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## National and local effects in the Italian regional elections (2018–2020). Beyond second-order election expectations?

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### ABSTRACT



This article investigates Italian regional elections held between 2018 and 2020 in order to assess whether, and if so, to what extent, regional elections present nationalized or localized features. We argue that the Italian regional elections do not perfectly reflect the expectations deriving from the Second Order Elections (SOE) theory. However, they are not completely ‘localized’, and they often mirror the national climate, as captured by Reif and Schmitt’s classical empirical expectations. Our contribution consists of two parts. First, we descriptively measure and discuss the extent to which high rates of volatility are due to local (*localness*) or national factors (*nationalness*). We do so by separately inspecting volatility produced by variations in electoral supply and by variations in vote shares. Secondly, after reflecting on the expected scope of the SOE theory in these terms, the latter component of volatility is explored to test Reif and Schmitt’s classic expectations. We show that, despite profound party-system change, recent Italian regional elections are still second-order – featuring, compared to legislative elections, lower turnouts and reversals for large, governing parties. Moreover, we show that, on top of the impact of national politics, regional and local peculiarities are nonetheless clearly visible; and, regardless of the recent extreme turbulence, they (mostly) follow classic historical trends and features.

### KEYWORDS

Regional elections in Italy; second-order elections; localization; nationalization; volatility

## Introduction

Regional elections are usually framed within the second-order election (SOE) theory, positing that there is less at stake in comparison to the national arena, which is first-order by definition. However, these elections – in Italy as elsewhere – have often been assumed to be such, by relying on (some of) the SOE expectations. In this picture, another topic needs to be considered. Party systems in Europe have undergone a long-term process of so-called nationalization (Caramani 2004), as the main driver of their configurations. Yet, a flourishing literature has recently challenged this view: in several European countries, territorial peculiarities have differentiated regional from national party

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systems. This article aims therefore to explore the extent to which differences between national and regional levels in terms of party systems and of voting behaviour may be attributed to nationalization or localization of the vote.

Italian regional elections are particularly suitable bases on which to conduct both such analyses. First, they have often provided mixed results in relation to SOE expectations and therefore their second-orderness is still debated (Mazzoleni 2002; Tronconi 2010; Massetti and Sandri 2013). Secondly, non-homogeneous voting behaviour between national and regional arenas has recently increased and scholars have claimed that this is probably ascribable to locally-rooted political dynamics rather than second-order effects. Thirdly, Italy has experienced a number of major changes at the party-system level and presents one of the highest levels of electoral volatility in Europe, both in the national (Emanuele 2015) and the regional arenas (Bolgherini and Grimaldi 2017), confirming its persisting instability. However, it is unclear whether this volatility is explained by national, second-order effects or by regional/local effects. Moreover, the scattered alignment of regional elections within the national electoral cycle implies a more complex picture in terms of the national/local vote relationship. Finally, recent Italian regional elections have been held in the context of unprecedented governing coalitions holding office at the national level, thus allowing an innovative test of second-order expectations for national-government parties.

This article starts from these considerations and compares the regional election cycle of 2018–2020 with the 2018 national election. The research questions investigated relate to the two aims of the article: to consider 1) the extent to which the SOE theory still explains the 2018–2020 Italian regional election results; 2) the extent to which features derived from the denationalization/localization literature influence these results. To address these questions we employ electoral volatility, a standard indicator of electoral dissimilarity. The most innovative feature of this article is the adoption of different conceptualizations and measurements effectively to address our research questions. In line with the recent literature (Chiaromonte and Emanuele 2017), we distinguish and separately investigate two components of overall electoral volatility. One pertains to electoral changes arising from voters changing their votes among fixed parties, the other reflects changes caused by parties changing the electoral supply. This distinction offers – through measurement, and disentanglement of the different components – both an empirical and a theoretical contribution. The latter allows us to clarify the expected scope and limits of the SOE theory.

The article is structured as follows. The second section provides the theoretical framework for our reflection. The third section explains our research design, distinguishing between Supply Volatility (SV) and Demand Volatility (DV), before presenting the (SOE) hypotheses. The fourth section discusses methodological aspects. The fifth section first provides the main descriptive findings related to SV and its further distinctions accounting for the nationalness/localness issue. Secondly, it addresses the traditional SOE expectations considering turnout and DV using the 2018–2020 regional elections to test the SOE theory. The sixth section concludes.

## Regional elections between national and local effects

### *Framing regional elections within the SOE theory*

Since Reif and Schmitt (1980)'s pioneering work, the SOE theory has been widely tested and applied to elections at many different levels. The core features of a SOE are its lower salience and its 'less-at-stakeness' compared to first-order elections. Three main empirical expectations are related to this less-at-stake dimension: lower turnouts; vote losses for large, established parties and gains for smaller and new parties; vote losses for governing parties and gains for opposition parties (especially if SOEs correspond to the electoral cycle's midterm).<sup>1</sup>

Regional elections are among those elections – typically, but not indisputably, together with European and municipal elections (Kjaer and Steyvers 2019) – considered as SOEs. Already indicated as such by Reif and Schmitt (1980, 8), regional elections have been analysed as SOEs widely in the European literature (Heath et al. 1999; Jeffery and Hough 2001; Pallares and Keating 2003; Jeffery and Hough 2006). More recently, alternative perspectives have been suggested. In particular, doubts have been raised concerning the applicability of the classical SOE theory to regional elections with particular features, e.g. more autonomous regions (Jeffery and Hough 2009) or particular political settings (Schakel and Jeffery 2013). The bias of methodological nationalism (Jeffery and Wincott 2010) – the tendency of the SOE theory to assume the national level as the 'natural' unit of analysis – has also been criticized.

Concerning the Italian case, regional elections have traditionally been considered SOEs (Loughlin and Bolgherini 2006) although, on closer inspection, they have always resulted in mixed evidence with respect to the SOE expectations. Some scholars consider these expectations to have been fulfilled only recently (Tronconi and Roux 2009; Passarelli and Tronconi 2015), while others doubt the second-orderness of regional elections precisely from that moment (Masseti and Sandri 2013). Overall, the capacity of SOE theory fully to explain the results has been questioned (Tronconi 2010). Moreover, the need carefully to consider cross-regional differentiation has been argued (Mazzoleni 2002; Massetti and Sandri 2013).

