

# **The 'Alpine Region' and political change**

**Lessons from Bavaria and South Tyrol (1946-2018)**

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Abstract. Bavaria and South Tyrol belong to the so-called 'Alpine (Macro-)Region', a transnational area located in the heart of Europe, where geopolitical, cultural and socio-economic peculiarities have resulted in distinctive democratic dynamics. The key question that this article aims to answer is whether these two regions can still be regarded as exceptional cases of political stability. It is shown that, since 2008, their political systems have experienced significant change. While transformations have also occurred at the national level in Germany and Italy, they seem even more dramatic in Bavaria and South Tyrol, particularly after decades of political continuity. It is argued that this unprecedented shift is due to the combined effect of regional and state-wide challengers and is linked to the multi-level character of party competition at the regional level. Generally, these two cases add a territorial dimension to the study of political stability and change in Western Europe.

Keywords: Bavaria; South Tyrol; Alpine Region; CSU; SVP; Political Change

## Introduction

In an important contribution to the study of European cleavages, Caramani and Mény (2005) focused on the so-called ‘Alpine Region’ as a peculiar case of cultural, political and economic distinctiveness in Western Europe. According to them, such distinctiveness posed challenges to processes of state formation and nation-building and also provided the breeding ground for populist reactions against European integration.

Most of the scholarly attention has been devoted to the two countries included in this macro-region: Austria and Switzerland. Both systems have experienced important changes over the last two decades. Indeed, already in the 1990s the rise of the Freedom Party of Austria and Swiss People’s Party altered established patterns of political competition by introducing elements of polarization within systems that were once highly consensual (Mazzoleni 2018; Traber 2015; Aichholzer et al. 2014; Fallend and Heinisch 2018). Additionally, large part of Northern Italy has been regarded as an interesting case within the macro-region, particularly since the rise of the Northern League (Albertazzi 2007). Surprisingly, however, South Tyrol and Bavaria did not experience the same level of political change, at least until the end of the 2000s. Few scholars have paid sufficient attention to these regional systems and considered their parallel trajectories.<sup>1</sup> This is partly due to a general lack of interest in political stability and a tendency in the literature to focus on national political dynamics, also defined as ‘methodological nationalism’ (Jeffery and Wincott 2010).

This article aims to assess whether the two regions can still be defined as exceptionally stable political systems. It also considers the political factors that may have contributed to the alteration of well-established equilibriums. The relevance of these questions goes beyond regional politics in Italy and Germany (or in the ‘Alpine Region’). Indeed, significant change in contexts where it is *least likely* to occur may be regarded as an indicator of deep and unprecedented transformations in the European political arena (Hutter and Kriesi 2019). Generally, the study of party systems, which, after decades of stasis, now appear surprisingly fluid, provides important (additional) evidence of the current crisis faced by established political actors at different territorial levels.

The next section reviews the ‘Alpine Region’ framework and provides an overview of the institutional, economic and political characteristics of Bavaria and South Tyrol. It shows why the literature has tended to consider these two regions as ‘exceptional’ not only within their national contexts but also, more generally, within Europe. This is followed by a discussion of

the main political challenges faced by once dominant parties in the two regions. It is shown that *systemic change* is linked to the emergence of new patterns of political competition and the mobilization of new political actors. In this way, our empirical *exploration* of change across clearly defined indicators (from dominance to volatility, from fragmentation to coalition building) is based on a preliminary assessment of its *causal* foundations and is also framed within recent literature on broader political transformations in Europe. In the case of South Tyrol and Bavaria, established parties have had to face new competition from two levels: regional and national. This explains why the discrepancy between pre- and post-crisis periods is even more evident in these two regional contexts than in their respective countries, Italy and Germany. The conclusion highlights the importance of regional cases like the ones analysed here, since they lend original support to the argument that European democracies are undergoing a process of deep restructuring.

### **South Tyrol and Bavaria: two ‘exceptional’ regions**

Both Autonomous Province of Bolzano-South Tyrol and Free State of Bavaria have been considered as exceptional cases not only in Europe but also in their respective national contexts. In a book focusing on the German *Land*, Peter James (1995: 1) defined Bavaria as ‘an exception to the rule in the German political system’. South Tyrol has equally been regarded as a peculiar case within Italy not only due to linguistic and cultural factors – the majority of its population is German-speaking – but also because of its highly distinctive political and institutional system (Scantamburlo and Pallaver 2014).

Great part of the political exceptionalism of these two regions has derived from the role played by two parties: the South Tyrolean People’s Party (SVP) and the Social Christian Union in Bavaria (CSU). Both parties can be defined as ‘regionalist parties’ which ‘primarily stand to defend and “promote” their particular region’ (Mazzoleni and Mueller, 2016: 2). They have both been described as ‘catch all-parties’ (Wagemann 2016; Pallaver 2016) as well as representative of ‘conservative’ regionalism within the so-called ‘Germanic’ zone of the Alpine Region (Keating 2005). Both SVP and CSU succeeded in combining some forms of opposition to the model of democracy established at the national level with their long-standing role in government at the regional level (Caramani and Mény, 2005: 42). As shown by Vampa (2018), both parties have been among the most regionally dominant ones in Europe for many decades. No other party has achieved the same position at the national level in democratic European

systems and similar levels of political dominance can only be found in a small number of other regional cases.

Both parties have been particularly active in the process of economic development of their regional communities, which moved from a situation of relative poverty after WW2 to being among the richest regions in Europe. Franz Josef Strauss, who led the CSU from 1961 to 1988 and was Minister-President of Bavaria from 1978 to 1988, promoted an intense and successful process of modernization, replacing the anti-industrial traditions of Bavarian Catholic politics (Milosch 2006). Since the early 1960s, also the economy of South Tyrol experienced two crucial transformations. The first one was the diffusion of industrial districts from the capital Bolzano to other municipalities of the province (Lechner and Moroder, 2012: 15). The second was the significant expansion of the service sector with the booming of tourism in the 1970s (Ibid: 17). As in the case of Bavaria, the process of economic transformation was supervised by the Provincial Government led for almost thirty years (1960-1988) by Silvius Magnago, who was also leader of the SVP from 1957 to 1991, a record in Italian history. Therefore, in both regions the consolidation of party dominance was also possible due to increasing economic prosperity under the ‘entrepreneurial’ leadership of strong political personalities.

