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Spaghetti Politics

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SPAGHETTI POLITICS

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Abstract

This article describes the impact of the Italian electoral reforms of 1993 on the structure of political alliances. The reform, which moved Italy from a pure proportional representation system to a mixed largely majoritarian system, was designed to increase transparency, reduce corruption, limit the number of political parties, and create the conditions for a politics of interests, rather than a politics of influence. Paradoxically, moving to a mixed electoral system had the opposite effect. In this article we demonstrate this impact, by modeling the structure of political alliances at multiple levels (municipal, provincial, and regional) of the Italian polity from 1986 to 2001, from data on roughly 441,000 persons elected to serve in almost 3 million positions.

| 1 | INTRODUCTION

This article considers the impact of a natural experiment. The experiment was the 1993 electoral reform of the Italian electoral system, a reform that moved Italy from a pure proportional representation system to a mixed first-pass-the-post, or majoritarian system. Drawing on data from election results for over 400,000 individuals, representing single parties or larger coalitions, elected to roughly 3 million positions in local, provincial, and regional elections from 1984 to 2001—that is from before and after the reform—we model the structure of political alliances over time. To anticipate the main results, we show that electoral rules, often largely ignored, play an enormously important role in structuring the political landscape. This should not be surprising—after all, the central rationale for reform was that it would impact politics. However, in the Italian case, electoral reform designed to clarify politics, that is, designed to reduce the number of political parties and unravel 'unholy' alliances—in short, increase transparency, had the opposite impact.

The central Italian political paradox has always been the simultaneity of rapid change and stability. On one hand, foreign observers of Italian politics have routinely highlighted the instability of the Italian political system, focusing attention on the often remarkably short life of the country's governments (Partridge 1995; Cioffi-Revilla 1984). On the other hand, domestic observers have typically stressed the immutability of the Italian system, focusing attention on the fact that the Christian Democrats controlled the state for over 50 years without interruption—an accomplishment no other party could claim for any other industrialized country in the world, over this whole period (Salvadori 2001; Bufacchi 1996). There is truth to both accounts; if governments came and went—which they did with often-awesome rapidity—the politicians leading them did not change, at least over the period from 1948 to 1993. This alone suggests some support for the old adage that trees that bend with the wind will last longer than those that are rigid.

Local observers are strongly split as to whether, following electoral reforms in 1993, the structure of the Italian political system has changed. Not surprisingly, looking over the past decade or so, we observe the same debate. On one hand, some scholars argue that reform has transformed the political system, introducing both new rules of engagement and new outcomes. Here, observers stress critical changes in the alliance system, increased interest representation, and concomitant declines in clientalism and corruption. (Reed 2001; Gundle and Parker 1996) Other scholars suggest that the characteristic feature of politics in Italy—the fact that the more things appear to change the more they stay the same—is never more clearly revealed than in the last decade, after electoral reform (Newell and Bull 1996; Ginsburg 2003; Fabbrini and Gilbert 2000, 2001).

Are both sides of this debate also right? This article considers what happened in Italy after 1993, when the structure of the Italian political system did change – driven by radical electoral reform that moved Italy away from a pure system of proportional representation and closer to a *first-pass-the-post*, plurality or majoritarian electoral system. The answer we provide is also paradoxical. Specifically, many things changed dramatically. At the same time, a structure for the elision of interests, for clientalism and corruption remained, albeit in a completely inverted form. To show this, we first describe the transformation of the Italian political system, showing how electoral reform induced radically new strategies for alliance

formation resulting in party fragmentation, an unprecedented expansion of the number of political parties and a structure of often contradictory political alliances so deeply tangled, knotty, and cyclic as to appear as a bowl of overcooked spaghetti.

These outcomes were unanticipated by both designers and critics of reform, all of whom felt – for better or for ill—that a shift away from proportional representation towards a plurality-based system would bring to the political landscape stability, a reduction in the number of parties, increased transparency of rule, and a politics based on issues arising from civil society rather than non-ideological factional interests. Consequently, in this article we consider why electoral reform worked to radically transform a political system, but failed to work in the direction predicted by theory.

Building Blocks

Our starting point is the significant literature in political science and political sociology which shows that historically, electoral systems matter because electoral regimes provide opportunities that reward specific strategic responses on the part of parties and party fragments (Morelli 2004; Grofman and Lijphart 1986). Despite this general agreement on the importance of electoral systems for structuring politics, sociological studies of electoral systems and their consequences for social stability have largely faded from the landscape of political sociology. One idea arising from this article is that sociologists interested in political culture, the stability of political regimes, and the dynamics of interest-representation, may have much to gain by retaining close focus on the rules of political systems, for these rules provide the context within and through which actors strive for recognition and power.

Although there are historical counter examples, it is generally the case that first-pass-the-post electoral systems—such as those in the United States (and more than 50 other countries)—yield relatively stable two-party systems. This relationship, first identified by the French sociologist Duverger (1954), has been aptly termed Duverger's law by political scientists. As Downs (1957) demonstrated years ago, in winner take all systems, parties have a strategic incentive to drift towards the center of the political landscape, since voters with positions elsewhere on the distribution have no rational alternative but to support the party closest to their interests.

In such systems, forming new parties is difficult. In a one-dimensional system with a left-right split, for example, new party formation on the left wing of the left-leaning party, caused by frustration with the platform oriented towards the center, would split the left vote, leading to election of the right-leaning party, a worse alternative (for those on the left) than the traditional left-leaning party. If it is difficult to start new parties on the left and right wings, it is more difficult to form parties that seek to occupy the center, for the left and right leaning parties will crowd as closely as possible to their position(s), thereby eliminating any reasonable chance that the new centrist party can achieve a plurality of votes.

Consequently, in countries with first-pass-the-post electoral regimes, two party systems predominate—not because their political culture has x or y characteristic, but because the rational strategic response to the pay-off yields behaviors that induce two, and only two, parties (Sartori 1971).

Although there are also historical exceptions, this is not the case for countries with electoral systems based on proportional representation. Here one observes the obverse; incentives for creating new parties that can occupy distinct niches (Sartori 1972). The incentive to occupy niches encourages parties to drift to the extremes and in the limit case, where social cleavages are not cross-cutting, leads to a hollowing out of the center. As with production markets for commodities as diverse as disposable diapers and frozen pizza, niche seeking on the part of parties selling platforms leads to sustainable market-schedules composed of 5 to 7 parties (or firms) (Lijphart 1984).

In countries with multiple axes around which interests are shaped, for example, left/right, religious/secular, north/south, etc, parties seek niches where they can garner votes sufficient to return candidates who then compose coalitions with other parties to make up a government. Since coalitions are needed to form governments, and since the center tends to be hollowed out as parties maneuver for identity, governments tend towards instability as the governing collations are composed out of alliances between parties representing increasingly narrow interests. Consequently, the coalitions that do form are likely to be quite heterogeneous, and therefore weak. This is the theory, in any case.

Conventional wisdom then suggests that in countries moving from proportional representation systems to systems closer to first-pass-the-post we ought to observe a reduction in the number of political parties, a drift towards the center of the political landscape, less of an emphasis on coalition formation, and enhanced stability. There is some evidence from the 29 countries that have adopted mixed systems that supports these expectations (Shugart 2001; Jeffrey 1999). For example, the number of parties increased dramatically following electoral reform which moved New Zealand from a first-pass-the-post to a mixed majoritarian/proportional representation system in 1993 (Vowls 2000). Likewise, in Germany which has long had a mixed system there are two large parties (CDU and SPD) each with roughly 30% of the seats in the Bundestag, and three minority parties (liberal, socialist, and green), each with roughly 10% of the seats. Here, then mixed systems appear to behave as expected. Specifically, in proportional representation tiers, we observe fractionalization of the party system, and in majoritarian tiers, we observe consolidation through election alliances (Cox 1997; Ferrara 2004; Moser 1997, 1999; Riker 1962). There is also evidence that mixed systems may lead to mixed results (Cox and Schoppa 2002). For example, Kostadinova (2002) suggests that mixed systems may stimulate moderate party fragmentation in Eastern Europe. Likewise, Ferrara and Herron (2005) show for 14 mixed systems evidence for contamination effects where the strategic incentive to parties encourages them to "go it alone" and reject pre-election cooperative agreements. Where contamination effects are observed, therefore, outcomes are more variable. In the Italian case, for example, Ferrara (2004) suggests that coordination (at the national level) reflects incentives that arise from the "majoritarian character of its electoral system" (Ferrara and Herron 2005; Donovan 2002).

In Italy, reform in 1993 shifted the electoral system away from a strict proportional representation (hereafter PR) system towards a majoritarian, first-past-the-post system (hereafter, FPTP). But as we noted earlier, in contrast to expectations from received theory, local, provincial, and regional Italian politics after reform features an explosion in the number of parties, an increased emphasis on coalition formation, and a structure conducive to a politics of influences rather than a politics of interests.

In this article we demonstrate these empirical outcomes. They have not been identified previously. To do so, we draw on data on the party affiliations of roughly 3 million elected officials holding office in more than 400,000 positions at multiple levels of observation, from the smallest towns to the largest regions in Italy over a twenty-year period (both before and after electoral reform).

