter competition between two opposed fronts was also accompanied by an increase in electoral participation, after years of decline. Yet the 'bipolarization' of competition was not clearly driven by national party strategies. In fact, populists' attempts at 'nationalizing' regional campaigns and transforming them into referendums on the government, which initially triggered a cross-regional, anti-populist response (i.e. the movement of the so-called 'Sardines': see the article by Caruso and De Blasio in this special issue), clearly failed. Regional issues and regional candidates played a central role – much more important than in the past – in determining electoral dynamics and outcomes in both pre- and post-Coronavirus rounds. This points to the increasing 'insulation' of the regional dimension of politics from national debates (and vice-versa), which is not surprising given the ambiguous political orientation of the government (and its leadership) in Rome. Overall, it seems that the pandemic merely accelerated trends that were already visible at the beginning of the year and, in some cases, had started well before 2020.

This article focuses on eight of the nine regional elections held in 2020 – the election in the small Valle d'Aosta has been excluded due to the peculiar political and institutional characteristics of this region. The discussion starts from a short overview of the events leading to the polling days, looking in particular at pre-election coalition building, the electoral campaigns and the positioning of key leaders. It then moves to the analysis of the electoral results. It considers changes in political participation, support for the major parties, the strengthening of local and non-partisan lists, volatility and shifts in political representation. The overall pattern is one of increasing territorial complexity and fragmentation: regional elections now clearly follow a logic of their own, dominated more by local leaders than national parties.

Coalitions and electoral campaigns: an overview

Following the transition to the so-called Second Republic in the early 1990s, regional elections in Italy seemed to be largely subordinate to national-level politics. This was already clear in 1995, when they served as an opportunity to launch a new centre-left alliance between post-Communists and former Christian Democrats, which would then win the 1996 general election. In 2000, regional elections anticipated the result of the

2001 general election, which saw the victory of a renewed centre-right coalition including both Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (Forward Italy, FI) and Umberto Bossi's Lega Nord (Northern League, LN). In 2005, the opposite happened: centre-left coalitions won in almost all regions and this preceded a change in national government in 2006. In 2010, dynamics were slightly more complex but still dominated by competition between opponents and supporters of the national government, which at that time was led, once again, by Berlusconi. This regular pattern of interactions between national ruling and opposition parties, which may be linked to the 'second order' nature of regional elections (Schakel and Jeffery 2013), no longer seemed to hold in 2015. This turned out to be the culmination of a 'critical' election cycle (Bolgherini and Grimaldi 2017) in which regional party systems had become more fragmented and volatile than in the past (Vampa 2015). To be sure, this was partly due to the fact that regional political competition had become more 'region-centred' (Bolgherini and Grimaldi 2017, 487), less dominated by national parties and leaders and more subject to region-specific factors than in the 1990s and early 2000s. This may also be explained by the fact that, due to a number of early elections – in some cases triggered by investigations and arrests involving regional politicians – the 15 'ordinary statute' regions no longer went to the polls simultaneously – as was the case until the early 2000s. At the same time, however, the growing instability of sub-national party politics was similar to that observed at the national level. After all, what was happening in the sub-national electoral arena reflected the deep de-structuring and re-structuring processes investing the Italian party system in its entirety after the financial crisis and Great Recession (Karremans, Malet, and Morisi 2019).

At the beginning of 2020, one political actor in particular tried to 're-nationalize' the political debate in regional election campaigns: Matteo Salvini. Paradoxically, this was the leader of a party that used to place particular emphasis on the regional political dimension and its autonomy. Yet Salvini's League had long ceased to be a regionalist party mostly concerned with federalism and decentralization and had become a 'state-wide' radical right populist party focusing on 'nativist nationalism' (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone 2018). The regional election in Emilia-Romagna was especially regarded by the leader of the League as an opportunity to re-launch his political project after his attempt to force an early general election in the summer of 2019 had failed. Salvini's exit from national government had led to the creation of a new executive, still led by Giuseppe Conte, but including the former opposition, the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), now allied with the M5s. This had probably been the first serious setback suffered by Salvini since his election as leader of the League and, as suggested by various opinion polls, had resulted in a sharp decline in his popularity rating (see Albertazzi, Bonansinga and Zulianello in this special issue).¹

Winning the regional election in Emilia-Romagna, a historical stronghold of the Left, would therefore prove that the new Conte government was lacking political legitimacy and that the League's calls for new elections were resonating with the wider electorate. In fact, already at the end of 2019, a League-dominated right-wing coalition had managed to defeat an alliance between the PD and the M5s in Umbria, where a corruption scandal involving the PD-led administration had triggered an early election. Umbria was also part of the so-called 'red-belt' (Barbieri 2012), that is, the group of central Italian regions where centre-left coalitions had been electorally dominant for decades. Yet Umbria is a relatively small and peripheral region, which carries much less political weight than

Emilia-Romagna. By winning in the latter region, Salvini sought to deal the final blow to the national government. In sum, he adopted an electoral logic that saw the regional dimension as subordinate to his national strategy.

