**Trasformismo in Italian regional assemblies: a systemic interpretation**

by Davide Gianluca Bianchi (Éupolis Lombardia)

**Abstract**

The essay studies “trasformismo” (party-switching) in Italian regional councils, examining Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany and Puglia from 1970 to 2010. Although *lato sensu* trasformismo – enrolment in the mixed group and party switches among the electoral lists – also has empirical relevance at regional level, *stricto sensu* trasformismo – i.e. the transition from the majority to the opposition, or *vice versa* – was quantitatively negligible. In the transition from the first to the second phase of the Italian Republic (after 1994-), the regional system was reorganized according to a government model in which there is a clear distinction between the roles of the majority and the opposition, by virtue of the direct election of presidents from 1995 onwards. Thus the thesis formulated by Giovanni Sabbatucci is confirmed: *trasformismo* is a pattern of government from the "center" of the political space, which is a very different option from the adversarial model of democracy which has emerged in the regions over the last two decades. As a result, this also seems to confirm the neo-institutionalist thesis expressed by Robert D. Putnam in his classic *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy* (1993), according to which «institutions shape politics» and the behavior of its actors.


**Keywords**

(in Italian) regions, trasformismo, Robert D. Putnam, Giovanni Sabbatucci

**Summary**

1. Preface; 2. The interpretations of trasformismo; 3. The concept of free mandate; 4. Trasformismo in the regional context; 5. Conclusion
1. Preface

It is an established fact that at the beginning of the 1990s, the system which had governed Italy since the rise – or even the return – of democracy at the end of the Second World War, entered into an irreversible crisis. To rebuild the relationship of trust between citizens and the political class, instead of the system of (partitocratic) proportionalism used in the “first phase” of the Italian Republic (up to 1992), the legislators took the option of shifting to majoritarian systems of election at every level of government in the political system. Regarding the municipalities, provinces and regions the combination of majoritarian electoral laws and devices aimed at encouraging institutional stability thus became generalized; this was not the case for the national government, where the majority system used for the election of parliament – the first past-the-post for 75% of seats and the (proportional) additional members system for the remaining seats, then the proportional system with majority premium – was not reflected in constitutional reforms aimed at strengthening the executive. As mentioned above, the institutional profile of regions was rather different: the decidedly majoritarian “Tatarella” electoral law was first approved in 1995, followed by the introduction of the direct election of presidents and, in 2001, the approval of the new Title V of the Constitution (which can also be read as the balance of "presidentialisation" of regional government). In terms of the institutionalization of majoritarian democracy, therefore, the national government and regional levels are placed at the opposite ends of the same continuum, in which institutionalization is medium-low in the former, while in the latter – the regions – it is high.

If we refer to the views expressed by neo-institutionalist Robert D. Putnam in his classic Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy (1993), i.e. "institutions shape politics", and by doing so affect the behavior of actors (which will be fully examined in the final part of this paper) it is particularly interesting to analyse the two institutional contexts of political representation, and its peculiarities, in order to empirically verify the possible behavior asymmetries of political actors on the scene. Within this topic, "transformismo", in the sense of it being a unique feature of Italian political representation, is especially prominent.

Moving on from how much may be known about trasformismo at parliamentary level, this paper extends the study of the phenomenon to the regions, in an attempt to answer the following research questions: is there a different incidence of trasformismo in parliamentary and regional assemblies (as far as we know regarding the latter)? How can the possible variability of the phenomenon be interpreted, in relation to the most widely accredited interpretations which seek to explain trasformismo? Is there – or may there be – a different meaning in the transformistic action when this is located in different political and institutional contexts? i.e. the halls of Parliament on the one hand and the regional councils on the other, and in particular whether these institutional bodies are organized according to non-equivalent systemic models.

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1 In all likelihood, this is an overstatement, but this is a topic which obviously can not be addressed here due to lack of space.
2 For a detailed analysis of the transition from the first to the second phase of the Italian Republic, see Almagisti, Lanzalaco and Verzichelli (2014).
The research attempts to fill a gap in studies on the Italian political class and its characteristic behavior in institutional contexts where its role is carried out. The first reason which might explain this singular lack of scientific contributions regards the shortage of reliable information about the regional level of government; or rather, the data are available but most are lost in the archives of regional councils, since they have not been collected in a systematic way. Only three regions, through their associations of regional councilors, have created publications which systematically gather together the composition of the assemblies and the political life of the groups. These regions are Emilia Romagna, Tuscany and Puglia. Specially researched data about Lombardy has been added to this limited sample. By so doing, information about four regions, whose combined populations exceed 20 million, has been gathered together. We believe that this sample will enable us to make sense of the main specificities of trasformismo at the regional level.