The organization for what follows is straightforward. We first describe the electoral systems (pre and post reform). We then discuss the data and methods. We then show data that indicate an explosion of parties, and coalitions, and what we believe are quite striking network images that reveal massive structural change across all levels subsequent to electoral reform. Finally we suggest why these outcomes—a true tragedy of the commons—although unanticipated, arose.

| 2 | THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Just as the United States has multiple levels of elected bodies – federal, state, county, etc; the Italians also have multiple levels. Here we concentrate only on the three levels below the national level, the region (by analogy to the US, state), the province (there is no exact analogy in the US context) and the commune (by analogy the municipality or county). In contrast to the United States where local, state, and national elections are governed by the exact same electoral rule (FPTP), the Italian electoral system subsequent to electoral reform in 1993 consists of multiple electoral regimes, each quite complicated. Here we describe the gross morphology of the pre-reform and post-reform communal, provincial, and regional regimes. Although we note differences across these systems, and while these differences have been the focus of Italian academics (Bartolini and D'Alimonte 1995; Chiaramonte and D'Alimonte 2000) it is critical to remember that the systems are, at their core, deeply similar. The similarity they share is that all are based on mixed logics, part FPTP and part proportional.

Pre-Reform Rules in Italy

The simplest system is the PR pre-reform system, which assigned seats of the council (or legislative body) to parties on a proportional base using the d'Hondt method common to many European countries and (in modified form) the EU Parliament. This allocation system works by calculating successive quotients for each list, where the formula for the quotient is V/(s+1), where V is the total number of votes that list received, and s is the number of seats that party has been allocated (initially 0 for all parties).

Whichever list has the highest quotient gets the next seat allocated, and their quotient is recalculated given their new seat total. The process is repeated until all seats have been allocated. The idea is to allocate seats in proportion to the number of votes a list received. This is achieved by maintaining the ratio of votes received to seats allocated as closely as is possible. As an aside, we note that in all PR systems, there is a slight bias that benefits larger parties, and this is also the case for the d'Hondt approach. In the Italian case, this bias was not particularly significant. Prior to electoral reform, mayors of the municipalities, and presidents of the provinces and regions were elected by the relevant councils, which were composed following the d'Hondt system, and not directly by the people. Consequently, one of the elements behind the "sale" of reform was more direct election. In the pre-reform period, all the various levels used the same system—proportional representation following d'Hondt.

Reform

In contrast to the simplicity of the pre-reform system, post-reform electoral systems in Italy appear positively Byzantine; each characterized by a labyrinth of rules and conditions for their application. Politicians understand the systems; but ordinary Italians likely have only a grasp of the bare outlines and even those relatively sophisticated in politics have only partial understanding (Fabbrini 2000). All of the systems at each level mix, with varying degree, proportional and majoritarian components. This is the central and most important fact, even

though the specific mix—that is, what proportion of seats under what conditions are allocated proportionally—differs across each level, with the regional most distinct from the provincial and communal.

Communal and Provincial Systems

We start with the local level—the commune—for the fifteen ordinary regions as established by the electoral reforms of 1993. There are five "irregular" regions that have relative autonomy over education, public health, environment, and so on. These regions also vary with respect to some details of the electoral system. In the autonomous regions, the proportion of local council seats allocated through the FPTP system differs slightly, but for what happens here we can ignore this. The simplest case is for the 7455 (roughly 92%) municipalities with fewer than 15,000 residents. In these small towns, election of the mayor and council occur on the same day. The candidate for mayor who receives the most votes is elected (this is a FPTP system, familiar to those in the United States) and his/her party, receives two-thirds of the council seats. The number of council seats and the size of the *giunta* (the executive branch) for each commune are largely determined by the population size, so the relevant variable is the proportion of seats assigned to the leading party or coalition. The remaining seats are assigned on the basis of proportional representation using the d'Hondt method. Just as a mayor's party gets 2/3rds of all the seats, if a mayor supported by a coalition wins the election, parties within the coalition are assigned seats to the council following the d'Hondt method, with parties getting more votes rewarded accordingly.

Life becomes more complex with the larger commune. For frame of reference, the large communes are extremely important in the Italian political context, including for example, Rome, Milan, Bologna, and Naples. Contestation in these major urban areas for political power is intense—and given the decentralized nature of the political system as a whole, more salient than comparable American positions, perhaps with the exception of the Mayoralties of New York, Boston, Los Angeles, etc. For municipalities with more than 15,000 residents, the Mayor is elected if s/he receives in the first round an absolute majority of all votes cast. In this regard, the system is comparable to the American system. If no candidate—as is the norm—gets an absolute majority, the top two candidates compete in a run-off election. The winner of the run-off is elected as Mayor. We are familiar with this for the democratic primaries, for example. In this regard, the system also reduces to a FPTP system.

If the Mayor is elected on the first round and if his or her coalition (or party) received *more than 50% but fewer than 60%* of the votes for council seats, the coalition is allocated 60% of the seats on the council. Second, the Mayor's coalition is allocated 60% of the council seats if the mayor is elected in the run-off and no other coalition received more than 40% of the vote in the first round. The fact that the Mayor's coalition is allocated 60% of the seats under both scenarios even though they do not receive 60% of the vote is designed to induce stability and enable a party or a coalition to actually govern. For all instances in which there was a run-off and for the remaining 40% of the council seats if there was not a run-off, council seats are allocated using the d'Hondt system. As for the smaller municipalities, within the winning coalitions, seats are assigned using the d'Hondt method.

The electoral system for the Provincial President and Provincial Council is similar to the large municipalities. The only difference is that the winning party or coalition is assured 60%

of the seats in the council, independent of minority coalition strength. Specifically, if the winning coalition does not receive 60% of the vote, they are allocated 60% of the seats on the Council; the balance then allocated using the d'Hondt method.

Regional regimes

The regional system is extremely complex, mixing multiple lists and levels with so many possibilities that it would be difficult to exhaustively list them The main element is that 80% of the seats on the regional council are allocated by the d'Hondt system, the balance allocated on the basis of absolute vote (e.g., a majoritarian system). Each region is composed of multiple provinces. The lists for seats under the proportional regime are organized on a provincial basis while the lists for seats under the majoritarian regime are based on the whole region. The vote for both groups of lists is cast at once on the same day. The two groups of lists must be tied. Specifically, each provincial list must be tied to a regional list, and the regional list must be tied with lists in at least half of the provinces. To be eligible for inclusion in the proportional component, a party (or coalition) must receive either 3% of the votes in a specific province, or 5% of the overall regional vote.

Voters are presented with two lists, one for the province and one for the region. They tend to vote inconsistently across these lists, for example, voting for party or alliance X in the proportional provincial election, while for the majoritarian component voting for party or alliance Y (D'Alimonte and Bartolini 1997). This inconsistency may either be the result of confusion, or reflect strategy, where voters distinguish between chances of programs under different electoral regimes and shift their votes accordingly.

As with the municipalities and provinces, there are two allocation systems—a PR system for 80% of the seats and a majoritarian system for the remaining 20%. The seats assigned through PR strictly follow the d'Hondt system; however the remaining "majoritarian" seats (20%) are allocated differently, depending on the outcome of the proportional component. Specifically, if the provincial lists that are tied to the winning regional list already have 50% of seats on the council, the winning regional list is allocated only 50% of all the majoritarian seats, i.e., 10%. This limits the ruling coalition to 60% of the seats. The remaining seats are assigned to candidates from the losing coalitions following d'Hondt. If the provincial lists that are tied to the winning regional list have fewer than 50% of all the votes, and the regional list that wins the regional vote wins with fewer than 40%, then the winning regional list is allocated all of the available seats, e.g. the remaining 20%. This brings the leading party to 60% of the provincial parliamentary seats. Thus, when a party or coalition receives *fewer* votes at the regional level, they are allocated *more* seats.

If the winning lists (the linked provincial and regional lists) after this allocation *do not* compose at least 55% of the council seat, the number of seats in the council is increased and seats are assigned to the winning coalition so that the winning list will have 55%. The council thus expands and contracts like an accordion to ensure that the winning coalition has between 55% and 60% of the vote. This process—of rewarding losing to a point—encourages party fragmentation and re-alliance. As with the Mayors of the larger municipalities, regional governors are elected if they win an absolute majority of votes. If no candidate wins an absolute majority, the leading candidates participate in a run-off election. The winner of that election is appointed to the governorship.

In short, the post-reform electoral system is, across each level, an awkward mix of competing PR and majoritarian principles. While different, each system rewards parties for forming coalitions that achieve very narrow majorities. These narrow majorities are then amplified under the seat allocation systems in place to guarantee stability of rule. From the point of view of each party, considering whether to join or leave a coalition, they get the most benefits when their party is small and when the coalition victory is fragile. These micro-incentives express themselves with respect to their strategic behavior. First, however, we describe the data used for this article, and the methods we employ to reveal structure over time.

| 3 | DATA AND METHODS

We use data compiled by the Italian interior ministry that identifies all of the individuals ever elected to public office in Italy from 1984 to 2001 at the municipal (commune), provincial and regional levels. Italy is divided into 20 regions, 5 of which have special legislative powers (Valle D'Aosta, Trentino Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Sardinia and Sicily). Each region is composed of provinces and each province is composed of numerous municipalities. At the time of data analysis, there were 103 provinces in Italy and 8101 municipalities.