Drawing on this debate, we note that some of the features of Italian regional elections have progressively changed and this may have had an impact on their second-orderness. First, until 1995 the 15 Ordinary Statute Regions (OSRs) voted together, as the regular five-year regional cycle was never interrupted. Since 2000 in contrast, snap elections have altered the regional-election calendar so that a gradually decreasing number of regions have voted simultaneously, and renewal of the mandates of regional administrations now takes place over a period of three years. Second, the national party system appears to have been in a state of constant flux in the last decade, with unprecedentedly large changes occurring at the 2013 legislative election (Chiaromonte and De Sio 2014), the 2014 European Parliament (EP) election (De Sio, Emanuele, and Maggini 2014), the 2018 legislative election (Chiaromonte and De Sio 2019) and the 2019 EP election (Angelucci, De Sio, and Paparo 2020; Landini and Paparo 2019). In such a context, a national five-year cycle contains utterly different configurations (governmental coalitions at the national level, party-system change etc.), which needs to be considered in the investigation of the regional elections results. For all these reasons, Italy provides ideal conditions for investigating the explicative ability of the SOE theory in the current, turbulent times.

### ***Denationalization and localization of the vote***

SOE theory assumes that the national level exerts a significant influence on other territorial levels and that votes are cast ‘also on the basis of factors in the main political arena of the nation’ (Reif & Schimtt 1980, 9). However, in our investigation we also need to consider nationalization/localization of the vote. Nationalization in its original Rokkian sense (Caramani 2004, xvii) means the ‘formation of national parties and party systems that parallels the creation of a national community’ and reflects the structuring of nation-wide party politics. Nationalization is also homogenization: a progressive reduction of territorial diversity, a dilution of local peculiarities, also due to the hegemony of the left-right cleavage over the others. Consequently, it is measured as the variation in time and space of partisan support and party systems in a process of convergence towards the national level (ibidem, 36). On the other hand, localization of politics (Caramani 2004, 39) is determined by non-uniform territorial configurations due to locally-based factors (therefore not leading to nationalization). Along with these processes of nationalization/localization of politics, studies have also focused on the nationalization/localization of voting behaviour.

Nationalization of the vote is the translation of the nationalization of politics and party systems into voting patterns. Denationalization of the vote means the opposite phenomenon: a progressive trend towards non-homogeneous voting behaviour within a country (Emanuele 2018). In this respect, Italy has swung between increasing nationalization and growing denationalization (Emanuele 2018, 52). Indeed, vote localization is often used as a synonym for vote territorialization: the rooting of voting behaviour in certain territories or, more generally, non-homogeneous voting behaviour (Caramani 2004) or vote regionalization (a synonym for territorialization, although it refers to the rootedness of the vote in specific regions). In contrast, territoriality is simply conceived as the presence and distribution across different geographical territories of different voting behaviours (Dandoy and Schakel 2013; Schakel 2017). Denationalization implies that non-homogeneity is due to a diminishing influence of the national level on local territories in voting, and to a reduction of the salience of national dynamics, whilst localization implies that non-homogeneity is due to an increasing specificity of territories (e.g. regions) in voting behaviour stemming from locally-rooted political dynamics. They do not exactly coincide, but both are processes increasing non-homogeneity.

Italy displays territorially-rooted voting behaviours, contrasting with the national pattern in at least two ways. First, ethno-regionalist parties (mainly) based on the centre-periphery cleavage have characterized parts of the country and, specifically, some regions (Tronconi 2015)<sup>2</sup>; secondly, some areas have long shown a persistent political orientation (e.g. the so-called Red Belt) presenting specific regional features (Galli 1968; Diamanti 2009; Bolgherini, Grimaldi, Paparo 2021). For all these reasons, we consider recent Italian regional elections as perfect cases to assess the extent to which different voting patterns between the national and the regional level are in fact occurring, and to disentangle the effects stemming from the national and the local levels.<sup>3</sup>

## Research design and hypotheses

Our study revolves around electoral volatility, which indicates the degree of (in)congruence in voting behaviour between two elections. Both studies on SOEs and those on localization of the vote adopt this indicator, which thus allows us to cover both the investigated aspects. Nevertheless, to assess thoroughly the nature of Italian regional elections, some clarifications are needed. First, volatility is here explored across levels, between national and regional elections. Secondly, it is crucial to separate two different cases: those in which volatility derives from variations in the results achieved in two elections by parties competing in both (national and regional) arenas; and those in which it is produced by variations in the electoral supply available to voters in the two elections.

To this end, we introduce the concepts of Demand Volatility (DV) and Supply Volatility (SV): the two components of overall electoral volatility (Total Volatility, TV). The idea of separating TV into its different dimensions builds on Chiaramonte and Emanuele (2017), who elaborated the concepts proposed by Powell and Tucker (2014). In their study of the evolution national party systems in Europe in terms of de-institutionalization at the national level, they distinguish between volatility produced by vote shifts only among established parties (Alteration Volatility), and volatility depending on the disappearance of old parties and the emergence of new ones (Regeneration Volatility).

Adapting such ideas to our cross-level, national-regional investigation, DV accounts for that part of volatility deriving from differences in the electoral performances of those parties running in both national and regional elections. It is crucial to have a separate measure of DV since homogeneity in the electoral supply (in terms of the parties competing in the different territorial arenas: here the national and the regional) is expected, in line with the SOE theory, to lead national dynamics to have a strong influence on the second-order results. Reif and Schmitt (1980, 11) argued that the more the same parties compete, the easier it is 'to assume intricate interconnections' between the arenas. If party systems at different levels are highly consistent, and thus most of the electoral supply coincides, this component of TV could explain almost all variation.

On the other hand, SV captures the part of electoral volatility resulting from differences in the electoral supply between different elections. By definition, this component has nothing to do with the SOE theory, which explicitly refers to second-order electoral performances compared to first-order elections. It is instead related to the localness topic since local specificity is expected to increase differences in electoral supply between elections. In short, the more party systems at different levels diverge, and the more the electoral supply varies among levels, the more SV accounts for TV. In contrast, the more DV explains TV, the more supply is stable and preferences are volatile (possibly according to the second-order expectations).