The response of the opposite front was quite different. Unlike in Umbria, where, for the first time, an electoral alliance between the PD and the M5s had been formed without much success, in Emilia-Romagna negotiations between the two parties failed. After the defeat in Umbria, the M5s was much less willing to replicate the same experience in other regions. At the same time, the PD – gripped by the ‘great fear’ of losing one of its last strongholds (Ramella and Bosco 2020) – had fewer incentives to build a renewed coalition and distance itself from the incumbent administration. While in Umbria the PD-led government had clearly disappointed voters, in Emilia-Romagna the incumbent president, Stefano Bonaccini, could point to the creditable record of centre-left government in the region. Generally, the PD built a campaign focused on regional issues and *buongoverno* (good government), avoiding references to the national executive where the party had to share power with the M5s, which remained an awkward ally for many PD activists and supporters. Therefore, it largely ignored Salvini’s attempts to draw attention to the limits of the Conte government and, more generally, to national issues, especially immigration and law and order (areas in which regions have little power).

However, while the PD refused to be involved in a nationally focused campaign pitting populists against anti-populists, a spontaneous movement emerged outside the perimeter of the ‘official’ centre-left coalition. The mobilization of the so-called Sardine (Sardines: see Caruso and De Blasio in this special issue) – groups of largely young, progressive citizens denouncing the radical stances of right-wing populists – sought openly to oppose Salvini and ‘*Salvinismo*’. Newell (2020) aptly defined them as ‘a movement of protest against populist politics’. By expressing their support for a (relatively broad) set of political values, rather than specific policy issues, the Sardines’ campaign soon assumed national relevance and went beyond Emilia-Romagna. The ‘red’ region was mainly regarded as the symbol of a political tradition, which was being threatened by the national (and international) rise of the far right.

It is unclear whether the mobilization of the Sardines played a decisive role in the victory of the PD in Emilia-Romagna – the ‘great fear’ did not materialize and Bonaccini was confirmed president of the region (see below). The movement was certainly not as vocal in the other region that voted in January, Calabria, which attracted much less ‘national’ attention (Mete 2020). In the end, despite ‘undergoing explosive growth’ (Newell 2020, 2) and attracting significant national attention, the Sardines’ project would become one of the first political victims of the pandemic. In the period following the first wave of Covid-19, little remained of a movement based on a loose network of grassroots groups, whose mobilization had been mainly symbolized by large rallies (no longer an option in an age of social distancing).

Thus, Salvini’s defeat and the premature collapse of the Sardines highlighted the weakness of ‘nationalizing’ pressures even before the Covid-19 outbreak. In fact, denationalizing tendencies seemed to have a more structural and lasting impact on the regional arena. In January, Bonaccini’s personality and a range of region-specific issues had emerged as key assets for the PD in Emilia-Romagna. After the pandemic, a similar story, in rather different contexts, occurred in Campania and Puglia, where the elections were dominated by the incumbent PD presidents: Vincenzo de Luca and Michele

Emiliano. Interestingly, this phenomenon of region-centred ‘presidentialization’ also invested two regions governed by the right: Liguria and Veneto, led by Giovanni Toti and Luca Zaia. Of course, regional voting systems based on direct election of the leaders of the executives had already contributed to strengthening presidential candidates vis-à-vis political parties over the previous two decades (Grimaldi and Vercesi 2018). Yet the pandemic, putting pressure on regionalized health systems, added more importance to the role played by regional presidents and this, in turn, shifted the political focus further away from national competition.

The separation between different territorial levels was also facilitated by the absence of a clear political target in Rome. The coalition in national government was not recreated at the regional level. The PD and the M5s formed an alliance only in Liguria (with little success), while they ran separately in all the other regions. Hence, it was quite difficult to frame the regional elections in the same way as in previous years – that is, as a clear contest between parties in national government and parties in opposition. Even in 2015, the then Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, had intervened constantly in the campaign to support PD candidates, whose success would in turn strengthen his government. This did not happen in 2020, when Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte avoided any direct involvement in the election. Indeed, any explicit endorsement of a PD or M5s candidate would have provoked tensions between the two parties. To be sure, compared to the previous election round of 2014–2015, in 2020 competition between coalitions was based more on what, at first sight, may appear as a classic dynamic of centre-left versus centre-right political blocs. Yet the nature and characteristics of these centre-left and centre-right coalitions varied from region to region and were more influenced by regional leaders – around whom alliances between parties and groups were built – than by national cleavages and state-wide dimensions of competition.

