

# Federalism and Decentralisation in Italy

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*PSA Conference, Edinburgh, March-April 2010*

## **Abstract**

Since the mid-1990s, a remarkable preference for federalism has emerged across the political spectrum in Italy, while political elites have taken concrete measures to decentralise decision-making to lower levels. Yet this does not reflect a genuine conversion of Italian elites away from unitary government, but rather a strategic response to pressures from regionalist parties and voters dissatisfied with the political class. The rise of the Northern League converged with a party system crisis in the 1990s to generate momentum for decentralization. Constitutional reform has been subordinated to ordinary politics, as governing majorities approve unilateral revisions to the Constitution. Yet these partisan reforms must be ratified by voters in confirmative referendums, which saw the centre-left devolution reform approved in 2001, while the centre-right federal reform was firmly rejected in 2006, although with a narrow majority in northern Italy. Despite the national elite and public consensus on federalism, Italian voters and politicians suffer from contradictory pressures and expectations, deepening the territorial divide. Recent attempts by Italian parties to agree the principles of “fiscal federalism” highlight their inability to address controversial questions such as the effective provision of public services and the levying of taxation across the national territory. This reveals the shallow commitment of elites and voters to genuine federal solutions as a response to the deeper socio-economic and political cleavages in Italian society.

## **Federalism and Decentralisation in the Italian State**

Since the mid-1990s, the Italian state has been undergoing a complex process of decentralisation. So far, this has resulted in devolution of competences from the central state to regional governments, and an enhancement in the leadership capacity of mayors and regional presidents vis-à-vis their legislatures. A major constitutional reform (2001) approved by the centre-left coalition gave more policy competences to the Italian regions, and restricted the power of intervention by the central state. Minor constitutional amendments agreed by most parties allowed for the direct election of regional presidents (1999, 2001). Ordinary legislation passed by centre-left governments (Bassanini Laws, Bindi reform) and centre-right ones (La Loggia Law) has completed these reforms and given regions the administrative capacity to carry out their new functions. Despite the apparent conversion of almost the whole political class to federalism, a genuine federalization of the state is still unrealized. A radical proposal for Constitutional reform sponsored by the Northern League and the centre-right coalition (2006) included a federal reform of the Italian parliament, semi-presidentialism at central level, and further measures towards regional devolution. Although approved by the governing majority, it was firmly rejected by voters in a nationwide referendum (2006), although narrowly supported by a majority of voters in northern regions (excluding Emilia-Romagna). Italian parties have since converged on framework proposals for ‘fiscal federalism’, but these do not amount to genuine fiscal decentralization, and represent a belated attempt to confront the vexed issue of territorial financing. Four factors explain this failure.

First, below the surface consensus, each party interprets federalism differently, displaying a shallow understanding of its logic and unrealistic expectations about how federalism can accommodate political and socio-economic cleavages. The absence of competing nationalisms and a strong unitary political culture in Italy means federal principles are poorly discussed and weakly understood, while the apparent federal consensus holds back the kind of concrete understanding reached through political contestation.

Second, constitutional reform is consistently subordinated to partisan politics although one of the motivations of reform has been to overcome popular dissatisfaction with the political class. The main statewide parties adopted calls for federalism and decentralization in response to the electoral challenge of the Northern League, or as a means to co-opt it as a coalitional partner. Partisan advantage is a major motivation for the competing reforms approved by centre-left and centre-right coalitions, a tendency that can be traced back to the earlier reforms that instituted regional governments in Italy between the 1940s and 1970s (Amoretti, 2002; Mazzoleni, 2009).

Third, federal reform has fallen foul of the deep-seated territorial cleavages in Italy. While voters support federalism in principle, southern voters are wary of anything sponsored by the Northern League (*Lega Nord*), which they suspect of undermining territorial solidarity and reducing financial support to the poorer South. The *Lega* has had a defining impact on political culture in northern Italy, where federal reforms are strongly desired by voters, although with unrealistic expectations about its merits in terms of administrative efficiency and lower taxation. Like its statewide counterparts, the *Lega* has taken an inconsistent and opportunistic approach to the federal question. It has consistently sought to scupper all attempts at incremental reform, and insists on its centrality to the process of negotiating regional autonomy. Genuine federal reform on a consensual basis would probably undermine the distinct *raison d'être* of the *Lega*, combative protest party that nevertheless participates in the Italian government as part of the centre-right coalition (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005). Italian parties are unlikely to achieve convincing incremental reforms to the state apparatus without *Lega* pressure, given the divergences of views within statewide parties, the intense competition between centre-left and centre-right coalitions, and the homeostatic tendency of parliamentary politics. But continued use of federal reform as a political ball game risks further voter disillusionment with the Italian political class.

Fourth, constitutional reform faces steep institutional obstacles unless there is broad cross-party support. Constitutional reforms can be adopted in Italy if both houses of Parliament approve them in two sittings, three months apart (the second time by absolute majority). However, if the parliamentary majority is less than two-thirds, then a confirmative referendum can be demanded by a fifth of Deputies, five regional councils, or fifty thousand electors. This made reform difficult under the old regime, when proportional representation encouraged fragmentation. With a majoritarian system in place since the 1990s, constitutional change can be pushed through by a governing coalition, but easily challenged by referendum when it lacks the support of opposition parties. Constitutional reform also needs to be given substance in enabling laws and decrees, which can be challenged at the Constitutional Court. There have been moments

when opposing Italian parties cooperated on Constitutional reform: after the Second World War; during the establishment of regional governments in the 1970s; and after the party system collapsed in the early 1990s. In recent years, governments have pushed through Constitutional reforms using partisan majorities, leading either to incomplete implementation by the succeeding government, or to the revoking of the reform in the confirmative referendum. More recently, government and opposition have agreed on the principles of fiscal federalism, although its implementation must still be determined by the incumbent government, so unlikely to be freed from partisan calculations.