The two parties have played very similar roles in their regional party systems, despite their different participation in national politics. The CSU has acted as the ‘sister’ party of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and has been represented in German governments for most of the post-war period. Indeed the party has successfully played a double-role (*Doppelrolle*) as dominant regional force and junior coalition partner at the national level (Wagemann, 2016: 42). On the other hand, the SVP has been quite marginal in the process of central government formation. It never entered a national cabinet and only provided external support to coalition governments (its votes were rarely decisive). This is mainly due to the difference in the structural significance of the two regions (Eaton 2017: 34–38). Despite both being ‘peripheral’ (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), Bavaria and South Tyrol do not have the same economic and political weight within their national systems. The former is the second most-populated German *Land* and its gross domestic product (GDP) is almost one fifth of the whole German economy. On the other hand, the Autonomous Province of Bolzano accounts only for 1.3% of Italian GDP and less than 1% of the Italian population.

Another key difference between the two regions, and the two parties, is the linguistic factor. South Tyrol is a case of ‘multi-linguistic’ region where German is the most-widely spoken language. The SVP has acted as the main representative of the German-speaking group (but

also the *Ladin* one), which is linguistically majoritarian at the regional level, while being recognized as a linguistic minority by the Italian constitution. The ‘pillarization’ of South Tyrolean society, which is based on the linguistic divide between German-speaking and Italian-speaking communities, has had deep impact on political dynamics (Stocker 2007) and has significantly contributed to ‘freezing’ party competition in the Autonomous Province. In Bavaria, on the other hand, the language issue has been almost completely irrelevant: the dialects spoken there are part of the linguistic spectrum of German.

Yet, despite these structural differences, the political systems of the two regions have been quite similar since the post-war period. This is because of the deeper cultural and political traditions of the ‘Alpine Region’ highlighted above. However, these legacies no longer seem to provide a sufficient basis for political stability. Both regional systems have experienced unprecedented political change in recent years. The next section considers the political factors that might have driven such change.

### **The emergence and strengthening of challenger parties**

The Great Recession, started in the late 2000s, has often been identified as a major cause of political transformation in Western Europe (Hutter and Kriesi 2019). Therefore, it might be tempting to directly link the changes discussed below to socio-economic factors. Yet, despite experiencing a significant slowdown in their economic growth, both regions seem to have performed significantly better than their national economies. Table 1 shows that between 2008 and 2015, the average GDP growth rate of Bavaria was one third higher than that of Germany. In the case of South Tyrol, the discrepancy between regional and national levels is even more striking. The South Tyrolean economy kept growing while the Italian one experienced a serious recession. Therefore, it seems that the two regions, although affected by the crisis, have preserved their economic dynamism. This, however, has not prevented them from experiencing important political transformations.

[Table 1]

According to recent research (Ruiz-Rufino and Alonso 2017), voters do not only punish incumbent and established parties based on how the economy performs during a period of crisis, but, more fundamentally, they may show a deeper dissatisfaction with how democracy works in a context in which policy choices have been significantly constrained. This is more striking at the regional level: the lack of alternation in regional office for very long periods of time, due

to the presence of hegemonic regional parties, raises questions about the *types* of democracy at regional level (Schakel and Massetti 2018).

Therefore, challenges to the political establishment may take place not only at the national level but also at the subnational one. Established parties have been losing votes in regional and local elections across Europe while new parties campaigning for the need to regenerate democracy have managed to become more stable features of subnational party systems (Scantamburlo et al. 2018). Having played the role of challengers to state-wide parties in the past, dominant regionalist parties are in turn being challenged by the electoral growth of new parties exploiting a situation of ‘political’ crisis, a dimension which should be kept analytically separate from the strictly economic one (see framework by Kriesi and Hutter [2019: 6]). It follows that also economically prosperous regions might face significant political change.

A new conflict structure has thus emerged at the subnational level, but it has intersected not only with the traditional left-right dimension but also with the centre-periphery one (Alonso 2012; Elias et al. 2015). In a context of increasing competition around democratic regeneration issues, the emergence of challenger parties at the national level has had its counterpart at the regional one. Regionalist parties have emerged that combine, with no apparent difficulty, a pro-periphery agenda (that goes from autonomy to outright separatism) with a new politics worldview, critical of the political and economic establishment (Scantamburlo et al. 2018). To be sure, regions might have been affected by the emergence of new ‘state-wide’ challengers resulting from the effects of national and supra-national crises (from the Great Recession to the refugee crisis). Yet, sub-national party systems might have also experienced the rise of new parties that are more directly linked to region-specific factors.

Both Bavaria and South Tyrol have been characterized by a complex space of political competition as the traditional left–right conflict has evolved alongside a territorial dimension (Hepburn, 2008; Scantamburlo, 2016). This complexity is compounded by the multilevel structure of the German and Italian states and its effects on the national and subnational party systems.

The South Tyrolean party system is characterized by a deep segmentation along linguistic lines dividing the electoral market into two distinct sub-arenas, whereby German and Italian parties do not tend to compete with each other. Until the 2013 regional elections, less than 2% of the German-speaking voters and less than 10% of the Italian-speaking ones left their respective electoral arenas (Scantamburlo 2016).

The main competitors of the SVP have always been intra-ethnic ones. The biggest threat to its dominance has been the rise of German right-wing secessionist parties, which emerged in opposition to the SVP's *de facto* abandonment of the right to self-determination. The most significant parties of the secessionist camp are the South Tyrolean Freedom (STF) and *Die Freiheitlichen* (DF). The STF stands in the irredentist tradition of 1960s violent activism and in 2008 emerged as a party campaigning for the reunification with Austria. DF, which was modelled on the right-wing populist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and became the SVP's major challenger, promotes the creation of an independent South Tyrolean state. Besides separatism, the political agenda of DF is also defined by a fierce anti-establishment rhetoric, a negative approach towards immigration and an increasing shift towards welfare chauvinism.

The continuous electoral success of those parties between 2003 and 2013 has put pressure on the SVP's centre-periphery agenda, confronting the party with a dilemma regarding the question of self-determination. Since the SVP's pragmatic autonomy policy, based upon consensus with Austria and Italy, is not compatible with claims for secession, the party has tried to accommodate the challengers' demands by advocating a 'maximum level of devolution' (Scantamburlo 2016). The radicalization of territorial demands has been accompanied by a shift to the right on societal matters and a more restrictive positioning towards immigration (Wisthaler 2015).