Table 1: Number of positions and individuals at each level

Years	Regions		Provinces		Municipalities	
	Individuals	Positions	Individuals	Positions	Individuals	Positions
1988	1027	1245	2836	3618	147431	194443
1989	1052	1283	2985	3712	149952	197045
1990	1050	1281	3021	3757	147791	194311
1991	1058	1258	2935	3636	144478	189805
1992	1056	1242	2924	3546	141045	179680
1993	1054	1258	2992	3505	135367	169425
1994	1083	1292	3628(*)	3652	126768	144710
1995	1095	1308	3685	3709	132329	150017
1996	1095	1309	3696	3724	132290	149423
1997	1091	1290	3575	3590	132602	149638
1998	1091	1304	3592	3623	130703	148302
1999	1138	1277	3643	3677	130143	148476
2000	1144	1279	3681	3712	130448	149701
2001	1147	1281	3642	3679	128652	148359
Total	17734	20731	53563	59271	2368799	2909178
Unique Individuals	3266		12034		441000	

Table 1 reports the number of positions and individuals by year for each level. Ignoring minor variation in the number of positions each year, there are slightly more than 1000 positions at the regional level, 3500 at the provincial level, and 130,000 at the local (municipal) level. In total, we have data on the incumbents of roughly 3 million positions. In the last column, we report the number of unique individuals elected at each level; 3,266 at the regional level, 12,034 at the provincial level, and 441,000 at the local level. From 1984-1987, the regional level data are missing observations from the South – consequently, we do not consider these data in our analyses. The sharp increase in the number of provincial positions in 1994 is caused by the addition of 8 new provinces.

As implied earlier, at each level the public administration is composed of a legislative council and an executive (*giunta*). Occupying multiple positions across levels is not uncommon. The same person can be, at the same time, a member of the town council and a member of the provincial council and in small commune one can be member of the council and of the *giunta*. Multiple individuals holding more than one office across levels and within the local level partly accounts for the variation in the number of positions between years for the three series.

Since electoral reform, an increasing number of politicians have been elected as part of local political groups, known as civic lists. The name of civic list stems from the alleged origin of the candidates—civil society rather than the political parties. The civic list appears to be a strategy for individuals associated with small parties to achieve sufficient votes to qualify for the proportional component of the seat allocation system. Consequently, politicians from small peripheral parties are roughly 8 to 12 times more likely to appear on civic lists than politicians from larger parties with stable histories, without any further distinction. Not surprisingly, civic lists appear to predominate in small municipalities, these with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants. In 2001, for example, no individuals were identified as elected from a Lista Civica from Milan, Florence, or Bari, and only six individuals were elected from Lista Civica in Rome. Figure 1 reports the distribution of Lista Civica politicians by level over time.

Figure 1: Proportion of politicians elected on civic lists
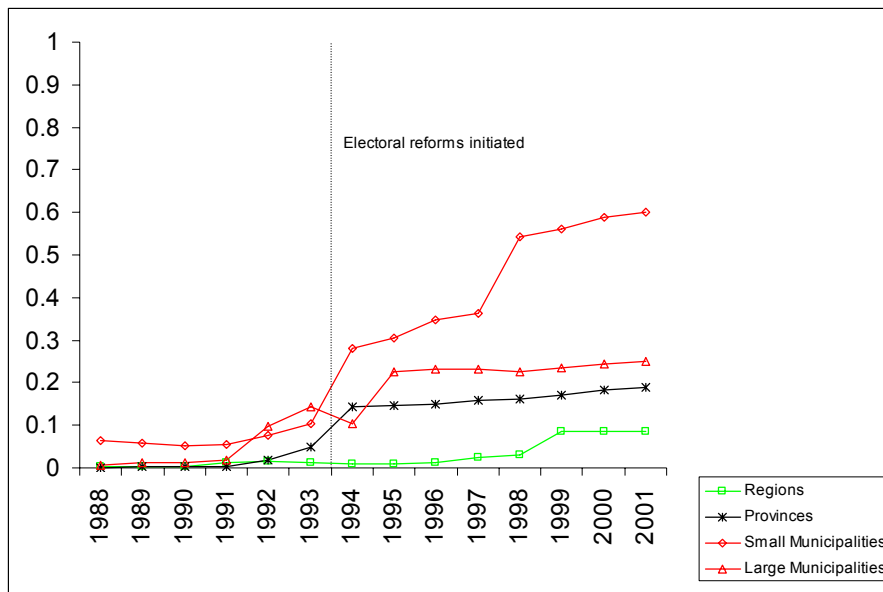
By 2001, at the municipal level, more than 50% of the seats went to candidates running on a Lista Civica in very small communes, while roughly 20% of the seats are filled from persons elected on Lista Civica in large municipality and provincial elections. Over the whole period, fewer than 10% of the individuals who ever served at the regional level are elected on a Lista Civica. Those at the municipal level who are elected on civic lists (Lista Civica and local parties) have significantly different career outcomes than those who are elected as representatives of parties. Specifically, they are significantly (p=.01) less likely to experience mobility to either the regional or provincial level than those elected from within the party system. Local politics and politicians with localist orientations dominate the civic lists. Consequently, their impact on the macro-structure of the political system, as described in this article, is limited.

For each elected individual, we have a record of the political party(ies) under whose label the candidate was elected. If individuals ran under multiple parties, they provide a link between the parties that they jointly represent. Thus, a candidate running for office under the joint auspices of the *Alleanza Nazionale* and *Forza Italia* induces a tie between these two parties. Technically, we build bipartite graphs of parties and politicians for each year and level. A simple example of such a graph is reported in Figure 2 (panels a and b) for the case in which a candidate "**A**" is elected under an alliance of three parties: *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS), *Partito Popolare* (PPI) and *Rifondazione Comunista* (RC), and a second candidate "**B**" is elected under an alliance of PPI and *Lista Dini* (LD), as shown in Panel a. This bipartite graph, by ordinary matrix multiplication (Breiger 1974; Bearman and Everett 1993), gives rise to a party-to-party graph, as shown in Panel b. Subsequent analyses focus on the structure of the party-to-party graphs, for all parties, across all levels, for all years from 1984 to 2001.

Figure 2: Constructing the party to party graph

Panel a: Bipartite graph

Panel b: Party to party graph
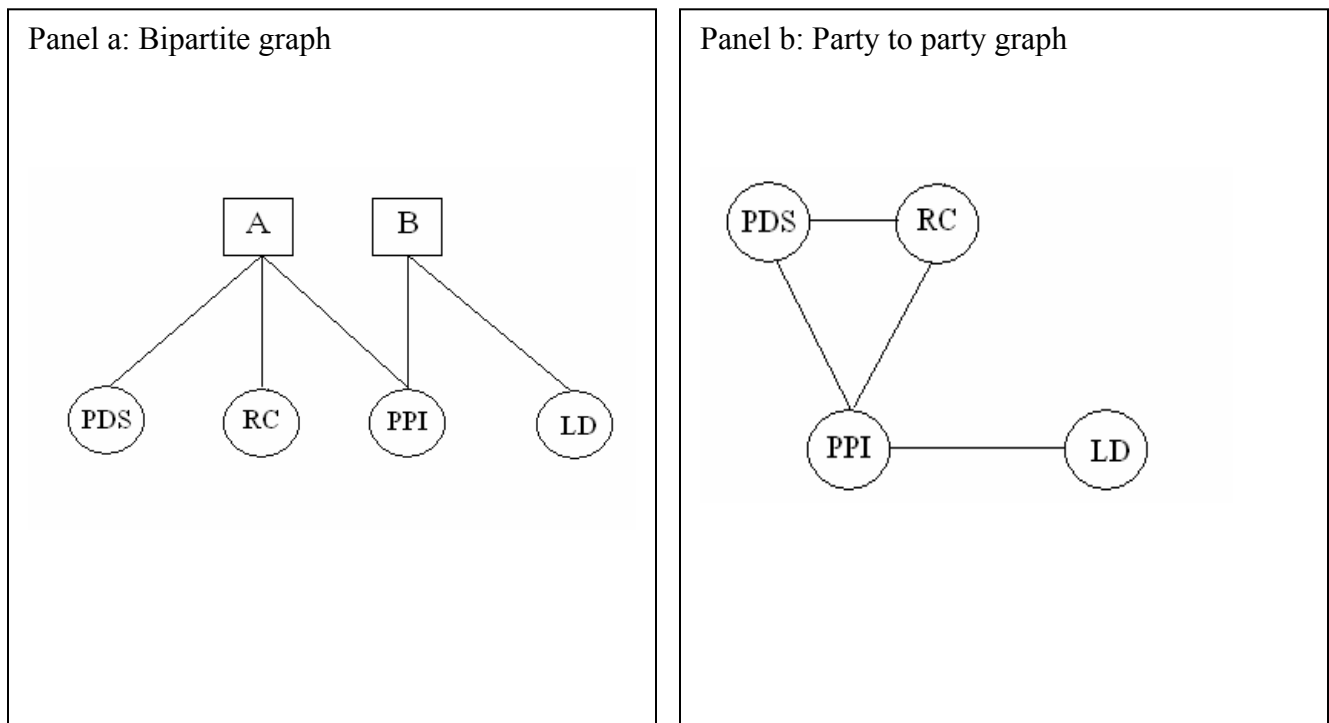
Because a party alliance means that elected individuals jointly represent the parties, the edges linking parties are composed of individuals, giving rise to a party-to-party matrix that provides the basis for our analysis of the structure of political alliances. To eliminate the possibility that edges between two parties are the result of trivial alliances, we consider only parties that are strongly connected by multiple alliances. To establish a threshold for indicating the presence of a tie between two parties, we generate an ordered vector by number of ties between parties for each level and election, for those parties with alliances. We set the bottom 3% of all observations to zero, indicating an absence of ties. In practice, this means that an edge between parties on the graphs of the structure of alliance at the municipalities level indicate at least 20 or more instances in which the parties were connected. For the provincial and regional level, ties are not indexed unless there are at least more than 15 instances of alliance. Consequently, idiosyncratic alliances, or alliances that result from data entry error, are not included and only alliances that are repeatedly observed are analyzed. The ties that make up the links between parties formed by a pre-election coalition are thus not artifacts of our design. They must appear dozens of times for us to recognize them a robust connection.

