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When Electoral Competition Determines Disproportionality

Majority Bonus and Regional Elections in France and Italy

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Abstract

This paper investigates the effect of the changing format of electoral competition on the level of disproportionality in a peculiar type of mixed electoral system: PR with Bonus. More precisely, we study the consequences of the emergence of a tripolar party system with two poles able to coordinate and one excluded from pre-electoral coordination on the level of disproportionality in countries using PR with majority bonus. The paper uses the cases of the three last regional elections in France and Italy to investigate this research question, as both countries share defining characteristics: they use PR with bonus in the regional elections, and they have both been characterized by the emergence or the surge of a strong third pole refusing any alliance with other parties in a party system that was previously characterized by fragmented bipolarism. The paper shows through descriptive statistics and by way of an OLS regression that the electoral size of the third pole and the closeness of the race between the two main contenders in given regional contests both contribute to a significant rise in the level of disproportionality, with consequences that are not to be discarded for the quality of representation in France and Italy.

Résumé

Ce papier analyse l'effet du changement du format de la compétition électorale sur le niveau de distorsion entre votes et sièges enregistré dans un type particulier de système électoral : les systèmes proportionnels avec bonus majoritaires. Plus précisément, on étudie les conséquences de l'émergence d'un système partisan tripolaire dans lesquels deux des pôles sont en mesure de procéder à une coordination électorale et un des pôles est exclu sur le niveau de disproportionalité.
Ce papier utilise le cas des trois dernières élections en France et en Italie pour analyser cette question de recherche puisque les deux pays partagent des caractéristiques essentielles : ils utilisent des systèmes proportionnels avec bonus majoritaire et ont connu l'émergence ou le renforcement d'un troisième pôle électoral puissant refusant les alliances avec les autres partis dans des systèmes partisans auparavant caractérisés par le bipolarisme fragmenté. Le papier montre à travers des analyses descriptives et des régressions linéaires que la taille du troisième pôle et le caractère compétitif de la compétition entre les deux partis ou pôles se disputant le bonus contribuent à une hausse très significative du niveau de disproportionnalité, avec des conséquences qui ne sont pas à sous-estimer pour la qualité de la représentation en France et en Italie.

INTRODUCTION

In the Hauts de France (a new region composed with the former regions of Picardie and Nord-Pas-de-Calais) in 2015, in the first round of the regional elections in France, only three lists managed to pass the 10% threshold offering the ability to go in the second round: the union of the left list (led by the Socialist Party) with 17.3% of the votes, the union of the right list (led by LR and the centrists of the UDI) with 26.3% of the votes, and the National Front with 41% of the votes. In the second round, as the Socialist Party stood down in order to avoid the election of Marine Le Pen as president of the region, the LR/UDI list managed to win the region against the National Front with 56.4% of the votes against 43.6% for the National Front. As a consequence, the left was totally unrepresented in the regional council whereas the union of the right obtained 116 out of 170 seats (68%) with a bit more than a fourth of the votes in the second round. The level of disproportionality registered amounted to 34.4%. This example illustrates quite dramatically how the constraints of complex electoral systems with majority bonus can have a drastic impact on seat-vote distorsion, and therefore on political representation. In this paper, I want to discuss the consequences of the emergence of a tripolar party system with two poles able to coordinate and one excluded from pre-electoral coordination on the level of disproportionality in countries using PR with majority bonus.

One of the most important characteristics that must be examined to understand the effect of electoral systems on political competition and representation is the distortion between votes and seats. As evidenced for instance by Michael Gallagher, the average level of disproportionality between votes and seats in the Netherlands – one of the countries using the most proportional electoral system - has varied between 0.9 and 1.6 between 1946 and 2012. On the contrary, the United-Kingdom, a country using a purely majoritarian electoral system, has displayed a level of disproportionality comprised between 4.13 and 17.45 between 1945 and 2015.[1] Indeed, even if one could consider that the 'ideal' electoral system is the one that conciliates a faithful representation of the preferences of voters with the ability to form an accountable government (Carey and Hix 2011), reality always implies hard choices to balance the

[1] https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/michael_gallagher/ElSystems/Docts/ElectionIndices.pdf , consulted 2 June 2017.

two objectives. Electoral systems with majority bonus are supposed to be an attempt to combine both objectives.

Authors who have sought to explain the determinants of disproportionality have focused almost exclusively on the effects of the different electoral systems characteristics, such as district magnitude, on the translation of votes into seats (Cox 1997; Lijphart 1994; Rae 1969; Taagepera and Shugart 1989). It has now been firmly established that party systems fashion electoral systems (Rokkan 1970; Boix 1999; Colomer 2005) as much as electoral systems fashion party systems (Duverger 1951; Taagepera 2007). Recent analyses focusing specifically on the issue of disproportionality have progressively focused on complex electoral systems (Bedock and Sauger 2014; Farrell and Katz 2014; Ferrara, Herron, and Nishikawa 2005; Moser and Scheiner 2004). Yet, there are few contributions analyzing the propensity of the structure of electoral competition to affect deeply the degree of seat-vote distortion. How can the characteristics of electoral competition have a drastic effect on the level of disproportionality registered at the constituency level in given elections?