The introduction of SV and DV allows, first, a descriptive comparison of these two components across the Italian regions, enabling us to ask, how much volatility is there? Where? Is volatility due to voters' or parties' choices? Moreover, each of the two components can be investigated to understand the nature of Italian regional elections in terms of the nationalness/localness of their results. Indeed, the non-homogeneities

captured by both SV and DV are multi-faceted. When looking at SV, it may be due either to regional/local lists not contesting legislative elections or to national parties not contesting (certain or all) regional elections, or even to national parties emerging after legislative elections and running in several (or all) regional elections. Hence, we further distinguish between SV<sub>n</sub>, that is that Supply Volatility due to national-level dynamics, and SV<sub>r</sub>, namely that component of SV that is due to regional-level politics. By comparing the relative weight of SV<sub>n</sub> and SV<sub>r</sub> within each region, we shall be able to assess from which level the differences in the party system derive. On the other hand, DV allows a proper test of the SOE model against the Italian regional case: SOE theory revolves around expected electoral variations for parties running in both the first-order and the second-order elections, which is exactly what DV measures.

While the SOE model represents the classic approach to studying the results of regional elections, we claim that it is crucial to establish that its validity is theoretically limited to DV, as Reif and Schmitt (1980, 11) themselves in their seminal contribution clearly point out. Second-order effects can be expected to occur in Italian regional elections (as in any other SOE) only if DV is sizable. Therefore, to confirm the explicative importance of the SOE theory, two separate conditions are required: first, that its classical empirical recurrences are verified; second, that DV relative to SV is a large portion of TV. Having clarified this, we now present the classic SOE expectations for voter turnout and party performances that will be scrutinized against our data. We expect:

*E1) turnout to be lower in regional elections, compared to national legislative elections.*

Moreover, considering that the stakes are not constant across regions, with elections in the Special Statute Regions (SSRs) having higher stakes as compared to elections in the OSRs, we expect that:

*E1b) declines in turnout will be smaller in SSR regions and larger in OSRs.*

Moving to expected party variations, according to the SOE model, we expect that in regional elections large parties lose votes and small parties gain, while governing parties lose and opposition parties gain. Thus, we expect that:

*E2) national party size has a negative and significant effect on electoral variations between regional and legislative elections;*

and that:

*E3) parties in government at the national level will have significantly lower electoral performances in regional elections compared to opposition parties.*

Moreover, SOE results of parties in government should reflect trends in government popularity, expected to follow a negative parabolic curve – with its minimum around half way through the national cycle (Stimson 1976; Tufte 1975). Since all the 2018–2020 regional elections took place in the first half of the 2018–2023 national cycle, we expect:

*E3b) negative electoral performances for governing parties to increase throughout the first half of the national electoral cycle.*

Concerning government/opposition dynamics, a further discussion is in order. National governments during the period considered were coalition governments, the literature on which typically distinguishes between senior and junior partners. Senior partners are identified by their larger share of seats in parliament and of places in cabinet, and by holding the office of Prime Minister (PM) (Clare 2010; Oppermann and Brummer 2014). Junior partners are smaller in parliament and in government. Very few second-order studies have made such a distinction. Those that have, have found that losses occur

both for the senior partner – more clearly blamed for governmental performance and suffering the cyclical effects of popularity – and the junior partners – losing because of their lack of experience in government, which prevents them from delivering on policy, and the fact that their voters are more radical, thus less willing to accept the compromises that coalition government inevitably entails (Klüver and Spoon 2020; Bolleyer 2008; Dunphy and Bale 2011). Thus, in fact, the classic junior and senior concepts combine two dimensions: one pertains to size and leadership, while the second refers to experience in government and openness to compromise. Typically, senior partners not only lead the government, but are also more used to it (and its compromises), as are their voters; while junior parties are both followers rather than leaders in the cabinet, are less experienced, and have supporters who are less used to governing practices.

From this perspective, the 2018–2020 Italian elections present critical peculiarities. The size/leadership dimension does not overlap with the experience/compromise dimension. The M5s was the largest party both in the Conte I and in the Conte II cabinets, and it held the office of PM,<sup>4</sup> but as a governing actor it was a novice (and therefore less experienced than its partners), as well as being less open to compromise. For these reasons we decided not to employ the classic junior and senior partner concepts, but to discuss second-order expectations applied to the actual coalition partners: the M5s – which combines both sources of second-order losses for governing parties (larger shares of blame as a leader; larger shares of dissatisfaction because of its inexperience) – and its allies – which present neither of these traits liable to result in losses. Thus, we expect that:

*E3c) negative electoral performances for governing parties will be significantly larger for leading and inexperienced coalition partners.*

## Data and methods

To assess empirically the hypotheses outlined above, we selected Italian regional elections during the 2018–2023 national electoral cycle. As mentioned earlier, they are particularly valuable for our investigation for several reasons. First, they were held at different moments in time, which makes it possible to assess the impact of the national electoral cycle timing within a case-study – reducing unobserved heterogeneity due to national-level characteristics. Moreover, they were held in the context of national governments that were unprecedented, both in terms of the nature of the coalitions involved, and in terms of the characteristics of the individual parties forming them – which offers the opportunity to shed light on peculiar dynamics of the second-order expectations for national-government parties. Furthermore, Italian politics during the period considered were extremely unstable, both in terms of party-system format and election results (Chiaromonte and Emanuele 2019). Hence, this article can tackle the regional and national dynamics influencing regional electoral outcomes in the increasingly common context of unstable party systems.

This article surveys 18 out of 20 Italian regions. Sicily is not included as its regional elections were held before the 2018 general elections (Emanuele 2017; Cerruto and La Bella 2018). The Valle d'Aosta is not included because of the unique electoral system employed for its legislative elections.<sup>5</sup> The autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano



in the Trentino-Alto Adige SSR are treated as two separate cases, since they held simultaneous but in fact separate ‘regional’ elections, which brings the total number of observations to 19.<sup>6</sup>

To carry out our empirical investigation, we relied on official electoral data from the Ministry of the Interior for both the national and the regional elections.<sup>7</sup> Total Volatility (TV) represents, for each regional case, the overall degree of electoral change across the legislative elections in 2018 and the regional elections held between 2018 and 2020. TV is measured by Pedersen’s (1979) aggregate index of electoral volatility – generally employed for variations between same-type elections, here adapted for our purposes including elections of different types – by means of the formula:

$$TV_{Leg_{2018}-Reg_{post-2018}} = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{p=1}^n |x_{pLeg_{2018}} - x_{pReg_{post-2018}}|$$

where TV is the total cross-level volatility,  $n$  is the number of parties in the system,  $x$  represents the percentage of valid votes received. This formula means that TV sums variations for all parties running in at least one of the two elections considered. In the event of a party running in just one of the two elections, the  $x$  for that party in the election it did not contest is 0. As anticipated, the most innovative contribution of this work lies in the introduction of the concepts of SV and DV. In empirical terms, they are simply the two components of TV:

$$TV = SV + DV$$

Within each region, we measure DV by computing electoral variations only for those lists fielded both at the 2018 parliamentary election and in the regional election considered. We stress that these lists do not need to be present in all regional elections across the country, they just need to be competing in both elections within a given region. Within each region, we measure SV as the difference between TV and DV, namely the half-sum of the absolute variations among legislative and regional elections for parties running in only one of the two elections.

