Bringing the Territory in the Political Agenda:
An Agenda-Based Model of Issue Politicisation

Linda Basile
PhD Candidate
CIRCaP - Centre for the Study of Political Change, University of Siena
E-mail: lindibas@alice.it

Abstract:

The inclusion of any policy dimension into the political agenda should not be taken for granted. Issues, like the animal species in nature, have to struggle with each other, before being part of the set of priorities of the whole system. Drawing on the burgeoning literature on policy agendas, this chapter examines whether, to what extent and how the territorial dimension has entered the party system agenda in Italy, between 1963 and 2008. The analysis will focus, in particular, on the variations in the amount of attention on territorial issues, over the time. For this purpose, the impact of the process of territorial restructuring, as well as of the electoral upsurge of the Lega Nord in the early 1990s will be taken into account. In particular, it is argued that the autonomist party had a major impact on the revitalisation of the issue in the second Republic.

Keywords: party system agenda, issue competition, salience, parties’ attitude, frames

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“To speak of politics is to speak of political issues, most invariably”
(Carmines and Stimson 1993:151)

Introduction¹. Unravelling politicisation of the territorial dimension: research questions and reasons for.

In 1960, Schattschneider argued that “in every modern society there are billions of potential conflicts, but only some of them become [politically] crucial”². Moreover, once a policy dimension has been introduced in the political arena, it is susceptible to be replaced by other issues, as part of a broader political strategy, which aims at changing the policy priorities of the system. Accordingly, even the resistance of an issue within the political agenda, over the time, should not be taken from granted at all. What the scholar defines as “the conflict of conflicts” is therefore just the competition among parties to introduce and keep issues within the political agenda, also known as issue competition. The latter has been defined by Carmines and Stimson (1993) as the struggle among political actors to decide which issues should enter the political agenda. The use of word such as “competition” and “struggle” is not accidental. The authors, in fact, conceive issue competition as a process of “natural selection”, in line with the evolutionary reasoning of biological theories. Issues, such as natural species, in fact, have to succeed in a harsh competition, to be selected as priorities of political debate. Moreover, once selected, they must keep on “fighting” with other issues, in order to preserve their place in the political agenda.

Under such premises, the present paper will propose an analysis of the politicisation of an issue. In other terms, it will seek to describe and explain the process of inclusion of a policy dimension within the agenda of a political system, its “struggle” against other potentially political issues to emerge and resist in the public debate, as well as the conditions under which it manages to “thrive against the heavy odds of competition for scarce attention” (Ibidem: 153).

In order to achieve this explanatory goal, one policy dimension, namely the territorial one³, and a specific political system, that is to say Italy between 1963 and 2008, have been selected as case

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¹ This paper is an excerpt of one chapter of the author’s PhD thesis, which is still under revision.
² Our translation from the Italian version of the volume.
³ The territorial dimension can be identified as a base-line concept and defined as an area of political space characterised by a number of possible perspectives on a specific set of issues related to the territorial organisation of the state. Such competing views tend to polarise along the territorial line (or cleavage, or continuum) of competition. Accordingly, actors located at the one end of a continuum favour a greater surrendering of competencies downwards to the sub-central levels, while actors at the opposite level pursue a strengthening of central power. Moreover, the territorial dimension is, on its turn, made up of different issues on which actors concretely confront themselves, such as: decentralisation/centralisation, federalised/unitary and cultural differentiation/homogenisation.
study. There are number of arguments to support such empirical choice. Firstly, the “torrent of reforms” experienced by the centralised European nation-states, which have progressively surrendered powers downwards to the sub-central levels in the second half of the XX century (Marks et al. 2008), is a cue of the crucial political importance of the territorial matters in many countries of the “old continent”. Indeed, before being adopted, reforms are – sometime harshly-debated in the political arena. That it is why it would be interesting to unravel the reasons that are likely to make territorial issues politically crucial, against other potentially conflicting policy dimensions. Within this framework, Italy represents an ideal laboratory of analysis: actually, the country has undergone an intense process of decentralisation, which has not yet come to an end; furthermore, its territory is deeply divided among distinctive communities, whose peripheral demands have known forms of political mobilisation. In particular, the analysis will focus on the period comprised between the election of 1963 and 2008. The starting point has been chosen because, after that electoral contest, territorial reforms started to be discussed in the institutional arenas, thus prompting the process of “regionalisation” in Italy; the analysis ends with 2008, when the latest elections before those recent of February 2013 have been held.

It should be pointed out that, in the present analysis, the notion of political agenda definitively overlaps with that of party system agenda. Actually, as Green-Pedersen (2007) has argued, in Western European parliamentary systems, the political agenda coincides more or less to that one of political parties, to the extent that they are the key decision makers in those systems. Accordingly, to study political agendas in Western European parliamentary systems means essentially to study the agendas of the party system (Green-Pedersen 2007: 274; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008).

In the light of the above discussion, the present paper will address the following research questions: has the territorial dimension been politicised in the Italian party system agenda, between the 1963 and 2008? Has its salience varied over the time? Which factors are likely to explain such variations, if any? The analysis will therefore explore parties’ discourse on the territorial dimension and it will discuss and test two of hypotheses to be grounded on a theoretical model, which is largely drawn on the agenda-setting literature.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section will discuss the proposed theoretical framework; then, section 2 will introduce the variables and the indicators to be used in the analysis, while the hypotheses will be presented in detail and discussed at length, in sections 4 and 5. The concluding remarks will finally try to connect and summarise the main findings, in order to provide an encompassing account of the politicisation of the territorial dimension.
1. The politicisation of the territorial issue: an agenda-based model

The venue of research dealing with the politicisation of issues in party systems is still at its infancy. Although some interesting insights have been provided (Green-Pedersen 2007, Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2009), current literature is yet far from developing an overall framework. The present paper, of course, does not aim at filling this gap in literature, to the extent that it proposes an empirical analysis based on a case-study, which does not allow inferring any generalisation. Nevertheless, drawing on the existing accounts of agenda-setting and issue competition and adopting the recent perspective based on party systems, it is possible to outline an agenda-based model of the politicisation of the territorial dimension.