This article deals with the case of the three last regional elections in France and Italy. Dealing with regional contests is an ideal setting to understand the effect of the variation of the format of electoral competition on disproportionality. First of all, despite the fact regional elections have commonly been labeled as "second-order", they display quite a high level of electoral variation between regions and settings, as underlined by Schakel and Jeffery who have criticized the "nationalizing bias" into the study of such elections (Schakel and Jeffery 2013). Secondly, both countries use an atypical electoral system attributing a large majority bonus to the leading coalition, even though the modalities for attributing the bonus are quite different in both countries. Thirdly, France and Italy are characterized by a very fragmented electoral competition, previously structured around two camps or parties that are progressively losing ground because of the emergence or the reinforcement of a powerful third pole: the National Front in France and the Five-Star Movement in Italy. In an article on a related topic, we had shown that the strategic incentives of a proportional electoral system with majority bonus tend to imply an intermediate level of disproportionality compared to those registered in proportional and majoritarian electoral systems, and favour a bipolar and fragmented format of electoral competition (Bedock and Sauger 2014). I will show in this paper that the tripolar structure of the electoral competition as well as the fight between the two main coalitions to obtain the majority bonus have a

very important effect on the level of disproportionality registered. Indeed, the link between electoral system and disproportionality is neither stable nor linear. Beyond the mechanical effect inherent to each electoral system, the same system can generate various consequences, in particular in terms of disproportionality. More broadly, the levels – sometimes vertiginously high – of seat-vote distortion registered in the Italian and in the French case in certain regional contests question more broadly the ability to adequately and fairly represent the preferences of citizens. Whereas mixed electoral systems are supposed to represent "the best of both worlds" (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001) – representativeness and governability – this paper provides evidence, that, on the contrary, they can encourage levels of disproportionality more drastic than those registered in purely majoritarian electoral systems in certain conditions.

In the first section, I will come back briefly on the anticipated consequences of mixed electoral systems on disproportionality. The French and the Italian cases will then be presented in the second section, recalling the main characteristics of the electoral systems in use for regional elections, as well as the recent evolution of both party systems. In the third section, two hypotheses dealing respectively with the effect of the "third pole"' and or the degree of closeness of the race between the two main coalitions on the level of disproportionality are presented. In the fourth section, after a brief presentation of the main descriptive statistics of the evolution of electoral competition in the last three regional electoral contests in France and Italy, I will present the result of an OLS regression confirming the independent effect of the strength of the third pole and of the closeness of the face on the level of disproportionality.

1. SECTION ONE: MIXED ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND DISPROPORTIONALITY

Massicotte and Blais have defined mixed electoral systems as such: "we consider an electoral system to be mixed if its mechanisms involved the *combination of different electoral formulas (plurality or PR; majority or PR) for an election to a single body*" (Massicotte and Blais 1999, 345). The two authors add that mixed systems, by nature, must incorporate "opposed principles", namely a mix of majoritarian and proportional principles. The definition of Blais and Massicotte is unsatisfactory when it comes to

describe electoral systems with majority bonus such as the ones used in France and Italy for regional elections, as they do not necessarily entail different electoral formulas. Still, the very notion of proportional representation with majority bonus clearly corresponds to an electoral system "mixing" proportional and majoritarian principles. Therefore, in the remaining of the paper, proportional electoral systems with majority bonus such as those used in the French and Italian case for regional elections will be considered as mixed electoral systems, although "unconventional ones" (Bochsler and Bernauer 2014).[2] Contributions focusing specifically on the effects of mixed electoral systems on the level of disproportionality are scarce, and have tended to deal only with systems where voters have to express several votes. Their conclusions are therefore not directly applicable to the case of proportional systems with majority bonus. Still, they do provide interesting elements to understand the mechanisms that could explain the differences in levels of disproportionality registered in these systems. They focus on two types of factors: the complex mechanical effects of mixed electoral systems, and the various strategic incentives they entail.

Dealing with the effect of multiple variations of mixed electoral systems on the number of candidates and parties competing at the level of the individual constituency, various authors have put in perspective the "contamination" hypothesis, showing that the proportional and majoritarian part of mixed systems have independent effects on fragmentation and disproportionality (Ferrara, Herron, and Nishikawa 2005; Moser and Scheiner 2004). They also show that mixed systems using compensatory principles between the majoritarian and the proportional part register, unsurprisingly, lower levels of disproportionality, whereas systems in which an absolute majority of the vote is required in the majoritarian part are more disproportional than those requiring only a relative majority. Focusing specifically on the case of proportional systems with majority bonus, Bedock and Sauger have demonstrated that the central issue to analyze the level of seat-vote distortion is the mode of allocation of the majority bonus, in particular in cases in which electoral coalitions are authorized and contribute to increase party system fragmentation in the proportional part of the electoral contest. The existence of a fixed bonus rather than a variable one increases the level of disproportionality.

[2] At the national level, such systems are quite rare. They can be found in Greece, in Italy between 2006 and 2013, in San Marino, or in Armenia.

They also show that the level of bipolarization limits the level of disproportionality involved by the majority bonus (Bedock and Sauger 2014).