## **Regional Government in Italy**

Federal ideas have a long history in Italy, having been discussed at the time of unification, during the late nineteenth century, after the First World War and again after the fall of Fascism in 1943-6 (Sabetti, 2000; Cuiffioletti, 1994; Zablatt, 2007). The 1948 Constitution placed a strong emphasis on civil equality and social rights, with a modernized and democratic nation-state as the vehicle for their realization; this pointed towards centralization and uniformity. The governing Christian Democrats (DC), still inspired by subsidiarity notions, nevertheless favoured regional decentralization, while the other main force, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), were Jacobin centralists that supported a powerful central state. A short-lived liberal party, the *Partito d'Azione*, inherited the Cattaneo tradition of federal autonomy, but was rapidly squeezed out as the party system polarized. Even before the Italian constitution was drawn up, Sicily had adopted its own home-rule statute, while regionalist demands emerged in the bi-lingual border regions of northern Italy. The solution adopted was highly asymmetrical, with Special Status recognised for the island regions of Sicily and Sardinia, as well as the bi-lingual regions of Val d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige, and later also Friuli-Venezia-Giulia. The rest of the country was divided into 15 Ordinary Status regions that would eventually be granted lesser powers, a compromise between federalists and supporters of administrative regionalism (Ferlandino and Molinari, 2009). With the outbreak of the Cold War in 1948 and the expulsion of PCI from the Italian government, the country entered into a long period of DC ascendancy, which was gradually eroded but only ended with the party system collapse in 1994. The DC soon abandoned their commitment to regionalism, fearing the creation of PCI strongholds in the "Red Belt" of central Italy, where the party was powerful and controlled most large municipalities. Excluded from the central government, PCI pushed for the establishment of regional governments, which it could use to showcase its own capacity for national leadership (Bull, 1987). With the issue so polarized, the establishment of Ordinary Status regions was postponed until the advent of 'centre-left' coalition governments between DC and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) in the 1960s and 1970s. Although PSI supported regionalisation as part of a broader reform of Italian politics, it interpreted this as a form of administrative decentralisation rather than a move towards federalism (Mazzoleni, 2009). The regional governments that emerged lacked clear policy competences, remained entirely dependent on the central state for resources, were hampered by weak institutional leadership, and soon became territorial emanations of the discredited 'partitocracy' (Hine, 1996).

From its inception, regional government in Italy was undermined by continuing centralist

tendencies. The political parties maintained close control of their regional branches, putting together electoral lists in Rome, and controlling resources and administration at the central level. Civil society remained rooted in national or local networks, producing 'regions without regionalism' (Pastori, 1980), or the 'paradox of regions' (Trigilia, 1991). Centralisation proved ineffective in overcoming the deep economic and social disparities among regions, leaving Italy as a country of missed unification (*unificazione mancata*). There was no coherent policy for regional economic management but rather a system of 'extraordinary interventions' for the south, focused on the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*. Run in the early years by a modernizing technical elite, it gradually came under the domination of the political networks of the governing parties, with their practices of patronage and clientelism (Graziano, 1984). Clientelism underpinned a mode of territorial management that discouraged local initiative and took all major issues back to the centre, while entrenching the political class as the essential intermediaries between centre and periphery (Keating, 1988). Some regional governments developed higher levels of institutional performance than others (Putnam et al., 1985; 1993) but generally failed to break establishment patterns of clientelist intermediation, especially in southern Italy where clientelism became the dominant mode of political exchange for governing parties (Allum, 1973; Parisi and Pasquino, 1980)

### **The Return of Regional Politics**

This static picture continued until the party system crisis of the early 1990s, and was only punctured by pressure from the *Lega Nord*, created in 1989 from the fusion of regional protest movements by the charismatic Umberto Bossi (Biorcio, 1997). Gaining impetus from resentment towards southern Italians and the transfer of resources from northern taxpayers to poorer southern regions, the *Lega* had an ambiguous relationship to the existing regional governments, seen as relics of the *Risorgimento* and tools of the *partitocrazia*. The *Lega* initially favoured a confederal solution in the form of three macro-regions, an idea first mooted in the nineteenth century as an alternative to a single Italian state. During the 1990s Bossi established total control over the party and expelled internal opponents (including the party's left wing), obtaining wide freedom of manoeuvre. The *Lega* participated in the first Berlusconi government (1994-5) but brought it down within a months, then veered towards separatist positions (Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2001), before re-joiningg the centre-right coalition in 1999 after obtaining the promise of federal reform. Anti-southern rhetoric was replaced by strident opposition to Muslim and East European immigrants, combined with strong Euro-scepticism. The party has since maintained two distinct discourses, a more crude and vocal one for its electoral constituencies, and a more pragmatic governing stance in Rome, allowing it to govern as part of the centre-right coalition, without alienating its more militant wing (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005). The *Lega* has put down strong roots in northern Italy, taking over many political networks of the old DC (Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2001), in the process transforming party competition along territorial lines (Shin and Agnew, 2008).

Yet federalist proposals are not solely a response to electoral challenges. Arguments for regional decentralization are also advanced on good government grounds. Many political and social actors have hoped that by breaking the nexus that allows local politicians to

extract resources from the centre, decentralization could undermine entrenched clientelism, although the practice of regional government since the 1990s has tended rather to entrench clientelist practices (Wilson, 2009). A related argument is based on efficiency and the need to manage an under-performing bureaucracy; again this assumes that better performance can be gained in the regions. Institutional performance in the Italian regions remains extremely uneven (Putnam et al., 1993; Vassallo, 2009), while decentralization has led to an expansion and duplication of government, rather than its streamlining and simplification. The central bureaucracy has not been reduced in cost or size, and largely performs the same functions, while sub-national government remains a major source of political patronage and public employment. Finally, decentralization is widely backed as a democratizing measure, introducing a more participative and responsive form of policy-making and administration. Italian parties have only paid lip service to the notion of grassroots democracy, but in the 1990s they converged on the necessity of direct election of sub-national leaders. This is a rare case of a popular institutional reform in Italy, which contributed to the decentralizing process by creating visible leaders intent on increasing their institutional power and wresting autonomy from national party elites (Fabbrini, 2001; Fabbrini and Brunazzo, 2003).