The starting point of this theoretical framework is the definition of the party system agenda as the set of policy priorities determined at system level by the choices of the individual parties and by their strategic interactions (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2009). A policy dimension is introduced in the party system agenda and, therefore, politicised, when most of the parties raise their attention on it, so that any other actor in the system cannot longer ignore it. It has been pointed out that parties’ actions are largely driven by their strategic goals. Accordingly, they are likely to heighten their interest on specific issues when they perceive concrete advantages in manipulating them.

The present research, in particular, will scrutinise only some among the possible conditions that are likely to influence issue politicisation, largely drawn on the agenda-setting literature. Each condition will be then discussed in the following sub-sections, thus providing the basis for the formulation of working hypotheses, to be tested in sections 4 and 5.

1.1. The “punctuated equilibrium” revisited

The first hypothesis that is likely explain the ebbs and flow of the salience of the territorial dimension in the Italian party system agenda can be directly borrowed from the “punctuated equilibrium theory” (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, Baugartner et al. 2006). The latter, although

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4 Most of the literature on agenda setting has developed eminently within the American context, thus producing accounts that inevitably reflect the peculiarities of that political system. Accordingly, little if any attention has been posed to the role of political parties in the dynamics of policy agendas, provided that they have a limited role in the US politics, if compared to that of interest groups, think tanks and policy entrepreneurs (Baumgartner et al. 2006). When moving to parliamentary systems, however, the primary role of political parties cannot be longer ignored. Recently, however, some pioneering researches (Green-Pedersen 2007: 274; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008) have sought to unravel the processes of politicisation of issues within the party system agendas.
developed to analyse the processes of policy making, might yield important consequences also for the study of policy agendas.

The punctuated equilibrium thesis assumes that public policy change on a specific field might be characterised by short peaks of incremental policy shifts, which interrupt relatively long periods of little transformation, when the decision making on the issue at stake proceeds along somewhat routine processes.

Although the punctuated equilibrium thesis is actually a theory of decision making, it nevertheless provides interesting insights to explain the variations of salience on specific policy dimension. Indeed, supported by empirical findings⁵, it further posits that the dramatic shifts in policy outcomes are likely to occur in correspondence with periods of heightened political attention to the problems; then, when the attention declines, a long phase of policy stability takes place. Accordingly, it can be argued that parties are likely to heighten the attention on an issue in the period that precedes a major reform, to the extent that they aim at raising a political debate around the imminent decision-making process. As already pointed out, in fact, parties are strategic actors; they will be thus expected to concentrate their attention on those issues that they aim at addressing with policy reforms (parties as policy seekers), thus looking for the electorate’s support for the imminent work of decision-making (parties as vote-seekers); Once the reform has been passed, however, the public interest on the topic will be likely to decline and the issue will lose its previous electoral appeal. Hence, it ceases to be a matter of direct confrontation among parties and, at the same time, parties are no more interested in promoting another major policy change in the immediate future; as a consequence, they will “freeze” the attention on this dimension of conflict, until the external and internal pressures to reform will put the issue of policy change once again at the centre of the political stage.

Within the aforementioned framework, the following hypothesis can be thus formulated:

✓ **H1**: The attention on the territorial dimension within the party system agenda is higher in the elections preceding a major reform; once a major policy change has occurred, the party system’s attention on the territorial issues decreases.

If this condition occurs, it should be therefore expected that there is a certain correspondence between the variations in the party system’s attention on the territorial dimension and the process of territorial restructuring in Italy. This argument is also consistent with the findings of Mazzoleni

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⁵ The theory has been tested eminently in the American context. Nevertheless, recent research efforts are developing comparative analyses aiming at testing the punctuated equilibrium theory also in different political systems.
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(2009b), whose empirical analysis, conducted with the use of CMP data, reveals that “an emphasis on decentralisation tends to increase in elections that precede a major reform” (Ibidem: 214).

1.2. Policy attention and policy definition: the importance of frames

An in-depth analysis of the political discourse on the territorial dimension, however, cannot be limited to the mere observation of the variations on salience. Since the earlier studies on policy agendas, it has been pointed out that the politicisation of issues is not just a matter of attention, but also of definition of the problem (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). The latter concept resembles that of frames, according to which it is not only important to know whether and to what extent parties talk about an issue, but also “how” they deal with it.

Issue framing at system level has been further analysed by Baumgartner et al. (2008) in a work dealing with the public debate on death penalty in the USA. The authors observe that the interest on that issue has risen again in the mid-1990s after a period of relative scarce attention, in parallel with the emergence of a new argument in a relatively old debate, namely the innocence frame. There is not one single event or factor to explain such a redefinition of the problem (Ibidem). Nevertheless, the authors observe that the upsurge of the innocence frame has come along with the increasing relevance of the pro-innocence social movements.

The insights developed by that research are likely to find application also to the present analysis. Indeed, in line with the aforementioned reasoning, it can be therefore expected that old, declining debates on one single dimension might be “re-vitalised” by the appearance of a new way of framing the issue. As a consequence, a heightened attention on a policy dimension after a stage of decline is expected; furthermore, the reframing of an issue is usually associated with the emergence of parallel movements in the surrounding political system.

Likewise, the political discourse in Italy on the territorial dimension presents some features resembling the aforementioned case of the US debate on death penalty. As a matter of fact, it is an old issue, which has undergone a progressive decline throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Since the early 1990s, however, it has been revitalised, in parallel with the emergence of a new, overwhelming autonomist movement, the Lega Nord.

Within this framework, it can be therefore expected that the presence of the regionalist actor might have changed the terms of the debate on the territorial dimension. Since 1992, mainstream parties had to deal with a new language in the electoral arena, which was deeply influenced by the tough rhetoric of the Lega. As a consequence, parties had to include in their political discourse the
reference to those frames that have been brought into the debate by Umberto Bossi’s movement. Hence, the following two hypotheses might be formulated:

- **H2a**: the electoral upsurge of an autonomist party is likely to affect the framing of an issue; in this way, new arguments are brought into an old debate;
- **H2b**: the reframing of an issue has an effect on its overall salience, which is likely to be revitalised after a period of decline.