| 4 | RESULTS

We first turn to description of data that reveal the basic demography of the system, with respect to parties and coalitions, for the pre and post electoral reform periods. These data are reported in Figure 3.
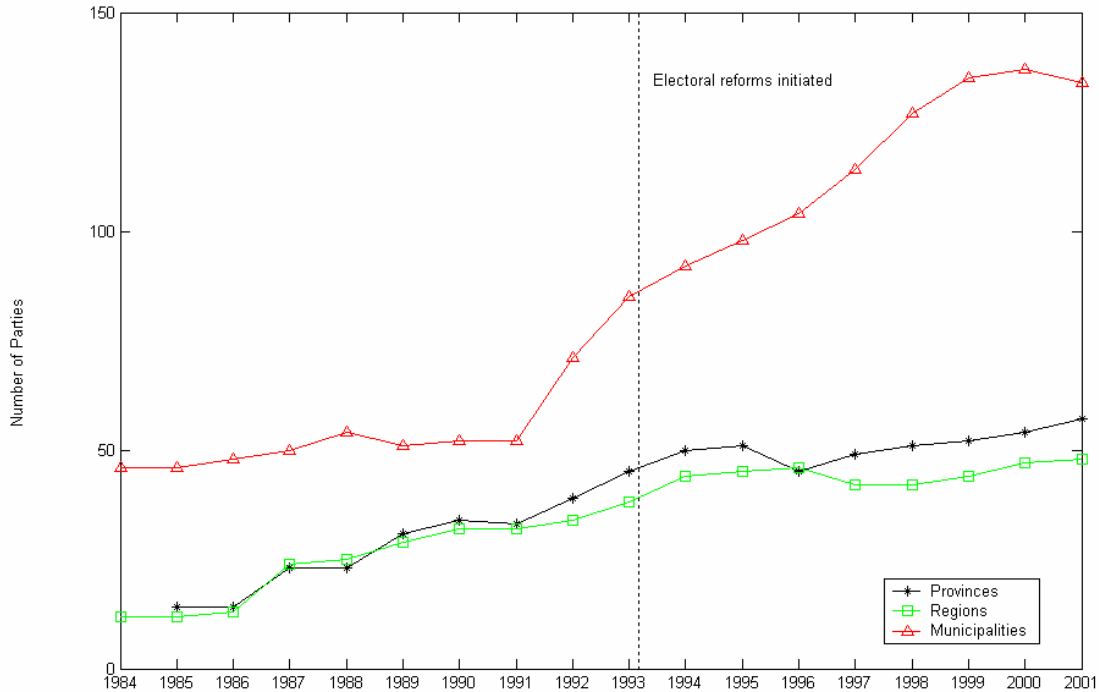
Figure 3: Number of political parties

Figure 3 reports the number of active parties in the system. It is easy to observe a phenomenal increase in the number of parties at the local level, an increase that anticipates the electoral reforms of 1993. This anticipation is due in part to the major corruption scandals and resulting trials that rocked the political system in the late 1980s, ultimately resulting in the breakdown of the centrist governing coalition built by the DC. At the local level, the ex-DC (at least those not imprisoned) formed their own parties, to avoid taint of association. The increase in the number of parties at all of the levels is still striking, even if the curve is not as sharp for the regional as the municipality level. But even at the regional level we observe roughly 50 identifiable parties (competing for a minimum of 3% of the vote). Across all levels, electoral reform designed to reduce the number of political parties had the reverse effect.

We now turn to consider the proportion of candidates elected as members of a coalition over time. The 1984-87 data are sparse as noted earlier, but there is no obvious reason why this should artificially reduce the proportion of persons elected as a member of a coalition, so we

include them here. For each region Figure 4 reports the proportion of candidates elected on a coalition ticket. Prior to reform in 1993, roughly 5% of candidates for regional parliamentary positions, and fewer than 30% of candidates for municipal or provincial positions ran as members of a coalition. Following the clean hands corruption trials of the early 1990s, the breakdown of the DC, and the consequent fragmentation of the communist party, and in anticipation of electoral reforms of 1993 we observe a striking increase in the proportion of candidates running as members of a coalition. By 1997, just a few years after reform, almost every candidate at every level represents a coalition of parties. Visual inspection of Figure 4 reveals this dramatic change: coalitions replace parties as the principle organizing element of the political sphere.

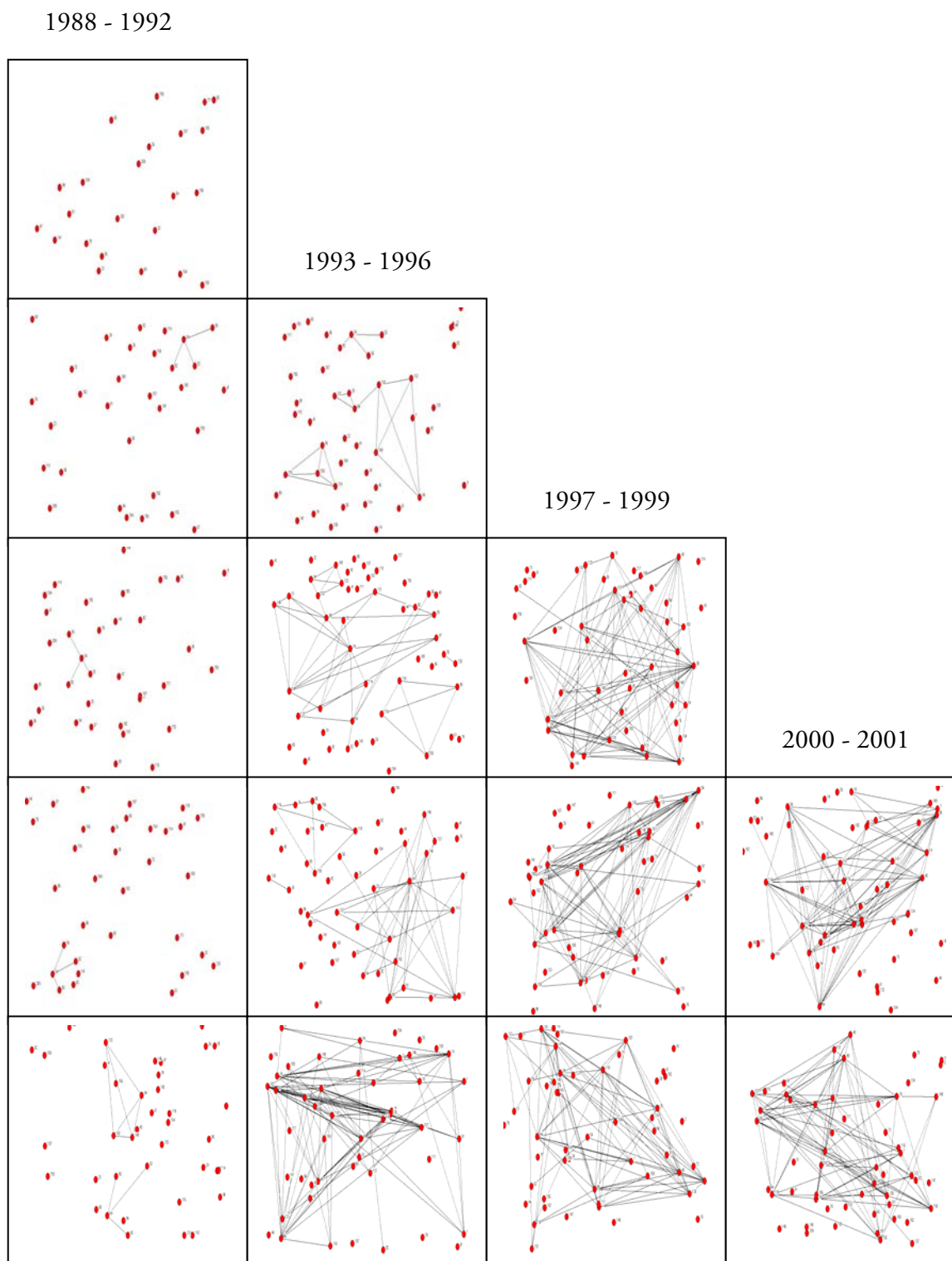**Figure 4: Proportion of officials elected in coalitions**
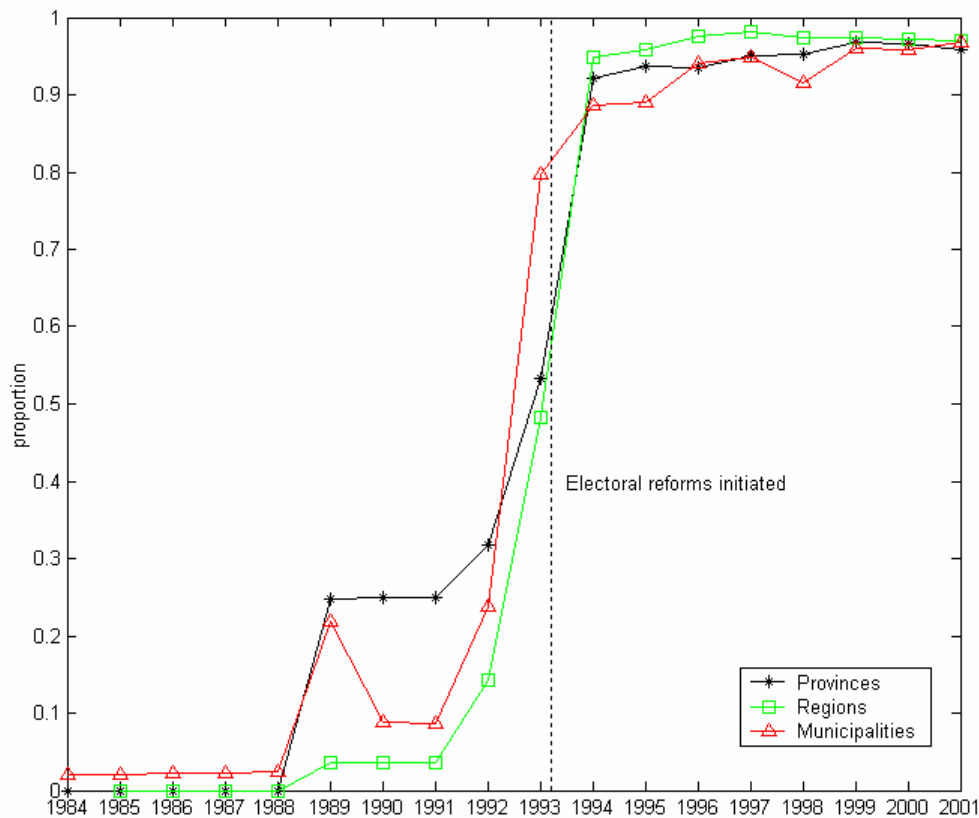
This shift—from party to coalition—should be expected as a consequence of moving from PR to a FPTP system as parties move to occupy the center of the electoral space. In theory, in order to capture the center under a FPTP system, coalitions will form internally prior to each election, rather than externally after the fact. In some regards, this is what we observe. In theory, coalitions formed ex ante (as versus ex post) move towards the "median voter", while retaining characteristics—as left, or right; secularor lay, etc.—to not alienate traditional support.