The enhanced centre-periphery competition, the rightward shift but especially a scandal about advance retirement payments for politicians, which affected all establishment parties, gave rise to an autonomist 'civic' list, *Team Köllensperger* (TK), which replaced DF as the SVP's main competitor after the 2018 regional election, obtaining 15.2% of the vote. The movement, named after its leader, and former 5 Star Movement (M5S), Paul Köllensperger, was created as a territorial list after an unsuccessful call for change in the M5S's national rules for candidate selection, which hampered the creation of a territorially based party organized across ethnic lines. TK is clearly inspired by the tradition of nonpartisan or civic lists that grew considerably at the local level in the 1990s and 2000s (Vampa 2016) but also started to play an important role in regional elections (Vampa 2015). They reflect the increasing distrust in traditional party actors not only in government but also in opposition (Scantamburlo et al. 2018).

The wave of right-wing populism has not only affected the German-speaking group but also the Italian-speaking community. In the past, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s, the nationalist right was quite strong among Italian-speaking inhabitants, who wanted to signal their



hostility towards excessive provincial autonomy from Rome. Yet the main representative of this type of parties in South Tyrol, the Italian Social Movement/National Alliance (MSI/AN), was a case of radical right lacking the core feature of populism (Mudde 2007). Interestingly the party that came closer to the populist dimension, the Northern League (LN), never played an important role in South Tyrol and, until 2018, its support never went above 5%. Despite being a pro-autonomy and pro-federalist party, its claim to represent the whole of the Italian North (the so-called *Padania*) was not well received in a region that sees itself as culturally and economically different from the rest of the North (Giordano 1999). Yet the transformation of the LN into a national(ist), state-wide party under the new leadership of Matteo Salvini (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone 2018) and its clear shift towards the populist radical right made it quite appealing to important sectors of the Italian speaking population. As a result, in 2018 the League (the term ‘Northern’ was dropped by Salvini) became the third largest political force of South Tyrol with 11.1% of the vote and the main ‘Italian’ party. This, as we show below, has had important implications for government formation.

Like South Tyrol, also the political system of Bavaria remained almost completely immune from change for many decades. Its configuration was only partly affected by the major realignments in the aftermath of German unification, which led to a greater territorial diversification of party politics. In fact, the CSU seemed able to consolidate its dominance in a period of increasing political fluidity at the national level. Thus, the Bavarian party system remained significantly different from that of both Western and Eastern *Länder* (Kießling, 2008).

The CSU’s nature as a regionalist party, which, mobilising around the concept of *Heimat*, advanced demands for special treatment and more autonomy, has had a significant impact on party competition in Bavaria (Hepburn 2008). In order to succeed electorally the regional branches of the German state-wide parties, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens have all been forced to adapt to the regional context by embracing a Bavarian territorial identity. While the FDP and the Greens have been slower in developing such a specific profile, the SPD, the historical competitor of the CSU, has long tried to exhibit a differential identity from the rest of the federal party organization constituting itself as *Landesverband* (including renaming itself *BayernSPD*) in order to allow for a higher degree of policy divergence. Yet these strategies of regional adaptation failed to pose a major challenge to the dominance of the CSU, since its competitors were still often

perceived as ‘affiliates to Berlin, with common membership structures and policy programmes’ (Hepburn, 2010: 537).

Given the particularity of German federalism, the Bavarian two-dimensional political space revealed a right-wing and nationalist (i.e. more autonomy) confluence on the one hand, and a centre-left and federalist (i.e. status quo) confluence on the other (Hepburn 2010). After intense competition with the nationalist *Bayernpartei* (in the 1950s), the former political space used to be entirely represented by the CSU, and the latter by the SPD, the Greens and, less consistently, by the FDP. As these parties rarely gathered more than 35% of the vote, party competition generally took place on the right-wing, pro-autonomy side of the ideological spectrum.

Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the CSU has been challenged by the rise of a territorial list, the Free Voters (FW). As a breakaway group of disillusioned CSU voters, in 2008 this political formation became the third largest one in Bavaria with 10.2% of the vote, causing the CSU’s worst result in 46 years (James 2009). In contrast to the other state-wide parties, the FW significantly overlaps with the CSU in ideological and programmatic terms, thus offering ‘CSU substance without being the CSU’ (Wagemann, 2012: 137). At the same time, the FW very well represents a shift towards different forms of political participation, which we have also noted in the case of South Tyrol (e.g. TK). Citizens’ involvement in politics no longer seems to be mediated by traditional party structures but instead, occurs within a decentralized network of local associations, which lack formal partisan affiliation. In this context, even formidable electoral machines, such as the CSU and the SVP, are increasingly unable to mobilize effectively.

Similarly to South Tyrol, also Bavaria has experienced the rise of the populist radical right. After having entered almost all regional parliaments and the *Bundestag*, Alternative for Germany (AfD) was expected to repeat its success in the Bavarian state election of 2018. The party posed a serious threat to the CSU, which for the first time in decades had a serious competitor to its right (the FW challenged the CSU more on the autonomy dimension than on the ‘left-right’ one). The party reacted by trying to co-opt some elements of AfD’s nativist discourse. At the federal level, the CSU also tried to distance itself from its sister party CDU. In a deadlock over federal refugee policy in the summer of 2018, CSU party chairman and federal interior minister Horst Seehofer came close to breaking the traditional alliance with the CDU and bringing down the national government. Yet, while this strategy seemed to have had a moderately negative impact on support for AfD, which fared slightly worse in Bavaria than in other regions, it led to significant defections of moderate voters to the Greens<sup>2</sup>, which

managed to replace the SPD as the largest opposition party for the first time in the history of Bavarian elections.

In sum, this section has shown that a reconfiguration of political supply has occurred in South Tyrol and Bavaria. This process was driven by emerging challengers at state-wide and regional levels (Figure 1). Bavaria has been exposed to both: AfD, as a national actor becoming competitive in the regional arena; the FW, as a region-specific competitor. The latter can be compared to the ‘civic’ challenge posed by TK to the dominant SVP in South Tyrol. Additionally, similarly to Bavaria, the Autonomous Province has been affected by the growing support for a national right-wing populist party: the League. Yet, given its ethno-linguistic peculiarities, South Tyrol has also experienced the emergence of regionally focused right-wing populist parties, DF and STF, which have been absent in Bavaria.

[Figure 1]

Regardless of their origins, regional or national, the challengers presented above have contributed to transforming the political systems of both regions. The next section provides an introduction of the key indicators which allow a systematic assessment of political change across different dimensions.