The rising number of non-partisan or local lists competing at the regional level is a clear sign of the increasing centrality of regional candidates and the simultaneous decline of state-wide parties in the sub-national electoral arena (Vampa 2015, 2016). This used to be a rather marginal phenomenon in regional elections. Yet, starting from the 2014/2015 round, we can observe a proliferation of groups and movements that cannot be clearly identified with the parties dominating national politics – across the eight regions they increased from 15 in 2010 to 37 in 2014/2015 to 59 in 2020. Often these are lists created by representatives of what is widely referred to as ‘civil society’, who are not affiliated to any party but declare their allegiance to a candidate for president. In 2020, all presidents elected in the eight regions enjoyed the support of at least one of these lists. In some cases – Veneto, Liguria, Campania and Puglia – ‘presidents’ lists’ even outweighed traditional parties in political influence and electoral strength (see next section). They were used by regional leaders not only to broaden the perimeters of their coalitions, but also to free themselves from the strategic and programmatic constraints imposed by parties to which, formally, they still belonged and were accountable.

Luca Zaia is a clear example of this process of shifting political weight from centre to region. In 2010, he had left his position as national Minister of Agriculture in the last Berlusconi government and had been elected president of Veneto with the support of only three national parties – his party, the LN, being the strongest one. Yet in 2015, he created his ‘personal’ list, which would become the largest political group of the region (see next section) and allowed him to govern Veneto autonomously from the national

leadership of his party. Giovanni Toti is an even more striking case of an emerging regional personality. In 2015, he had been parachuted into Liguria by Silvio Berlusconi and had unexpectedly won the election. In the years following he gradually distanced himself from the leader of FI and in 2020 he even created his own list – Cambiamo con Toti Presidente (‘Let us change, with Toti as President’) – which would win more votes than any of the other parties of the centre-right coalition supporting him. In sum, in 2020 incumbent presidents, and presidential candidates more generally, played a key role in structuring sub-national electoral competition. One may even say that, rather than nationalizing regional campaigns, these increasingly powerful actors helped to regionalize national politics.

Participation and electoral results

Despite its challenges, 2020 can be regarded as a positive year for citizens’ electoral participation. A significant increase in voter turnout, compared to the previous electoral cycle, could already be observed in January. In Emilia-Romagna, for instance, turnout increased by 30 percentage points. This trend continued in September, in spite of the pandemic and the unusual time of year for the holding of elections. Overall, 2020 marked a clear reversal in the long-term decline in electoral participation at the regional level, which had reached its lowest point in the 2014/2015 cycle – when overall turnout fell below 50% for the first time. Of course, in 2020 a constitutional referendum on the reduction in the number of MPs was held on the same day as the September elections and might have attracted more voters. However, there had been no constitutional referendum in Emilia-Romagna in January and, still, electoral participation had already skyrocketed then. The data included in [Table 1](#) show that, together with Emilia-Romagna, two other regions, Tuscany and Marche, enjoyed the most significant bounce back in turnout. This might be explained by how competitive the electoral process had become there.

Until 2015, the three regions had been clearly dominated by centre-left coalitions and, in fact, the gap between the centre left and its strongest competitor had even increased in 2014/2015. In 2020, in contrast, the regional elections in Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna became much tighter. The right-hand side of [Table 2](#) (section B) clearly shows this. In Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, centre-left coalitions basically held their share of the vote. What brought a radical change in political equilibria was the dramatic increase in support for the centre-right coalitions. This resulted in a relatively narrow gap between winner

Table 1. Turnout in regional elections from 1990 to 2020 (percentages).