The fact of coalitions however does not really tell us anything about their structure, or the structure of ideological differences that are refracted and organized by political parties. The next three figures, one each for the municipalities, provincial and regional levels, address this issue. Figures 5, 6 and 7 report the structure of the pre-election alliances for each level from 1988 to 2001. We exclude 1984 to 1987 because there are no pre-election alliances, and there is therefore nothing to be gained by representing a longer series of empty graphs.
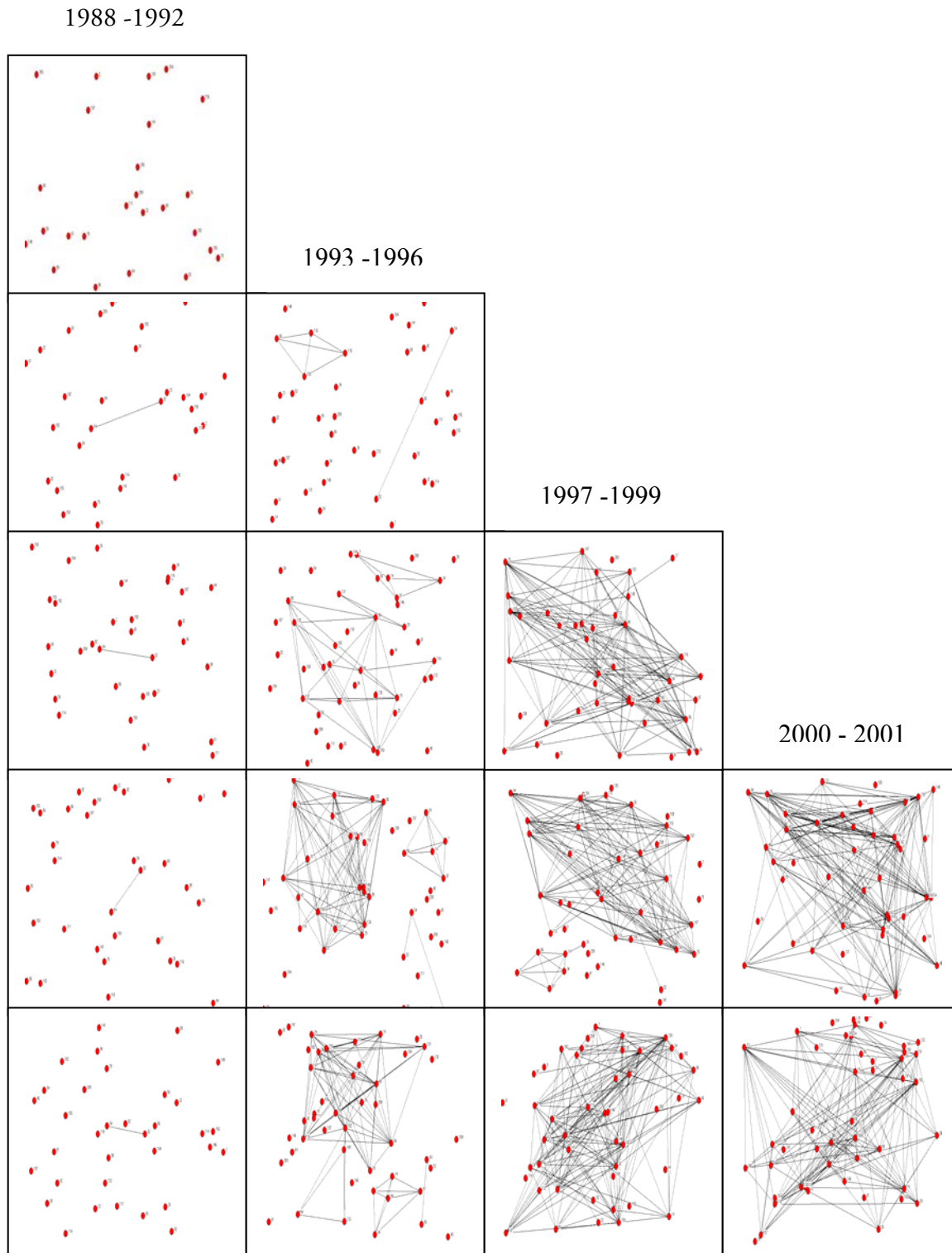
Figure 5: The Structure of Political Alliances over Time: Municipalities