### **Measuring political change: indicators**

In dominant (or formerly dominant) party systems it is often difficult to disentangle party-specific and ‘systemic’ characteristics (Bogaards and Boucek 2010). Indeed, the dominant party and the whole system are often considered as two sides of the same coin and changes in the status of the first are likely to have an impact on the latter. Measuring change in dominant party systems should therefore start from an analysis of the success of the dominant party in absolute terms and relative to its challengers. This should then be complemented by system-wide indicators looking at overall levels of volatility and fragmentation. Lastly, by linking representation to government, one should consider changes in executive politics. This would provide a multidimensional and comprehensive assessment of change within a political system.

Starting from the dominant party, of course, the share of votes and seats it wins is fundamental if we want to measure its centrality within the party system (Huo 2007: 746). Yet it is also important to assess the strength of the dominant party in relation to that of its main

competitor. This can be operationalized by using the index of dominance developed by Vampa (2020: 92), which combines ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ dominance. It is expressed by the following formula:

$$\text{Dominance } (d) = \text{Absolute} * \text{Relative} = s * \left(\frac{s}{c}\right)$$

Where  $s$  is the share of parliamentary seats controlled by the largest party in government and  $c$  is the share of parliamentary seats controlled by its main competitor. Therefore the larger the score, the more dominant the party. An unprecedented decrease in the level of dominance may be interpreted as a sign that political equilibriums are changing.

Yet dominance only tells us something about one key actor and the competition it faces. Volatility and fragmentation help us assess the level of change at the party system level. Of course, these indicators may be related to party dominance but they should be kept analytically distinct. Chiaramonte and Emanuele (2017) have recently highlighted the differences existing between total volatility and party system regeneration. Whereas the former refers to the vote switching across all parties, the latter focuses on volatility caused by new party entry and old party exit from the party system (Ibid. 377). The Pedersen’s (1979) index of volatility can be disentangled in order to take into account deeper changes deriving from the emergence of new challengers or the collapse of old political forces. An unprecedented increase in total volatility and party system regeneration can also be interpreted as a clear sign of political change.

The emergence of new actors and the increasing instability of a formerly dominant party system is also captured by indicators of party fragmentation. The index measuring the effective number of parliamentary parties developed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979) can be used to assess this change. More fragmentation may point to a systemic shift to ‘moderate’ or even ‘polarized’ pluralism (Sartori 1976).

Fragmentation is also likely to affect the last dimension of change considered here: government formation. A general distinction can be made between ‘oversized cabinets, which do contain more parties than are necessary for majority support in the legislature’ and ‘minimal winning cabinets’, which instead do ‘not include any party that is not necessary to reach a majority in parliament’ (Lijphart, 2012: 79-80). Consensual democracies tend to rely on the former rather than the latter. Minimal winning cabinets may in turn be divided into single party majorities and coalitions. Lastly minority governments are formed when they are composed of representatives of a party (single party minority) or parties (coalition minority) that do not control a majority of seats within the representative assembly to which the executive is

responsible (Strom 1990). A move from one type of government to another can also be interpreted as a sign of political change, particularly if this happens after many years (or decades) of continuity.

The indicators presented above help us provide a comprehensive assessment of political change, considering a plurality of dimensions. If they are all altered then there is strong evidence that a process of systemic change is under way. The aim of this article is to prove that, as a consequence of the shifts in political supply presented in the previous section, this is occurring in two regions once characterized by high levels of system stability.

### **Systemic change in the two regions**

If we focus on the elections which took place in the last ten years and compare them to those occurred in the previous decades, a clear picture emerges in both regions. In the last three elections the SVP achieved its worst results since 1948, reaching an all-time low of 41.9% in 2018 (Figure 2). In 2008 the party received less than 50% of the vote for the first time in its history and in 2013 it also failed to win an absolute majority of the seats in the Provincial Council (Scantamburlo and Pallaver 2014). It did not recover from that loss. Similarly, the three elections in 2008, 2013 and 2018 saw the CSU share of the vote drop below 50% for the first time since 1970. The party failed to obtain the absolute majority of the seats in 2008 (first time since 1962). The modest recovery in 2013 proved temporary and in 2018 the party obtained its worst score in *Land* elections since 1950. In sum, the 2008-2018 period has not been particularly positive for either party. They have managed to preserve their role as the largest parties in their respective political systems, but their dominant position has been significantly weakened.

[Figure 2]

Table 2 includes the scores based on the dominance index by Vampa (2020). The post-2008 period has the lowest score in the whole post-war history of South Tyrol, meaning that the SVP is much less dominant today than at any time in the past. Interestingly, it can be noted that despite a moderate decline in its share of the vote in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, its level of dominance remained very similar to that of the immediate post-war period. It even increased compared to the 1960s and 1970s. This is due to the fact that between the end of 20<sup>th</sup>

and beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the SVP suffered much less than its competitors in electoral terms. Therefore, it increased its ‘relative’ dominance. It is also striking that dominance of the winning party of South Tyrol was significantly higher than that of the largest ruling party at the national level. However, SVP dominance and the difference between regional and national levels collapsed after 2008, thus suggesting once again the decline of South Tyrolean exceptionalism.

In Bavaria levels of ruling party dominance used to be lower than in South Tyrol, due to the fact that opposition to the CSU was much less fragmented. The Bavarian SPD managed to attract around one third of electoral support in most elections until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This in turn negatively impacted on the relative dominance of the CSU. Yet Table 2 clearly shows that since the 1970s the party has been consistently more dominant than the largest party in central government. In fact, while national party dominance declined in the early 2000s, regional party dominance rose to its highest level. The picture changed after 2008. Despite increasing fragmentation in the opposition (partly due to the crisis of the SPD), the dominance of the CSU reached its lowest levels since the 1960s. Yet there is a key difference between today and six decades ago. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s the party was in the ascendant and was establishing the basis for its future dominance (James, 1995: 115–121), since 2008 it has been on a clearly downward trajectory.

[Table 2]

The increasing political instability of the system and the impact of new challengers in both Bavaria and South Tyrol is well captured by measures of volatility. Table 3 looks at levels of total volatility in Bavaria and South Tyrol and compares them to those of Germany and Italy. What emerges is that total volatility in the decade starting from 2008 has reached unprecedented levels in South Tyrol. It is true that in the 1980s and 1990s this region already experienced an important increase in volatility. Yet, when the Italian party system was undergoing a deep transformation in the 1990s, it remained relatively low and even decreased in the 2000s. Today, there is no difference between national and regional levels. Volatility also peaked in Bavaria and Germany in recent years. In fact, today it is higher at the regional than at the national level.