### 2. Variables, data and methods

According to the above outlined theoretical framework and the related hypotheses, the main dependent variable to be analysed in this paper is the degree of politicisation of the territorial issues in the party system agenda. The latter can be measured as the overall amount of attention on that dimension and operationalised as the mean salience of the territorial issues in parties’ manifestos, at a given point in time. As for the independent variables, the main hypotheses developed in the analysis refer to two plausible predictors of salience, namely the process of territorial reforms in Italy and the patterns of parties’ conflict on the territorial dimension.

The data used for the empirical analysis are eminently those developed by using original coding scheme\(^6\), which has been conceived to measures parties’ attitudes on the territorial dimension, through the content analysis of parties’ manifestos. For the purposes of the present research, 96 political documents have been coded with the proposed instrument. Each manifesto has been firstly divided into quasi-sentences and, then, all the statements related to the territorial issues have been coded as positive (i.e. favourable to processes of redistribution of authority downwards), negative or neutral. Furthermore, each relevant quasi-sentence has been assigned a special code when it refers to specific arguments to support its “pro” or “anti” decentralist position, thus providing a measure of the frames.

Then, the raw data obtained with this content analysis have been further re-elaborated, in order to measure the salience of and the position on the territorial dimension in parties’ manifestos.

In particular, saliency has been measured by computing the percentages of statements (quasi-sentences) related to territorial issues in the electoral documents; as for position, drawing on Libbrecht et al. (2009a and 2009b), who rely on Rabinowitz and McDonald (1989), it is measured as the total amount of decentralist quasi-sentences minus the total amount of centralist ones, divided

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\(^6\) An in-depth description of the coding scheme is included in the PhD Thesis. Further information can be directly requested to the author.
by the total number of *salient* quasi-sentences. As for the neutral sentences, they are not included in the numerator, to the extent that they are expression of a certain directional ambiguity. The values of the directional certainty range from $-1$ to $0$ to $+1$, given that it is not calculated as a percentage. Finally, by multiplying the latter for the salience of territorial issue, the values for the *directional intensity* can be obtained (Libbrecht et al. 2009a and 2009b). The directional certainty and intensity has been measured also for each frame.

The above outlined instrument allows measuring the main dependent variable, namely saliency, and one of the two predictors, that is to say parties’ positions on the territorial issues. The further independent variable, i.e. the process of territorial restructuring in Italy, has been measured by using various institutional and normative sources, as well as the “Regional Authority Index” elaborated by Hooghe et al. (Marks et al. 2008, Schakel 2009, Hooghe et al. 2010). This index combines a set of aspects of a decentralising process, from the constitutional acknowledgement of the sub-national levels to financial autonomy, in order to measure the path of intensification of sub-national authority over the time\(^7\).

For what concerns the methodological aspects of the analysis, a thoughtful interpretation of descriptive statistics, frequency tables, cross-tabs and graphs will be used to test the hypotheses.

### 3. The struggle for politicisation and the ebb and flow of salience

The test of the aforementioned hypotheses, however, rely on the very preliminary condition that *the Italian party system has paid attention to the territorial issue throughout the entire time span considered, although with varying degrees of intensity*. Accordingly, the hypotheses to be tested should aim at explaining the dynamics of resistance and revitalisation of the issue, in the ongoing struggle for *keeping* a place in the agenda.

Figure 1, below, reports the distribution of the attention on the territorial issues before any electoral contest that has taken place between 1963 and 2008. Each box-plot is connected by a line, which indicates the mean saliency score for each year. It emerges that the territorial dimension has been present in *all* the electoral periods included in the analysis.

Nevertheless, it can be also observed that the level of overall interest *has not been even* over the time. Actually, there has been a peak of attention in 1963, which has been followed by a slow, but constant decline until 1987, to rise again in the 1990s, when it reached the two highest peaks in 1996 and 2008.

\(^7\)For further details on this index: [http://www.unc.edu/~gwmarks/data_ra.php](http://www.unc.edu/~gwmarks/data_ra.php), last accessed on 30\(^{th}\) August 2013.
It appears evident, however, that, especially the peaks of 1963 and 1996, are affected by the presence of outliers. Moreover, since the 1992, the electoral manifestos of the autonomist party *Lega Nord* have been also included in the sample. It is therefore reasonable to expect that the mean scores for those years have been heightened by the noticeable attention paid by that movement to territorial issues. Accordingly, Figure 2 displays the variations of means scores after removing both the outliers and the documents of the main regionalist party\(^8\). It emerges that the attention on territorial issues remains quite high in 1963 even without the outlier (*Partito Repubblicano Italiano*). The declining trend is confirmed also by Figure 2, until the lowest peak of 1987. Then, in 1992 the average attention considerably increases of 1.97 percentage points, even without the *Lega’s* manifesto. Little variations are then registered in 1994 and 1996. The attention of the state-wide parties on territorial issues diminishes again in 2001, while the LN seems to increase the proportion of statements devoted to the matter. The 2006 represents a quite exceptional situation, since in that electoral contest only two coalition documents have been issued\(^9\). Finally, the 2008 election reveal a dramatic drop of the salience of the territorial dimension. In those elections, the *Lega Nord* formally endorsed the coalition manifesto of the *Popolo delle Libertà*, but it nevertheless issued another programmatic document, which entirely dealt with the creation of a federal government on the model of the “macro-regions”\(^{10}\). It seems that, while the autonomist party was strengthening its federalist rhetoric, the state-wide parties have lost their interest in campaigning on the territorial restructuring of the country.