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014/ 2015		2020	Difference 2020/previous election
Liguria	84.8	79.6	70.5	69.6	60.9	50.7	53.4		2.7
Veneto	90.8	85.2	75.6	72.4	66.4	57.1	61.1		4
Tuscany	89.6	85.2	74.6	71.4	60.7	48.8	62.6		13.8
Marche	89.5	84.6	74.3	71.5	62.8	49.8	59.7		9.9
Campania	81.2	73.9	69.5	67.7	63	51.9	55.5		3.6
Puglia	84.3	75.7	70.2	70.5	63.2	51.2	56.4		5.2
Emilia-Romagna	93	88.3	79.7	76.7	68.1	37.7	67.7		30
Calabria	75.8	68.6	64.6	64.4	59.3	44.1	44.3		0.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>86.5</i>	<i>80.3</i>	<i>72.8</i>	<i>70.8</i>	<i>63.6</i>	<i>49.4</i>	<i>58.5</i>		<i>9.1</i>

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior

Table 2. Summary of regional election results (difference with previous election in brackets) (percentages).

	A										B		
	Results of Parties and Lists (%)										Results of Main Coalitions (%)		
	PD	M5s	FI	League	Fdl	Other	Local	Centre left	Centre right	Gap winner/loser			
Liguria	19.9 (-5.7)	7.8 (-14.5)	5.3 (-7.4)	17.1 (-3.2)	10.9 (+7.8)	7.4 (+0.8)	31.7 (+22.2)	38.9 (+11.1)	56.1 (+21.7)	17.2			
Veneto	11.9 (-4.8)	2.7 (-7.7)	3.6 (-2.4)	16.9 (-0.9)	9.6 (+7)	4.3 (+0.4)	51.1 (+8.5)	15.7 (-7)	76.8 (+26.7)	61.1			
Tuscany	34.7 (-11.6)	7 (-8.1)	4.3 (-4.2)	21.8 (+5.6)	13.5 (+9.6)	11.9 (+10.5)	6.9 (-1.7)	48.6 (+0.6)	40.5 (+20.5)	8.1			
Marche	25.1 (-10)	7.1 (-11.8)	5.9 (-3.5)	22.4 (+9.4)	18.7 (+12.2)	7.7 (-4.3)	13.1 (+8.1)	37.9 (-3.2)	49.1 (+30.1)	11.2*			
Campania	16.9 (-2.9)	9.9 (-7.3)	5.2 (-6.2)	5.6 (+3.2)	6 (+3.6)	32.4 (+0.6)	24 (+9)	69.5 (+28.3)	18.1 (-20.3)	51.4			
Puglia	17.2 (-2.6)	9.9 (-7.3)	8.9 (-2.5)	9.6 (+7.2)	12.6 (+10.2)	12.7 (-19.1)	29.1 (+14.1)	46.8 (-0.3)	38.9 (+20.6)	7.9			
Emilia Romagna	34.7 (-9.8)	4.7 (-8.6)	2.6 (-5.8)	32 (+12.6)	8.6 (+6.7)	6.2 (-5.3)	11.3 (+10.3)	51.4 (+2.3)	43.6 (+13.7)	7.8			
Calabria	15.2 (-8.5)	6.3 (+1.4)	12.3 (=)	12.3 (+12.3)	10.9 (+8.4)	12.5 (-22.7)	30.6 (+9.2)	30.1 (-31.3)	55.2 (+31.6)	25.1*			
Total	22.2 (-4.8)	6.8 (-7.8)	5.3 (-5.8)	17 (+7.2)	10.3 (+6.8)	13.3 (-1.9)	25 (+6.3)						

*In this region the majority changed from the centre left to the centre right
 Source: Author's own elaboration based on data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior

and loser (narrower than in most other regions), thus making inter-coalition politics in Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna much more competitive. In the Marche region, the centre-left coalition remained more or less stable, while the centre-right camp – which in 2015 had been split into two coalitions – surged by around 30 percentage points, thus flipping the region for the first time since the mid-1990s. The increased electoral ‘vulnerability’ of the red regions may therefore explain the shift in voters’ mobilization observed in [Table 1](#). This was also driven by strong appeals, aimed particularly at left-wing voters, to cast a *voto utile* (a ‘useful vote’), i.e. not to ‘waste their votes’ by casting them for third-party candidates. This was particularly effective in Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, while less successful in the Marche, where disillusionment with the left seemed to prevail and a similar dynamic to that of neighbouring Umbria could be observed. Among the other regions, only Puglia had a similar narrow gap between coalitions – and it is perhaps no coincidence that this is the region that experienced the largest increase in turnout in the South.

Instead, huge gaps between coalitions emerged in Liguria, Veneto, Campania and Calabria. In the first three regions, this was a clear sign of consolidation of the incumbent administrations and incumbent presidents, who played a key role in rallying voters and expanding the electoral support of their coalitions. Calabria, however, confirmed the highly volatile and unstable nature of its politics. Since 1995, this region has always experienced large swings from one coalition to the other.