[Table 3]

When we focus on regeneration volatility (Table 4) the picture is even more striking, with both Bavaria and South Tyrol scoring relatively high in the post-2008 period. In Bavaria after four decades of almost non-existing regeneration volatility, the political situation has become even more fluid than in Berlin. In the three *Land* elections since 2008, on average regeneration volatility has been 3.6%, twice as high as at the federal level. This is mainly due to the fact that in addition to the emergence of AfD, which also occurred at the national level, Bavaria has also experienced the rise of the FW.

In South Tyrol regeneration volatility has reached unprecedented levels. The emergence of new locally-focused political actors like TK and the collapse of the traditional Italian right – replaced by the League (almost non-existing before 2018) –, combined with the dramatic transformations affecting Italian politics as a whole, seem to have contributed to this shift.

[Table 4]

The figures shown in table 5, confirm once again the picture of significant change characterising the post-2008 period. In South Tyrol party fragmentation in the provincial council reached an all-time high in the post-2008 period. For the first time since WW2, the regional and national party systems have been equally fragmented. This is quite striking if we consider that while in the 1990s and 2000s fragmentation increased substantially at the national level, it remained relatively low regionally. Also in Bavaria, the once very simplified party system is now much more fragmented and the gap between land and national levels is much smaller than it used to be in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. In fact for most of the post-1970 period until the mid-2000s, the effective number of parliamentary parties in Bavaria was below 2.

[Table 5]

These changes have also impacted on the process of government formation in the two regions. In the past both parties were self-sufficient and when coalitions were formed, as in the

case of South Tyrol, this was more due to institutional mechanisms that favoured collaboration among political actors representing different ethnolinguistic communities.

Indeed, according to the Autonomy Statute of 1948 and the principle of maximum inclusion of all societal segments, South Tyrolean linguistic groups have to be represented in the government according to their proportional strength in the provincial council. ‘Ethnic proportionality’ (*Ethnischer Proporz*) requires that all candidates declare themselves belonging to one of three recognized language groups (German, Italian and Ladin). Despite reaching an absolute majority of seats until 2008, the SVP always needed an Italian coalition partner to form a government.

The principle of maximum inclusion of all language groups in the decision-making process has undergone profound changes in the past 25 years because of the radical transformation of the political landscape. Until the collapse of the national party system in the early 1990s, the traditional governing partners of the SVP, the Christian Democrats (DC) and the Socialists (PSI), always represented between 40 and 50% of Italian speakers. Yet since the collapse of the Italian party system in 1992-1994, the SVP formed coalitions with centre-left parties, which only won the support of less than one third of the Italian-speaking voters (Pallaver 2016). This is because, in addition to the ethnic principle, the SVP has always paid particular attention to the *political* compatibility of its coalition partners, especially concerning their position towards provincial autonomy. In this respect, the SVP ruled out coalitions with parties, which, even when representing significant sectors of the Italian population, were critical towards autonomy. Interestingly, in the 1990s, the majority of the Italian speaking population chose right-wing parties supporting a more centralistic approach to regional affairs. The ever decreasing inclusion of Italian speakers has been one important reason for increasing ‘Italian discomfort’ (*disagio*), because the majority did not feel represented by the provincial government (Scantamburlo and Pallaver 2014). Therefore although the SVP continued to win an absolute majority of votes and seats until the 2000s, thus retaining its dominance within the German-speaking community, the consensual character of South-Tyrolean politics started declining.

The last two elections marked a clear end of consensual executive politics even though formally the principle of ethnic proportionality remained intact. As shown in Figure 3, in 2013 oversized government majorities (controlling always more than 60% of the seats until the early 2000s) were replaced by a minimal winning coalition between a weakened SVP, no longer able to dominate the German-speaking constituency, and the Democratic Party (PD), representing a minority of the Italian-speaking community.



The 2018 election even failed to produce a majority for an SVP-PD combination. The only feasible winning coalitions were a coalition with the League, which became the main ‘Italian’ party, or a coalition with the PD and the Greens. For the SVP both combinations entailed political dilemmas. While the League is a Eurosceptic party, the SVP is decidedly Euro-enthusiastic. Moreover, although shifting to the right, the SVP is still far away from the League’s clearly hostile discourse towards immigration. On the other hand, a coalition with the Greens and the PD would have included a smaller section of the Italian linguistic group. The SVP also has big reservations about the Greens’ ‘inter-ethnic’ character.

The eventual decision to form a coalition with the League marks a turning point in the political history of South Tyrol. For the first time an Italian right-wing party enters the South Tyrolean government and for the first time since the early 1990s a government party represents the majority of the Italian voting population. Yet this improvement in the level of inclusiveness of the coalition is accompanied by the decreasing ability of the SVP to represent the German-speaking community. The overall result is that for two consecutive elections South Tyrol is governed by the smallest governmental majority that has ever ruled South Tyrol in its 70 years of democratic history. Minimal winning coalitions now seem a stable feature of the system and this is likely to have an impact on future political dynamics and policies.

[Figure 3]

Bavaria was characterized by relatively high levels of political consensualism for a short period, immediately after WW2. Oversized cabinets were formed in 1946, 1950, 1958 and 1962. Only a governmental majority formed in 1954 excluded the CSU. From 1966 single party governments became the norm in the Land. The CSU managed to win absolute majorities in the Land parliament for more than four decades. The absence of institutional mechanisms similar to the South Tyrolean ones allowed the CSU to govern alone. Yet, the much more fragmented and fluid political situation after the 2008 election has significantly altered this tradition of one-party majority governments. In 2008, the SPD, confined to the opposition for five decades, even contemplated the possibility of starting talks with the other parties to form an alternative coalition. While such an arrangement was unlikely to materialize, it became evident that after the 2008 electoral result the presence of the CSU in government could no longer be taken for granted (Wagemann, 2016). In the end, as shown in Figure 4, the CSU

managed to form a coalition with the FDP, ending the Bavarian exceptionalism based on single party governments. In fact, federal level developments encouraged a coalition with the FDP, since a possible cooperation between the two parties had already been discussed before the 2009 federal election and a black-yellow coalition in Munich was seen as an important dry run for the future change in Berlin (James, 2009).