The aforementioned description points out that the territorial dimension not only has *always been present in the Italian party system agenda*, but it has also revealed a considerable resistance over the time, *although with some fluctuation*. This up-and-down of salience has passed through the critical junctures in the Italian Republican history such as the shift from the “first” to the “second” Republic and the consequent radical transformation of the party system. Nevertheless, the territorial

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\(^8\) It should be noticed that, in 2006, the autonomist party did not issued any electoral manifesto on its own, to the extent that it joined the coalition program of the *Partito delle Libertà* (see also infra).

\(^9\) It was due to the effect of the electoral law n. 270, approved on 21st December 2005, which is still in force. At article 1, paragraph 5 the law enables parties at forming coalitions and at expressing the name of the leader of the coalition; if parties express their link with a coalition, they cannot deposit a manifesto on their own, but they have to endorse the program of the whole coalition. (http://www.normativa.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2005-12-21:270!vig= : retrieved on 6th June 2013). In the case of the 2006 elections, all the parties that entered the parliament had joined the two coalitions of Unione (centre-left) and the Casa delle Libertà (centre-right). The Lega Nord subscribed this latter manifesto. For that year, it has not been possible to find even other programmatic documents of the single parties that formed the two coalitions.

\(^10\) Actually, it was an internal resolution of the so-called “Parlamento del Nord” (Parliament of the North, now called Parliament of the Padania). For further info, consult also the page on Wikipedia: http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parlamento_del_Nord
dimension seems not only to have resisted to such change, but even to have been *revitalised at the onset of the second Republic*.

Under such premises, the following questions deserve an answer: why did the attention of the party system on the territorial dimension has decreased after the 1960s? Which factors are likely to explain the revitalisation of these issues in the “second Republic”? And what does explain the resistance of this dimension within the party system agenda?

The following sections will therefore try to suggest and test two hypotheses to these ebb and flows in parties’ attention on territorial issues, by focusing especially on factors like the *territorial reforms* (section 4), and the definition of the issue (section 5).

**Figure 1. Box-plots of the distribution of salience for each electoral context.**
4. Does salience walk through the path of reform?

Before testing the *Hypothesis 1*, it should be ascertained whether the path of territorial restructuring in Italy is likely to resemble a *policy punctuation scenario*.

Baumgartner *et al.* (2006:10) observe that, in these cases, policy changes can be visualised by preparing a frequency distribution of the annual amount of change on that policy area. If the punctuated equilibrium occurs, such distribution should appear as a *leptokurtic* curve, whereas the central peak should represent the occasional punctuations and the long tails the little policy changes of the remaining periods.

The frequency distribution can be obtained by using the data on regional authority (RAI) developed by Hooghe *et al.* (2010). This index provides a measure of the authority of the sub-national levels, from 1950 to 2006, along eight dimensions: institutional depth, policy scope, fiscal autonomy, representation, law making, executive control, fiscal control, constitutional reform. The country data set aggregates these scores to the country level. The policy change can be thus calculated as the amount of annual increment of this index. For instance, the score of RAI until 1996 was 17.5 and it increased up to 19.5 in 1997, for the decentralising effects of the so-called “Leggi Bassanini”: as a consequence, it will be registered a policy change of 2 points. On the other hand, from 1998 to 2001 the RAI kept the score of 19.5, which indicates a stability of the sub-
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national authority; it means that, in those years, no relevant territorial reform has been adopted and, accordingly, the related amount of policy change will be of 0 points. It clearly emerges from Figure 3, above, that the frequency distribution of the annual policy change describes a typical leptokurtic curve. From a policy punctuation perspective, the peak of the curve represents the watershed, incremental territorial reforms, while the long tails correspond to the long periods in which the territorial distribution of competencies has undergone small or null changes\(^\text{11}\).

Figure 3. Distribution of policy change, according to the RAI index 1950-2006 (Hooghe et al. 2010).

\[ \text{Frequency distribution (in percentage)} \]
\[ \text{Amount of annual policy change} \]

Once assessed that the path of territorial restructuring in Italy has followed a policy punctuated pattern, it remains to ascertain whether a major reform has usually been preceded by heightened parties’ attention on territorial issues and followed by decreased interest on the topic.

Table 1, below, provides a synopsis of the relevant territorial reforms in Italy adopted between 1963 and 2008, with the relative variations of the salience of the territorial issues within the party system, before and after each legislature. This table should be read in conjunction with the values of annual mean salience (see Figures 1 and 2 in section 3, \textit{supra}), as well as with the saliency scores of each single party, grouped by year (see Table 2, below).

\(^{11}\) Actually, over 56 years, the RAI index registers 48 years in which the territorial distribution of powers has not changed at all and three years in which a small reform has increased the index of just 1 point or less: it means that for the 91.08\% of the whole considered period there has been a certain stability; on the other hand, in four cases there have been incremental transformation, such as the already mentioned reforms of 1997 and 2001, which have determined a dramatic shift of the index of regional authority.
The first watershed territorial reform has been the institution of the ordinary regions in 1968, adopted during the fourth Legislature that had started in 1963. In line with the expectations, the electoral debate preceding that reform has been characterised by a noticeable attention on the territorial issues. Even by excluding the outlying value of the PRI (17.82%), the average salience remains nevertheless high (5.28%). No relevant party, in that period, did ignore the territorial dimension, whereas the saliency scores among parties ranged from 4.63% of PSDI to the 6.23% of PCI.

The reform of 1968 was approved a couple of months before the end of the legislature. In the following elections that have been held in 1968, the attention dramatically dropped also among some of its previous passionate supporters, such as the PCI (1.80%) and the PRI (7.84%), while the PSIUP completely ignored the issue. The highest amount of attention (9.63%) has been paid by the MSI, which was a fierce opponent of the regionalist reform. Notwithstanding such decline, the average interest remained nevertheless high (4.9%), to the extent that the process of territorial restructuring was still perceived as a “work in progress”. The fifth legislature has been actually characterised by important reforms, which partially completed the policy change started in 1968. Among them, there are the two laws of 1970, which have been opposed by the PCI, and the related implementing decrees of 1972.