Considering individual parties ([Table 2](#), section A), the M5s and FI were the clear losers of the elections. Both parties saw their electoral support drop by more than half and they lost votes in all regions except Calabria. Yet while FI has been in decline for years, as shown in [Figure 1](#), the M5s has experienced a much more dramatic and abrupt electoral collapse. In the 2018 general election, the M5s was by far the largest party in the eight regions, winning more than one third of the vote. In just two years, the Movement seems to have almost completely dilapidated its political capital. It is too early to say if this decline is reversible, but the M5s can already be regarded as an example of a populist

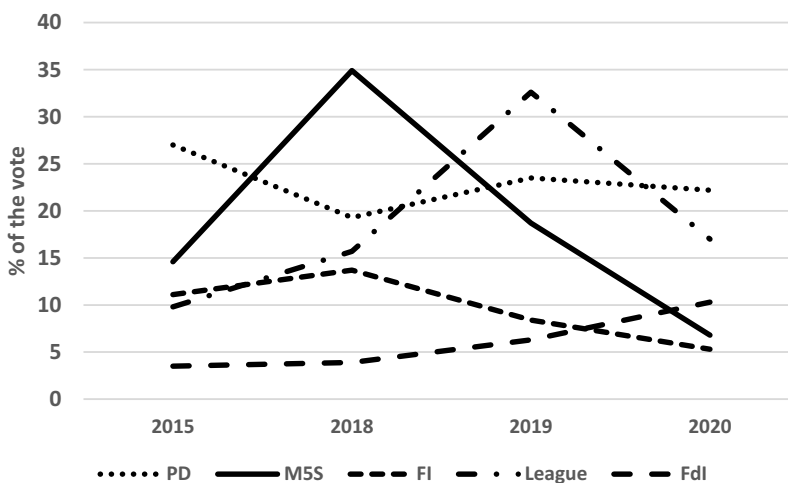


Figure 1. Main parties’ electoral results in the eight regions from 2015 to 2020 (percentages). Source: Author’s own elaboration based on data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior

‘anti-system’ party that has been damaged by its own success. Rapid electoral growth, also due to the ‘catch-all’ appeal of its ‘eclectic’ or ‘polyvalent’ populism (Mosca and Tronconi 2019; Pirro 2018), allowed the Movement to seize power in a relatively short period of time. This, however, also forced it to reach compromises and forge alliances with very different parties, the League in 2018 and the PD in 2019, causing confusion within its electorate. The inexperience of its leadership and the lack of a solid organization also conspired against the M5s, which failed to play a decisive role in any of the key regional contests in 2020.

The Movement decided to run alone in all regions. Liguria was the only exception. There an alliance between the M5s and the PD was created but, as in Umbria in 2019, it was heavily punished by voters. Generally, the results of the 2020 regional elections confirm the crisis of identity and the dilemmas of a populist party-movement that was created to break the cartel dominated by traditional centre-left and centre-right coalitions but is, in fact, unable to build an alternative to their duopoly without reaching compromises with them. In the end, many M5s supporters, faced with a return to bipolar competition, decided not to ‘waste’ their vote, particularly in the red regions. This is what happened, for instance, in Emilia-Romagna, where most M5s voters defected from the Movement’s official candidate and instead chose Bonaccini’s centre-left coalition (Regalia, Valbruzzi, and Vassallo 2020).

The PD too experienced electoral losses compared to the 2014/2015 regional election cycle. Yet, despite losing 4.8 percentage points, it won the largest share of the vote in 2020 (Table 2, section A). This was not an obvious result, since in the previous general and European elections the party had lost its position as largest party, having been overtaken by the M5s in 2018 and by the League in 2019. Figure 1 suggests that, overall, its electoral trajectory has been the most stable over the last five years, crossing that of the M5s and the League. On the one hand, this stability may be regarded as a weakness, pointing to the inability of the party to appeal to new constituencies and fulfil its ‘majoritarian’ ambitions. On the other hand, considering that the party has experienced various splits and has been in an almost continuous state of crisis and ‘soul-searching’ – it also had to compete with a wide range of local lists – a result above 20% shows how resilient the PD is. So far, no other party or movement has been able to challenge its primacy on the centre left.