The 2013 election returned a single-party majority. This, however, was due to the mechanisms of the voting system, since the CSU failed for the second time in a row to secure an absolute majority of the votes. The precariousness of the CSU recovery was confirmed by the 2018 election, when the party fell well short of an absolute majority of the seats. Once again alternative majorities were possible. In the end, the CSU managed to maintain its governmental position thanks to an agreement with the FW. While the latter were perceived as CSU deserters in 2008 and thus were not considered as possible coalition partners, they were among the favourites in 2018. In order to avoid prolonged negotiations like those at the federal level, where the longest government formation process in Germany's post-war history led to another Grand Coalition (Bräuninger et al., 2019), the CSU pushed for a quick solution. After two exploratory talks with the FW and the Greens, the CSU finally opted for a coalition with the FW, given their programmatic and ideological similarities. As shown in Figure 4 this is the smallest parliamentary majority in Bavarian history, with the exception of the 1966-1970 one, which, however, was not a coalition but a one-party government. It is evident that the invulnerability of the CSU belongs to the past.

[Figure 4]

Table 6 shows that, considering all six indicators together, both regions have experienced unprecedented systemic change. South Tyrol has moved from being a highly dominant, moderately volatile and concentrated party system, characterized by consensual-style executive politics into a more competitive, highly volatile and fragmented party system, where minimal winning coalitions have become the norm. The competitive character, fragmentation and volatility of the Bavarian system have also significantly increased since the early years of the post-war period and the once dominant party no longer seems to be self-sufficient.

[Table 6]

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown that two sub-national political systems, which used to be among the most stable ones in Western Europe, have experienced significant change in the last decade. Bavaria and South Tyrol seemed immune to political transformations until the early 2000s. Yet their political exceptionalism has clearly come to an end. It is no longer possible to talk about invulnerable dominant parties ruling the two regions. High levels of party fragmentation and volatility also seem to suggest increasing dynamism in the level of party competition.

South Tyrol and Bavaria have shared important political characteristics as part of the so-called Alpine (macro-)Region, despite their structural differences. Today they are facing similar challenges deriving from significant shifts in their political supply. The combination of regional and state-wide challengers explains why post-2008 systemic changes have been relatively more radical in these two regions than in their respective countries. The decline of once dominant forces has been accompanied by the rise of new local and civic movements, TK and the FW, which are not directly linked to traditional party organizations. Additionally, the rise of the populist radical right has been evident in both regions, although, due to the different role played by ethno-linguistic factors, it has not taken exactly the same form. In Bavaria the success of AfD has been linked to state-wide transformations and has opened a new right-wing front of political competition with the CSU. In South Tyrol, first the success of STF and DF, within the German-speaking community, and then that of the League, within the Italian one, have also shifted political competition to the right and challenged the SVP. Unlike what happened in Bavaria, which is more ethnically homogeneous, right-wing populism has emerged both as a state-wide challenge and as a region-specific phenomenon.

This study does not only focus on regional politics but also contributes to broader debates on political change, party dominance and the emergence of new challengers. The turbulences experienced by national party systems and governments are well known and have been extensively analysed. A focus on the transformations occurring in sub-national systems, which were once regarded as extremely resilient, provides additional – and original – evidence of the radical restructuring of politics occurring in Western Europe. South Tyrol and Bavaria should be considered as key examples of systemic change in a period of significant political uncertainty. Future studies could focus on similar cases or look for sub-national contexts in which a period of restructuring and instability has resulted in a new equilibrium.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The book by Hermanseder (2014) is a notable exception, although this study is in German.

<sup>2</sup> Post-election polls by Tagesschau showed that more CSU voters defected to the Greens than to AfD  
<https://wahl.tagesschau.de/wahlen/2018-10-14-LT-DE-BY/index.shtml>

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Table 1. GDP growth in Bavaria/Germany and South Tyrol/Italy before and after the crisis

|                            | <i>Bavaria vs Germany</i> |         | <i>South Tyrol vs Italy</i> |       |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|---------|-----------------------------|-------|
|                            | Bavaria                   | Germany | South Tyrol                 | Italy |
| Pre-crisis<br>(2000-2007)  | 2.4                       | 1.9     | 1.7                         | 1.5   |
| Post-crisis<br>(2008-2015) | 1.5                       | 0.9     | 1.1                         | -0.9  |

Source: Eurostat



Table 2. Dominance of winning party: comparing Bavaria and South Tyrol to Germany and Italy. Averages and differences between region and country by decade.

|                          | 1940s       | 1950s        | 1960s       | 1970s       | 1980s       | 1990s       | 2000s<br>(pre2008) | Post-2008   |
|--------------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------|
| <b>Bavaria</b>           | 1.74        | 0.55         | 0.74        | 1.22        | 1.27        | 1.16        | 2.08               | <b>1.14</b> |
| <b>Germany</b>           | 0.38        | 0.79         | 0.53        | 0.43        | 0.52        | 0.56        | 0.4                | <b>0.65</b> |
| <b><i>Difference</i></b> | <b>1.36</b> | <b>-0.24</b> | <b>0.21</b> | <b>0.79</b> | <b>0.76</b> | <b>0.6</b>  | <b>1.68</b>        | <b>0.49</b> |
| <b>South Tyrol</b>       | 4.23        | 3.41         | 3.12        | 2.79        | 4.04        | 3.39        | 4.19               | <b>1.43</b> |
| <b>Italy</b>             | 0.98        | 0.86         | 0.64        | 0.55        | 0.45        | 0.38        | 0.47               | <b>0.83</b> |
| <b><i>Difference</i></b> | <b>3.25</b> | <b>2.55</b>  | <b>2.48</b> | <b>2.24</b> | <b>3.59</b> | <b>3.01</b> | <b>3.72</b>        | <b>0.6</b>  |

**Sources for Tables 2 to 5:** Author's own calculations based on data from Italian Interior Ministry (<https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/>) and Tagesschau election archive (<https://wahl.tagesschau.de/>)

Table 3. Total volatility: comparing Bavaria and South Tyrol to Germany and Italy. Averages and differences between region and country by decade.

|                          | <b>1950s</b> | <b>1960s</b> | <b>1970s</b> | <b>1980s</b> | <b>1990s</b> | <b>2000s<br/>(pre2008)</b> | <b>Post-<br/>2008</b> |
|--------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Bavaria</b>           | 19.4         | 11.8         | 6.5          | 5.5          | 5            | 11.6                       | <b>18.6</b>           |
| <b>Germany</b>           | 15.1         | 8.4          | 5            | 6.5          | 8.3          | 8                          | <b>15.8</b>           |
| <b><i>Difference</i></b> | <b>4.3</b>   | <b>3.4</b>   | <b>1.5</b>   | <b>-1</b>    | <b>-3.3</b>  | <b>3.6</b>                 | <b>2.8</b>            |
| <b>South Tyrol</b>       | 9.1          | 5.9          | 10.9         | 15.9         | 18.5         | 13.6                       | <b>24.9</b>           |
| <b>Italy</b>             | 9.7          | 6.1          | 7.5          | 8.6          | 22.4         | 14.3                       | <b>24.9</b>           |
| <b><i>Difference</i></b> | <b>-0.6</b>  | <b>-0.2</b>  | <b>3.4</b>   | <b>7.3</b>   | <b>-3.9</b>  | <b>-0.7</b>                | <b>0</b>              |