The other strand of research focusing on the effects of mixed electoral systems on party system characteristics has focused on the strategic incentives of mixed electoral systems rather than on the mechanical effects implied by their structural characteristics. Moser and Scheiner (2004) insist on the importance of party strategies showing that the varying level of institutionalization of political parties tempers the mechanical effects of mixed systems and can cause unexpected consequences, such as the proliferation of candidates in the majoritarian part of the election. Bocshler has analysed a series of countries using a mixed, compensatory electoral system (Italy, Albania, Lesotho and Venezuela), in which parties obtaining many seats in the majoritarian part are supposed to be penalized in the proportional part in order to obtain a relatively proportional distribution of seats, such as in the German electoral system. In reality, parties have deliberately used tactics to limit compensation between the proportional and majoritarian part, giving incentives to their voters to use split tickets in order to build larger majorities. Mechanically, these strategies have led to a rise in the level of disproportionality registered (Bochsler 2012). Comparing six Hungarian elections, Bochsler also shows that in Mixed Member Proportional Systems with positive vote transfers, the level of disproportionality depends on the interaction between the number of compensatory seats and of party system fragmentation (Bochsler 2014). Manow, using the case of Germany, reaches similar conclusions demonstrating that the proportional part of the electoral contest can actually exacerbate the level of disproportionality in the case in which many small parties present candidates in majoritarian constituencies in which they have no chance to win (Manow 2011). In the Italian case, the systematic 'hacking' by the main parties of the mechanism of the *scorporo* that was supposed to ensure the compensation between the proportional and the majoritarian part of the election have been well documented (D'Alimonte and Bartolini 2002; D'Alimonte 2005). Beyond particular cases, it has been shown that there is great variation in the level of electoral coordination depending on the type of mixed system and on the age of the democracy (Riera 2013). Dealing with PR with majority bonus, Bedock and Sauger show that the majority bonus constitutes a very strong incentive for political parties to coordinate prior to the election or during the election to form coalition in order to get the bonus (Bedock and Sauger 2014).

These contributions highlight several important conclusions. Firstly, the level of disproportionality registered in mixed electoral systems is supposed to be at an intermediate level between those using PR and those using a majoritarian system, and this level depends on the characteristics of the allocation of the bonus and of compensatory mechanisms. Secondly, the complexity inherent to mixed electoral systems involves contradictory incentives and a large room of maneuver for political parties that may temper the mechanical effects of the electoral system by adapting their strategies, in particular regarding the compensatory mechanisms between the majoritarian and the proportional part of the election. Still, one fundamental factor is curiously missing from the picture: beyond the mechanical effects of mixed systems and the strategic incentives they involve, how does the structure of electoral competition affect the levels of disproportionality registered?

2. PR WITH BONUS IN FRAGMENTED AND TRIPOLAR PARTY SYSTEMS

Before presenting the main trends in regional elections that have occurred in France and Italy since 2003 and the two hypotheses, it is important to recall briefly the main characteristics of the French and Italian party systems, and of the electoral systems in use for regional elections. Both countries are particularly interesting to understand the consequences of the format of electoral competition on disproportionality in mixed systems, because they share defining characteristics: tripolar and fragmented party systems with a third pole refusing any alliance with other parties, and electoral systems with bonus thus encouraging pre-electoral coordination.

Italy is one of the only countries in which most electoral systems at the national and the local levels use different variations of PR with majority bonus. The issue of the reform of the national electoral system is, once again, on the table after the decision of the Constitutional Court of January 2016 to cancel several major provisions of the *Italicum* adopted in 2015 to replace the electoral system in place for the 2006, 2008 and 2013 elections. Still, we can make a few conclusions on the consequences of the emergence of a strong third pole on disproportionality at the national level taking the example of the *Porcellum* electoral law that had been last used in 2013 and in which a substantial majority bonus was in place. Between 1993 and 2008, the Italian party system has been characterized by a "fragmented bipolarism" (Chiaramonte 2010), or

even by a "destructured bipolarism" (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2013). The Italian party system featured a very high level of electoral volatility and the permanent renewal of the partisan alternatives on the left and on the right. The legislative elections of 2013 have provided the clear demonstration that since 2008, the Italian party system has, yet again, undergone a deep transformation, and said farewell to bipolarism. This transformation has been confirmed by the regional elections taking place between 2013 and 2015 in Italy (Tronconi 2015). Whereas national and local elections had been characterized by the fight between two electoral poles (one pole of the center-left, one pole of the center-right) alternating in power from 1993 to 2010 or so, the Five-Star Movement has emerged as an inescapable political force in the general elections of 2013, obtaining 25.6% of the voters in the lower chamber, being the most voted party in this election. There have been several competing explanations of the emergence of the Five-Star Movement including the anti-party feeling exacerbated by Silvio Berlusconi (Donovan 2015), the general dissatisfaction with the Italian political system (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2013), or the ability of the Five-Star movement to represent popular citizen demands on several policy issues (Conti and Memoli 2015). As a consequence, the total number of votes obtained by the two main parties in 2013 has fallen to only 58.7% compared to 78.9% in 2008 (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2013).

