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# **We did well enough. Systemic reforms, changes in recruitment procedures and the evolution of Italian political science**

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## **Abstract**

Italian political science has evolved over time, dealing with various reforms and changes in the structure of academic careers and procedures for recruitment that have characterised the recent decades of the Italian university system. This paper reflects on how these changes have challenged the foundational identity of Italian political science and how they have influenced its development as a community of scholars. Three relevant dynamics emerge: the shift from a national and centralised community to a set of local networks of scholars, the capacity to perform well in terms of professional standards, and the risk that the capacity to reproduce the discipline's identity, or at least its foundational core, could be significantly weakened.

## **1. Introduction**

The institutionalisation of political science in Italy has been the subject of a complex diachronic path whose different drivers and results have already been convincingly dealt with. We know a lot about the process of autonomisation from other disciplines (Graziano 1986; Morlino 1989; 1991), about the different drivers that have led to the asymmetric distribution of political science in Italian universities and thus a significant concentration of political scientists in only a few of them (Capano 20005; Capano and Verzichelli 2010), and about the level of internationalisation and social impact of the discipline (Capano and Verzichelli 2016). But while there is enough convincing research on various dimensions of the evolution and reality of Italian political science, there is an analytical gap in grasping how the discipline has been reproducing itself and whether and how its foundational identity has been able to survive external challenges and changes.

To embark on this kind of analysis it is important to remember that academic 'disciplines are reservoirs of ways of knowing which, in dynamic combination with other structural phenomena, can condition behavioural practices, sets of discourses, ways of thinking, procedures, emotional responses and motivations. Together this constellation of factors results in structured dispositions for disciplinary practitioners who, in conjunction with external forces, reshape them in different practice clusters into localised

repertoires' (Trowler 2014, p. 24). Thus, it has to be assumed that the evolution of Italian political science, intended as a set of knowledge territories and common practices, has been embedded, constrained and influenced by external factors; of these, the characteristics of the higher education system are unavoidable drivers.

According to the comparative literature on higher education policy, two factors are specifically relevant to understand the evolution of Italian political science: systemic governance arrangements and the design of academic career structures. Systemic governance arrangements design the field of action of universities and thus the set of constraints and incentives that structure their autonomous strategies regarding the development of academic disciplines (including hiring and promoting academics). The characteristics of the academic career structure directly influence both the choices of universities as well as individual strategies (Bleikliem and Michelsen 2013; Fumasoli, Goastellec and Kehm 2015).

Thus, what Italian political science actually is can be seen by understanding how its foundational identity has been touched or modified in practice by the changes that occur over time in university systems, in the rules structuring academic careers and in the practices of recruitment.

By assuming this analytical perspective, in this short piece I analyse how changes in systemic governance arrangements, as well as in the rules structuring career paths, have impacted how Italian political science originally defined itself and how it has had the opportunity to reproduce over time.

The analysis is based on applying what we know about the evolution of the Italian university system and some qualitative and quantitative data with my personal experience in a more-than-30-year career as a political scientist (with some experience in institutional positions and in recruitment committees at national and local levels).

The analysis shows how many changes, at both the systemic governance level and in the rules on careers, have had some interesting implications for Italian political science: first, the shift from a national, hierarchical but cohesive community with a mentionable propensity to internationalisation to a set of local networks of scholars in which there are some highly internationalised people; second, the capacity to perform relatively well, from a qualitative point of view, in each of the stages of the diachronic reforms; third, the risk that the decentralised structure of the community of political scientists could weaken the capacity to reproduce the discipline's identity, or at least its foundational core.

The paper is structured as follows: in the second section I will sketch out the foundational identity of Italian political science. In the third section I will summarise changes at the systemic level and their effects on political science; in the fourth section I will reconstruct the diachronic evolution of the rules on academic hiring and career together with some considerations on its impact on political science. In the fifth section I will assess what have we done, where we are and what we should do.