2. The interpretations of trasformismo

Trasformismo is considered a "peculiarity" of Italian parliamentary representation, to the point that the debate about it has been continuous and almost uninterrupted since it first began in the late nineteenth century. The word itself made its way into the political vocabulary between the end of 1882 and the beginning of 1883, following its use by the then President of the Council of Ministers Agostino Depretis (1813-1887) in a speech at Stradella on 8 October 1882:

«If somebody wants to join our ranks, if he wants to accept my modest program, if he wants to change and to become progressive, how can I reject him?» (quoted by Salvadori 1994, 357).

Depretis intended to answer those who attacked him for the agreements made during the election campaign with the Historical Right headed by Marco Minghetti (1818-1886), thus distorting – according to critics – the program of the Historical Left, to which Depretis belonged. Indeed, it is well known that the latter was the first President of the Council of the Left, which was at its height between 1876 – the date of so-called "parliamentary revolution" that had led to the fall of the Historical Right – and 1896, when the Giolittian age began. In the country’s political leadership, radical liberals from the Historical Left alternated with conservative liberals, who belonged to the ranks of the Historical Right, among whom the name of the Count of Cavour (1810-1861) stood out.

Leaving aside the specific meaning it had taken on in the historical and political context that generated it, the word has entered into the common lexicon, especially for the pejorative implications that it entails, as a sort of characteristic representation of bad national habits:

«From Depretis on, since his methods of government will be adopted by their successors, the word T. serves to indicate a new type of parliamentary practice consisting of a continuous bargaining of votes between the majority and the opposition, corruption raised to the political key and determinant resourse, in anything but infrequent passages of politicians from one sector to another of parliament, from one party to another one. More generally, T. will be identified with the symptom of a pathological condition of the entire parliamentary system, the cause of its inefficiency and ineffectiveness as the nerve center of the political system, of its inability to put in place defined and compact coalitions, stable majorities, accountable oppositions» (Mastropaolo 1983, 1203).

Although it is in line with a widespread feeling, this reading of the phenomenon reflects a more than evident generality which blurs its edges. In more precise conceptual terms, the theme of trasformismo has been central in the work of various historians who have studied the political life
of Italy, to try to identify the underlying dynamics of the Italian political system, in all its variants and especially in its "regularity". These studies argue that alternating power in the years immediately following unification was more apparent than real, despite the fact that the categories of "Historical Right" and "Historical Left" have entered into the common lexicon to identify the two main formations of the time. *Trasformismo* intervened to allow the political system to operate with more flexibility as it had been based on strong socio-cultural homogeneity of the political class who sat in parliament. According to this interpretation, the suggested tendency – arose at the time of Cavour, Deprestis and Giolitti – would then become a structural factor. Thus a feature which was to become a sort of genetic code of Italian politics was introduced: namely, system calibration at the "center" of the political space, with little dynamism dedicated to the replacement of an alternative political offer, which in some phases took the form of passive inactivity ¹.

Among the monographic studies on *trasformismo* published in recent years, the books by Giovanni Sabbatucci and Luigi Musella are worthy of particular note: the former places more emphasis on structural and political issues, the latter on historical and cultural heritage. Both of these contributions are equally useful for acquiring knowledge of the topic: despite their different nuances, the reader is struck by the common denominator of the overall interpretation of *trasformismo*. It is described as a practice aimed at counteracting the alternating power of political parties which differ considerably in their stances and projects (which is nothing but the fundamental operating rule of Central-European and Anglo-Saxon liberal-democracies). In his thesis, Sabbatucci argues that in democracy, the “principle of consent” determines this dynamic:

> «One of the many possible definitions of democracy is one that refers to the relationship between power and consent. Normally, in democracy one rules because consent has been obtained, while in authoritarian regimes the link between the two terms is usually reversed, chronologically and causally» (Sabbatucci 2003, 3).

As a result, in democracies «power erodes those who have it», while in other regimes, and even in malfunctioning democracies, «by definition, power creates more consent than it expends (power erodes those who do not have it) [...]»: in other words, the physiological mechanism of alternating power seizes up (or does not even begin to work) giving rise to what we usually call a "blocked system" (Sabbatucci 2003, 4). Armed with this premise, Sabbatucci comes to support an assertive thesis on the political history of Italy:

> «By this thesis I do not want to argue that, in the long-term, the results of political consultations - that is the only legitimate tool for measuring consent - are irrelevant [...]». I just want to say that they have never, by their own virtue, handed the government over to a force from which it was previously excluded; conversely, the exercise of power (be it bureaucratic-patronage, dictatorial and/or partitocratic) has always provided those who controlled the executive with the improper (to varying degrees) means to obtain consent» (Sabbatucci 2003, 5).