Table 4. Regeneration Volatility: comparing Bavaria and South Tyrol to Germany and Italy. Averages and differences between region and country by decade.

|                    | 1950s      | 1960s      | 1970s       | 1980s       | 1990s       | 2000s<br>(pre2008) | Post-<br>2008 |
|--------------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------|---------------|
| <b>Bavaria</b>     | 5.4        | 4          | 0.4         | 0.75        | 0.8         | 0                  | <b>3.6</b>    |
| <b>Germany</b>     | 3.8        | 1.2        | 0.9         | 0.3         | 1.2         | 0.6                | <b>1.9</b>    |
| <i>Difference</i>  | <i>1.6</i> | <i>2.8</i> | <i>-0.5</i> | <i>0.45</i> | <i>-0.4</i> | <i>-0.6</i>        | <i>1.7</i>    |
| <b>South Tyrol</b> | 4.5        | 1.6        | 3.6         | 9.6         | 7.7         | 7.4                | <b>13.9</b>   |
| <b>Italy</b>       | 0          | 0          | 1.1         | 1.3         | 9.1         | 11.7               | <b>8.5</b>    |
| <i>Difference</i>  | <i>4.5</i> | <i>1.6</i> | <i>2.5</i>  | <i>8.3</i>  | <i>-1.4</i> | <i>-4.3</i>        | <i>5.4</i>    |

Table 5. Effective number of parliamentary parties: comparing Bavaria and South Tyrol to Germany and Italy. Average and difference between region and country by decade.

|                          | 1940s        | 1950s        | 1960s        | 1970s        | 1980s        | 1990s        | 2000s<br>(pre2008) | Post-2008           |
|--------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Bavaria</b>           | 2.32         | 3.43         | 2.45         | 1.98         | 1.94         | 2.11         | 1.87               | <b>3.24</b>         |
| <b>Germany</b>           | 4.01         | 2.62         | 2.38         | 2.32         | 2.58         | 2.82         | 3.12               | <b>3.8</b>          |
| <b><i>Difference</i></b> | <i>-1.69</i> | <i>0.81</i>  | <i>0.07</i>  | <i>-0.34</i> | <i>-0.64</i> | <i>-0.71</i> | <i>-1.25</i>       | <b><i>-0.56</i></b> |
| <b>South Tyrol</b>       | 2.25         | 2.03         | 2.19         | 2.54         | 2.39         | 2.86         | 2.6                | <b>3.63</b>         |
| <b>Italy</b>             | 3.65         | 3.5          | 3.6          | 3.43         | 4.05         | 6.43         | 5.15               | <b>3.63</b>         |
| <b><i>Difference</i></b> | <i>-1.4</i>  | <i>-1.47</i> | <i>-1.41</i> | <i>-0.89</i> | <i>-1.66</i> | <i>-3.57</i> | <i>-2.55</i>       | <b><i>0</i></b>     |

Table 6. South Tyrol and Bavaria: summary of political change in 2008-2018

|   | <b>South Tyrol</b>   | <b>Bavaria</b>   |
|---|--|--|
| <b>Electoral support for main party</b> | Lowest ever  | Lowest since 1954  |
| <b>Party dominance</b>                  | Lowest ever  | Lowest since 1960s   |
| <b>Total volatility</b>                 | Highest ever   | Highest since 1950s  |
| <b>Regeneration volatility</b>          | Highest ever   | Highest since 1960s  |
| <b>Fragmentation</b>                    | Highest ever   | Highest since 1950s  |
| <b>Government type</b>                  | From oversized majorities until 2008 to minimal winning coalitions.<br>Smallest parliamentary majority ever. | From single party majorities (1962-2003, oversized majorities before 1962) to minimal winning coalitions.<br>Smallest parliamentary majority since 1966. |