The emergence of a very strong third pole not coordinating with any other party enables us to make several observations regarding disproportionality. Firstly, the center-left coalition that won the 2013 general elections obtained a majority bonus of 54% of the seats with only 29.5% of the votes, and only 0.4 point more than the center-right coalition. The level of disproportionality registered in 2013 in the general elections was 17.3%, three times as high as the one registered in 2008. Such a level of disproportionality can only be compared to the ones registered in majoritarian systems, such as the UK or France. This suggests the highly distortive potential of the majority bonuses when the party or the coalition coming ahead obtains a score well below 50% of the votes in a context of strong party fragmentation (Conti and Memoli 2015; Passarelli 2014). Other authors underline that the level of disproportionality in 2013 is linked to the infinitesimal gap between the two main coalitions (Baldini 2013), whereas the Five-Star Movement had chosen to run on its own. Finally, it is clear that the third pole, here the Five-Star Movement, has been the most severely penalized by the electoral system in absolute terms, in particular when compared to small parties that were part of the center-right and the center-left coalition (Conti and Memoli 2015,

530). One should add that the Italian party system is characterized by a process of de-institutionalization and de-nationalization (Vampa 2015, 2016), a trend only confirmed by the recent scissions in the Democratic Party in early 2017. This trend is particularly pronounced in the regional contests that have long been characterized by more and more differentiated regional party systems (Tronconi and Roux 2009). In practice, it means that the electoral strength of each pole in each Italian region greatly varies, and calls for an assessment of the consequences of this variation on disproportionality.

The electoral system used in Italy in most ordinary regions – although many of them have adopted more or less substantial variations that will not be presented here but are incorporated in the model presented in the following section[3] – has been put in place in 1995 with the "legge Tatarella" also instituting the direct election of the presidents of regions. Voters are given two votes: a provincial list vote, and a vote to choose a candidate for the presidency of the region elected with a plurality system. Candidates for the presidency are also head of a regional list, and all provincial lists are linked to a candidate for the presidency. 80% of the seats are allocated to provincial lists through PR, with a threshold of 3% or the requirement to be affiliated to a coalition gaining at least 5% of the list votes. 20% of the seats are allocated to regional lists. If the winner of the presidency is elected with less than 50% of the votes, all seats go to her regional list. If the winner of the regional presidency gets more than 50% of the votes, the list she is heading gets 10% of the assembly seats and the other 10% are distributed proportionally. Lists supporting the winning candidate are guaranteed 55% of the seats if the provincial lists of the coalition obtain less than 40% of the votes, 60% otherwise. If the number of seats is inferior to the 55% or 60% thresholds, new seats are created until these thresholds are met (Bedock and Sauger 2014, 102). Therefore, the "standard"' Tatarella system uses three different tiers; a bonus being simultaneously majority-ensuring and compensatory; and two electoral formulas (one proportional, the other majoritarian).

As it is the case in Italy, France has long been characterized by a "bipolar multipartism" (Bornschier and Lachat 2009), with two main poles alternating in power both at the national and at the local level in a context of relatively high fragmentation (Haegel

[3] All variations to the Tatarella law adopted over the years in Tuscany, Puglia, Calabria, Campany, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Umbria and Marche all share the defining characteristics of the "Tatarella" standard system, namely multiple tiers, compensatory bonus and the existence of two distinct electoral formulas.

2007). Contrary to what had been the case between 1993 and 2008 in Italy however, the two main French parties (the Socialist Party and the Republicans, ex-UMP) have had to deal since the mid-1980s with a strong far-right electoral contender, the National Front (FN). However, the plurality system in place at the national level for presidential and legislative elections has always greatly limited the access to office of the third pole, the National Front. Similarly, the fact that the electoral systems at the local level systematically favor the parties able to win in the second round and therefore to build alliances or to attract voters from other parties has long constituted a major difficulty for the National Front to obtain seats or municipalities (Sauger 2007). Moreover, the French electoral systems involve complex pre-electoral coordination and coalitions from which the National Front is systematically excluded (Di Virgilio, Dolez, and Laurent 2016). The French electorate has long been described as tripartite (Grunberg and Schweisguth 2003), with strong ideological differences between the voters of the Socialist Party, those of the moderate right and those of the National Front. This broad picture has greatly changed since 2007. First of all, it has been argued that the "borders" between the three electorates, and more specifically between voters of the UMP/LR and those of the National Front have tended to vanish as parties have focused more and more on immigration and cultural issues since the mid-2000s (Gougou and Labouret 2013). Secondly, the National Front has been able to become more and more often not only the third party, but also the second or even the main party according to the electoral context. The party has been continuously on the rise, obtaining 17.9% of the votes in the first round of the presidential election in 2012, 24.8% of the votes in the European elections of 2014 (making it the main party in that particular election), coming first in 71 *départements* in the elections of 2015 (Ehrhard 2016, 86), and obtaining 28.4% of the votes on average in the 2015 regional elections. According to Martin, France may be becoming a tripartite party system in which three electoral forces compete to access the second round, but in which the stronger of the three, i.e. the National Front, systematically loses against its electoral contender in the second round (Martin 2016), at least for now.