As elsewhere in Europe, there has been a move away from ‘top-down’ centralized regional development policies towards ‘bottom-up’ development strategies based on local initiative. The single European market further undermines old-style regional policies based on cross-subsidization and integrating regions into national markets, with more emphasis on inter-regional competition within European markets. This ‘new regionalism’ is taken up in wealthier regions of northern Italy as a way of disengaging from their poorer compatriots in the South (Keating, 1998). It emphasizes the need for lagging regions to reduce their dependency on transfers and improve their competitive potential, with a key role for institutions and political leadership in achieving this outcome (Piattoni, 1998). Italian regional policy is increasingly conducted within the framework of EU regional policy, which may be another force for reform, with its requirements for transparency and accountability (Bull and Baudner, 2004; Fargion et al, 2006).

Welfare state reform in Europe is also taking on a territorial dimension, with regions emerging as a key level for planning and rationalization. The main task of Italian regions has always been the management of the health service, and further decentralization since the 1990s has been a means of forcing them to use their resources more effectively without being bailed out by central government. The fiscal squeeze imposed by the European Stability Pact, as part of the conditions for Italy entering the Euro, made this more difficult and put a renewed emphasis on fiscal responsibility. In reality, regional governments are unable to balance their health deficits, and continue to be bailed out by the central government, triggering a new elite consensus on the need for “fiscal federalism”, interpreted as a standardisation of expenditure costs rather than genuine financial autonomy.

All the main state-wide parties in Italy have incorporated federal reform into their programmes, but continue to interpret this in different ways. The centre-left *Partito Democratico* (PD) embraces the theme as a necessity to compete more effectively in the

north, but its vision of federalism looks more like administrative decentralization. The party places strong emphasis on the need for uniform levels of services and entitlements, and views federalism as a way to improve administrative efficiency (PD, 2008). The *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista* (PRC) emphasizes equality above all, generally opposing federalism as a ‘trojan horse’ for neo-liberal reform (Cento Bull, 2002), but the party is less significant after losing all its parliamentary seats in the 2008 election. The centre-right *Popolo della Libertà* (PdL) is a fusion of the post-Fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN), a centralist party with strong support in southern Italy, and Berlusconi’s personal party *Forza Italia* (FI), strong in the northern regions of Lombardy and Veneto as well as parts of the south, notably Sicily. Support for the Union of Christian Democrats (UDC) is concentrated in southern Italy, where many of its regional barons are in favour of greater autonomy, prompting internal differences on the issue. As the Italian party system has reconstituted on bipolar lines between the centre-right and the centre-left, both sides have become internally divided on issues relating to territorial government.

### **The Progress of Reform**

The political opportunity for regional reform was provided by the crisis of the party system in the early 1990s, which eventually gave way to an alternation of centre-left and centre-right coalitions. A 1993 law introduced direct election of mayors, to give greater visibility and accountability to local government, and loosen the grip of political parties over municipal politics (Fabbrini, 2001). The popularity of this reform prompted Italian parties to agree a similar direct election of regional presidents, again approved with strong cross-party support (Fabbrini and Brunazzo, 2003). In the late 1990s, the Bassanini laws provided for the transfer of powers and responsibilities, while an all-party commission, the *Bicamerale*, sought a broader constitutional framework for them. This phase of cooperation ended when Silvio Berlusconi pulled out of the *Bicamerale* and PRC brought down the Prodi government in 1998. The centre-left Amato government (2000-1) introduced its own Constitutional reform, approved unilaterally and endorsed in a confirmative referendum held in 2001. By this time, Berlusconi had returned to power with the support of the Northern League, which insisted on *la devolution* as the price for coalitional backing. After years of intra-coalitional negotiations, a package deal on Constitutional reform was approved unilaterally by the centre-right government in 2005, but defeated in a confirmative referendum held in 2006. After a brief and unstable interlude with the second Prodi government (2006-2008), Berlusconi was restored to power after the 2008 general election. In the following year, Italian parties agreed on the principles for implementing ‘fiscal federalism’, with framework legislation approved in Parliament that did not enter into contentious details.

### **Bicameral Commission (1996-8)**

In 1996 an all-party committee of both chambers, the *Bicamerale* was set up to examine a broader reform of the Constitution, in which the territorial dimension would feature prominently. The *Lega*, which had entered its secessionist phase and sensed the trap of incremental reform, boycotted most of the proceedings and sought to divide the participants on key issues (Bull and Pasquino, 2007). Along with PRC, the *Lega*

presented thousands of amendments to the text to try and obstruct progress. As the *Bicamerale* moved towards consensus on a range of issues, including more regional autonomy and a stronger Prime Minister, Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* withdrew its support in an attempt to bring down the centre-left government in 1998. Shortly afterwards, PRC withdrew its support from the Prodi government, but a new centre-left coalition was re-constituted under Massimo d'Alema, leader of the *Democratici di Sinistra*. Many of the proposals of the *Bicamerale* relating to decentralisation taken up by the centre-left coalition in its 2001 Constitutional reform (see below).

### **Bassanini and Bindi Reforms (1997-2000)**

The Bassanini administrative reforms (1997-9), passed by the centre-left Prodi government with broad parliamentary support, devolved competences to the regions and municipalities in line with existing Constitutional provisions. This included all administrative responsibilities confined to their territories, but excluded key transversal competences and major infrastructure projects. The legislation took the form of a series of laws and decrees, with actual transfers of personnel and resources negotiated individually (Gilbert, 2000). Although not as radical as its exponents claimed, the Bassanini reforms increased the administrative capacity for regions in the design and allocation of public services. They were followed up by the Bindi reforms (1999-2000), which completed the regionalisation of health-care management, already initiated under the Amato government in 1992 (Maino, 2001). The term federalism did not feature in either law, but entered sharply into the political debate, with some politicians and commentators talking of 'administrative federalism', although many authors saw this as misleading (Baldi and Baldini, 2008). Linked to the Bindi reforms was a new system of regional finance in 2000, with the assignment of certain tax revenues to the regions, including the proceeds of a new business tax (IRAP). Yet this was far from a system of fiscal federalism: regions continued to rely on central transfers or proceeds from state income taxes for a majority of their operating income.