Figure 1. New challengers and systemic change

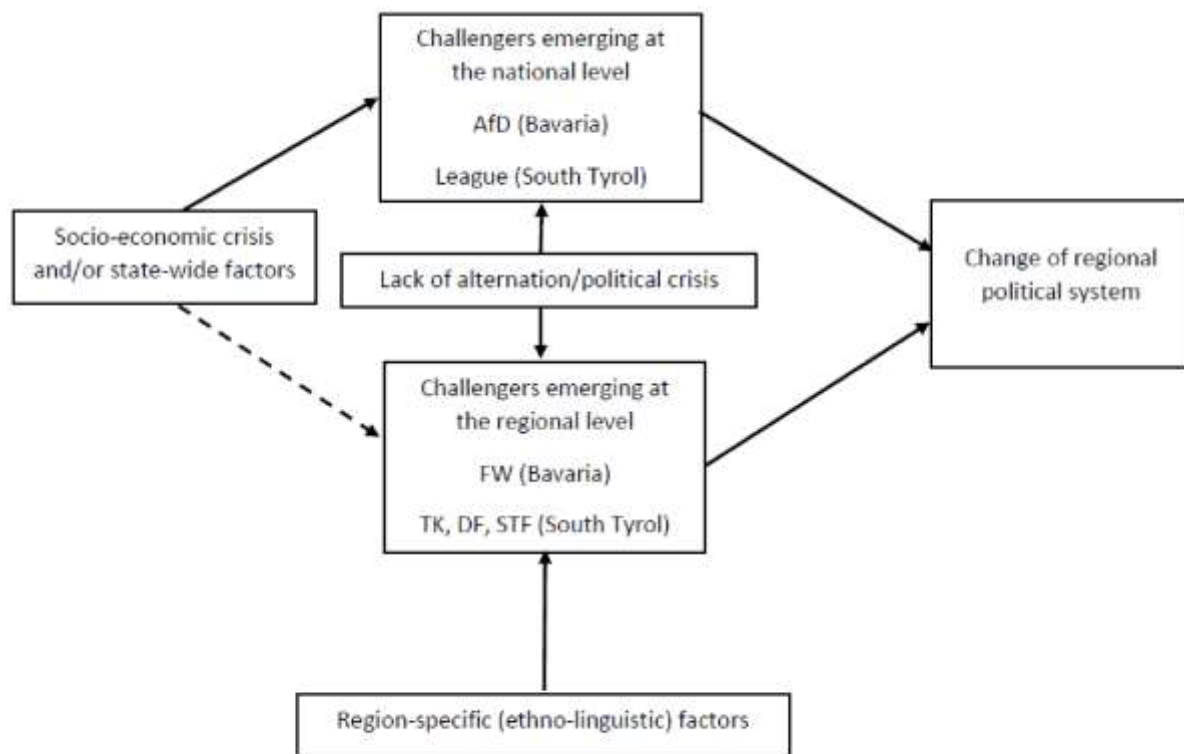


Figure 2. Support for SVP and CSU since 1946

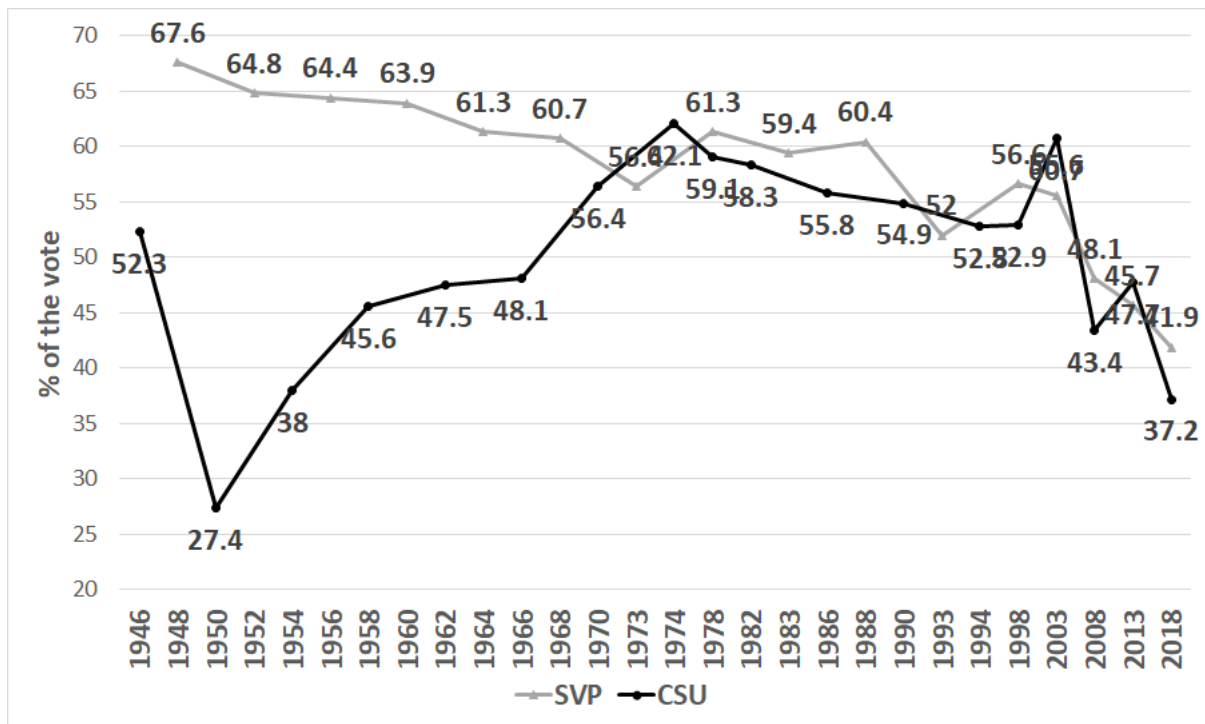


Figure 3. Government composition in South Tyrol (% of parliamentary seats)

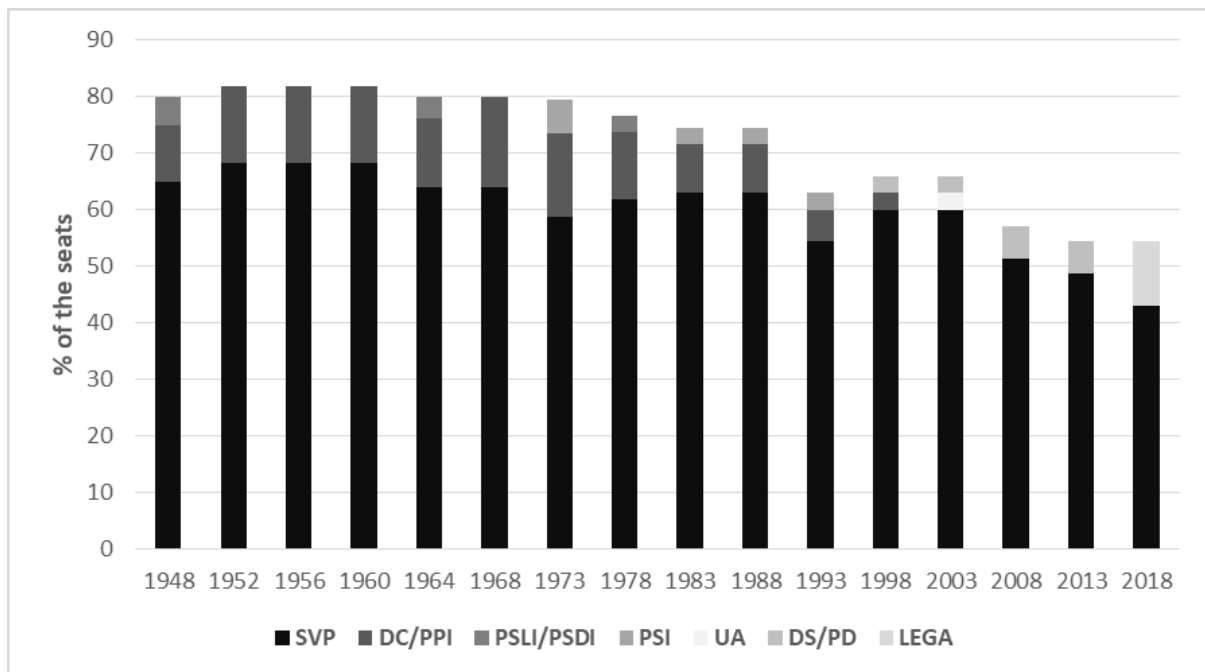




Figure 4. Government composition in Bavaria (% of parliamentary seats)