For each of the two components we provide a further investigation. For SV we analyse whether it is due to instability of the national party system or to specificities of the regional party system. To this end we simply classify the lists whose variations contribute to SV as either ‘national’ or ‘regional’, according to their geographical scope – and thus regardless of whether the one election they contested was the 2018 general or the subsequent regional election.<sup>8</sup> By doing so, we can compute, for each region, the level of SV<sub>n</sub> and SV<sub>r</sub>, by simply (half-) summing the volatility due to lists of the two different types – national and regional.

With reference to DV we will perform an empirical test of the SOE expectations, which requires a data matrix whose observations are no longer the regional cases, but the single parties, nested in regions ( $N = 184$ ). The dependent variable, for each of these parties within regions, is the electoral performance – the difference between the percentage of valid votes received in the regional elections and in the legislative elections. Within each region, only parties running in both elections are included.<sup>9</sup> Predictors will be party size, party government/opposition status, and the electoral cycle. As required by the SOE theory, they all refer to the national, first-order arena, and they are measured as follows.

National party size is, for all regional observations of each party, its nation-wide share of valid votes in the 2018 legislative elections. Governmental status is attributed to the various parties according to their situation at the moment of each regional election. We have experimented with two alternative measures to investigate the different impact of governing status for leading/non-leading and experienced/inexperienced coalition partners (as discussed previously). For elections held during the Conte I cabinet, M5s cases are coded 1 (since M5s was the leading, inexperienced partner in the first-order arena), League cases 0.5 (as it was the non-leading, experienced partner), while all remaining (opposition) parties are coded 0. For regional elections held during the Conte II cabinet, M5s regional cases are coded 1, the PD and LeU (non-leading, experienced) 0.5,<sup>10</sup> while all remaining parties are coded 0. The alternative measurement strategy does not distinguish between coalition partners. It is simply a dummy scoring 1 for parties in government and 0 for all other parties.<sup>11</sup> The national electoral cycle is measured as the proportion of the five-year national electoral cycle that had elapsed at the moment of each regional election. To test for the cyclical effect, we will use an interaction with the government/opposition variable.<sup>12</sup> As DV is a cardinal variable, we will perform OLS regressions empirically to test our SOE expectations.

Finally, with reference to electoral turnout, we need to compare turnout in legislative and regional elections for each region. However, the number of electors in each region differs between the two electoral competitions. For parliamentary elections, Italian electors resident abroad cast their votes in a separate constituency. For regional elections, they vote along with those who reside in the region concerned. Hence, the number of electors is higher at the regional than at the national elections and this difference might lead to an overestimation of the turnout gap between the two elections. To overcome this problem, we calculated the turnout in regional elections in two alternative ways: by dividing the number of voters by the number of registered electors in the regional elections; by dividing the number of voters by the number of registered electors in the *legislative* elections. This second measure is explicitly designed to provide a more accurate comparison with turnout in the legislative elections and a more rigorous and challenging test of the SOE expectation of lower turnout in regional elections.<sup>13</sup>

Before moving to the hypothesis testing, below we report descriptive statistics for TV, DV, and SV in our 19 regional cases. [Table 1](#) shows that TV overall is quite large, almost 40 points on average. It also suggests a connection between the timing of the regional election and TV. In fact, TV is highest (above 50 points) in regions holding their elections a long time after the 2018 national elections, while the regions with the lowest TV are the only two whose regional elections were held on the same days as the 2018 elections. Moreover, [Table 1](#) shows that TV is mostly due to DV which is over 60% in half of the Italian regions (ten out of 21), namely all the Red-Belt regions (Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna, Marche, and Umbria) along with Lazio and Abruzzo in the centre, Piedmont in the North, Basilicata, Calabria, and Apulia in the South. Both DV and SV seem to be almost equally important (around 50% and 40%, respectively) in another seven regions (Lombardy, Molise, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, the province of Trento, Sardinia, Campania, Liguria, and Veneto). Only in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, is TV mainly (more than 60%) due to Supply Volatility.

**Table 1.** Total volatility and its components.

Region	Geo-political area	Status of region	Regional election date	Total volatility (TV)	Demand volatility (DV)	Supply volatility (SV)	DV/TV, %
Campania	South	OSR	21/09/2020	57.8	32.5	25.2	56.3
Veneto	North	OSR	21/09/2020	56.9	29.3	27.5	51.6
Calabria	South	OSR	26/01/2020	52.1	33.4	18.7	64.1
Apulia	South	OSR	21/09/2020	50.3	35.4	14.9	70.4
Sardinia	South	SSR	24/02/2019	46.3	23.3	23.0	50.2
Basilicata	South	OSR	24/03/2019	46.1	29.2	16.9	63.4
Liguria	North	OSR	21/09/2020	40.0	22.1	17.9	55.2
Province of Trento	North	SSR	21/10/2018	39.2	20.5	18.7	52.2
Province of Bolzano	North	SSR	21/10/2018	37.8	14.9	22.9	39.4
Marche	Red belt	OSR	21/09/2020	37.2	30.0	7.2	80.7
Emilia-Romagna	Red belt	OSR	26/01/2020	36.6	30.8	5.8	84.2
Umbria	Red belt	OSR	27/10/2019	36.5	27.1	9.4	74.1
Abruzzo	South	OSR	10/02/2019	33.2	23.1	10.1	69.7
Molise	South	OSR	22/04/2018	31.9	16.8	15.1	52.6
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	North	SSR	29/04/2018	28.6	16.1	12.5	56.4
Tuscany	Red belt	OSR	21/09/2020	27.9	23.9	4.0	85.5
Piedmont	North	OSR	26/05/2019	26.3	20.4	5.9	77.7
Lazio	South	OSR	04/03/2018	17.9	11.1	6.8	62.0
Lombardy	North	OSR	04/03/2018	9.7	5.5	4.2	56.4
Average				37.5	23.4	14.0	63.3

Source: Authors' compilation.