## **2. The foundational identity of Italian political science**

Italian political science developed and was institutionalised between the 1960s and 1980s. It was a long and complex process of community-building and delimiting the borders of the disciplinary territory of knowledge by a group of masters (the founding father, Giovanni Sartori, together with Alberto Spreafico, Domenico Fisichella, Giacomo Sani,

Giorgio Freddi, Giuseppe di Federico, Paolo Farneti and Giuliano Urbani) who invested intellectual resources and time in making political science an autonomous field of study and embedding it in the university system (Graziano 1986). There were two pillars in this community and disciplinary building: a deliberate empirical approach and ‘Americanization’ (due to the close relationship that most of the masters had with the US in terms of training) (Morlino 1991). This group of people and the following generation (Stefano Bartolini, Luigi Bonanate, Mauro Calise, Maurizio Cotta, Roberto D’Alimonte, Carlo Guarnieri, Alfio Mastropaolo, Leonardo Morlino, Gianfranco Pasquino,) built the national community (the *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* being founded in 1971 and, in 1981, the Italian Association of Political Science).

Since the beginning, the founding community of Italian political scientists has shared the idea of belonging to the international community of political scientists. Thus, an international attitude has always been a constitutive part of the discipline. Giovanni Sartori accumulated a strong international reputation; the first chair-holder in public administration, Giorgio Freddi, earned his PhD at Berkeley, as did Giacomo Sani. The following generation of scholars, who are now retired (for example, Stefano Bartolini, Maurizio Cotta, Bruno Dente, Carlo Guarnieri, Alfio Mastropaolo, Leonardo Morlino and Gianfranco Pasquino), cannot be considered a parochial group: they have extensively published in international venues and were part of international research networks.

Furthermore, it was a strong community that decided to maintain its unity (notwithstanding a natural fragmentation due to different theoretical approaches and topics of research) on the basis of its foundational identity (empiricism, the sharing of basic common epistemological and methodological choices that can be applied to the various forms of the political phenomenon). What was being studied (international relations, bureaucracy, political parties, public policies, etc.) was not important; what was important was to be part of a community sharing the same way of knowing and professional practices.

So, we could say that notwithstanding the characteristics of university systems and career structure, Italian political science from the 1970s to the turn of the century was anchored to the international community. Thus, publishing in international venues was not unusual (as it was in other disciplines among the so-called ‘political and social sciences’) (Morlino 1989; 1991), and this helped maintain a common sense of belonging to a community bigger than the various subdisciplines and research topics. The high propensity for internationalisation is also demonstrated by the attachment and the persistent involvement of the founding fathers and the following generation in the activities and steering of the International Political Science Association and of the European Consortium of Political Research.

The sense of community was so relevant that it pushed political scientists against their own interests in terms of expansion of the discipline in the university system. Notwithstanding the university system’s prized division of disciplines, formally recognised by the Ministry of Education as scientific disciplinary sectors (the basic units for assigning academic positions and distinguishing the courses to be taught), Italian political scientists have always been willing to maintain their unity and thus stay together in only one scientific sector. For example, in 2004, during the annual conference of the Italian Political Science Association, a proposal to divide into two scientific sectors was rejected by the assembly. If that choice had been made, it can be estimated that the academic

positions in political science could be 25-30% more than they are. But Italian political scientists preferred to stay united.

### 3. Systemic reforms and Italian political science

The Italian university system has undergone various reforms in the last three decades (Capano 1998; Donina, Meoli and Paleari 2015; Capano, Regini and Turri 2016). Since the end of the 1980s, everything has changed in the main systemic arrangements. Here it is relevant to focus on those systemic changes that have directly affected the evolution of political science in terms of a 'reservoir' of way of knowing and professional practices, among which the most relevant are the following: 1. the concession of institutional autonomy to universities; 2. the establishment and subsequent reforms of the PhD programmes; 3. the introduction of a national research exercise. These changes contributed on the one hand to weakening the institutional incentives to maintain a cohesive community at the national level while, on the other hand, showed how the discipline has been capable of maintaining its original attitude towards internationalisation.

Institutional autonomy was introduced in 1989 and started to be fully operationalised in 1994 (Capano 2010; Capano, Regini and Turri 2016). This meant a significant change in how the university system works, especially in terms of increasing the freedom of universities to choose how to spend their resources and to be responsible for them. This has had a relevant impact in terms of the development of academic disciplines because its quantitative development has been completely dependent on local choices. Without this change, we could not explain, for example, the incredible expansion of the discipline at the State University of Milano (from three political scientists at the end of the 1980s to 24 today), or the decrease in Florence (from 17 in 1999 to 10 today). Institutional autonomy drastically changed the rules of the game in many dimensions of the dynamics of Italian higher education, and, above all, it has weakened the role that academic guilds have played at the national level (Clark 1983; Capano 2008). One of the consequences of institutional autonomy has been, as we shall see, to give the power of recruiting to universities, thus softening the previous vertical coordination existing in political science that influenced the processes and choices in academic recruitment and promotions.