Since 2003, France uses a two-round electoral system with PR and a majority bonus to elect the regional councilors for six years. In 2013, reversing the attempt of 2010 to suppress regional and departmental councilors to replace them with "territorial councilors", a new law has consequently reduced the number of regions in France,

dropping from 22 to 13 regions[4]. The lists compete at the regional level. If a list gets the absolute majority of the votes in the first round, it obtains 25% of the seats whereas the remaining 75% are distributed proportionally to all lists obtaining at least 5% of the votes, including the winning list. If no list has an absolute majority, a second round is organized in which only the lists that got more than 10% of the votes in the first round can compete. Lists that have received between 5 and 10% of the votes in the first round are allowed to merge with the remaining lists. The list obtaining a plurality of the votes in the second round receives 25% of the seats while the rest are allocated proportionally between all lists receiving at least 5% of the votes, including the winning list (Bedock and Sauger 2014, 102). Therefore, the French regional electoral system is quite distinctive from the Italian one: there is a single regional tier, the bonus is fixed (25% of the seats) and the electoral thresholds are considerably higher than in Italy.

3. HYPOTHESES

This paper does not seek to study the pure mechanical effects of the PR with majority bonus on the level of disproportionality registered in regional elections in France and Italy. It has already been established that the higher thresholds and the existence of a large fixed bonus in France involve a higher level of disproportionality than in Italy (Bedock and Sauger 2014). Rather, we discuss the consequences of the new format of the party systems on disproportionality. Indeed, for ideological reasons, the Five-Star Movement and the National Front have been unwilling to form pre-electoral coalitions and therefore to comply by one of the strongest incentive of electoral systems with majority bonus. One should add that the two hypotheses underlined below are expected to explain the difference in disproportionality registered across electoral constituencies, and, therefore, within a single country and election, and not across countries.

H1. The stronger the third pole, the higher the level of disproportionality registered.

As already mentioned above, and based on the example of the results of the 2013 national electoral contest in Italy, it is expected that the level of disproportionality is

[4] Only the regions Île de France, Bretagne, Centre-Val de Loire, Corse, Pays de la Loire and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur have remained unchanged. Seven new regions have been created, with the fusion of two or three former regions depending on the case: Nouvelle Aquitaine, Occitanie, Auvergne-Rhône Alpes, Normandie, Hauts-de-France, Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, Grand-est. For matters of comparability, Corse has been excluded from the analysis.

higher when there is a strong third electoral pole than when only two parties / coalitions compete for the majority bonus. The rationale behind the hypothesis is quite simple: there is only one "prize" (the majority bonus), and this bonus can only go to a single pole (be it a coalition or a single party). To put it differently, and regardless of the repartition of the votes between parties, there can be only one winner. On the other hand, there can be multiple losers, namely all parties/ coalitions not obtaining the prize, which are more penalized when the punishment of not obtaining the majority bonus is distributed between several poles than when there is only one loser.

H2. The closer the competition between the two main poles, the higher the level of disproportionality registered.

Again, this second hypothesis is largely based on the observation of the results of the legislative elections of 2013 in Italy in which the race between the center-left and the center-right coalition to obtain the majority bonus in the lower chamber has been extremely tight. It is expected that when the race between the two leading electoral poles is very close, the level of disproportionality is higher than when the gap between the two main electoral contenders is higher. This again is linked to the fact that there can be only a single winning party or coalition in electoral systems with majority bonus. When the election is very disputed, it means concretely that the winning party or coalition obtains the whole prize while having only obtained a few more votes than its main contender.

What is important here is not only to test whether these hypotheses hold, but whether these two situations (separately or combined) can have a *substantial* distortive effect on the level of disproportionality. In other words, we aim to test if the variations in the levels of disproportionality registered are strong enough to consider that these systems may in certain circumstances severely restrict the access to public office to losing parties, putting a strain on the quality of political representation.

4. ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF THE THIRD POLE AND CLOSE ELECTORAL RACES ON DISPROPORTIONALITY

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Before commenting the results of the OLS regression model performed to test empirically the two hypotheses, it is enlightening to analyze the descriptive statistics for

a series of indicators of electoral competition in the three series of regional elections occurring in France and Italy during the last decade or so (Tables 1 and 2).

Several indicators of electoral competition have been quite stable across time in the Italian case (Table 1). The average gap between coalitions ranges from 16.2 to 20.1%. In other words, there tends to be quite a significant gap between the winning and the losing coalition, although the standard deviations are very high, suggesting that the level of competitiveness in each regional contest in Italy varies a great deal. This illustrates the "de-nationalization" phenomenon underlined above. Both the average number of lists obtaining less than 1% of the votes and the effective number of electoral parties (NeffV) have been stable during the three elections, with on average between 10 and 12 lists obtaining less than 1% of the votes and a number of effective parties ranging between 5.3 and 6.3. On average, the bigger party has obtained around 30% of the votes in each election. All of these indicators point toward a very fragmented electoral competition in which no party has been able single-handedly to obtain a share of votes amounting to the majority of votes.

What has changed strikingly between 2005 and 2015, on the other hand, is the level of bipolarization, and, obviously, the average strength of the third pole. In 2005 and 2010, the center-left and the center-right coalitions have been able, on average, to secure almost the totality of the votes in the majoritarian part: 96.6 and 93.2 % on average. The dispersion indicators show, furthermore, that this situation of almost perfect bipolarization was present in the totality of Italian ordinary regions. In the regional contests taking place between 2013 and 2015, on the other hand, the third pole has managed to secure on average 27% of the votes, and sometimes up to 40% in Marche. This number has been multiplied by 8 compared to the 2005 election. The level of disproportionality (calculated by the Least Square index, Gallagher 1991) has also been continuously on the rise. The seat-vote distortion was on average of 5.2% in 2005, of 6.2% in 2010, and of no less than 9.9% in 2013-15 (with a maximum of 13.9% in Marche). Indicators of dispersion also suggest that the differences across regions in terms of disproportionality have become higher across time.