## Findings

The descriptive evidence reported in [Table 1](#) presents some points of interest for our research questions. It indicates that in the SSRs and certain northern regions, namely the League's strongholds (Veneto and Lombardy), territoriality claims might be sufficiently relevant as to produce not only differences in DV (e.g. for the ethno-regionalist parties or the League), but also substantial SV linked to the number of civic, local and personal lists associated in different ways (in terms of policy, identity, local notables) with the territory. We next move on to the in-depth investigation of the two components of TV, to assess the localness/nationalness of the Italian regional elections and the explicative power of the SOE theory.

### *Investigating supply volatility: nationally- or regionally-driven?*

To recall, SV accounts for that part of TV due to party lists being fielded in only one of the two elections (regional or national). When investigating these lists in terms of their national (SV<sub>n</sub>) or regional (SV<sub>r</sub>) scope, [Table 2](#) shows that SV is mostly due to regional politics. In many regions SV in fact mostly consists of SV<sub>r</sub> (roughly two thirds on average), that is regional subtleties represented by local, civic or personal lists. This is a first important piece of evidence, which suggests that party-system instability across Italian regions is mostly the manifestation of regional politics, rather than a consequence of instability in the party system at the national level. The regions where regional politics has the highest impact (over 75%) are: Veneto, Liguria, Sardinia, and, as expected, the autonomous provinces of Bolzano and Trento.

**Table 2.** Supply volatility and its components.

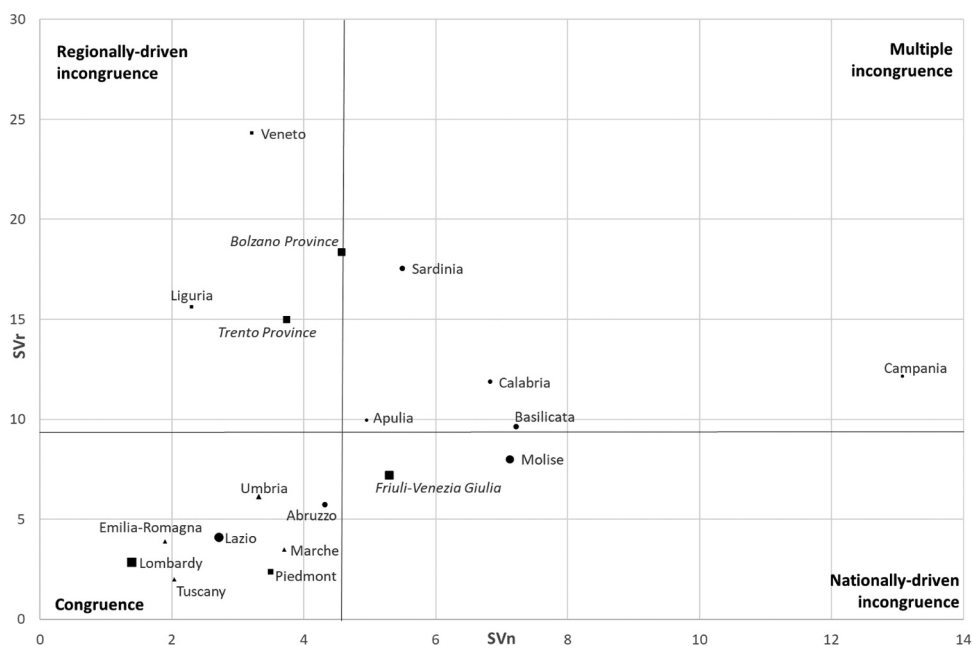
Region	SV	SVn	SVr	SVr/SV, %
Veneto	27.5	3.2	24.3	88.3
Liguria	17.9	2.3	15.6	87.2
Bolzano Province	22.9	4.6	18.3	80.0
Trento Province	18.7	3.7	15.0	80.0
Sardinia	23.0	5.5	17.6	76.2
Lombardy	4.2	1.4	2.8	67.2
Emilia-Romagna	5.8	1.9	3.9	67.1
Apulia	14.9	5.0	9.9	66.7
Umbria	9.4	3.3	6.1	64.8
Calabria	18.7	6.8	11.9	63.5
Lazio	6.8	2.7	4.1	60.1
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	12.5	5.3	7.2	57.5
Basilicata	16.9	7.2	9.6	57.2
Abruzzo	10.1	4.3	5.7	57.1
Molise	15.1	7.1	8.0	52.9
Tuscany	4.0	2.0	2.0	49.4
Marche	7.2	3.7	3.5	48.3
Campania	25.2	13.1	12.1	48.2
Piedmont	5.9	3.5	2.4	40.3
Average	14.0	4.6	9.5	63.8

Source: Authors' compilation.

However, supply variations due to national politics (SVn) are present in all regions, which reflects the instability of the national party system, with the emergence of new national parties – such as IV or Azione – after the 2018 legislative elections. SVn is as important (around 50%) as SVr in Molise, Marche, and Tuscany. In these regions, SVn is due to a considerable number of national lists not running in the regional elections. In Campania, both components of SV are in percentage terms almost equally important as well, but it is worth stressing that here SVn is the highest by far (13.1).

Figure 1 shows the scatterplot for SVn and SVr. On both components of SV, we separate regions below and above the mean value. This allows a meaningful classification of the Italian regions. Starting with the lower left quadrant, SV is below average on both the national and the regional dimensions, indicating that electoral supply in regional elections resembles that of legislative elections. Hence, these regions are characterized by party-system *congruence*. Proceeding clockwise, the upper left quadrant groups those regions where supply variations due to the regional level are larger than the average, while those due to the national level are below average. These are cases of *regionally-driven incongruence*, as here the differences in supply across the two arenas stem from regional peculiarities. The opposite case is the lower right quadrant (*nationally-driven incongruence*), with cases showing large SVn and low SVr. Here party-system differences are nationally driven: expressions of variations in the national party system being reflected in the electoral supply in regional elections. Finally, the upper right quadrant groups regions where both SVn and SVr are higher than the mean. These party systems feature *multiple incongruence*, as the lack of supply homogeneity is not interpretable as a national or regional phenomenon, but rather as an overall reshuffling of the party system due to the contemporaneous presence of different (national and local) effects.