### **Direct Election of Regional Presidents (1999-2001)**

A Constitutional amendment in 1999 introduced the direct election of regional presidents in the 15 Ordinary Status regions. Unlike subsequent Constitutional reforms, it was supported by all main parties and accompanied by legislation on the internal reorganization of regional governments (Baldini and Vassallo, 2001). A Constitutional revision in 2001 extended the reform to Special Status regions, except for Val d'Aosta and the province of Bolzano. Presidents gained the sole power to choose or dismiss their executive; the terms of presidents and legislatures became tied together; and the coalition of parties linked to the winning presidential candidate was guaranteed a majority of seats in the legislature. These reforms aimed to strengthen regional leadership, by making it impossible for parties to replace presidents mid-way through their legislative term, a system modeled on the direct election of Italian mayors (Fabbrini, 2001). Regional presidents could use the threat of dissolving the legislature as a way to control the disruptive behaviour of recalcitrant governing parties (Fabbrini and Brunazzo, 2003), and in fact these reforms stabilized regional presidencies, with no incumbents dismissed by

their legislatures since the reform was approved. Regions can also frame new statutes of autonomy that outline their form of regional government, competences and values. Unlike Spanish statutes of autonomy, which have quasi-Constitutional status, Italian statutes remain strictly subordinate to Constitutional laws, and cannot lead to new competences or resources being granted. The resulting process of statute reform in Italy has generated little interest, except among unscrupulous politicians who used it to increase the number of seats in the regional legislature. Since 1999 regions can also develop their own electoral systems. Two regional legislatures sought to develop hybrid systems that mixed the direct election of regional presidents with the possibility for regional parliaments to replace them, but the Constitutional Court struck these provisions down, insisting either on direct election or indirect election of the president. An attempt by legislators in Friuli-Venezia Giulia to substitute direct election of regional presidents with indirect election by the legislature was overwhelmingly rejected in a 2003 referendum, so never attempted elsewhere. The few regions that changed their electoral systems only increased the legal threshold to reduce parliamentary fragmentation, and in Tuscany abolished preference voting (Chiaromonte and Tali Barbieri, 2007).

### **Devolution and Constitutional Reform (2000-2001)**

Although Italian parties had failed to negotiate a Constitutional reform package during the *Bicamerale* (1996-8), this option was resurrected by the governing centre-left coalition after its heavy defeat in the 2000 regional elections. However, this became focused on regional devolution rather than a broader reform of the political system, as the *Bicamerale* had envisaged. The 2000 regional elections had seen the *Lega* re-join the centre-right coalition, winning in all contested northern regions and threatening to wipe out the centre-left coalition in northern Italy for the 2001 general election. In a desperate attempt to under-cut the *Lega* and contain the electoral damage, the centre-left parties rushed through a Constitutional reform between September 2000 and April 2001, offering the prospect of concrete decentralising reforms to northern voters. Much of the content was based on the *Bicamerale* proceedings (see above). The reform was nevertheless forced through at the end of legislature with the sole votes of the governing coalition, infuriating the centre-right and setting a precedent for unilateral revision of the Constitution (Cento Bull, 2002).<sup>1</sup> The centre-piece was a new Title V of the Constitution, which declared that the Italian state was ‘composed of’ regions, provinces and communes, whereas the original clause has said that it was ‘divided’ into them. Equally radical in appearance was a clause listing the competences of the central government, with regions given all residual competences. A clause in the 1948 Italian Constitution, allowing Parliament to over-ride regional laws in the name of the general interest and widely abused by central legislators and bureaucrats alike, was repealed despite appearing in the *Bicamerale* text. Ordinary Status regions could also apply for additional powers, taking them up to the level of Special Status regions, subject to approval by an absolute majority in both houses of Parliament. Although this has never been granted, it creates the possibility for asymmetry in regional competences between Ordinary Status

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<sup>1</sup> The imminence of a general election also accounts for some of the numerous lacunae in the text, which have been ignored rather than remedied.

regions.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the central state retained important competences in matters like the environment and competition, which the Constitutional Court was to interpret broadly as ‘horizontal’ powers, cutting across sectoral responsibilities devolved to the regions (Morrone, 2009). The state also retained responsibility for ensuring ‘essential levels of services needed to ensure civil and social rights throughout the territory’ and the power to intervene to assure these (Article 120), constituting a new but more limited national interest clause, justified by leftist principles. There was a large and poorly defined area of concurrent competences (Cento Bull, 2002), and it was not clear whether regions would be able to take over administration of central state services in their areas (Falcon, 2001a). Like so many of the reforms we are considering, the new Title V required detailed enabling laws to make a reality out of its many provisions, as well as a fundamental shift in administrative organisation and practice, neither of which was to emerge over the ensuing decade.

The 2001 Constitutional reform introduced the principle of “fiscal federalism” (Article 118), but did not reform the existing system of territorial financing, which consisted of a share of income and business taxes to regional governments, with an inter-territorial compensation fund to provide equalization. There was also an implicit tension between the new provisions and the explicitly unitary language in the rest of the Constitution (Pizzetti, 2003; D’Aloia, 2003). Reform of the Senate was postponed to a future date, since this would have undermined the status of current incumbents, making it more difficult to approve the Constitutional reform (Bull and Pasquino, 2007). This omission left the regions without any significant mechanisms for “shared rule” at central level, necessary in a federal system to complement their “self rule” at regional level (Fabbrini and Brunazzo, 2003). Shared rule for the regions in Italy is limited to a consultative State-Regions Conference, convoked at the request of the central government to discuss policy implementation, but whose agenda is fixed and set by the central government.<sup>3</sup>

The centre-right parties were in a quandary over whether to support the centre-left reform. Although the *Lega* and *Forza Italia* supported devolution in principle, they opposed the centre-left reform for partisan reasons. Although more centralist in orientation, AN and UDC were keen to make electoral inroads in northern Italy. The 2001 general election saw these parties win and form a governing coalition, prompting the need for a coordinated position in view of the confirmative referendum. At the time of its approval, the main parties denounced the Constitutional reform as ‘false federalism’, but largely abstained in the parliamentary vote, promising a ‘genuine’ federal reform upon return to government. Since the reform lacked a two-thirds majority, a confirmative referendum was easily called. The ensuing referendum campaign saw the centre-left unite in favour of their reform, while denouncing the proposed centre-right reform as ‘egotistic regionalism that lacks solidarity’ (Antonio Bassolino, regional president of Campania, *La*

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<sup>2</sup> Before its abrupt demise, the second Prodi government (2006-8) had in fact been negotiating on this issue with the region of Lombardy (Mazzoleni, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> A transitory clause provided that until Senate reform was achieved, regions and local governments would be invited to participate in the parliamentary committee on regional affairs. If a bill falling within regional or shared competence was not acceptable to this committee, it could be passed only by absolute majorities in both chambers.