An important role in making the political system itself more compact and leading it to operate using a logic other than democratic alternating was played by the constant presence of "anti-system" formations: in liberal and monarchist Italy, these were the Socialists – in particular "maximalists" – from which Fascism as a "movement" ² was born; in the democratic and republican age, it was the

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¹ It would be too complex to highlight here how transformation interacts with another characteristic factor of Italian politics: patronage (*clientelismo*). For a genealogical analysis, see. Parsi (1988).

² The distinction between Fascism as a "movement" (*movimento*) and Fascism as a "regime" (*regime*) is made by Renzo De Felice (1929-1996): see De Felice (1997).
The Communist Party, upon which weighed the well-known *conventio ad excludendum*. Succeeding
governments moved into a well-defined polical area – in liberal Italy this was represented by the
forces of the Historical Right and Left; in the republican age, by the formations of “*quad- or penta-
party*” (quadri- o penta-partito) – without any considerable discontinuity. Once again, in
Sabbatucci’s words:

«In all representative systems, one creates a gap between an *area of representation*, which in
theory should cover (although this is not always the case) the entire spectrum of forces in society,
and an *area of legitimacy*, which is always narrower than the first. When this difference is marked,
it creates big problems, not only in the relationship between the political system and society, but
also in the workings of the political system» (Sabbatucci 2003, 10).

In this regard, one might question the political nature of the last two decades, those which
journalistically go under the label of "second Republic", and on the alternating power of different
political formations, which would seem to contradict Sabbatucci’s thesis. Without going too deeply
into the topic, there is the perception that alternating power is undoubtedly effective, but is based
on the contingent political struggle. This struggle lacks the dynamics required to find institutional
consolidation other than the insistence on the political scene of actors with the support and skills to
generate alliances in their favor and against their positions (Sartori 2004). In short, in the “second
phase” of the Italian Republic (after 1994-) alternation occurred, but without institutionalization of
the political system therefore, in many respects, the considerations formulated above continue to
apply. Moreover these considerations are further corroborated by the bipartisan coalitions – the so-
called "wider agreement (larghe intese) governments" - that have been in existence since November
2011 (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2012).

Following this line of interpretation, which consequently does not recognize any sharp discontinuity
between the first and second phase of the Italian Republic in terms of the phenomenon of
trasformismo, Marco Valbruzzi has attempted to construct a typology that, in terms of political
behavior, distinguishes between "molecular" trasformismo, which affects the individual MPs, and
"group" trasformismo. As regards the political system and the purposes of the dynamics which have
been analyzed, the same study identifies an "inclusive" dynamic towards the majority and an
"exclusive" one aimed, however, at establishing a collaborative, but more distant, relationship with
the opposition. From a diachronic perspective, the following table provides a summary, and covers
the whole spectrum of Italian political history following unity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Molecular transformism</th>
<th>Group transformism</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive transformism</td>
<td><code>Liberals' transformism</code> (1876-1887)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><code>Conservative transformism</code> (1887-1900)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pentapartito (1980-1992)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Among the anti-system formations, the post-fascist *Movimento sociale* should also be included. It is, however,
placed outside the so-called "constitutional arc" (arco costituzionale), i.e. all the political forces which voted for the
1948 Constitution.
6 «Just as the liberal class became the only party entitled to rule between 1861 and 1914, so it was with Democrazia
Cristiana between 1945 and 1992» (Musella 2003, 175).
7 There were political scientists who traveled very different routes describing the basic characteristics of the Italian
political system after World War II: for example, Giovanni Sartori (1982) spoke of "polarized pluralism", while Giorgio
Galli (1966) described it as a case of an "imperfect two-party system". See the most up to date analysis: Guarnieri
This is an interesting attempt, which in some ways – particularly in terms of political behavior - is also confirmed at the regional level (as we will see in the final part of this paper). Summing up these initial considerations, it seems appropriate to reiterate one of the scientific questions which - as stated in the introduction – underlies this contribution: is trasformismo a national vice, or a systemic choice to govern from the center of the political space by excluding the "extremes", or rather by trying to keep them under control? Luigi Musella has no doubts about this point:

«The idea of trasformismo is generally linked to limited periods in Italian political history [...]. In our case, on the other hand, we intended to propose trasformismo as a typical, constant and structural factor of the political system in a united Italy. Even considering the diversity of Italy during the years 1861-1925 and 1945-1992, it can still be said that the impossibility of a system based on alternating power characterized the liberal age as much as the republican age. In both periods it allowed a small ruling class to be formed which, unable to act except within itself, ended up by aggregating groups and people who were often divided by doctrine and politics, but united by the desire to protect the system from all the forces that were excluded from it. Hence the importance that the "center" has always had in joining the center-right and the center-left and that rejected the right and left as anti-system formations» (Musella 2003, 173)\(^8\).