The League and FdI, the two parties of the populist radical right, have clearly expanded their support base in comparison to 2014/2015. Salvini’s League was still behind FI in the previous regional elections, but it is now leading the right-wing bloc. Yet this is not a novelty of 2020. In fact, the 2020 regional elections marked the end of the electoral expansion of the party, which had reached its peak in 2019. Compared to the results of the European election in the eight regions analysed here, Salvini’s party has seen its share of the vote almost halve. On the other hand, FdI is the only party that has continuously grown since 2015, overtaking FI. It has more than doubled its support since then and this confirms what most polls have been suggesting since 2019: Giorgia Meloni’s party has become a major player in Italian politics and can even aspire to replace the League as the leading party of the right (see Albertazzi, Bonansinga and Zulianello in this special issue).

One interesting detail emerging from the data in Table 2 concerns the support for the League in Liguria and Veneto. In both contexts, Salvini’s party actually won a smaller

share of the vote than in 2015 (not to mention 2018 and 2020). Today Salvini's party is stronger in the former red regions of Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany and Marche than in Veneto. Part of the losses suffered by the League in Liguria and Veneto can be explained by the unprecedented success of the local lists created to support the candidates for president. In Liguria Giovanni Toti's list *Cambiamo con Toti Presidente* became the largest group in the centre-right coalition, overtaking the League, which in 2015 had been the leading party of that bloc. In Veneto, Luca Zaia's personal list had already overtaken his own party in 2015 but in 2020 the gap with the League widened from 5 to almost 28 percentage points. The list *Zaia Presidente* ('Zaia for President') grew from 23.1% of the vote to an astonishing 44.6%. Basically in 2020 Zaia no longer needed the votes of the League, or any other centre-right party, to win the election. Therefore, the president of Veneto, despite formally belonging to Salvini's party, demonstrated that he was, *de facto*, an autonomous political actor who could do without the support of the national leadership. Presidents' lists were also quite strong, although more fragmented, in the South. Here, they were particularly important for centre-left incumbent presidents in Campania and Puglia. Overall, local lists won a quarter of the total vote across the eight regions, thus surpassing the share won by the largest party, the PD.

Even though the role played by parties at the sub-national level clearly declined, the 2020 elections marked a return to a 'bipolar' type of competition. Table 3 shows the evolution of the 'bipolarism index' (Bolgherini and Grimaldi 2017, 495) in the eight regions from 1995 to 2020. The index is given by the combined electoral support (as a percentage of the total vote) of the largest and second largest coalitions. Thus, the higher the value, the more the political system is centred on the competition between two coalitions. A score of 100 indicates that there is a 'duopoly', meaning that no votes are cast outside the two main electoral blocs. The data point to a progressive concentration of support for two coalitions from 1995 to 2005. The trend changed in 2010. 2015 saw the least bipolar elections in more than two decades. While the two main coalitions together won on average 96.3% of the vote at the peak of the 'bipolarization' process, in 2015 their combined share collapsed to 71.9%. This was largely due to the rise of the M5s but also to the fragmentation of the centre-right coalition (running separately in various regions) and to the existence of moderately successful candidates of the radical left. The 2020 elections saw a 're-concentration' of the vote, particularly in Liguria, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, where support for the M5s collapsed. Yet, as already mentioned above, this return to bipolarism did not reduce territorial fragmentation. In fact, due to the unprecedented success of local lists and the central role played by local candidates,

Table 3. Level of electoral bipolarism (index of bipolarism, in percentages).

	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Liguria	80.4	96.8	99.2	100	62.4	95
Veneto	70.6	93.2	93	89.3	72.8	92.5
Tuscany	86.2	89.4	90.2	94.1	68	89.1
Marche	90.5	94.1	96.3	92.9	62.9	86.4
Campania	87.2	98.4	96	97.3	79.5	87.6
Puglia	95.7	97.5	99	91	65.5	85.7
Emilia-Romagna	85.8	96.8	97.9	88.8	79	95
Calabria	82	98.6	98.7	90	85	85.4
<i>Average</i>	<i>84.8</i>	<i>95.6</i>	<i>96.3</i>	<i>92.9</i>	<i>71.9</i>	<i>89.6</i>

Source: Author's own elaboration based on data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior

what we observe is the emergence of a *territorially fragmented bipolarism*, in which competition between two coalitions is region-specific and is not framed within a ‘state-wide’ logic of national governing parties versus national opposition.