In the case of France (Table 2), the gap between coalitions has become smaller in 2015, meaning that elections have become more disputed: 8.2% on average compared to 13.7% in 2004 and 17.7% in 2010. As it was the case in Italy, the fragmentation has remained quite stable with a number of effective parties around

4.5 in all three elections, and on average around eight lists gaining less than 1% of the votes in the first round. The sum of the votes obtained by the two main parties in the first round has been relatively constant (around 60%), as the sum of the votes obtained by the two main parties/coalitions in the second round (between 85% and 87.8%). What has changed on the other hand is the strength of the third pole, measured as the votes obtained by parties or coalitions not constructed around the Socialist Party or the UMP/LR. This number has risen from 12.8% in 2004 to 30% in 2015. Finally, the level of disproportionality, which was already high in 2004 and 2010 compared to Italy (11.3% and 11.5% respectively) has almost doubled in 2015, reaching 22.9%. In some regions where the Socialist Party did not stand in the second round to avoid a victory of the National Front (Hauts-de-France), the level of disproportionality has reached unprecedented levels unmatched in any election with a majoritarian electoral system: indeed, the average gap between votes and seats in this region was of 34.4%.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics of the main characteristics of the electoral competition in the regional elections in Italy, 2005-2015*

		Gap coalitions	Lists>1%	NeffV	Bipolarisation(1)	% bigger party	Third pole (2)	Lsq
Elections 2005								
	Mean	16,8	11,9	6,3	96,6	30,7	3,4	5,2
	S.D	12,1	2,4	2,4	2,6	12,5	2,6	1,3
	Minimum	0,6	8,0	3,4	90,2	15,5	0,8	2,6
	Maximum	38,2	16,0	10,3	99,2	48,8	9,8	7,2
Elections 2010								
	Mean	16,2	10,5	5,3	93,2	31,0	6,9	6,2
	S.D	10,8	2,7	1,3	3,9	6,3	4,0	2,1
	Minimum	0,4	7,0	3,7	88,8	20,8	0,0	3,9
	Maximum	32,9	16,0	7,9	100,0	42,2	11,3	9,3
Elections 2013-15								
	Mean	20,1	11,4	6,3	73,0	30,0	27,0	9,9
	S.D	13,2	2,3	1,8	8,5	8,9	8,5	2,7
	Minimum	2,8	8,0	3,6	60,0	19,5	15,0	4,1
	Maximum	40,2	16,0	8,7	85,0	46,3	40,0	13,9

Source: my own calculations based on the electoral results found on the Ministero dell'Interno.

Note: all calculations have been computed taking into account the results of the regional elections in the following Italian ordinary regions: Piemonte, Lombardy, Veneto, Liguria, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria, Marche, Lazio, Campany, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria.

(1) This figure has been computed by adding the scores obtained by the center-left and the center-right coalitions in the majoritarian part.

(2) This figure corresponds to the percentage of the votes obtained by parties not competing in the center-right and center-left coalitions in the majoritarian part.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics of the main characteristics of the electoral competition in the regional elections in France, 2004-2015*

		Gap coalitions	Lists>1%	NeffV	Bipolarisation (1st round)	Bipolarisation (2nd round)	% bigger party (1)	Third pole (2)	Lsq
Elections 2004									
	Mean	13,7	7,6	4,4	59,9	87,5	35,0	12,8	11,5
	S.D	6,8	1,4	0,6	6,8	7,1	4,6	7,2	0,8
	Minimum	2,1	5,0	2,9	47,8	78,0	27,9	0,0	9,4
	Maximum	24,0	10,0	5,7	79,2	100,0	46,3	22,0	13,3
Elections 2010									
	Mean	17,7	8,9	4,7	58,5	87,8	33,0	12,4	11,3
	S.D	7,5	2,1	1,1	14,4	19,9	8,7	7,5	2,6
	Minimum	5,8	7,0	3,8	48,1	77,1	26,4	0,0	8,1
	Maximum	35,5	11,0	5,5	68,4	100,0	41,0	21,0	13,6
Elections 2015									
	Moyenne	8,2	8,1	4,3	60,0	85,0	33,9	30,0	22,9
	S.D	6,7	0,7	0,3	4,2	10,3	4,0	9,7	6,6
	Minimum	0,3	7,0	3,7	55,4	67,6	27,9	14,0	14,1
	Maximum	21,7	9,0	4,8	68,5	100,0	40,6	45,2	34,4

Source: My own calculations based on the electoral results of the Ministère de l'Intérieur.

Note: Calculations for 2004 and 2010 have been computed taking into account the results of the regional elections in Alsace, Aquitaine, Auvergne, Basse-Normandie, Bourgogne, Bretagne, Centre, Champagne-Ardenne, Franche-Comté, Haute Normandie, Île de France, Languedoc-Roussillon, Limousin, Lorraine, Midi-Pyrénées, Nord Pas de Calais, Pays de la Loire, Picardie, Poitou-Charente, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Rhône-Alpes.