Excluding the Fascist age, usually interpreted by Croce as a "parenthesis" – i.e. a phase after which, mutatis mutandis, there was a revival of at least some of the main features of liberal Italy – the Italian ruling class thus assumed the characteristics of "political noteworthies" with very little mobility and a strong inertia in institutions and political parties. These characteristics were reflected in the serious difficulties of the political system to deal promptly and effectively with the reforms which became necessary from time to time.

### 3. The concept of free mandate

From a technical point of view, the principle which allows for trasformismo is the parliamentary "free mandate" or - alternatively - the principle of "no constraint of mandate"\(^9\). In legal terms, it was already legislated at constitutional level in section 410f of the Albertine Statute (Statuto Albertino). In the republican Constitution of 1948, the principle is covered by the following rule:

«Every member of Parliament represents the Nation and carries out his/her duties without a constraint of mandate» (section 67).

The debate surrounding section 67 was particularly concise and expeditious in the Constituent

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\(^8\) The literature on trasformismo is extensive: in relation to this paper see at least Cammarano (2009); Carocci (1992); Misefari (1989); Nencini (1996); Pasquino (2010); Rogari (1998); Sabbatucci (1998); Salvadori (2001; 2004); Tullio-Altan (1989 e 2000); Vander (2004). For a comparative perspective see Heller and Mershon (2009).

Assembly (Assemblea costituente), obviously with the assumption of addressing a non-controversial principle. Clearly, the republican legislative framework of political parties and political representation was significantly affected by the experience of Fascism: the rules of the Constitution were a direct consequence of antifascist culture. Within the setting of a constitutional safeguard for pluralism and freedom of speech, the subjectivity of parties under public law was removed, because legal recognition was one of the technical features which had enabled the Fascist Party to assume an institutional role and to alter the Albertine Statute without changing its rules. On the other hand, the focus of the constraint of mandate prohibition shifted from the constituent voters to the MP’s party, the terms of which should be explained, in order to make sense of the practical implications of the rule in question.

The rule which imposed prohibition of the "constraint of mandate", duly updated operationally, actually ended up protecting the MP from any demands which could be made of him by his party: for example, the head of the party demands an MP’s resignation from parliamentary office due to his expulsion (or voluntary exit) from the party ranks. What would then prevail would be the democratic mandate on what scholars have called the "constraint of mandate by party": once elected, the MP is protected from the influences to which he may be subjected both from his constituent voters as well as from his party leaders. To conclude on this point, it may be observed how:

«Constitutional prohibition [the author refers to section 67 of the Constitution, ed.] has essentially taken on the characteristic of a mere safeguard clause for MPS against his/her own party or the electorate. With no other constitutional choice - as in the case of the suspension mechanism – he could abandon the party which allowed him to be elected or dissociate himself/herself in various political choices, being assured, however, of enrollment in another parliamentary or assembly group» (Scarciglia 2005, 102).

To further clarify the issue, there is an important judgment issued by the Italian Constitutional Court (n. 14 on 7 March 1964) about the interpretation of section 67. According to the Court, the rule does not prohibit per se any agreement between voters and candidates, or between the latter and the parties to which they belong, but they simply declare it legally irrelevant, and thus make it impossible to enforce in court. If the object of these agreements is not illegal, it would simply be a question of "natural" obligations, to which those involved can comply if they feel morally obliged to do so. Any breach of the agreements cannot, however, be sanctioned by judicial authority.

As a result, the theory of "constraint of mandate" – which would make trasformismo technically impossible – has to be rejected for every possible interpretation: in the assumption that voters can place limits on the elected, and in the much more realistic version according to which MPS have no margin for any political and intellectual autonomy regarding the demands from their party leaders. Observing how the actual exercise of this autonomy may not benefit MPS’ political careers is an obvious remark, but theoretically irrelevant.

Upon closer examination, the right to change group affiliations within the halls of Parliament – interpreted as an extreme yet legitimate example – is nothing but a consequence of free determination which is – or should be – the basis of activity of those who act in representative assemblies. This is attested to by a classical source of political thought, the Speech to the electors of
Bristol (1774) by Edmund Burke (1729-1797), which is worth referring to verbatim for the seminal role it has taken on in the theory of political representation:

«Certainly, Gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a Representative [...] But, his unbiassed opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you; [...] Your Representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion» (Burke 1996, 69).

4. Trasformismo in the regional context

Moving on to the findings of the research, on a lexical issue it should first be said that "transfughismo" (transfughismo) is the technical term which jurists use to identify what historians and political scientists call "trasformismo". The reasons for this choice are not arbitrary: while with trasformismo – as we have seen – a concept is defined which starts from the behavior of representatives in the halls of Parliament, and ends up taking on much broader meanings which go in different directions (historical, cultural, political science, etc.), whereas with the word "transfughismo", scholars of public law refer to purely factual data, namely the shift from one political group to another in a representative assembly. In these terms, Salvatore Curreri provides the following definition for "parliamentary transfughism" (transfughismo parlamentare): «during the term of legislature, the shift by deputies or senators from the political party group to which they were elected to another» (Curreri 2004, 7)\(^{13}\).