As the process of reform started to be channelled within the institutional routine, however, the territorial issue revealed an ongoing diminishing appeal. The elections of 1972, 1976 and 1979, in fact, register a constant decline in the average attention on this dimension. At the end of the 1970s the mean salience was 2.78%, with a loss of 4.59 percentage points, when compared to the score of 1963. During these three legislatures, the only important reform has been the law no. 382 of 1975, which has been implemented with the decree 616 of 1977.

The 1980s have been characterised by certain stagnation of the process of territorial restructuring. It should be therefore expected a similar immobility also in the average salience of the territorial dimension in party system’s agenda. However, the saliency score shows an unexpected, although limited, increase in 1983. The institution of the “State-Region conference” in the following legislature cannot explain such an increase, according to the punctuated equilibrium thesis, provided that it cannot be considered as a watershed and incremental reform. Nevertheless, looking carefully into the data, it can be noticed that the saliency score of 3.04%, registered in 1983, is eminently affected by the 7.81% salience of the MSI manifesto, which kept on raising its critical discourse on the regionalisation process. For that year, however, this document represents an outlier, as shown in Figure IV.4, provided that the scores of the remaining parties range from the 0.71% of the PSDI to the 3.85% of the PLI, which are well below a “relevant” mean.
excluding the outlying manifesto, the mean salience for 1983 slows down to 2.85%, thus confirming the thesis of *scarce attention in periods of stagnation in the reform process*. The “territorial immobility” of the 1980s indeed concludes with the lowest peak of attention registered in 1987 (1.87%).

The picture, however, seems to change in the early 1990s. The saliency score of 1992 registers an increment of 1.87 percentage points from the previous electoral debate. It can be at least partially explained with the electoral breakthrough of the *Lega Nord*, which has most probably contributed in revitalising the attention on territorial issues. Nevertheless, in line with the proposed understanding of punctuated equilibrium thesis, this growing attention might be also interpreted as a prelude to a new season of reforms. Actually, the mean attention was similarly high even two years later, in 1994, in a renewed political scenario and it further rose up to 8.20% in 1996, although this high score has been affected by several outliers. On average, during the 1992-1996 period, which has been characterised by short and instable legislatures, the overall party system’ attention towards the territorial dimension has been exceptionally high, even by excluding the outliers’ and the *Lega*’s manifestos (around the 4% on the whole period).

It seems somewhat limitative to interpret such an exceptional rise of interest uniquely as a reaction to the autonomist rhetoric. Rather, it seems to have been a symptom of a renewed need to restructure the current territorial asset. As a matter of fact, the thirteenth Legislature, started in 1996 and led by a centre-left majority, has been a period of watershed reforms, comparable to those of the 1968-1975, although characterised by an unprecedented partisan divide. As already described in Chapter 2, they culminated in the reform of the Title V of the Constitution, which dramatically transformed the pattern of redistribution of competencies across levels in Italy.

Furthermore, the election of 2001, which have been held a couple of months before the constitutional referendum for the approval of the reform of Title V, registered a drop of interest of 1.71 percentage points, again by excluding the *Lega* and the outliers.

During the fourteenth legislature (2001-2006) the process of territorial restructuring has undergone an interruption, surrounded by a general decline of interest on it within the party system agenda. Nevertheless, the government led by Berlusconi has tried to put its flag in the process of territorial restructuring, which has been dominated until that point by the centre-left. The ruling centre-right majority, however, had to face the difficult ideological tensions between the autonomist party and *Alleanza Nazionale*, which was the heir of the fierce anti-regionalist MSI. The new, partisan, constitutional reform approved in 2005, however, has been affected by the difficult bargaining within the government coalition, thus producing a somewhat ambiguous “federalist” reform, which was eventually rejected by the constitutional referendum of 2006.
### Table 1. Synopsis of increase of salience before and after the occurrence of territorial reforms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Reforms</th>
<th>Salience of Reforms</th>
<th>Major Reform</th>
<th>Minor Reform/Implementing Decrees</th>
<th>Mean Salience in Preceding Election</th>
<th>Mean Salience in Following Election</th>
<th>Increase/Decrease of Salience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28th April 1963</td>
<td>L.108/1968</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>28th April 1963</td>
<td>7.37% //5.28%</td>
<td>↓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20th June 1976</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(July 1977) Decrees implementing L.382/75</td>
<td>3rd June 1979</td>
<td>2.78%</td>
<td>↓=</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd June 1979*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26th June 1983</td>
<td>2.78% *(+0.26)</td>
<td>↑=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26th June 1983*</td>
<td>(October 1983)</td>
<td>Presidential decree for the creation of the State-Regions Conference</td>
<td>5th April 1987</td>
<td>1.77%</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th April 1987</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>L.142/1990</td>
<td></td>
<td>5th April 1992</td>
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*The mean saliency score decreases to 2.35% without the outlying value of MSI’s document; ** Data of 2008 should be compared with those of 2001, because of the very short length of the fifteenth legislature.
In 2006, the average interest seemed to rise again, but this score should be taken with great caution, provided that only two coalition documents have been issued in that year. Moreover, the fifteenth legislature had a very short duration, due to the destabilising effect of the new electoral rules adopted in 2005. The following elections have been then held in 2008. In that year, the party

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system’s mean saliency score, calculated by excluding the Lega Nord, has been the same as in 2001. The sixteenth legislature has been actually characterised by the fiscal federalism reform. Nevertheless, it should be argued that it has been eminently perceived as a follow-up of the main reform of the Title V, rather than a watershed territorial reform. Accordingly, parties have no more sought the advantages of campaigning on territorial issues, to the extent the latter have been channelled again within the path of routine institutional processes.

At the light of the above outlined scenario, there is reason to argue that the revised punctuated equilibrium thesis is likely to apply to the case of parties’ discourse on territorial issues in Italy. Actually, it seems that periods of heightened attention on that policy dimension have usually set the pace for a season of reform (in 1963-1968 and in 1992-1996), whereas crucial reforms have been generally followed by a declining interest on the topic addressed by the policy change (such as in the 1980s and in 2001).