1988 - 1992

1993 - 1996

1997 - 1999

2000 - 2001
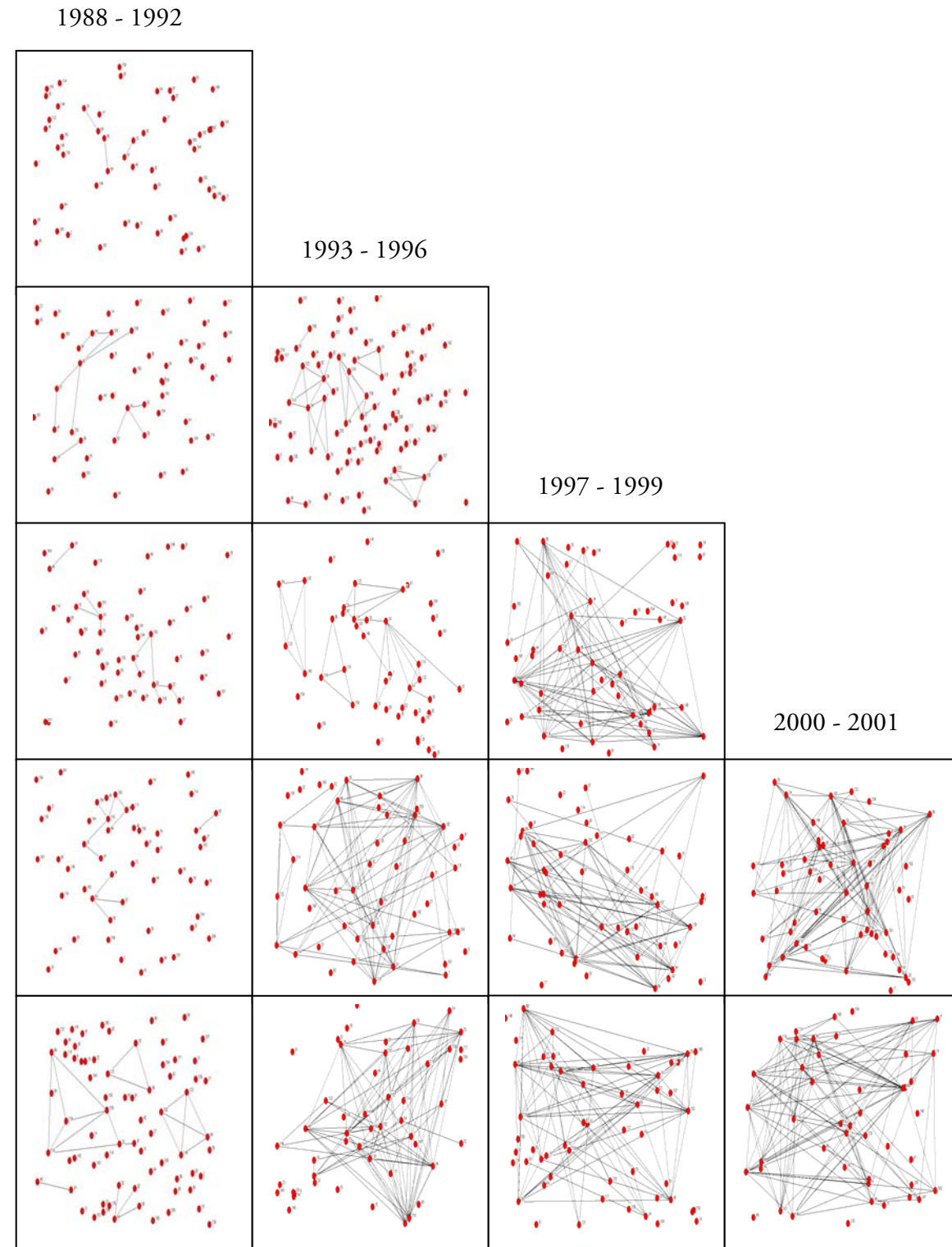
Figure 6: The Structure of Political Alliances over Time: Provinces

1988 - 1992

1993 - 1996

1997 - 1999

2000 - 2001

Figure 7: The Structure of Political Alliances over Time: Regions

1988 -1992

1993 -1996

1997 -1999

2000 - 2001

Focusing first on the local municipal level, each dot represents a party. Thus, in 1989, there are 50 dots. Lines connecting dots reflect alliances between parties. In 1989, for example, we observe 11 alliances between 13 parties in three small, disjoint, components. By 1994 we observe almost 100 unique parties at the municipal level—rising to 137 in 2000. Figure 5 thus reports trimmed alliance structures from 1994 onward. Specifically, we exclude from representation (but not analysis) isolates and parties that have alliances with only one other party, composing a disjoint dyad. Figures 6 and 7, which report the structure of alliances between parties at the provincial and regional levels respectively, are not trimmed.

Considering Figure 5 first, the fourteen panels report the structure of alliances over time reading down, from left to right. Thus the first panel in the top left refers to 1988, the panel immediately below to 1989. The second column starts with 1993, the year of electoral reform. From 1988 to 1993 we observe very few alliances connecting a minority of parties in small disjoint components. Subsequent to electoral reform in 1993 we observe massive structural change, resulting in the emergence of a single interconnected component that links the majority of parties into what appears to be a giant bowl of spaghetti. By 1995, this structure—an inversion of the pattern observed under DC control in the pure proportional representation period—is in firmly in place. Instead of a hollow center surrounded by small isolated peripheral parties in perpetual opposition, we observe a crowded center of overlapping and tightly interwoven parties and party clusters. Figures 6 and Figure 7 reveal the same striking structural change, initiated immediately after the electoral reform of 1993, and firmly in place by 1996.

The most striking feature of the post-reform structure is the absence of structure. Here we observe a giant jumble of overlapping parties: secular and lay, separatist and nationalist, right and left. One can move, for example, from the far right (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*) to the far left (*Rifondazione Comunista*) in fewer than three steps, often in only two and in some instances through a direct tie.

Against this background, it is useful to recall the expected outcomes of election reform. On one had, reform was designed to lead to a reduction in the number of political parties. It was also designed to clarify the ideational space of politics, by encouraging the formation of large political parties or party coalitions whose platforms encompassed diverse positions on issues arising civil society. Clarification of the political sphere was expected to lead to increased transparency—that is a tighter linkage between constituents with interests and the officials who represented them. Neither of these outcomes occurred. Instead, election reform led to the perverse and wholly unanticipated amplification of the perversities of both pure proportional representation and majoritarian systems. Specifically, we observe an explosion, rather than reduction, in the number of parties, massive coalition formation without ideological foundation, and a crowding of the center. This pattern is robust and observed for all levels, at roughly the same time.

Deep Structure

It is possible that because we pool alliances across multiple municipalities into a single graph that the core finding we report – especially for the data arising from the thousands of small municipalities across the whole of Italy—is artifactual. To address this possibility we consider whether or not electoral reform impacted alliance formation evenly across each region.

Figure 8 reports as a box plot, the proportion of parties in the largest component over time, for each region.