If empirical studies devoted to trasformismo/transfughismo in parliamentary halls – both in political science (Di Virgilio, Giannetti and Pinto 2012; Valbruzzi 2014) and public law (Curreri 2004, 7) – are quite rare, they are even scarcer on regional councils. Enzo Colarullo (2001) worked on the subject using a considerable amount of data, taking account of what happened during legislature V (1990-1995) and VI (1995-2000) in the regional councils of Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Piedmont and Tuscany and cases of transfugismo in the regional Council of Sardinia in reference to legislatures X (1989-1994) and XI (1994-1999). His remarks on the subject are rather telegraphic, and are mainly aimed at verifying the existence of the phenomenon in a dimension other than the national one:

« [...] we have to emphasize that the data on the mobility of individual councilors is partially independent from that of the establishment of new groups during the legislature [...] and the establishment of monogroups [...]. However, the quantitative aggregate indicator alone allows us to evaluate the consistency of the phenomenon of transfughismo which appears to have massively involved even the regions» (Colarullo 2001, 61).

Indeed it would be possible to develop more in-depth considerations even using a limited sample such as that used by Colarullo. Nevertheless, his research is affected by some (not negligible) methodological limitations: firstly, the empirical data should cover a longer period of time, not just two legislatures in close succession – Colarullo considered the V and VI for the regions with ordinary statute and X and XI for Sardinia – because the “ordinary” regions’ history has now exceeded 40 years, and those with special statute began at the same time as republican Italy (if not

\(^{13}\) By analogy, the same concept could be applied to the regional representative assemblies, but - as we shall see in the following pages - this purely formal notion has a penetration capacity to read the phenomenon that does not comply with political science analysis.
before, as in the case of Sicily). This is where the first practical difficulties arise: it is not easy for the scholar to access the data in question.

Our research is also affected by this limitation which is not easy to overcome: while we were able to find data about all the concluded legislatures – from the I to the VIII (1970 to 2010) – it was not possible to access further data other than Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany and Puglia. This was due to the fact that, in the first case, we were able to rely on the cooperation of the General Secretariat of Lombardy Regional Council, while in the other cases we consulted publications specifically dedicated to the life of the respective regional councils. With regard to the data obtained, we have to admit that these are not perfectly homogeneous: the data contain more details about the recent legislatures and become scantier the further one goes back in time. These asymmetries, and a less than optimal rigor in the way data is presented within the publications cited above, suggest that some caution should be exercised with regard to the quantitative evidence. Nevertheless, the first impression one gets from the analytical study of the political life of regional councils is that their activities appear to be very much a reaction to national dynamics, of which regions often seem to be a "dependent variable": for example, the names of the groups have often swiftly followed national events, but have hardly ever preceded them. As a result, the phenomenology of trasformismo itself seems to be a consequence of what has been decided in other political offices, especially within the national secretariats of parties.

In many respects, this feature is more evident for the regional legislatures of the first twenty-five years, until the mid 1990s. Nevertheless, even through the study of this subject, the higher status of regional politics in the transition from the first to the second phase of the Italian Republic seems obvious, which in the regional context basically coincided with the introduction of the direct election of the President, introduced de facto by act n. 43, on 23 February 1995. This step undoubtedly shifted the political focus onto the executive action of regions, making trasformismo quite marginal, because, living under the principle of simul stabunt, simul cadent both president and council, it ends up having very little room for maneuver. It is well known that the constitutional act n. 1/1999 affirmed the principle that the president is directly elected by the citizens (and he cannot be replaced by the council during the legislature). There was still the possibility in the regional statutes to decide otherwise than through the direct election of the president, but no region moved in this direction to define its system of government and the respective electoral law.

To go into further depth, the following table shows the empirical findings in relation to the regions considered:

| Table 2 Cases of trasformismo lato sensu in some Italian regional councils from 1970 to 2010 |

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14 Emilia Romagna Region, 2010 (unregistered publication available online at the following link: http://elezioni.regione.emilia-romagna.it/wcm/al/astud/pub/legislativo/index/pubblicazioni/gli_speciali.htm); Tuscany Region - Regional Council (2012), the Puglia Region, 1998 (the data for the information contained in this source was specially updated by the General Secretariat of the Council to include the VIII legislature, due to the fact that this was already under way for the new edition of the same publication). Even in the case of the Lombardy Region, there is a recent publication of the same nature (Vallini 2009) which, however, does not include information on trasformismo / transfugismo (the data relating to the Regional Council of Lombardy are therefore unpublished). The findings of the specific cases about the sample in question (Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany and Puglia for the period 1970-2010) are listed in Appendix research Bianchi (2012). The request made to the other regions to access such data for scientific purposes received no response.