Calculations for 2015 have been computed taking into account the results of the regional elections in the new regions: Auvergne-Rhône Alpes, Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, Bretagne, Centre-Val de Loire, Grand est, Hauts-de-France, Île de France, Normandie, Nouvelle Aquitaine, Occitanie, Pays de la Loire, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur

(1) This figure has been computed taking into account the results in the first round

(2) This figure corresponds to the percentage of votes obtained by coalitions / parties not constructed around UMP/LR and PS in the second round.

Hence, descriptive statistics tend to point towards a relationship between the level of disproportionality registered in a given election and the strength of the third pole, whereas the link between disproportionality and competitiveness is not apparent in the descriptive statistics. We now need to look at the electoral results at the level of each constituency to test more systematically the two hypotheses underlined above.

4.2 Variables and regression analysis

In order to test for the effects of the size of the third pole and of the closeness of the race in each regional contest on the degree of disproportionality, I conducted a standard OLS regression with clustered standard errors. Clustered standard errors are used in order to correct for the fact that errors are related across groups and to correctly estimate the confidence intervals, the clusters being each region and the number of observations ranging from one to three. As already mentioned, the aim of this analysis is to understand, all other factors being held constant, what can explain the differences registered in terms of disproportionality across regions rather than only across countries.

The dependent variable is the least square index (Lsq), i.e. the standard measurement of seat-vote disproportionality. The unit of observation is the region for a given electoral year. The first main independent variable is the size of the third pole, i.e. the number of votes obtained by parties and coalitions not related to the center-right and the center-left in the majoritarian part in Italy, and the score obtained by parties or coalitions not led by the Socialist Party and LR/UMP in the second round in France. The second independent variable is the gap between the two leading parties or coalitions, in percentage points. For Italy, this has been calculated taking into account the results in the majoritarian part, whereas for France this has been calculated with the results of the second round. In both cases, I was focusing on the leading contest for the distribution of the majority bonus.

I added a series of control variables related to the format of party competition and to the type of electoral system in use for each regional contest. The first control variables is the level of fragmentation measured as the effective number of electoral parties (NeffV), computed using the results of the list part in Italy and of the first round in

France. I also controlled in one of the models for the size of the main electoral party, computed in the list part in Italy and in the first round in France. The idea behind these two control variables is that the effect of the size of the third pole and of the competitiveness of each race may differ according to the level of fragmentation, and should therefore be controlled for. Finally, I added a control variable related to the type of electoral system in use and divided into three categories: one for the electoral system in use in France, one for the standard Tatarella system in Italy, and one for the variations in use in a number of ordinary Italian regions (see above). This control was indispensible given the fact that the Italian and the French regional electoral systems do not have the same effects concerning the level of disproportionality due to the mode of allocation of the electoral bonus, making the French system more disproportional (Bedock and Sauger 2014).

Table 3. *Results of the OLS Regression (dependent variable: least square index)*

	Model 1	**Model 2**
Size of the third pole	0.271***	0.276***
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Gap between the two leading coalitions	-0.119***	-0.171***
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Number of effective parties	-0.256	0.912
	(0.29)	(0.15)
Bigger party		0.253
		(0.08)
Electoral system (ref. cat. : France)		
Tatarella	-5.059***	-5.506***
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Variation	-4.516***	-5.540***
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Constant	11.968***	-1.219
	(0.00)	(0.88)
N	93	93
R-square	0.71	0.72

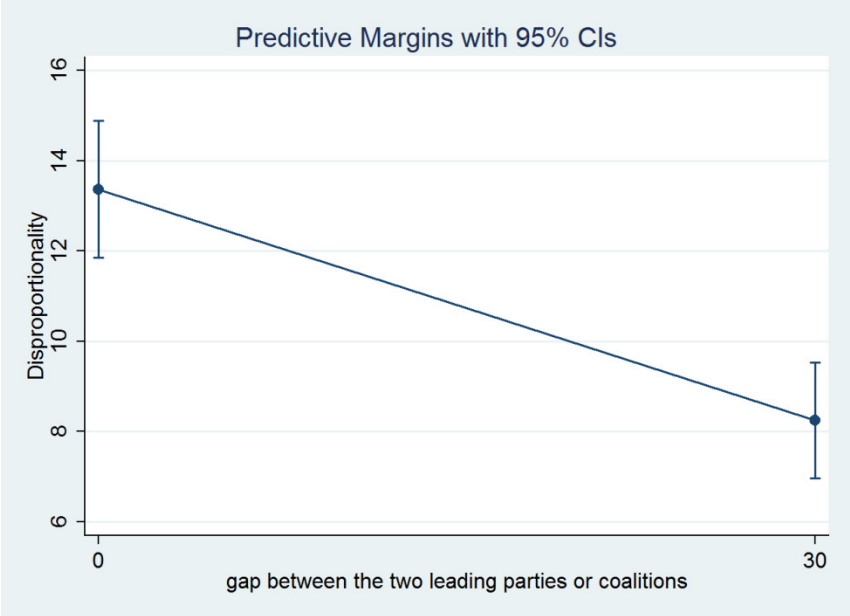
p-values in parentheses, clustered standard errors