The return to a more bipolar type of competition was also accompanied by persisting high levels of volatility – measured by using the Pedersen index (see Bartolini and Mair 1990). The 2014–2015 electoral cycle had already seen high levels of volatility, at around 50% across the eight regions, similar to those of 1995 – when regional elections took place shortly after the transformation of the old, postwar party system between 1992 and 1994. Following the 1995 cycle, however, volatility declined, due to the relatively rapid stabilization of the new party system, and in 2010 it was still well below the levels of the mid-1990s (around 30%). In 2020, in contrast, volatility remained very high (45%). In Tuscany, it even marked a record high, reaching 50% for the first time. This suggests that, unlike the previous systemic crisis of the mid-1990s, the political crisis that began in the aftermath of the Great Recession has not led to a new equilibrium. In fact, the Italian political landscape remains rather unstable and the socio-economic crisis resulting from Covid-19 is likely to create new fractures in a context of weakening party organizations and political allegiances (as clearly shown in the case of the red regions).

If we move from votes to elected representatives, the picture of strengthening local lists and weakening political parties is generally confirmed. Table 4 shows that in 2020 local/personal lists increased their overall share of seats in regional councils by more than 7 percentage points. It is too early to discuss the implications of this shift. To be sure, the increasing weight of local lists is likely to increase the autonomy of regional presidents in policy-making processes. Indeed, presidents will be able to establish strong direct ties with representatives who are not formally affiliated to any party. Probably Veneto is the most extreme case in this respect. In this region, President Luca Zaia would be able to have a majority and govern just by relying on the support of his personal list and one councillor from another local list (Lista Veneto Autonomia). He does not need the support of his own party, Salvini’s League.

Among the political parties, only FdI outperformed the overall growth of local lists, increasing its representation by 9.2 percentage points. Giorgia Meloni’s party fared particularly well in the two regions where its candidates were leading centre-right coalitions: the Marche and Puglia – in the latter it entered the regional council for the first time. The League also expanded its overall representation in regional councils, particularly in the South. For the first time, it won seats in Campania, Puglia and Calabria. On the other hand, the M5s lost all its seats in the regional council of Veneto and failed to gain representation in Calabria, a region where Beppe Grillo’s Movement had won more than 40% of the vote in the general election only two years earlier. FI’s electoral collapse, already observed in Table 4, meant that the number of its elected representatives almost halved. The decline was particularly marked in central-northern Italy. Today Berlusconi’s party is so weak that FI councillors play a pivotal role only in Calabria. In all the other regions won by the right, their votes are not necessary to form a majority. The PD, despite remaining the party with the largest regional representation, experienced a significant loss of seats (–8.6% across the eight regions). For the reasons mentioned above when discussing the case of Veneto, the weakening of the PD relative to local/personal lists is also likely to shift decision-making power away from the party to centre-left regional presidents. In turn, this will

Table 4. Representation in the eight regions* (percentages).

	A							B			C Disproportionality
	Main parties and groups – % of seats won							Fragmentation (ENPP)			
	PD	M5s	FI	League	Fdl	Other parties	Local lists	Fragmentation (ENPP)			
Liguria	19.4 (-6.4)	6.5 (-12.9)	3.2 (-16.2)	19.4 (-3.2)	9.7 (+6.5)	0 (-9.7)	41.9 (+41.9)	5.6 (+0.6)		4.9 (-2)	
Veneto	13.7 (-3.9)	0 (-9.8)	3.9 (-2)	19.6 (-2)	9.8 (+7.8)	2 (+2)	51 (+7.9)	3.4 (-2.7)		3.7 (-0.3)	
Tuscany	56.1 (-4.9)	4.9 (-7.3)	2.4 (-2.5)	22 (+7.4)	9.8 (+7.4)	4.9 (=)	0 (=)	2.6 (+0.2)		16 (+4.8)	
Marche	25.8 (-25.8)	6.5 (-9.6)	6.5 (=)	25.8 (+16.1)	25.8 (+22.6)	3.2 (-3.3)	6.5 (=)	4.7 (+1.5)		6.8 (-5.9)	
Campania	17.6 (-13.8)	13.7 (=)	5.9 (-9.8)	5.9 (+5.9)	7.8 (+3.9)	29.4 (+15.7)	19.6 (-2)	10.8 (+4.5)		3.9 (-6.4)	
Puglia	33.3 (+5.8)	9.8 (-3.9)	7.8 (-2)	7.8 (+7.8)	13.7 (+13.7)	0 (-31.4)	27.5 (+9.9)	5.6 (-1.2)		13.6 (+6.6)	
Emilia- Romagna	46 (-14)	4 (-6)	2 (-2)	30 (+12)	6 (+4)	2 (-4)	10 (+10)	3.2 (+0.7)		8.5 (-3.5)	
Calabria	16.1 (-12.9)	0 (=)	19.4 (=)	12.9 (+12.9)	12.9 (+12.9)	12.9 (-9.7)	25.8 (-3.2)	7.7 (+2.3)		8.7 (-1.1)	
Total	29.1 (-8.6)	5.9 (-6)	5.9 (-4.2)	17.5 (+6.8)	11.3 (+9.2)	7.1 (-4.8)	23.1 (+7.4)				

*Difference with previous election in brackets.