Figure 8: The proportion of parties in the largest component by region.
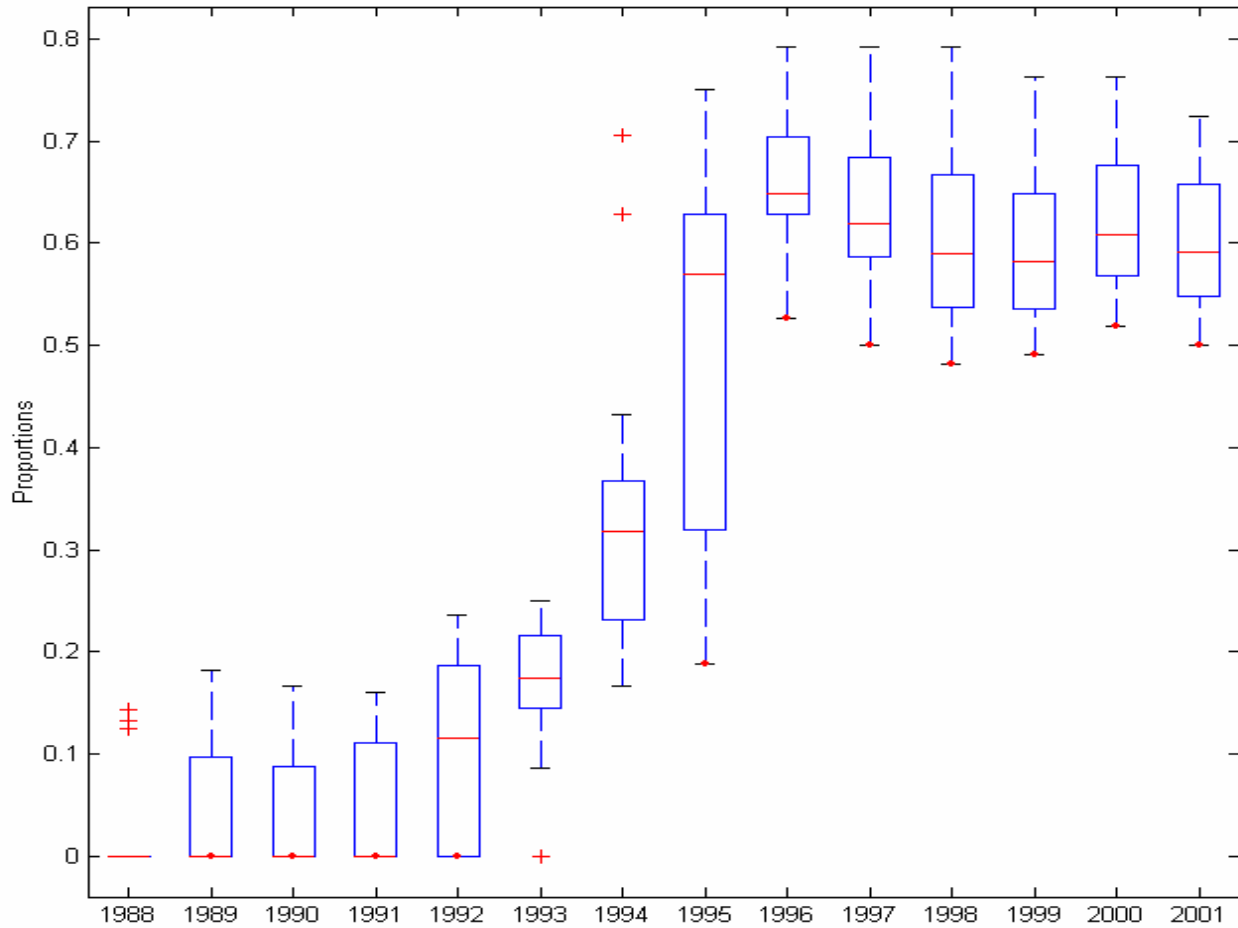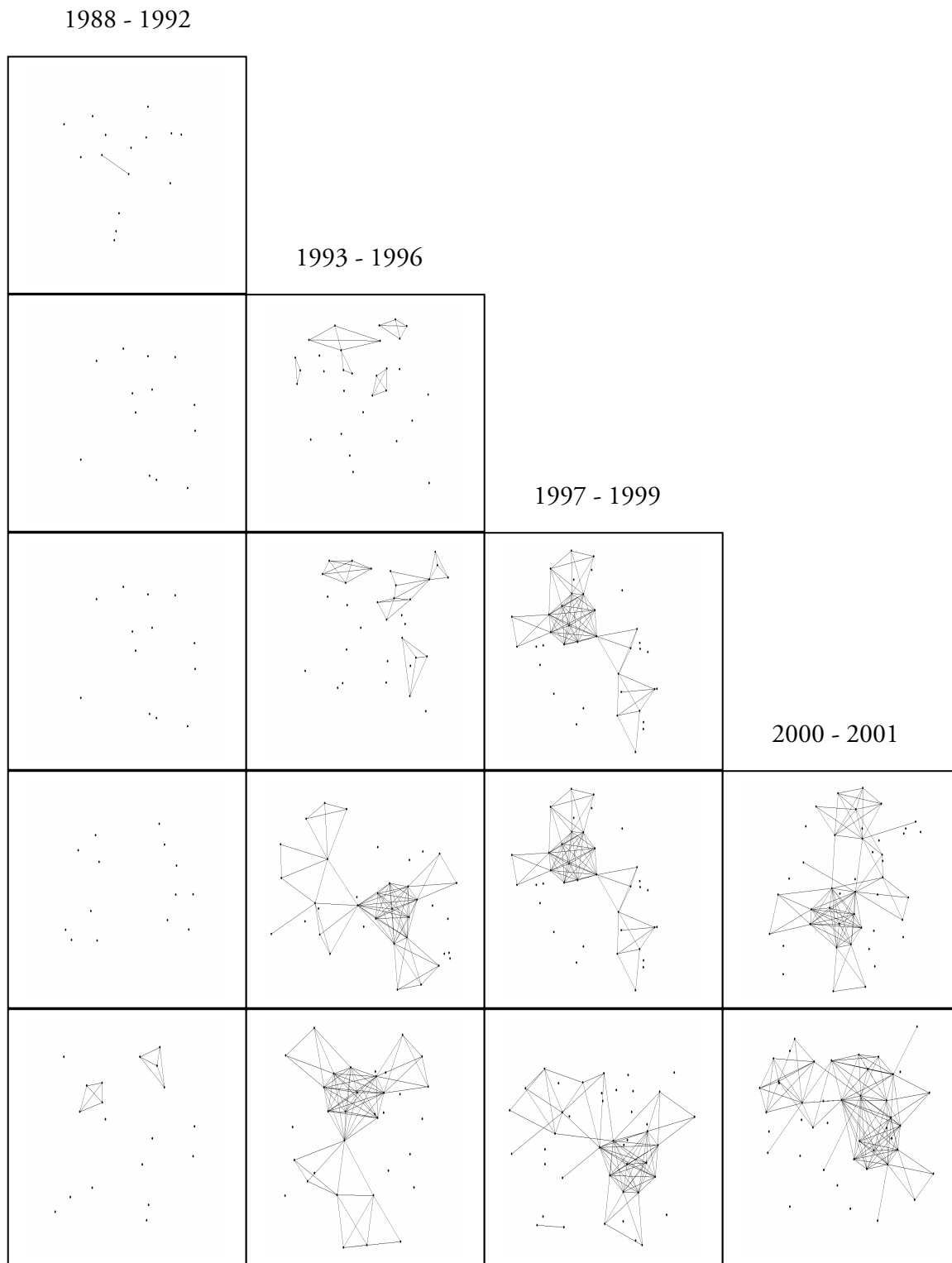

Thus, 50% of the observations for each region are found within the box, the solid line marks the median, and outliers are indicated by dots. Prior to electoral reform in 1993, far fewer than 20%—and more typically fewer than 10%—of parties were in the largest component. In fact, we observe pre-election alliances only in the North—Lombardia, Veneto, and Piemonte—where separatist regional parties joined together to compose what would later emerge as the Northern League. After 1996, more than half of all parties, and frequently more, are located in a giant central component. It follows that pooling observations across small disconnected municipalities from different regions is not inducing the macro-structure we observe.

It is possible that the variation we do observe in Figure 8 reflects long-standing regional differences in Italy that are often thought to be associated with different political cultures, arising in part from different underlying social structures. In the industrial north and center,

Figure 9: The Structure of Political Alliances over Time: Municipalities, Lombardia

1988 - 1992

1993 - 1996

1997 - 1999

2000 - 2001
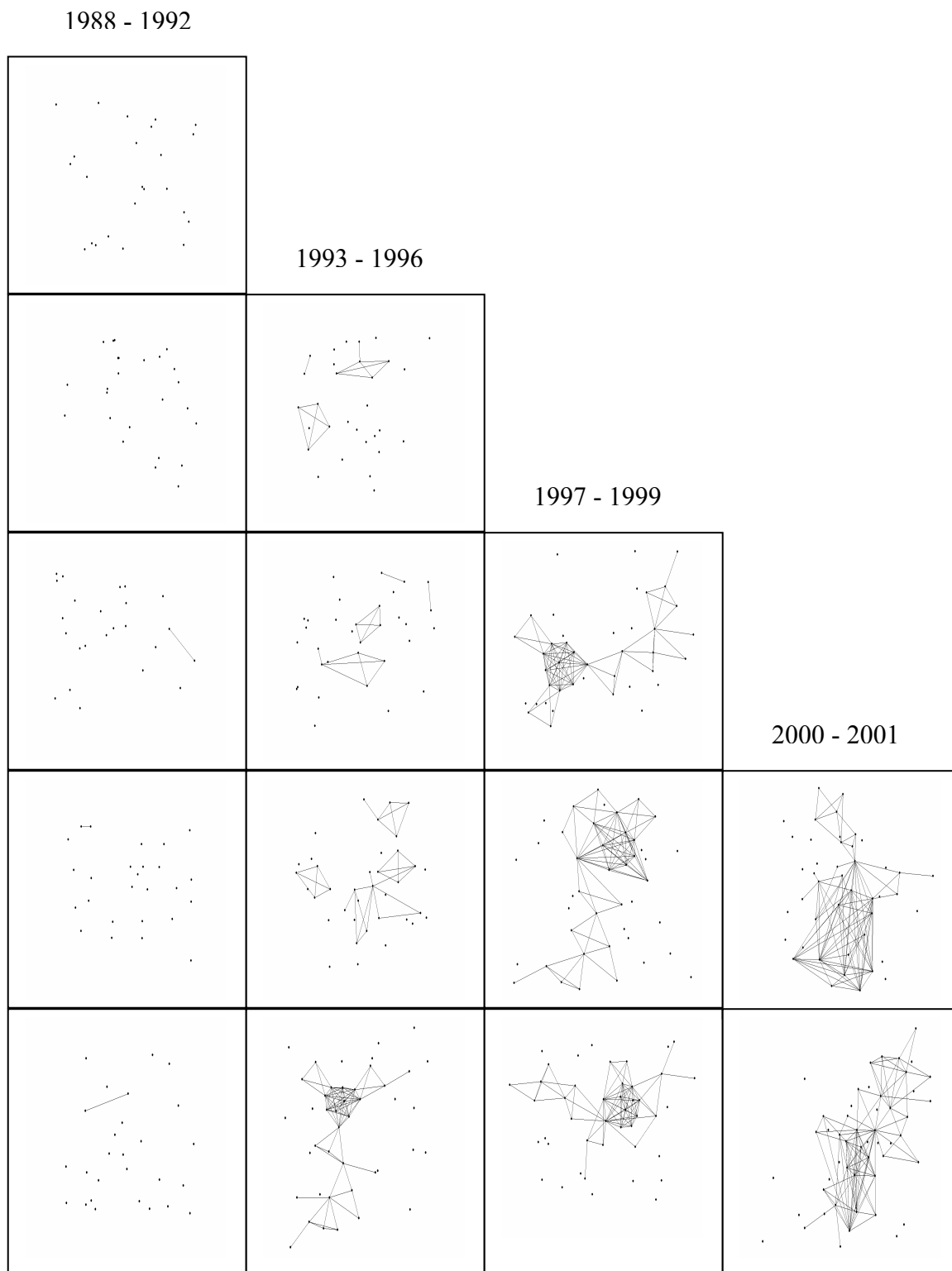
Figure 10: The structure of political alliances over time. Municipalities, Campania

1988 - 1992

1993 - 1996

1997 - 1999

2000 - 2001

politics is thought to be more clearly aligned with class cleavages, whereas in the agrarian south, clientalism remains a powerful force (Putnam 1993; Riley 2005; Santoro 1997). To test this hypothesis, we consider the structure of alliances in one Northern region where we observe pre-election alliances (Lombardia) and one Southern region (Campania). While no direct comparison captures all of the meaningful dimensions, by analogy to the United States, this would be akin to comparing Illinois (industrial) and Louisiana (agrarian and with a long tradition of corruption). Under PR, the left (PSI) dominated local politics in Lombardia, whereas in Campania—and most forcefully in Naples—the DC was hegemonic.