15 As it is known, the previous electoral law (act n. 108 on 17 February 1968) provided for a strictly pro-assembly system which was very similar to the one used at the time for local authorities.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legislature</th>
<th>Lombardy</th>
<th>n.</th>
<th>Emilia Romagna</th>
<th>n.</th>
<th>Toscany</th>
<th>n.</th>
<th>Puglia</th>
<th>n.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VIII (2005-2010)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII (2000-2005)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI (1995-2000)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V (1990-1995)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV (1985-1990)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>III (1980-1985)</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>II (1975-1980)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>50</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I (1970-1975)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The column n. indicates the total number of councilors.

**Key:**

/ = no case
- = data not available

**Source:** literature cited in note 14.

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**Figure 1** Percentage cases of *trasformismo lato sensu* with respect to the elected (data from Table 2)

The data consider what we call "lato sensu trasformismo", i.e. an elected politician moving from one political council group to another in terms of the party list in which he had been elected, and also joining the mixed group. This choice takes into account not only the theoretical notes referred to in section 3, but also the fact that – on the basis of the councils’ rules in the regions considered – within the mixed group the counselors can continue to maintain a cultural-political identity, which often becomes the vehicle for a second shift to another group. In other words, entry into the mixed group is not an ultimate goal, and not infrequently it is an intermediate step towards a new group\textsuperscript{16}.

With regard to the regional councils studied in this paper, there has been a similar trend in three of the regions observed – Lombardy, Emilia Romagna and Tuscany – in which trasformismo has no significant relevance until the beginning of the 1990s, due to the political marginality of the regional level of government and also to the great stability of the party system. Starting from the first two regional legislatures of the “second phase” of the Italian Republic, however, there has been a rapid increase in the number of cases which can be traced back to the dynamics of "group transformism": in other words, they constituted a repositioning within the new political framework which introduced various new parties onto the scene (at the regional level this is the equivalent of the quantitative peak which accompanies the transition from the XI to XIII parliamentary legislature: Valbruzzi 1994, 178). This trend is confirmed by the increase of cases in Puglia during the VIII legislature, when the political figure of Nichi Vendola arrived as the leader of the radical Left: unusually in terms of the above, in this case the trasformismo observed in Puglia regional Council precedes a political fact which was later to spread throughout the nation.

If the same data is closely examined not only quantitatively but also qualitatively, however, the results change dramatically. Given the assumptions made about the rules of the political game, in relation to which - although in very rough terms - one could use the classic categories of "consensus democracy" for the national level of government and "majoritarian democracy” (or “adversarial democracy”) for the regional level (Lijphart, 1999), it would not be out of place to wonder how many of the above-mentioned transformists have crossed the border that separates the majority from the opposition within the regional council. In this case we would be talking about "stricto sensu trasformismo", in line with Depretis’ original inspiration, which – as we have seen – invited the historical Right MPS to move towards the historical Left to broaden the parliamentary base in support of his cabinet:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legislature</th>
<th>Lombardy</th>
<th>Emilia Romagna</th>
<th>Toscany</th>
<th>Puglia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VIII (2005-2010)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII (2000-2005)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI (1995-2000)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V (1990-1995)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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<td>IV (1985-1990)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>/</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{16} This is one of the reasons why - as mentioned in note 13 – we do not use the legal concept of "transfughism" (trasfughismo), which does not take into account entries into the mixed group.
<table>
<thead>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Legend:**

/ = no case  
- = data not available

**Source:** literature cited in note 14.

In this case, the data change greatly, allowing the analyst to speculate about the reasons for transformistic action: is it (or might it be) qualitatively different in the parliamentary or regional context? It seems that in parliament there is a need to directly influence the parliamentary basis of government, while in the regional councils the need prevails for inter-party repositioning within the coalitions of the majority and the opposition, whose outer perimeter is rarely crossed when there is a shift in the groups.

Moreover, this is confirmed by the voting behavior in the mixed group, whenever it has been possible to study it: most of the time the counselor within this group – an *in fieri* dissenter or transformist – continues to vote for the original formation – the majority or opposition – despite having abandoned the primary group

Although there is still a dearth of information on this subject, we could still cite episodes regarding parliamentary *trasformismo* which are very different from the above: to give a straightforward example, there was the controversy surrounding the fall of the Prodi government in October 1998, as well as the events following the vote of confidence for the Berlusconi government in December 2010 (Di Virgilio et al., 2012). *Trasformismo* in the regional context appears to have no dynamics of this kind, because it gives the impression of working within slightly different systemic paradigm.