*Repubblica*, 1 October 2001) and would create a two-speed Italy (Francesco Rutelli, prime ministerial candidate, *La Repubblica*, 18 April, 2001). Despite papering over internal divisions and opposing the unilateral nature of the centre-left reform, *Forza Italia* was deeply divided on this issue. Some prominent regional presidents (e.g. Roberto Formigoni in Lombardy, Raffaele Fitto in Puglia) supported it as an incremental step towards a federal state, while others followed the party line and opposed it (e.g. Giancarlo Galan in Veneto). Since the reform gave the *Lega* no centrality in the negotiation of regional autonomy, Bossi instructed party militants to campaign against it as a measure of “false federalism”, and invited party supporters to abstain in the referendum, declaring that a vote “wasn’t even worth the price of petrol” (*La Repubblica* 08/10/2001). With many centre-right voters staying at home and media coverage occupied by the 9-11 attacks and the Afghan war, the turnout was a mere 34 per cent. The reform nevertheless passed by a clear margin of 64.2 to 35.8 per cent (Bull and Pasquino, 2007). A majority supported the Constitutional reform in every region except tiny Val d’Aosta, although the YES vote was lower in northern regions (61.9 per cent) than in central (68.7 per cent) or southern (62.9 per cent) regions.<sup>4</sup>

BOX I HERE

### **Failed Federalism through Constitutional Reform (2001-6)**

The nature of the 1999 coalitional agreement between the *Lega* and the centre-right coalition bound the latter to a Constitutional reform aimed at transforming Italy into a federal state. However, moderate federalism was achieving consensus across the political spectrum, prompting even AN and UDC to overcome their initial reluctance and support it: AN as part of a broader conversion to political respectability, and UDC to satisfy the autonomist demands of regional party barons. *Forza Italia* had developed a powerful autonomist faction in northern Italy as well as in Sicily, although the opposing demands of northern and southern constituencies made it difficult to approve a reform that would have immediate financial consequences in terms of fiscal transfers and welfare provision, so the vexed question of territorial financing was left out. Overall, the prospects for a Constitutional reform sponsored by the *Lega* were much better than in the 1990s, despite the divergence of views within the governing coalition. The latter sought first to implement the centre-left reform. The Minister for Regional Affairs, Enrico La Loggia (*Forza Italia*) formulated the enabling legislation necessary to bring in the new Title V of the Constitution, a choice that illustrates how shallow the opposition of *Forza Italia* had been to the centre-left reform. The La Loggia law (2003) sought to clarify the new distribution of competences and specify the role of the regions in the making and

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<sup>4</sup> Northern regions are intended as Lombardy, Veneto, Piedmont, Liguria, Val d’Aosta, Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, and Trentino-Alto-Adige. Central regions are intended as Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria, Marche, and Lazio. Southern regions are intended as Abruzzo, Basilicata Calabria, Campania, Molise, Puglia, and the island regions of Sicily and Sardinia. Data was obtained from the *Politica in Italia* yearbook series (Istituto Cattaneo, Bologna). Aggregations and calculations are by the author.

application of European laws; but again much of the detail was postponed to future decrees. It did not address the problem of cross-cutting national laws, but did allow the state to transfer administrative competences by agreement with the regions, and further expanded the already large field of concurrent laws.

To maintain political momentum for Constitutional reform, and to highlight the centrality of the *Lega* in this process, Bossi became Minister of Institutional Reform, entrusted with advancing proposals for *la devoluzione*. He interpreted his brief according to a radical federalist logic aimed at reducing concurrent laws and giving regions ‘exclusive’ competences in health, education and police. Although played up for the *Lega* electorate, the actual provisions were much less ambitious, restricted to health service organization; management of some schools; limited influence over aspects of the educational curriculum; and control over local police. In any case, the listing of regional powers was inconsistent with the principle of residual powers provided in the new Title V. Further confusion was introduced when, at the end of the new list of powers, an article added ‘any other power not expressly reserved to the State’, making it uncertain whether the list of regional powers was definitive or illustrative (Editorial, *Le Regioni*, 2003). The idea of *devolution* was inherited from Scotland, to illustrate the “Celtic” nature of the Padanian people and assert their demand for self-government, but above all to differentiate the *Lega* from the mainstream pro-federal consensus of the state-wide parties. Yet the most radical aspect of this legislation was the reform of the Italian parliament, which proposed to end the symmetrical bicameralism between Chamber of Deputies and Senate, and institute an asymmetrical bicameralism with a reduced number of parliamentarians. The Italian Senate would continue to be elected in multi-member regional constituencies, preventing it from becoming a genuinely “territorial chamber”, yet elections would now occur on a rotating basis concurrently with those of regional legislatures. The Senate would no longer be able to give or withhold confidence in the government, but would retain final authority to determine laws in matters of concurrent competence between region and state. This would have created considerable confusion, given the vast areas of concurrent competences, and the impossibility of determining exclusive jurisdiction in legislation that cross-cut policy areas (Cammelli, 2004). The number of parliamentarians was to be reduced in both chambers, although only after several legislatures. Delegates of regional and local legislatures would have participated in Senate proceedings, but without the capacity to vote. This clashed with the demands of regional presidents in northern Italy (and many *Lega* politicians), who demanded a greater role for regional governments in central policy-making, through a delegated upper house like the German *Bundesrat*.