For both Figure 9 (the structure of alliances in Lombardia) and Figure 10 (the structure of alliances in Campania) we report the historical pattern of party alliances for the pre and post-reform period. As before, reading down the columns from left to right, one can see for both regions a strikingly similar pattern. By 1996 in Lombardia and 1995 in Campania, the majority of all political parties become interlinked within a single giant component which progressively increases in both size and density over time. This occurs despite quite striking differences in political culture (Gobetti 1996; Hazelrigg 1970; Misra and Hicks 1994; Weakliem 1991; Seton-Watson 1967).

Figure 11: Newman-Girwan modularity score by region over time
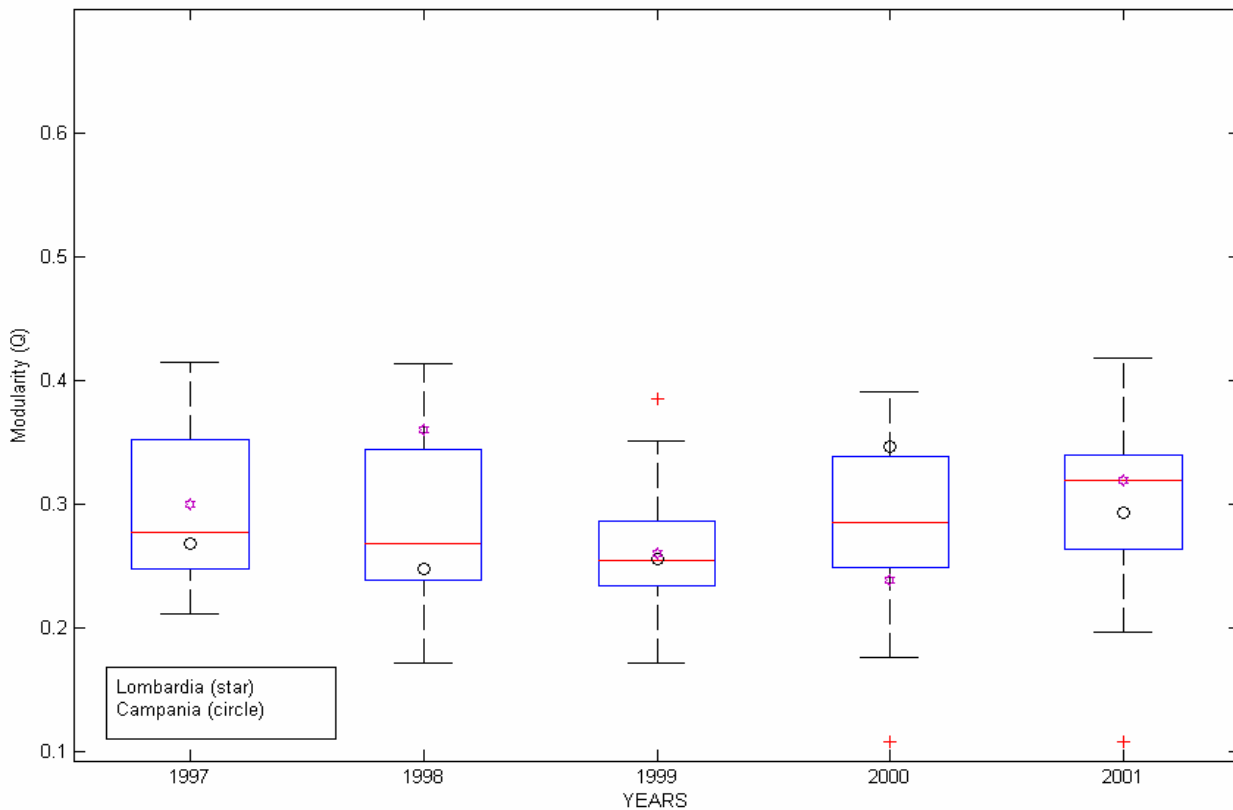
Structural isomorphism is thus not artifactual—rather it is the result of the logic of politics. The electoral reform of 1993 impacted each region in the same way, instituting new rules that provided the context for similar strategic responses on the part of parties.

It is possible, of course, that Lombardia and Campania—both dominated by the politics of an important city (Milan and Naples, respectively) could exhibit similar pattern as a consequence of this underlying similarity. To assess this possibility, and to provide confidence that the cases were not selected because they fit the theory proposed herein, we calculate Newman-Girvan modularity scores for each region over time, from 1997 to 2001, that is for the five years where we observe the vast majority of parties in a single, fully connected component (Girvan and Newman 2002). The Newman-Girvan algorithm seeks to identify natural breaks in graphs to reveal "communities" of nodes, or more precisely, densely connected subgroups. The algorithm iteratively removes edges with high betweenness and seeks to identify the most parsimonious partition of nodes to induce disjoint subcomponents. The quality of the partition is reported by the modularity score. In general, modularity scores for social networks appear in the .4 to .7 range. Scores lower than .4 indicate that it is not possible to achieve a meaningful partition; that the graph under consideration is substantively an integrated component (Newman and Girvan 2004) Figure 11, reports results from this analysis. Two facts are revealed. First, Lombardia (indexed by a star) and Campania (indexed by a circle) are typical regions; structures we observe there are observed in each of the other regions. Second, only in a few instances are modularity scores (Q) reported in acceptable ranges. From 1997 to 2001, a meaningful partition of the political alliance structure is impossible.

| 5 | Discussion

I n Italy, from 1948 to 1992, governments were formed and collapsed with astonishing frequency—lasting on average less than one year. Despite this, or more accurately, because of this, the Christian Democratic (DC) party was able to maintain control of the polity without interruption. Material rather than ideational interests determined political outcomes. Likewise, mystery and intrigue rather than clarity and transparency characterized the political process. One indicator of an absence of accountability is corruption. From 1948 to 1992, for example, just considering the lower house the judiciary charged 1588 of the 2923 (or 54%) of the members of parliament with some crime. Considering only serious crimes (including murder), the judiciary brought charges against 1192 individuals, or 41% of those who ever served. With the exception of elections in 1976 and 1992, those charged with corruption were as likely or more likely (from 1948 to 1956) to be re-elected as those not charged (Chang and Golden 2006). Perhaps most significantly, from 1972 to 1992, the vast majority of deputies charged with serious corruption served in the ruling coalition.

It is possible that Italian voters like corrupt officials and set out to elect them. This is not the case. Italian voters dislike crooks at the same modest rate that other voters dislike crooks. In the United States, for example, officials convicted of corruption lose somewhere between 6 and 11% of their support. In Japan, 62% of officials convicted of corruption are reelected, compared to 51% of Italian deputies (Chang and Gooden 2006). Despite similarly modest penalties, the proportion of corrupt officials in Japan and the United States never approaches 50%. Thus the rate of corruption cannot be tied to greater indifference on the part of Italian voters. It was, and is, the product of a structure of rule that rewards clientalism.

This insight was the insight of the Italian reformers who called for electoral reform. Noting that a specific structure of rule—a structure best characterized as an intertwined clique of parties strung together on the basis of post-election instrumental deal making in order to retain power—was associated with corruption, electoral reformers set out to transform the rules of engagement to break that structure. Electoral reform was thus designed to open the system to a politics based on ideal rather than material interests. In this article we show that electoral reform produced outcomes wildly unanticipated by reformers and theorists. Instead of a diminution in the number of political parties we observe an explosion; instead of clear factions we observe the formation of a giant, knotty, cyclic, and intertwined cluster of parties formed on the basis of local and ideologically contradictory, pre-election alliances.

The central empirical finding of this paper is, of course, that the mixed electoral system in the Italian case amplified the perversities of both the proportional representation and majoritarian systems. Parties and party fragments split apart; new parties were formed, and all raced to form alliances with other parties in order to exploit small incentives in the electoral system. These incentives rewarded small parties in fragile coalitions with small majorities. Rational parties thus were thus encouraged to make irrational deals in advance of each election. These deals, when aggregated, reveal a system in which communists are as close to post-fascists as they are to separatist, where separatists are as close to religious conservatives as they are to nationalists, and where nationalists are as close to the corrupt remains of the Christian Democrats as they are to the socialists. This is why many observers feel that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

As political sociologists, we are concerned with opinions and interests, parties and politics, institutions and outcomes. In this article, we suggest that an old concern of political sociology, electoral regimes, not be forgotten in the mix of important factors that structure the political experiences of countries, individuals and their representatives (Linz and Stepan 1996). For the structure of electoral systems, as suggested by the Italian case, can in often quite profound ways change the rules of engagement in politics, and thus transform the possibilities for democratic renewal, the fair representation of interests, and the sweeping away of corruption, that provide a rationale for our concern with how those who rule, really do it.

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