Observing the regions' placements in the quadrants, many relevant points emerge. The *congruence* regions form the most numerous group, with 8 of the 19 cases: the two regions where regional elections were held together with the legislative elections; those of



**Figure 1.** Types of regions according to supply volatility components (SVn, SVr). Source: Authors' compilation. SSRs in italics; the square shape identifies northern regions, the triangular shape is used for regions in the Red Belt, and the circular shape identifies southern regions; the size of the marker shows the proximity to the 2018 general elections, with larger markers indicating elections closer in time.

the Red Belt; Abruzzo, and Piedmont. The four cases with *regionally-driven incongruence* are (not surprisingly) the autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano (traditionally the most peculiar in terms of party systems), Veneto and Liguria – two cases characterized by very large presidents' lists for the centre-right incumbents.<sup>14</sup> Only two cases (11%) appear in the *nationally-driven incongruence* quadrant: Molise and Friuli-Venezia Giulia. This is a further indication that, overall, party-system instability in the regions is only marginally provoked by national politics. Again, not surprisingly, the *multiple incongruence* quadrant contains the whole of the South. Clearly, Campania is exceptionally high in its overall SV (specifically due to SVn), but all five southern regions are found here. Overall, the picture emerging from **Figure 1** appears reassuring. Regional party systems, though variegated in terms of similarity with the national level, do not move randomly. Indeed, while single idiosyncrasies are present (such as Luca Zaia in Veneto,<sup>15</sup> or the importance of electoral simultaneity<sup>16</sup>), we can trace clear indications of the enduring effects of regional history. Classic political subcultures (especially the Red Belt) have a stabilizing effect; while the traditional electoral instability of the South (Bartolini, Chiaramonte, and D'Alimonte 2004; Raniolo 2010), where voting has traditionally been driven more by candidates than parties (Parisi and Pasquino 1979; Emanuele and Marino 2016), is reflected in party systems with high levels of both SVn and SVr. Moreover, SSRs – and specifically Bolzano and Trento – confirm that they are particularly regionalized in their party system instability.

### Testing the SOE theory

Finally, we present the empirical test of the SOE theory against the Italian 2018–2020 regional elections. Starting with electoral turnout, to recall, E1 predicts declines in turnout in regional elections compared to legislative elections. Table 3 confirms this expectation. The two right-hand columns report turnout variations from legislative to regional elections, and the figures are by a landslide negative. As explained earlier, a simple turnout comparison between parliamentary and regional elections may be misleading. For this reason, besides the standard turnout column (3), we include column 4, which shows the turnout at regional elections computed with the same number of electors as in the parliamentary elections (fixed electors) – that is, not counting electors resident abroad.<sup>17</sup> Crucially, this more demanding comparison too corroborates the claim that turnout declines in regional elections – by eight percentage points on average. Overall, this represents a clear confirmation of E1.

Moreover, we notice that the only positive variation is registered in the province of Bolzano, where the regional turnout (regardless of how it is computed) is higher than in national elections. This might be consistent with the special status of the province, and thus with the suggestion that provincial elections are considered as less second-order.<sup>18</sup> This is in line with E1b. Nevertheless, this does not apply to other SSRs (namely the province of Trento, Sardinia, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia) where the turnout is in fact lower at regional than at legislative elections. This can be explained by the absence of strong ethno-regionalist parties.<sup>19</sup> In all OSRs, the SOE expectations seem to be confirmed: turnout is indeed lower at regional than at national elections.<sup>20</sup> However, the crucial test of E1b lies in the comparison of turnout variations among low-stakes OSRs

**Table 3.** Turnout in legislative and regional elections in Italian regions, 2018–2020.

Region	Turnout in 2018 national elections, %	Turnout in regional elections, %	Turnout in regional elections (fixed electors), %	Turnout variation (Reg-Nat), Pp	Turnout variation (Reg-Nat with fixed electors), pp
Bolzano Province	69.0	73.9	72.8	4.9	3.8
Lombardy	76.8	73.1	76.9	-3.7	0.1
Lazio	72.7	66.6	72.4	-6.1	-0.3
Molise	71.6	52.2	68.0	-19.4	-3.6
Basilicata	71.1	53.5	66.4	-17.6	-4.7
Emilia-Romagna	78.3	67.7	71.4	-10.6	-6.9
Piedmont	75.2	63.3	67.8	-11.9	-7.4
Campania	68.2	55.5	60.8	-12.7	-7.4
Apulia	69.1	56.4	61.6	-12.7	-7.5
Sardinia	65.5	53.7	57.8	-11.8	-7.7
Calabria	63.6	44.3	54.5	-19.3	-9.1
Umbria	78.2	64.7	67.7	-13.5	-10.5
Veneto	78.7	61.1	67.7	-17.6	-11.0
Marche	77.3	59.7	66.1	-17.6	-11.2
Tuscany	77.5	62.6	65.8	-14.9	-11.7
Trento Province	79.4	64.1	67.3	-15.3	-12.1
Liguria	72.0	53.4	58.3	-18.6	-13.7
Abruzzo	75.3	53.1	61.5	-22.2	-13.8
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	75.1	49.6	57.8	-25.5	-17.3
<i>Average</i>	73.4	59.4	65.4	-14.0	-8.0

Source: Authors' compilation.

and high-stakes SSRs. On this, we do not find clear indications. Turnout on regional voters declines by 15 points in OSRs and 12 points in SSRs. However, the decline is identical (–8 percentage points) when looking at the fixed-voters measure. To sum up, in the 2018–2020 regional elections turnout clearly decreases significantly compared to national first-order elections (E1), while it is unclear whether this is related to the stakes of regional elections (E1b).