5. New frames in an old debate

It has been pointed out in section 2 that the coding scheme allows identifying some specific arguments that are used by parties to justify their support (or opposition) to the redistribution of competencies downwards. Table 3, below, reports the frames that have been included in the coding scheme, with the corresponding values of the mean salience and the standard deviation of; furthermore, it has reported the number of documents in which they have been found and the range of the values of their directional certainty. Actually, the mean salience assumes very low values, to the extent that the use of one frame is usually limited to a couple of statements in the whole document. That is why it is more interesting to look just at whether the argument is present or not, regardless of the “quantity” of its use throughout the text.

In order to present the coded frames and how they have been used, the following subsections will show the evolution over the time of different groups of frames; the different use that parties have made of each frame will be also examined, that is to say whether they are arguments to support decentralist or centralist attitudes. Finally, a comparison between the use of frames before and after the electoral breakthrough of the LN is proposed.
Table 3. Descriptive statistics for frames

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5.1. Frames and functional pressures

The process of territorial restructuring has been primarily triggered by functional pressures; among them there are the need to enhance the levels of efficiency and democracy of the states’ structure, as well as the demands to overcome problems related to inter-territorial inequalities. Also, claims for decentralisation are often triggered by underlying liberal principles, according to which the power should not be concentrated within the central authority.

Figure 4, below, reveals that all these frames have been found throughout the whole examined period, although the liberal argument has been seldom if ever used in the first Republic. In 1963, a particular emphasis on efficiency and democracy can be observed. In that electoral debate, in fact, parties were called upon to motivate their support to the institution of the ordinary regions, whose implementation was at stake. On the other hand, the argument of territorial solidarity has been present since the 1963, but it is only after the 1992 that it is so largely used, thus overcoming those of efficiency and democracy. A peak in the use of the territorial solidarity frame is found in 1996, which was also the year of greatest radicalisation of the Lega’s rhetoric (see also infra). Given the marginal relevance of the liberal argument, only the efficiency, democracy and territorial solidarity frames will be thoroughly examined over the time.
As it emerges from the values of the range, the *efficiency* frame has been also used in a negative way; in other terms, some parties maintained that, through the process of decentralisation, state bureaucracy could have been further jeopardised, rather than improved (Figure 5). In particular, during the first Republic the MSI has been sceptical about the fact that bureaucracy could benefit from the creation of further layers of public administration. This position was nevertheless consistent with the overall rightist centralist attitude. On the other hand, it is more interesting the use of this frame made by the PLI in 1979. In that case, notwithstanding its general support to decentralisation, the party warned about the inherent risks of inefficiency: “La Direzione ribadisce la sua convinzione che la dimensione regionale rappresenta la dimensione ottima per l'esercizio della funzione autonomistica su un territorio più vasto di quello comunale. Ma, nello stato attuale delle strutture pubbliche, con la loro tendenza ad inflazionarsi sotto l’aspetto burocratico e del costi, sarebbe grave e pericoloso errore aggiungere la struttura regionale alle altre strutture pubbliche già esistenti, senza una revisione generale del sistema delle autonomie, che può benissimo attuarsi prima delle elezioni del Consigli regionali, e nei confronti della quale bisogna mettere di fronte alle loro responsabilità le opposizioni”.

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12 The data concerning the position are drawn on the dataset and they are reported and discussed at length in the PhD thesis.
After the 1992, year of the electoral breakthrough of the LN, however, all parties but the PPI in 1994 believed in the beneficial effects of decentralisation. Even basically centralist actors such as the Verdi in 1994 and RC in 2001 cannot deny that a process of territorial restructuring would, at least in principle, enhance the overall level of efficiency.

A similar pattern can be found in the case of the democracy frame. Both before and after the 1992, most of the parties agree on the purported democratic advantages of a decentralised asset (Figure 6). Even the MSI, in 1994, whose attitude was still leaning to centralism, was aware about the need to bring the institutions closer to the citizens, in order to enhance their democratic participation.\(^{13}\)

The only two cases of open scepticism are those of the PLI in 1979 and of UDC in 2008, the latter in line with a general centralistic attitude. The Unione in 2006 also shows a somewhat negative sign on this frame.

**Figure 5. Use of the Efficiency frame by parties**

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\(^{13}\) In that case, however, the MSI supported a redistribution of powers to provinces and municipalities, thus rejecting the regional asset.
As for the territorial solidarity frame, it should be pointed out that it occurs when the party addresses the problem of the socio-economic equality across poorer and richer areas of the country. In a nutshell, the territorial solidarity principle is used to ensure that, even within a decentralised asset, the equality across regions would not be jeopardised; moreover, this tenet pursues a redistributive role of the central state, in order to bridge the socio-economic gap between poor and rich territories. The support for the territorial solidarity will be therefore indicated by a negative sign of this frame, to the extent that it implies a centralised management of state resources. Nevertheless, this argument can be used, and quite often it is, to frame pro-decentralist attitudes. Most parties, in fact, “temper” their support to decentralisation through the reference to the principle of territorial solidarity.

As it emerges from Figure 7, before the 1992 this argument was almost eminently used by the centralistic MSI, to warn about the threats to territorial solidarity posed by the ongoing process of territorial restructuring. Only very few decentralist actors have pointed out the need to temper the support to reforms with the commitment to ensure inter-territorial equality. After the burst on the scene of the Lega Nord, however, most of the coded documents adopt this frame: out of 46 manifestos collected for the 1992-2008 period, in fact, the territorial solidarity argument has been found in 35 of them. Not only it became popular, but also, for the first time, it has been used by the LN from an anti-southern perspective. Actually, the autonomist party, in the 1990s, has endorsed the principle of keeping the resources where they are produced, i.e. in the rich and productive
northern Italy, against the inefficient and wasteful South. As a consequence, it was inevitably for most of the other parties to reaffirm the tenet that the pursuit of decentralisation would have not put under discussion the mutual solidarity among regions. They had to reassure the non-Lega’s voters and especially the Southern electorate that the proposed federalism was something different from the “secession” invoked by the tough rhetoric of Bossi’s movement. A clear example of the “reassuring” use of the territorial solidarity principle can be drawn from the manifesto of Ulivo in 2001, issued right after the “leftist” territorial reform: “occorre comunque assicurare forme e strumenti di solidarietà statale e/o interregionale, che consentano alle regioni meno ricche di garantire comunque servizi adeguati e promuovere lo sviluppo delle proprie comunità”.