To balance the concessions to the Northern League, more centralizing measures were brought in, which made for a highly contradictory reform. The clause allowing the central state to over-rule regional laws in the national interest was re-instated, and the clause on national standards and levels of service was retained. The clause allowing Ordinary Regions to gain asymmetrical powers was deleted, and the central government regained the power (lost in the 2001 reform) to suspend regional laws pending an appeal to the Constitutional Court. Seventeen fields were declared to be of exclusive state competence, many cutting across regional competences (Ferrari, 2006) and there was no comprehensive reform of regional finance to accompany the legislation, a contentious

issue again left to a later stage. Berlusconi and AN obtained a strengthened and directly elected Prime Minister. UDC obtained an electoral system reform for general elections that reverted to proportional representation, yet awarded a bonus for the winning coalition to satisfy other coalitional partners. In fact the electoral system was the only surviving feature of this package, since it was enacted through ordinary legislation.<sup>5</sup> The Constitutional reform and the new electoral system were both widely criticized by jurists, academics, business associations, trade unions, and elder statesmen. Many observers noted the confused nature of these reforms, resulting from efforts to satisfy the competing demands of all parties (Cammelli, 2003; Vassallo, 2006; Sartori, 2009). Jurists and academic commentators pointed out that the word devolution in the UK referred to a process of decentralisation by the sovereign Parliament, which was free to take powers back at will; just the opposite of the principle of constitutional entrenchment and exclusivity that Bossi claimed for his reform (Falcon, 2002).

The centre-left saw an opportunity to unite and oppose the reform, which it presented as a divisive threat to equality, citizenship and standards, talking up the danger of twenty separate health and education systems, and contrasting it with their own ideas of 'solidaristic federalism' (Romano Prodi, RAI news 30 March 2005). They accused the centre-right of being hostages of the *Legha* and undermining territorial solidarity, although the reform did not address territorial financing. They heavily criticised proposals for a strong prime minister, although many of them had supported this option in the *Bicamerale*. The three main trade union federations were equally opposed to what they saw as a divisive reform and an affront to the unitarist social spirit of the Italian constitution. *Confindustria*, the main business group, was also sceptical, seeing devolution as a recipe for more bureaucracy and governmental waste, but kept a low profile in public debate to avoid alienating northern businesses close to the centre-right. The Catholic Church was critical of the threat to inter-regional solidarity and the unilateral way the process was managed, prompting UDC (its closest political ally) to distance itself from the reform.

Following a pattern set by the 2001 Constitutional reform, a confirmative referendum was called by the parties in opposition, and held after they had come to power. The second Prodi government (2006-8) and its centre-left parties campaigned compactly for a rejection in this referendum, which saw a relatively high turnout (53.7 per cent), especially when compared to the 2001 Constitutional referendum and recent abrogative referendums.<sup>6</sup> The reform was voted down by almost two to one (61.3 to 38.7 per cent), but this time there was a marked territorial difference in voting patterns, reflecting the close association of *la devolution* with the Northern League and its territorial strongholds. The YES vote actually won in northern Italy excluding Emilia-Romagna (50.3 per cent), winning a clear majority in the large regions of Lombardy and Veneto. The NO vote was

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<sup>5</sup> The effects of the 2005 electoral system were ultimately damaging for UDC, marginalising the party after its defection from the centre-right in the 2008 election. The abolition of single member districts and the lack of preference voting increased the powers of central party elites over candidate selection and entirely nationalised electoral campaigns (Fava, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Unlike confirmative referendums in Italy that have no quorum, abrogative referendums have a quorum of 50% which has never been achieved in the last decade.

successful in Emilia-Romagna and the ‘Red Belt’ regions of central Italy (67.4 per cent), where the centre-left maintains its electoral strongholds. A high NO vote was registered in southern Italy (74.8 per cent), as well as the islands of Sicily and Sardinia (70.6 per cent), reflecting negative association with a reform heavily sponsored by the *Lega*.<sup>7</sup> Centre-right voters in southern Italy had apparently not followed the instructions of their party leaders. However, many centre-right politicians campaigned rather half-heartedly, including most of the AN and UDC leadership. The *Lega* had won in its electoral constituencies in northern Italy, while resistance had come from statewide parties in Rome and their southern supporters, so defeat in the Constitutional referendum did not imply a broader political failure. Nor did it discourage the *Lega* from reconstituting its centre-right alliance for the 2008 general election, which saw *Lega* support double through populist demands for fiscal federalism and punitive anti-immigrant measures.

### **Fiscal Federalism (2008-)**

Berlusconi’s third government (2008-) made a priority of local and regional finance, under the heading of ‘fiscal federalism’, again under *Lega* pressure. The term was not clearly defined, and the framework legislation approved has little to do with federalism. It is instead an attempt to standardise expenditure across the national territory and rein in excessive deficits, giving local and regional governments a specified share of central taxation, as well as the limited possibility to raise new taxes. This framework legislation won broad support in the Italian parliament, due to growing convergence on reforms that are federal in name but much less in practice. The only objections came from the radical left parties, which lost all their seats in the 2008 general election, so could be ignored.