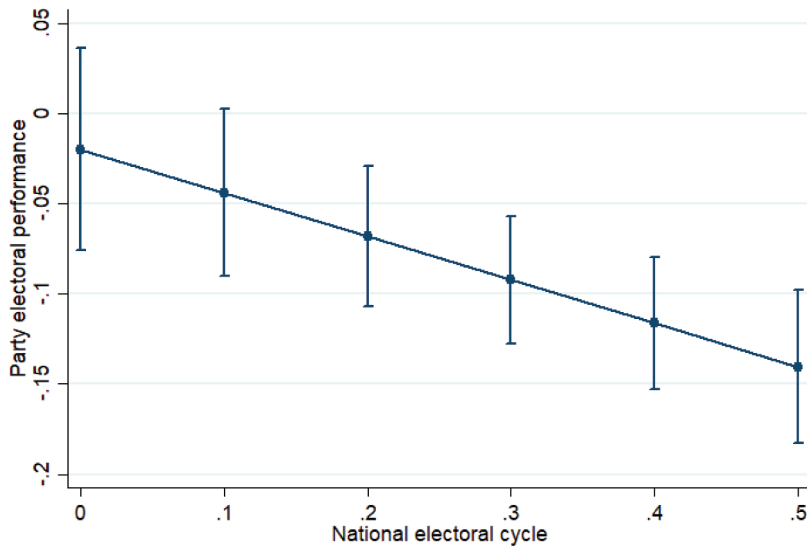
Finally, we scrutinize, in light of the SOE theory, DV: the part of TV that is accounted for by variations in the electoral support won by lists fielded in both elections. As [Table 1](#) revealed, this component accounts for 63% of TV, so it is indeed relevant to assess its second-order qualification. [Table 4](#) reports evidence from the relevant regression models. Model 1 shows that party size has the expected negative and significant effect on electoral performances – thus confirming E2. Large parties are more likely to lose votes in comparison to small parties when moving from legislative to regional elections. Moreover, Model 1 shows that the dummy variable separating governing and opposition parties fails to yield a significant effect, which is contrary to E3 – even though the coefficient goes in the expected negative direction.

However, when in Model 2 the governing/opposition dummy is replaced with the alternative 3-point ordinal variable (which distinguishes between governing parties that are leading and inexperienced on the one hand, and non-leading and experienced on the other), we observe that the governmental status indicator becomes significant, while still showing the expected negative sign. We thus find empirical confirmation of E3, that governing parties are punished in regional elections as predicted by the SOE theory. However, our evidence indicates that in recent Italian regional elections, this statement must be qualified, as it refers only to leading, non-experienced coalition partners (exactly as expected on the basis of E3c). This is confirmed by comparing the predictive power of Model 1 and Model 2, which reveals a sizable increase in the variance explained – from 37.7 to 44.1%

**Table 4.** Predictors of party performances between regional and legislative elections in 2018–2020 Italy.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Party size	–0.497*** (0.000)	–0.294*** (0.000)	–0.303*** (0.000)
Position in government (0 = No; 1 = Yes)	–0.00531 (0.686)		
Position in government (0 = No; 0.5 = Non-lead+experienced; 1 = Lead+inexperienced)		–0.0968*** (0.000)	–0.0200 (0.465)
National electoral cycle			0.0359 (0.084)
Position in government (0 = No; 0.5 = Non-lead+experienced; 1 = Lead+inexperienced) *			–0.241** (0.002)
Constant	0.0318*** (0.000)	0.0261*** (0.000)	0.0176** (0.009)
<i>N</i>	184	184	184
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.377	0.441	0.467

Regressions performed with standard errors clustered by regions.  
*p*-values in parentheses \* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01, \*\*\* *p* < 0.001



**Figure 2.** Marginal effects of position in government on party performances between regional and legislative elections in 2018–2020 Italy throughout the national electoral cycle.

Finally, Model 3 adds the national cycle. It confirms E3b, as governing-party performances follow the expected negative trend over the first half of the national electoral cycle. In fact, they become significantly negative immediately after the legislative elections, and they grow more and more negative over time (Figure 2).

Although the increase in the explicative power of Model 3 with the introduction of the national cycle is not large (around 2 points), we consider a quite strong confirmation of the validity of the SOE theory for Italian regional elections the fact that a regression model with just three predictors accounts for almost 50% of the variance in the electoral performances of single parties within regions – which (as shown earlier) is the largest part of TV. Such predictive power, especially considering the small number of predictors, can be virtually characterized as ‘strong’ with specific reference to multi-variate analysis with aggregate data (Franklin 2008). Moreover, each of the single expectations is confirmed by our data. Turnout is lower in regional elections; large parties lose; (leading, inexperienced) governing parties lose – and increasingly so throughout the course of the (first half of the) national electoral cycle.

### **Unstable Italian regional elections between second-order national effects and peculiar regional dynamics**

The article aimed at unravelling the nature of the Italian regional elections between 2018 and 2020 against two main strands of literature: that on regional elections as examples of second-order elections, and that on the increasing non-homogeneity of the vote from the national to the regional and local levels (that is denationalization/localization of the vote). This is even more important given the growing instability of party-systems in many consolidated democracies in Europe, a condition making previous assumptions and



regularities much weaker and apt to be questioned. On this front, recent Italian elections are ideal cases for analysis, as they were held in a particularly unstable national context, thus allowing a rigorous test of these crucial dynamics under the new unstable normality.

To address these issues, our analysis was based on electoral volatility. We divided volatility into two main components, namely Demand Volatility – which derives from the differences in the electoral results of those parties running in both national and regional elections and relates to the SOE-theory – and Supply Volatility – which captures the part of electoral volatility depending on differences in the electoral supply among different territorial levels, which can be traced to the nationalness versus localness of the vote. This distinction enabled us to provide a meaningful descriptive analysis of the 2018–2020 regional elections, clarifying that, while supply instability clearly matters, the high levels of electoral volatility observed are mostly produced by changes in voters' electoral choices.

Then, a closer investigation of SV revealed that instability in the electoral supply was mostly attributable to regional factors, but with significant variations across regions, which however reflected some enduring effects of established patterns. In particular, variations in the electoral supply do not significantly influence electoral change in the classically stable Red Belt; while, again as expected, in (most of) the SSRs the electoral instability produced by changes in the electoral supply is almost entirely driven by regional factors. Continuity also emerges in the South, in terms of the great instability of the party systems, indicated by the strong impacts on electoral volatility of variations, of both a national and a regional nature, in the electoral supply.

Finally, the DV component permitted a rigorous test of the SOE expectations set by Reif and Schmitt (1980). All expectations considered are confirmed: turnout decreases (though not straightforwardly depending on the regional stakes); large parties suffer electoral losses as do governing parties (although only when they are leading/inexperienced partners in the coalition), and these losses are higher when approaching the mid-term of the national cycle. Thus, DV not only remains the largest part of volatility, but it is also explained by the SOE theory. This evidence, from a test for individual parties across multiple regions (and thus differently from previous research), allows us to state that Italian regional elections remain second-order in respect of national parliamentary elections. And, counterintuitively, this is so despite the major transformation of the Italian party system and the rapidity with which these changes have occurred in the last decade.