The issue of interpreting the lack of regional *trasformismo*, both general (*lato sensu*) and specific (*stricto sensu*), in the “first phase” of the Italian Republic (up to 1992), in which very few cases can be observed, could remain open: this seems to confirm the political marginality of regions *in se*, which long accompanied its history in the early postwar decades. Indeed it is widely known that the regions – despite being one of the most original ideas of the constituents – remained unimplemented until 1970. After this date they continued to receive very little financing at least until the end of the 1970s, and essentially they remained bodies of a purely administrative nature, until the reforms of the 1990s and more importantly the reform of Title V of the Constitution in 2001. In other words, *lato sensu trasformismo* is an indicator of political liveliness and of the progressive institutional importance which regions have taken on in recent years, also taking into account the *corsus honorum* of the political class which increasingly began their careers in the regions before being destined to carry out national roles. Nevertheless, regional trasformismo, whenever it exists as it did in the first two legislatures of the “second phase” of the Italian Republic (after 1994-), does not take the specific form of shifts from the majority to the opposition (and *vice versa*), but - with rare

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17 Empirical evidence on this issue is limited to Lombardy.
exceptions – it remains hinged on the systemic logic of majoritarian democracy (Cotta and Verzichelli 2000).

Having made these observations, in conclusion, we can return to the starting point, i.e. trasformismo according to the interpretation attributed to it by Giovanni Sabbatucci in his monograph on this subject. As we have seen, drawing largely upon Giovanni Sartori’s work on party systems, Sabbatucci explores trasformismo in relation to the "imperfect" character of Italian democracy, which would not be able to operate according to the dynamics of alternating power, as it is subject to a gravitational force towards the center, partly in order to marginalize the "anti-system" forces which are often present on the political scene. This negative feature is much less common in the other levels of government, in which some political forces – which at the national level have suffered a conventio ad excludendum – are in office on the majority side. We refer for example to the communist Guido Fanti (1925-2012), mayor of Bologna from 1966 to 1970 and president of the Emilia Romagna region from 1970 to 1976; he was succeeded by Renato Zangheri (1925) as mayor of Bologna from 1970 to 1983. There are many more examples. It may not be denied, however, that these experiences could be interpreted as the result of the same political factors which in the national government determined the conventio ad excludendum: in this perspective, the block at the center experienced by the anti-system forces could be offset by the possibility of being within the majority at the other levels of government (although might have been largely controlled by the state). This thesis is particularly convincing if one takes into account the logic that presided over the operations of national politics in the “first phase” of the Italian Republic, but it may also have some plausibility in relation to governments which have been in power since November 2011 (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2012), which had the North League as the only opposition party, followed by the Five Star Movement after the general election of February 2013. The latter political parties display many anti-system party characteristics (Sartori 1982; 2005) and, at the same time, they administer municipalities and govern major regions (in the case of the North League) as did the PCI in the past.

Looking now at the experience of the Italian regional government in a broader perspective, it should be remembered that some Anglo-Saxon scholars have commented on this in terms of its commendable civic-mindedness. In particular, the American political scientist Robert D. Putnam, with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, carried out a very well known piece of research over a period of more than twenty years which was published in Italy under the title La tradizione civica nella regioni italiane (1993) and at the same time in the United States under the title Making Democracy Work: Civic traditions in Modern Italy (1993). Aside from some of the content which is undoubtedly dated – e.g. the analysis of "social capital" on which much work has been done in recent years regarding Putnam’s classic work (Ferragina 2012; Vassallo 2013) – there are some epistemological aspects which are relevant to our research. From a methodological point of view, his work can be placed in the so-called "neo-institutionalism" category, on the basis of two postulates:

«1. Institutions shape politics. The rules and the standard procedures that constitute an institution leave their imprint on political outcomes, as they structure political behavior. [...] The institutions influence politics as they forge the identity of actors, power and strategies. 2 Institutions are shaped by history. Whatever other factors affect their form, institutions have inertia and "robustness"» (Putnam 1993b, 9)\(^{18}\).

\(^{18}\) The empirical aspect of Putnam’s research consisted of conducting several rounds of interviews with the politicians of the regions and with some witnesses, some nationwide opinion polls collected during the period of the research and statistics to frame the socio-economic development. In this regard, see also the "seminal" book which inspired Putnam’s famous work of: Almond, Verba (1989). For a more recent study of the different variants of "neo-institutionalism", see Hall, Taylor (1996).
In view of these statements, it is possible to view the institutions as an "independent variable" regarding proposition n. 1, or as a "dependent variable" concerning the second proposition by Putnam: in the former case, institutional changes can be seen to alter the identity, power and strategy of political actors; in the latter case – i.e. considering institutions as a "dependent variable" – one must consider how they are conditioned by the past and by their historical legacy. Putnam used this methodology in particular to explain the different "institutional performances" of regional democracies in his sample (Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Puglia and Basilica). This level of awareness will be taken into account when formulating the final remarks about our research.