Source: Italian Ministry of the Interior

further accelerate trends of presidentialization and territorial fragmentation that have been ongoing for years.

Table 4 (section B) also suggests that in 2020 most regional councils became more politically fragmented than at the previous election. The Laakso and Taagepera (1979) index, measuring the effective number of ‘parliamentary’ parties (ENPP) – that is, those winning representation in the regional councils –, increased in almost all regions, with the exception of Veneto and Puglia. The huge success of Zaia’s list can explain a certain level of ‘simplification’ in the first context. Puglia, in contrast, was the most fragmented region in 2015 and its slight decline on this indicator just points to a general convergence with the other regions, whose councils, on the other hand, have become more ‘plural’. Puglia also seems to be an outlier with regard to disproportionality – measured by Gallagher’s (1991) least squares index – which, as displayed in Table 4 (section C) declined in almost all regions. Tuscany is another exception. Unsurprisingly, disproportionality seems to be negatively associated with the number of effective parties. This means that, as councils become more fragmented, they also reflect more closely the actual preferences of the voters. Yet it should be remembered that, while Italian regions have adopted different voting systems, they all assign a ‘majority bonus’ to the coalition of the winning candidate for president. Puglia and Tuscany are more disproportional than the rest of the group partly because their elected presidents won a plurality rather than an absolute majority of the vote. Therefore, the ‘mechanical’ effect of the majority bonus on the disproportionality of the outcome was particularly visible in these two regions. In contexts like Campania, Veneto and Liguria, the electoral advantage of the winning coalitions was so large that the majority bonus was not triggered. No extra seats were needed to gain control of regional councils.² Hence the increased proportionality observed in some regions is less an indicator of a general trend than it is a function of the unprecedented success of the winning coalitions. This success, as discussed in the previous section, was mainly due to the central political role played by regional leaders.

Conclusion

The 2020 regional elections took place in a critical year for Italy. Another crisis hit the country, although it did not originate from the usual twists and turns of Italy’s unstable politics or struggling economy. This time the shock was clearly exogenous and unpredictable. The pandemic suspended political competition for months. The return to a precarious normality in the summer showed that something had in fact happened behind the apparent freezing of Italian politics. At the subnational level, regional presidents had gained new centrality during the health emergency. Given the extensive powers that regional governments have in the area of health care this is not so surprising. Yet, rather than reversing pre-crisis trends, the pandemic merely accelerated processes that were already visible in January, before the start of the outbreak.

This article has stressed that, in both rounds of elections in January and September, regional actors clearly asserted their autonomy from national politics. Each region followed a particular path, which was substantially shaped by the personalities of local leaders and candidates. Thus, in January, while in Emilia-Romagna a centre-left coalition led by the incumbent president decisively won in an election that the leader of the right-wing League had tried to nationalize, in Calabria a centre-right alliance triumphed.

Again, in September, voters rewarded both centre-left and centre-right candidates with no consistent pattern. Hence, the plebiscitary victory of centre-right Luca Zaia in Veneto occurred while centre-left Vincenzo de Luca beat his opponent by more than 50 percentage points in Campania. Similar diverging trajectories can be observed in Liguria and Puglia. It is true that, overall, the right managed to flip two regions, Calabria and Marche. Yet these outcomes did not result from a national swing to the right. In fact, traditional competition between left and right seems to have lost any meaning— De Luca hardly campaigned on a left-wing platform, while Zaia clearly distanced himself from Salvini's new turn towards Italian nationalism. In this context, even the role of national parties is questioned. While boosting turnout, the political revival of regional leadership did not appear to have a positive impact on political parties' overall strength. On the contrary, regional leaders seem increasingly to rely on a number of local or personal lists, avoiding partisan labels, in order to reach new voters and strengthen their positions and autonomy. Given these shifts, one may wonder whether Italian regional politics is gradually heading towards a fully candidate-based, 'party-less' model of democracy. Analyses of future regional elections will undoubtedly help to address this question.

Notes

1. See <http://www.demos.it/a01641.php>
2. In the case of Calabria, even though the centre-right coalition won by a very large margin and did not need the majority bonus, the existence of a system of coalition and list thresholds contributed to the disproportionality of the final outcome.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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