The results of this article are therefore significant for both strands of the literature. On the one side, our evidence suggests that breaking down TV into DV and SV, and then this latter further into its national/regional subcomponents, offers a powerful tool for an in-depth descriptive analysis of single elections and for capturing the features of each region. On the other side, it provides a first step towards a test of the SOE theory in a world profoundly different from that of the early 1980s when it was proposed. Our empirical test of its validity is of utmost importance in contemporary political systems where strong local issues couple with instable parties, and where multidimensionality has undermined the stability of party systems. This study looked at the turbulent Italian case. While its findings cannot be generalized to the stable contexts of the past, it draws on a unique opportunity to comprehend contemporary party systems and their cross-level dynamics. By providing analytical tools to unravel electoral volatility and multi-level vote congruence, it may foster further research on this topic as well as further tests of the SOE theory drawing on other party systems.

## Notes

1. Reif and Schmitt also observed that the proportion of invalid votes is larger, and that parties' ideological extremism affects SOEs – a topic which we do not investigate because of the problematic classification of the Five-star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle, M5s) (Mosca and Tronconi 2019).
2. Mainly the province of Bolzano with the *Südtiroler Volkspartei* (South Tyrolean People's Party), the party of the German-speaking minority concentrated in that province; Valle d'Aosta with the *Union valdôtaine* (Valdostan Union) representing the French-speaking minority; and Sardinia with the Partito Sardo d'Azione (Sardinian Action Party) striving for Sardinian independence.
3. However, this study includes (for each region) only one time point. Hence, we cannot assess nationalization or localization, which are dynamic processes over time. Rather, using the nationalization/localization literatures as starting points, we perform a time-invariant (within-region) analysis, permitting assessment of the extent to which regional elections are influenced by national politics (nationalness) or local features (localness).
4. As PM, Giuseppe Conte was neither a parliamentarian nor a member of the M5s. Nevertheless, we consider the M5s to be the leading party in both the Conte I and Conte II cabinets, because, besides having the largest share of seats in Parliament, it successfully imposed Conte as PM on its (varying) partners.
5. The single MP for the region is elected in a single-member plurality district, which makes it impossible to compute electoral variations for parties, and thus to implement our empirical strategy.
6. In Italy a standard practice in regional research is to treat them as separate 'regional' entities rather than as parts of a single region. This is due to the contrasting nature of their (separate) elections and party systems, which would make computing congruences at the regional level quite illogical. In fact, while formally part of the same region, the two autonomous provinces enjoy the powers and authority of a region within their respective provincial territories. For instance, they are listed separately as members of the State-Regions Conference <http://statoregioni.it/it/presentazione/componenti/conferenza-stato-regioni-e-sessione-europea/>.
7. For those regions whose regional elections are not coordinated by the ministerial electoral office, we rely on official data published by the regions.
8. To be clear, for our purposes it is critical to separate nation-wide parties that either did not contest the 2018 election (for instance because not yet born, such as Azione and Italia Viva (IV), or did not contest the regional elections in a given region (all part of SVn), from regional lists (again running in just one of the two elections) – either regional parties, civic lists, personal lists of the candidates for president: anything that cannot be traced back to the national political arena. In empirical terms, we separate these lists running in either the 2018 national or subsequent regional election according to whether they compete in only one region (SVr), or more than one region (SVn).
9. Major parties do not require clarifications, as the M5s, the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), the Lega (League), Forza Italia (FI), and Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) ran in all the 19 regions with their own symbols and names. They constitute the majority of the observations (95 out of 184). For the minor electoral cartels present at the 2018 general elections (Liberi e Uguali (Free and Equal, LeU), Noi con l'Italia (Nci), Insieme, etc.), we have considered in continuity any of the constituent parties present in the regional elections. If two or more were present separately, we considered in continuity only the largest of the components – on the assumption that so it would have been in 2018 as well. We consider this intermediate strategy preferable for our analytic purposes to the alternatives of considering in continuity either the sum of the competing individual components (which would artificially reduce what we are trying to measure through SV) or none of such components, which might result in an overestimation of the discontinuity in the supply.

10. IV is not mentioned since it was founded in September 2019 and thus no regional lists are present in this dataset, which includes lists running in both the 2018 legislative and subsequent regional elections.
11. A clarification is necessary for the regional elections held on the same day as the 2018 legislative elections (Lazio and Lombardy). All parties were treated as opposition parties, since the status as governing party for the then nationally incumbent parties is expected directly to affect their results at the legislative first-order elections, and not the variation between the two (simultaneous) electoral results.
12. As all the regional elections considered took place during the first half of the cycle, it is not necessary to use the quadratic cyclical term.
13. For regional elections, electors resident abroad cannot vote at the Italian embassy or consulate in the country where they reside, as they can for parliamentary elections. They need to return to Italy. This constraint makes it reasonable to assume that the numbers of returning voters is small, and thus, to rely on the number of electors registered in each region for parliamentary elections when comparing turnouts.
14. Both in Liguria and Veneto, incumbent presidents were relevant national personalities within the centre-right field. Giovanni Toti, Liguria's president, is the founder and leader of the (minor) national political party Cambiamo! Luca Zaia is among the most prominent representatives of the League, which, during the period covered by this analysis, had established itself as the largest Italian party. Both presidents ran in the 2020 regional elections supported by the major centre-right parties and a number of civic/local lists. Among the latter, both candidates had lists of their own – Zaia Presidente and Cambiamo con Toti Presidente – and loyal candidates in the Council lists. Both in Liguria and in Veneto these presidents' personal lists emerged as the plurality lists in the proportional arena – receiving 22.6% and 44.6%, respectively.
15. See note 14.
16. To recall, Lazio and Lombardy were the two regions holding their regional elections on the same day as the 2018 general election, and they are both among the most stable regions. See also note 11.
17. The validity of this measurement choice is confirmed by the fact that the turnout with fixed electors is in fact almost identical between legislative and regional elections in the two regions (Lazio and Lombardy) that held the two elections on the same day.
18. A slight increase also emerges for 2020 in the Valle d'Aosta – not included in this analysis – where another strong ethno-regionalist party (the Valdostan Union) is present.
19. The Sardinian Action Party strengthened its alliance with the League both for the 2018 parliamentary election (where some of its representatives ran under the League's label and symbol) and for the 2019 regional elections, probably weakening the appeal of the regional competition as a first-order arena for an ethno-regionalist party.
20. We also note that the turnout in OSRs tends to decline more when regional elections are separated from national elections by a large time interval. In fact, the average decline for those OSRs voting in 2018 is 1.3 points; for those voting in 2019 it is 9.1, and for those voting in 2020 it is as much as 9.8.

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