The debate on “fiscal federalism” has a long history in Italian politics. Sub-national governments lost most of their taxation powers in the 1970s, and came to depend almost entirely on transfers from the central state. The main responsibility of regional governments was in health, for which more than 80 per cent of their revenue was earmarked, most passed directly on to local health boards (Hine, 1996). The system was plagued by deficits, which central governments were obliged to meet in order to keep services running. Successive governments since the late 1990s sought to introduce greater responsibility, convert central funding into block grants, and make regional and local governments raise more of their own revenue. As part of the Bindi reforms, regions were to gain a proportion of VAT receipts together with their own taxes, eliminating central support except for an equalization fund (Maino, 2001). The latter would eventually be based on more rational criteria than historic expenditure. Successive reforms gradually transferred taxing powers to the regions and localities, raising the proportion of expenditure they levy from 15 to 44 per cent (Presidenza del Consiglio, 2009), through a mix of assigned and devolved taxes. Yet the assigned revenues (including a growing

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<sup>7</sup> The precise regions listed in each category and details of the data sources are listed in Footnote 4. The victory of the YES vote in northern Italy is evident when Emilia-Romagna, an industrially developed central-northern region with strong corporatist tendencies and a historic preference for the centre-left, is included for categorical purposes among the central regions rather than the northern ones.

share of VAT) were never sufficient to meet rising health costs, and a new system of fiscal equalization was never developed, leading to continued health-care deficits still being met by the central government (*Sole24Ore*, 25/7/2009). Genuine fiscal federalism, based on financial autonomy of constituent units has, if anything, been weakened. The second Berlusconi government abolished the estate tax (ICI) for most households, although this had been the main autonomous source of revenue for municipalities. The current Berlusconi government pledges to abolish the IRAP, an unpopular business tax that is one of the main sources of revenue for regional governments. Sub-national governments will have to rely almost entirely on assigned shares of central taxation, and less efficient regions with weak fiscal capacity will struggle to cope. The legislation aims to reduce the state's fiscal burden, transferring it to the regions and localities, and seeks to avoid moral hazard by making regions and localities directly responsible for their expenditure. Yet this commitment lacks credibility while the Berlusconi government continues to bail out its coalitional allies in municipalities such as Catania and Rome.

Northern centre-right politicians sought to present this reform as a radical advance in regional autonomy, and a way of keeping more money in the pockets of northern voters. This reflects the electoral dominance of *Lega* and *Forza Italia* in northern Italy, which has made fiscal federalism a key demand of regional governments. The reform was modeled on proposals by the centre-right government of Lombardy, which had the backing of the regional opposition (Wilson, 2009). Centre-left politicians were concerned at losing further ground in northern Italy by opposing this reform, and could legitimately argue that it completed their 2001 Constitutional reform (Article 118), stressing the provisions on equalization. Bipartisan consensus also reflects the lack of details in this framework legislation, which needs to be complemented by implementing legislation within two years, followed by five years of adjustment. The new law establishes a Bicameral Commission, alongside an array of technical commissions designed to evaluate the existing system of territorial financing and produce detailed proposals for how fiscal federalism could operate. The initiative for legislation would remain with the government and its parties, raising the possibility of future conflict with the opposition. The new proposed system of regional financing would see regions receive a share of indirect taxes and income tax levied at central level, and powers to propose new taxes in fields not covered by existing taxes. Transfers from the central governments, at present largely based on historic expenditures, would be replaced by a fund for disadvantaged regions calculated on standardized costs, privileging more efficient and responsible governments, while penalizing wasteful and inefficient ones. Central control over sub-national expenditure would actually be reinforced, through a new Stability Pact to limit the deficits of local and regional administrations. Nor is the reform territorially comprehensive, since it does not affect the financial autonomy of Special Status regions. These contribute little to the costs of maintaining the central government, paying public debt, or supporting poorer regions, despite the bi-lingual regions in northern Italy being very wealthy. This has prompted inter-regional disputes and a spate of local communes applying for transfer into adjacent Special Status regions (Giovanetti, 2004; 2007). A more significant problem is Sicily, whose regional government keeps 100 per cent of its taxation but still relies on additional transfers from the central government, partly due to serious mismanagement and widespread clientelism. Sicily is not included in this

legislative proposal, ostensibly because of its Special Status, but in reality because it remains a stronghold for the centre-right coalition. The relationship of Sicilian politicians to the centre-right coalition is nevertheless strained, with many accusing the Berlusconi government of a pro-northern bias in priorities and expenditure (*Financial Times*, 30/7/2009). Some have broken away from the new PDL, allying with the southern-based Movement for Autonomies (MpA) to construct a predominant “Party of the South”. A large autonomist party in southern Italy would introduce a significant new territorial dynamic into Italian politics, counter-posing the *Lega* in the political discourse on regional autonomy, and further weakening the hold of the state-wide parties.

### **Assessing Progress**

Italy has made, at best, halting progress towards federal reform. One problem has been the failure to define the project or its aims. Federalist language has become the common currency of politics, with parties criticizing each other for not being genuine enough, highlighting the lack of agreement over definitions. There is not only confusion between regional decentralization and federalism proper — that distinction is also difficult to draw in other European countries like Spain — but the political consensus conceals much wider differences over state design. For the left, Italy is a unitary polity committed to uniform welfare standards and equity, although in practice this has never existed due to widely divergent levels of institutional performance (Putnam et al, 1985; 1993). The Northern League is focused on its own territory, seeks greater regional powers, and wants to reduce financial transfers to the south. UDC and the former AN element in the PdL remain more centralist, concerned with maximizing transfers to southern strongholds rather than increasing regional autonomy. Many of the former *Forza Italia* element are uninterested in sharing power with a new territorial elite, but others have become regional ‘barons’ through control over territorial powerbases, so have an interest in contesting the central leadership. Regional decentralization also cuts across party lines in other European countries, dividing both left and right, and territory has become a significant cleavage in pitching rich regions against poorer ones, but in Italy matters are particularly confused by the lack of a shared political vocabulary.

These differences become acute where decentralization intersects with welfare state reform. The 1948 Constitution, with its lists of social rights, represented an aspiration to national unity based on equal citizenship in the face of the diversity inherited from the past. A series of sectoral laws, such as the law on social protection of 2000, were intended to overcome fragmentation (Agostini, 2008). Regionalism is sometimes portrayed on the left as a threat to this, a neo-liberal recipe for self-interest and undermining solidarity. Indeed, one of the principal motives of the *Lega* is to disengage from territorial solidarity and keep the North’s resources at home. The apparent contradiction between promotion of national standards and regionalization can perhaps be overcome, but only through rethinking the nature of the Italian state. There is a more solidaristic conception of decentralization in sections of the centre-left, which sees it as a way of achieving real equality, through extending high quality public services and a ‘race to the top’. Regionalization of health and social services was intended to produce more responsible government and a better use of resources. To realize this vision, however,

would require a change in Italian political and administrative culture, and the emergence of a more federal spirit, stifled on the one hand by clientelist practices and on the other by the legalistic obsession of many reform advocates. National solidarity consequently becomes an excuse for constant central interference, rather than a broad underlying principle to be applied at all levels of government (Pizzetti, 2003).