Figure 7. Use of the Territorial solidarity frame by parties

5.2. Frames and Identity pressures

A second group of frames includes those arguments referring to as the “identity pressures” to territorial restructuring. It has been argued, in fact, that the redistribution of competencies downwards might be triggered by the citizens’ demands for the acknowledgement and protection of local identities. Furthermore, parties might express the will of pursuing a decentralised asset while

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14 It is still needed to ensure forms and instruments of state and / or interregional solidarity, enabling the less prosperous regions, however, to ensure adequate services and promoting the development of their communities
preserving, at the same time, the value of national unity. Finally, the autonomist parties have often channelled the identity claims; as a consequence, the other state-wide parties have often sought either to endorse the regionalist demands or to oppose them, especially when they put forward radical proposals, such as the full secession.

Figure 8 reveals that the references to national unity and territorial identities were already present even before the 1992. After that year, however, their use has considerably increased. On the other hand, quite obviously, parties have mentioned the autonomist actor only after the electoral breakthrough of the LN.

Figure 8. Mean salience of each frame, by year (Functional pressures group)

As for the identity frame, it should be noticed that it assumes eminently positive sign (Figure 9). According to the coding scheme, it means that parties use this argument to endorse the principle of protection of local identities and values. Only few times there has been a negative sign, which indicates the need to protect the Italian identity and values. Except for the case of PLI 1979, this
emphasis on national identity has been a peculiar feature of the centralist discourse of the rightist MSI/AN.

While the identity argument does not present any significant variation before and after the emergence of the LN, the national unity argument is likely to show some interesting patterns (Figure 10). Before the 1992, in fact, the (few) documents containing it displayed a negative sign; as a matter of fact, in those cases parties invoked national unity either to oppose the territorial restructuring or to support it with the reassurance of the protection of the value of the integrity of the nation. When the Lega Nord entered the political arena, however, it basically broke the “taboo” of the inviolability of the national unity. The fragmentation of the Peninsula was now invoked and the ideals of the Risorgimento were no more untouchable. As a consequence, most of the other state-wide parties have been somewhat forced to appeal to the national unity in their documents; indeed, they had to further differentiate their decentralist attitude from the secessionist rhetoric of the autonomist party. In a nutshell, they had to highlight to the electorate that to support decentralisation would not mean to jeopardise the traditional nation-state and its values, which were now openly challenged by the LN.

Figure 9. Use of the Identity frame by parties
That the tough rhetoric of the LN was perceived as a threat by the other state-wide parties it emerges also from the quite recurrent use, in negative terms, of the *autonomist frame* (Figure 11). During the 1992-2001 period, in fact, many parties have sought to take the distance from the divisive, secessionist perspective of the League’s federalism. Some examples might better clarify these cases: “*Anche qui rifiutiamo le proposte della destra del Nord*”\(^\text{15}\) (Ulivo, 2001). On the other hand, RC, which has displayed a more ambiguous stance towards decentralisation, uses the threat posed by the “rightist” *Lega Nord* to justify its scepticism towards any process of territorial reform: “*La "devolution" invocata dalle regioni ricche del Nord, governate dalle destre, mira in realtà a spezzare il paese (...). Va perciò abbandonato ogni riferimento a modelli federali frutto, nel nostro paese, di un dibattito marcato da spinte separatiste*”\(^\text{16}\) (RC, 2001). Rather obviously, this frame is completely absent in the political discourse of the main *Lega Nord*’s ally, namely FI, while the MSI/AN has used it in 1992 and 1996, when it did not enter a coalition with the LN.

\(^{15}\) Even in this case we refuse the proposal of the Right of the North.

\(^{16}\) “The” devolution "invoked from rich regions in the north, ruled by the right, in reality aims at breaking the country (...) It is therefore abandoned any reference to federal models result, in our country, a debate marked by separatist movements"
5.3. Frames and Political opportunity structures

The political discourse on the territorial dimension, however, has not been transformed only by the upsurge of a regionalist actor. New political opportunity structures, provided by the broader EU framework, in fact, have contributed to change, since the 1990s, the way of conceiving the process of territorial restructuring. A burgeoning literature envisages in the European framework the main political opportunity structure for the strengthening of sub-national authorities (Kohler-Koch 1997; Keating 2001; Aguilera de Prat 2006; Petri 2008); nonetheless, it seems that Italian parties, between the 1960s and 1980s, have rather underestimated the potentialities of the EU in fostering a process of territorial restructuring (or, rather, they consider this argument as not really appealing for the voters). In 1992, however, the ratification of Maastricht treaty gave a significant impulse to the processes of territorial restructuring throughout the Western Europe. Among the other innovations, in fact, the treaty has introduced the Committee of the Regions and the subsidiary principle, which specifically addressed the problem of a redistribution of competencies downwards in the European nation states. The role of the EU in fostering the process of decentralisation, as well
as in putting forward subsidiarity in European institutions, have thus embodied in quite recurrent frames, adopted by many documents after the 1992 (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Mean salience of each frame, by year (Political opportunity structure group)

As for the *EU frame*, it should be argued that the European Union is usually considered as an ideal framework to enhance the process of territorial restructuring. Nevertheless, especially in the 1990s, however, the perspective of a “Europe of the regions” has negatively perceived in some cases, whereas it was assumed that a key role within the supranational actor should be kept by the nation states; for instance, the document of MSI 1994 stated that: [*l’Unione Europea* è utopistico disegnarla come una grande Federazione di innumerevoli entità regionali*]

17. On the other hand, the *Lega Nord* has often claimed the potential decentralising incentives provided by the EU.

Furthermore, after the introduction of the subsidiary principle by the Maastricht Treaty, the reference to the tenet that policy making decisions should be made at the most decentralised level has been often introduced in documents to support decentralist attitudes.