5. Conclusion

*Mutantis mutandis*, one could apply the same postulate – i.e. the principle that "institutions shape politics" – to interpret the different effects that *trasformismo* has in national parliament and regional assemblies. In the same period in which Putnam published his research, the legislator seemed to want to collect the positive requests which came from the above-mentioned civic culture: even before the regions with ordinary statute were ruled by the legislation mentioned above (law n. 43 on 23 February 1995), in the early 1990s, the direct election of mayors and presidents of provinces was introduced (law n. 81 on 25 March 1993). This legislative turning-point was prompted by an intention to regenerate political processes starting from the level closest to the citizens, following the discredit these processes had received due to notorious scandals and recurrent episodes of corruption (which unfortunately have not ceased).

Within a few months, something similar was attempted concerning national representation by parliament, with the introduction of constituencies for the election of ¾ of members of parliament and senators (see law n. 276 and 277 on 4 August 1993). The "constitutionalization" of majoritarian democracy, at national level, should have led to the strengthening of the executive branch: this step has always met with strong resistance, in line with the idiosyncrasy of any form of monocratic power, which is one of the most characteristic (though not always positive) features of the republican constitution in Italy.

As a result, the character of Italy’s somewhat anomalous democracy, as mentioned by Sabbatucci, has remained intact: a system which is subject to the force of gravity from the "center" (Donovan and Newell 2008), a key feature in the political game, a gym for trasformismo and a place of tireless mediations (LaPalombara 1987). In a scenario such as this, it is difficult to distinguish the divisive "adversarial democracy" line which separates ruling government accountability from the "shadow cabinet" of the opposition.

This point deserves more in-depth examination if it is to be properly discussed, but, the different effect of *trasformismo* in the strict sense of the word (i.e. the shift from majority to opposition, or *vice versa*) – accentuated at the national level, and much less significant in regional level – would seem to confirm this thesis. Wherever there has been no institutionalization of majoritarian democracy, as in the national government, certain dynamics continue to be at work which tend to produce a constant return to the center of the political space, identifying it as strategic. Conversely, at the regional level where there is a majority electoral system, but also the direct election of the president, *trasformismo* does not have impact and centrality, because the "center" is not the strategic

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19 The asymmetries which were put before American scholars seem explicable only by reference to the different pre-unification history that affected the regions: in particular, in their view it was important that in the Centre-North, after the year 1,000, the democratic experience began to emerge in the communal age, while in the South, at exactly the same time, the Bourbon monarchy had been established.
place in the political space, but – as in every majoritarian democracy – the share of votes which by its nature is contestable and which a (tentatively) majoritarian formation tries to gain, moving from a position to "side", more characterized by the political point of view than the central location.

If the center of the political space is occupied by "centrist" formations, trasformismo is the result of a gravitational force which they exert on the other political forces, without there being any real alternation in power (Sartori 2005, 119); where, however, the latter is the rule, trasformismo is the exception and the clear distinction of roles and accountabilities makes it a politically marginal and essentially irrelevant phenomenon. Here there is no "marginal utility" in stricto senso trasformismo, because the political equilibrium is defined a priori by the systemic guarantee of governability, as a rule for the entire duration of the legislature20.

In other words, the research collected in this paper might be considered an empirical confirmation of Putnam's first proposition, according to which "institutions shape politics" and significantly affect the behavior of its actors. But before coming to such an assertive conclusion more work needs to be done: a comparison of the empirical evidence presented in this paper with parliamentary trasformismo, to be conducted diachronically and synchronically, disaggregating the data on Camera and Senato in relation to different electoral rules (mattarellum and porcellum to use sartorian terms), expanding and collating the available case studies in the stricto and lato senso trasformismo categories. For example, it would be interesting to study, using a positive method, trasformismo in the Senato before and after 2005, following the introduction of an electoral system which was particularly likely to generate marginal utility for trasformismo, because – as it is known – the majoritarian premium assigned on a regional basis tends to create very narrow majorities which are not necessarily in line with those of the Camera (where the premium is on a national basis). Once these additional checks have been performed the thesis in question could be presented as an interpretation of transformistic phenomenology validated by a number of empirical referents.

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20 If this consideration is seen in relation to Italian regions, the institutional problem becomes quite different, and that is to prevent the representative assembly from becoming (or being likely to become) politically marginal just when it obtains the direct election of the head of the executive. Since this case is not desirable, various regional councils have invested in efforts to rethink their political role towards the evaluation of executive policies: in this regard see the special issue dedicated to the analysis and evaluation of public policy (A & PPV) Rivista italiana di Politiche pubbliche (no. 1/2012), edited by Gloria Regonini.


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