Territorial reform has become a highly partisan issue, with differences between the views of the competing coalitions deliberately magnified, although some of the biggest differences lie within the respective coalitions. Parties in government tend to oppose policies they supported in opposition and vice versa. Two major Constitutional reforms were brought in as partisan measures, supported only by the governmental majority. Negotiations took place at the centre, with weak input from regional governments, who contributed more to the political debate than the inter-party negotiations. They played an important role during the 2001 Constitutional referendum, where some centre-right regional presidents had opposing positions to the central leadership. The recent laws on federalism were based on proposals formulated by the regional government of Lombardy. But regional governments played a more subordinate role in the 2006 Constitutional referendum, which was transformed into a test of credibility between two competing national coalitions, as well as a test of allegiance to the *Lega* in northern Italy.

Decentralization in Italy also differs from what one might expect in a federal model, in dealing with all three sub-state levels (regions, provinces, municipalities) on a similar legal basis. In this it resembles the French state model, where central governments have been unable to make a clear choice in favour of the region. This situation differs from German federalism, or devolution in Scotland, where the federated or devolved unit has complete control over the constitution and powers of local government. Even in Spain, where local government retains a direct link with the centre, there is a clear differentiation of the status of autonomous communities from that of municipalities. Sectoral laws giving the central state extensive powers of intervention and regulation remain unaltered, although the 1948 Constitution had stipulated this should be done within three years of its coming into effect (transitory disposition 9). Difficult choices, for example about the degree of policy differentiation to be allowed, or on fiscal equalization and territorial equity, are always postponed for future legislation. Ever more issues are referred to the Constitutional Court for resolution. The number of cases concerning territorial competences taken to the Court increased sharply after the 2001 Constitutional reform, from 25 (2000) to 98 (2003) (Roux, 2008), while the political-administrative machine often carries on as though nothing much has changed, continuing to pass detailed legislation in fields of residual regional competence (Falcon, 2003; Merloni, 2005). The state administration has not been radically reformed since the Bassanini reforms; rather there is a proliferation of task forces and ad hoc mechanisms to deal with territorial problems. The central government continues to bail out regions and localities that get into fiscal problems, especially when run by the same coalition.

However, it would be wrong to argue that nothing has changed. The Bassanini and Bindi reforms, the direct election of regional presidents, the 2001 Constitutional reform, and the 2003 La Loggia laws, have combined to enact a change in the workings of regional

government. The effect has been to consolidate existing tendencies, rather than converge towards high levels of institutional performance. Centre-right governments in northern regions, such as Lombardy or Veneto, exalt the principles of choice and competition, and give the private sector a big role in the provision of health-care and social services. This contrasts with the public management style of 'red belt' regions such as Tuscany, whose regional government has kept down costs and encouraged innovation without relying on the private sector. Southern regions continue to be characterized by policy incoherence and state clientelism. Recent research confirms that decentralisation has not bridged the huge gulf in institutional performance between north and south (Vassallo, 2009). Strong territorial variations also affect the views of the general public, highlighted in the Istituto Cattaneo public opinion survey of 2008. Although a national consensus for stronger regional governments emerges (67.6 per cent), more citizens in the south believe the actual process of regionalisation has made things worse (24.3 per cent) rather than better (23.6 per cent), although a majority (52.1 per cent) believe nothing has changed. Regionalisation is viewed more positively in the North, although 55-60 per cent of voters there believe nothing has changed. Regional presidents are viewed more positively since their direct election, while few voters support a more centralized state (Vassallo, 2009). All of this suggests there are examples of successful regionalism in Italy, but that federalization, implying a transformation of the system as a whole (including at the centre), remains a distant and elusive goal. The proposed Constitutional reform of 2005 sought to transform the Italian parliament in a federal direction, but its internal incoherence and highly partisan character contributed to its failure in the 2006 confirmative referendum, stalling for now the process of federalization.

Territory remains a critical factor in Italian party competition, with centre-right and centre-left coalitions obliged to make very different appeals across the national territory. Although the *Lega* continues to pressure for state decentralisation, its aggressive and opportunistic positions prevent a more moderate consensus from emerging. The territorial divergences in the 2006 Constitutional referendum also make reform more difficult, while a federal spirit is unlikely given the polarizing character of both regionalist movements and general political discourse. Italian parties want to combine lower taxation with better public services, through the magical formula of "fiscal federalism", but existing proposals have not addressed the complex trade-offs that need to be made between taxation and welfare provision across the national territory. Meanwhile, the partisan politics of Constitutional change and the subsequent difficulties of implementation mean no reform can be carried through to its logical conclusions. Italy has certainly devolved its government, but is far from becoming a truly federal state.

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BOX 1

## Article 117 of Constitution

### Exclusive State Competences

- a) foreign policy, Europe, citizenship
- b) immigration
- c) relations with religious bodies
- d) armed forces
- e) currency, finance, competition, fiscal equalization
- f) national and European elections, referendums
- g) state public administration
- h) public order and security except for local administrative police
- i) citizenship and residence
- j) civil and criminal justice
- k) determination of minimal levels of services across national territory
- l) basic norms of education
- m) social security
- n) customs and border controls
- o) weights, measures, time and statistics
- p) care of environment, ecosystem and cultural artefacts

### Shared Competences

Shared competences are matters pertaining to: international and European relations of Regions; health and safety at work; education, but respecting autonomy of educational institutions, and professional training; research and innovation; health; food; sports; civil protection; territorial government; ports and civil airports; major transport and navigation networks; communications; energy; supplementary welfare; harmonization of public expenditure and taxes; promotion of culture; savings banks; regional credit funds. In these matters, the regions legislate within the framework of national standards. All other matters are within the competence of the regions.