17 It is a great utopian to conceive [the the European Union] as a great Federation of several regional entities.
Figure 13. Use of the EU frames by parties

Figure 14. Use of Subsidiary frames by parties
To conclude with this group of frames, the rather exceptional case of the *political foe* argument deserves some attention.

It should be noticed that it has been seldom if ever used, especially after the 1992. In this case, the political enemy has been seen as a sort of obstacle to the enhancement of the decentralisation process. Just two parties, the MSI and the PLI in 1968, coherently with their opposition to the institution of the regions, have blamed the political adversaries just for their support to the territorial reforms.

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**5.4. The “revitalising” effects of new frames in the political discourse**

It has been hypothesised in the present section, firstly, that the electoral breakthrough of the *Lega Nord* has brought new frames into a relatively old debate and, secondly, that the reframing of the territorial dimension has at least contributed to revitalise party systems’ attention on it.

According to the aforementioned analysis of frames, it has emerged that the upsurge of Bossi’s movement has introduced a new frame, i.e. the autonomist party argument, and has fostered the use of other frames such as those of national unity, territorial solidarity and territorial identity.
In particular, after 1992, many state-wide parties have sought to employ arguments related to national values, inter-territorial solidarity, to further mark the differences between their decentralism and the Lega’s secessionism. On the other hand, however, it has also come into sight that new arguments have been introduced also by other external events than the Lega’s electoral success. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992, for instance, has contributed to reframe the territorial issues in terms of “Europe of the regions” and subsidiary principle.

The hypothesis 2b, however, concerns the impact of reframing on the saliency of the territorial dimension. Actually, it has been observed in section 3 (supra) that the 1990s have been characterised by a revitalisation of that policy area after at least one decade of overall decline. Although it is not possible to argue that such heightened attention has been due just to the introduction of a new way of thinking decentralisation, the aforementioned discussion suggests some insights. In particular, it seems that since the 1990s the problem of territorial restructuring has been differently connoted from the past by the presence of the tough rhetoric of the Lega Nord. As far as the autonomist movement has broken the taboos of national unity and cohesion, all those parties that were likely to support territorial reforms could not limit themselves to a taken for granted, assumed decentralist attitude, expressed with few statements in their manifestos. Rather, they have been called now to clarify to their electorate that their support to the processes of territorial restructuring was something different from the challenges to the national unity and cohesion posed by the LN. As a consequence, this “reassuring” need has inevitably implied to devote more space to the territorial issues, as well as to redefine them in a new way.

6. Concluding remarks. The (still open) “circle of life” of the territorial dimension

The present paper has sought to apply an agenda-based model to the analysis of the politicisation of the territorial dimension. It has been argued that the process of politicisation of issues can be compared to that of the evolution of species in biology. As well as species fight with each other to succeed in the deterministic natural selection, so even policy issues have to “struggle” before entering the party system agenda. Moreover, they have to keep on fighting, over the time, in order to preserve their place in the political debate.

The data discussed in the preceding sections have revealed that the territorial dimension has actually succeeded to enter the political agenda. For the whole observed period, more than a half of the documents have paid an attention on territorial issues well above the mean, whereas the average salience has been relatively high. It can be therefore argued that it has been a politicised issue. Hence, there is little doubt about the fact that this policy dimension has been “winning” in the
“conflict of conflicts” among issues. It is, however, difficult to ascertain when, how and why it has actually been successful in such battle, provided that there is a plethora of potential reasons to determine the inclusion of an issue into the agenda; furthermore, the data have been analysed since 1963, so that it is not possible to assess whether the territory was present in the political debates even before that date.

It has nevertheless been pointed out that, rather than explaining the actual moment of politicisation, it is more interesting to observe whether and how the territorial dimension has managed to resist to the ebb and flow of salience over the time. It has been, in fact, observed that the average attention on these issues has not been constant over the time. After a peak in 1963, it has undergone a rapid decline, until the lowest level of interest, achieved in 1987. After 1992, however, the territorial dimension seems to have been revitalised.

The analyses have revealed that, in line with the proposed, revised “punctuated equilibrium thesis”, the average salience of the territorial dimension has been higher before any major reform. Such finding is consistent with the definition of parties as strategic actors, to the extent that they focus their interest only on those issues that are to be addressed by an incremental policy change. The “Darwinian” account of the issue politicisation proposed in this chapter, however, raises a further argument. Once parties have entered the arena, as already argued, they have to struggle to avoid to be overcome by new, contingent issues. Actually, since the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s the territorial dimension was running the risk “to sink into the oblivion”. However, “something” happened in the early 1990s, during the troubled times of the shift from the first to the second Republic, so that these issues have been revitalised and put once again in a prominent place in the political debate.

Although, with the data at hand, it is not possible to empirically assess any clear causal relationship, it can be nevertheless argued that such revitalisation has at least come along with the electoral upsurge of the autonomist actor. Furthermore, the latter has contributed, with its tough secessionist rhetoric, to redefine the territorial dimension; in this way, it has basically forced the other parties to devote more space in their documents, in order to differentiate, in front the electorate, their support to decentralisation from the secessionist and anti-southern perspective of the Lega Nord. This “issue reframing”, together with the second wave of territorial reforms, which has occurred in the mid-1990s, as well as with the incentives to the regions introduced by the Maastricht Treaty, have thus all been concurring factors that have contributed to mark a new season of the politicisation of the issues at stake. It seems that, so far, notwithstanding the harshness of the “conflict of conflicts”, the circle of life of the territorial dimension has not come yet to an end but, rather, it has undergone a new start.
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