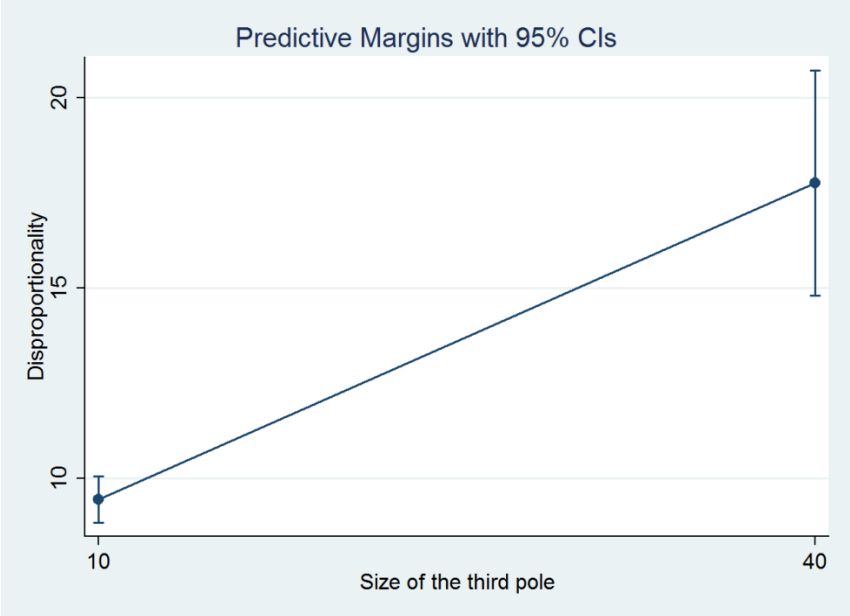
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

The results are summarized in two separate models. The two models confirm both hypotheses and show the independent effect of the level of competitiveness between the two leading coalitions and the size of the third pole on disproportionality. Both models confirm the independent effect of the size of the third pole on disproportionality, with very similar coefficients. The effect is statistically and substantially significant: when the electoral size of the third pole rises from 15% to 35% of the votes, the level of disproportionality registered rises by 5.4 points. Therefore, the decline of the bipolarization of the electoral competition both in France and Italy is clearly related to a surge in the level of disproportionality, all other factors being held constant (see Figure 1). The first model (not controlling for the size of the main party) shows that when the gap between the two coalitions rises 20 percentage points, the level of disproportionality all other factors being held constant is reduced by 2.4 points, the results being strongly statistically significant. When the size of the first party is controlled for (Model 2), the effect is even stronger: when the gap between coalitions rises by 20 percentage points is reduced by 3.7 points (Figure 1). In other words, when the gap between the two leading coalitions is wider, the level of disproportionality registered is smaller; confirming that all other things being equal, the penalty for parties not obtaining the majority bonus in close race is higher.

The control variables show that the number of effective parties gaining votes has no effect on the level of disproportionality registered, even when the size of the bigger party is also controlled for. On the other hand, and as expected, the electoral system in use has a statistically significant effect on the level of disproportionality registered: the model predicts that the level of disproportionality is respectively 5 and 4.5 points lower according to the type of system in use in Italy (model 1), and around 5.5. points lower when the size of the main party is also controlled for (Model 2).

Figure 1. *Predicted effect of the size of the third pole and the gap between coalitions on disproportionality*





5. CONCLUSION

To conclude this paper, we have shown that the French and Italian examples seriously call into question the ability of so-called "majority-assuring but minority-friendly" electoral systems (D'Alimonte 2015), combining PR and majority bonus, to ensure fair electoral representation when there is a strong third pole considered as an

unacceptable coalition partner by the rest of the parties. Indeed, the very fact that the same electoral systems can entail levels of disproportionality varying up to threefold or more according to the format of party competition is quite problematic, as it involves that the effects of these systems is contingent to the format of electoral competition. In both countries where the National Front and the Movimento Cinque Stelle seem to be here to stay and to remain in the coming years one of the strongest - if not the strongest - electoral contender, electoral systems with majority bonus appear to add a strong element of uncertainty and to foster in some circumstances unacceptable levels of disproportionality rather than reconciling "representation and accountability" (Ganghof 2016). It is useful to recall that the new regional electoral system in France in 2003 had been almost explicitly created to enable the formation of stable majorities *without* the National Front[5], betting on the fact that this party would never be in position of winning alone in the second round. On the light of recent developments, one can wonder whether the promotion of such electoral systems in order to keep away from power undesirable third poles does not amount to playing the sorcerer's apprentice.

More than that, this calls into question the ability of such electoral systems to perform the role often assigned to institutions, namely, to reduce uncertainty. North considers for instance that "institutions reduce uncertainty by providing a structure to everyday life" (North 1990, 3). They are, therefore, supposed to provide stability and predictability in human interaction. When applied to the specific case of electoral system, this means that one of the roles of any electoral system is to provide relatively readable patterns that are either the consequence of their mechanical effects or of the behavior of political actors. What is striking in the case of Italy and France, however, is that the same electoral system may involve very different consequences across elections.

[5] See for instance the debates in the National Assembly regarding the *loi relative à l'élection des conseillers régionaux* of 2003: http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/12/cri/2002-2003/20030142.asp (consulted on the 15th of March 2017).

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