The PhD degree was established at the national level in 1980 and first implemented in 1985. This represented a watershed in the Italian university system because it had been the only country in the Western world that did not offer PhD degrees. The PhD level was established according to a highly centralised architecture: the number of positions (around 2,000-2,200 per year for all disciplines) was established and funded by the Ministry of Education, and they were distributed to a consortium of universities. In this centralised arrangement, the universities in which there was a significant presence of political scientists joined together to offer a unique national PhD programme. It has to be underlined that during its existence, this national programme in political science offered between four and seven positions per year (fully covered by scholarships). This innovation was important for the institutionalisation and reproduction of political science. The programme had a three-year duration, and the students had to attend compulsory courses, mainly in Florence (but also in Bologna and Pavia). This programme was designed to train a small number of prospective political scientists

according to a unified vision of the discipline. Starting from 1999, a new national regulation, along with the autonomistic policy begun ten years before, changed the system by shifting from national to local PhD programmes. The consequence was the establishment of various PhD programmes in political science in Pavia, Milan, Turin, Siena, Bologna (for a few years) and Florence, which enrolled more than 25 students each year. This development significantly enlarged the number of younger political scientists (in a context of an increasing number of positions in the university system) while pushing towards a kind of partial specialisation of the offered programmes (which had an average of three to four positions each) (Tronconi 2007).

A new reform was introduced in 2013, and it completely changed the institutional framework by imposing very constraining rules that made it almost impossible to offer PhD programmes purely in political science (above all, the requirement that each programme must offer at least six scholarships per year). Thus, there is no PhD which is fully devoted to political science in Italy (except for one in Milan), while there are many PhD programmes in political and social sciences. These are offered by departments of political and social sciences that are composed of scholars belonging to various disciplines (law, history, sociology, political thought and philosophy, political science, and others). Thus, due to the asymmetric distribution of political scientists within the university system (Capano and Verzichelli 2016), these PhD programmes can offer very few positions in the discipline nationwide. The evolution of the institutional arrangement of PhD degrees has thus contributed to softening the original national cohesion of the community of Italian political scientists

The establishment of the national research exercise (VQR) represented a watershed in the governance arrangements of Italian higher education. Inspired by the UK experience, it impacted how universities are funded, as well as how the academic community publishes. The reaction of Italian political science is noteworthy. In fact, in both rounds of VQR (which assessed the research outputs of the periods 2004-2010 and 2011-2014), the discipline showed itself to be a forerunner in the field of social and political sciences when assessed in terms of internationalisation (measured as the percentage of submitted outputs published in international venues, mostly international journals). These data are interesting because they show the tendency of the discipline to overcome national borders and to consider internationalisation as a constitutive asset that predates (Verzichelli 2014) the reform of 2010 and the recruitment system itself, as underlined above.

#### **4. Changes in recruitment procedures and their effects on Italian political scientists**

The design of an academic career system can be seen from three different points of view (Olsen, Kyvik and Hovdhaugen 2005):

- From the systemic side, it is a tool for increasing the performance of the higher education system (the better professors are, the more probable it is that the systemic performance will increase in teaching and research).
- From the institutional side, it is a tool to increase the quality of staff and to cover new, specialised fields.

- From the individual side, it is a tool that should be competitive and meritocratic and capable of motivating in terms of career recognition.

These characteristics have been mixed together in different ways and have produced various paths; in many countries, especially in recent decades, these characteristics have been reformed to find a better equilibrium, especially in Europe (Fumasoli, Goastellec and Kehm 2015).

The Italian university system has changed the rules regarding the careers of academics various times since the unification of the country in a continuous attempt to find an equilibrium between systemic, institutional and individual interests. However, the adopted solutions have been characterised by a recurrent pendulum movement between the centralisation and decentralisation of choices and by the cyclical use of the same tools (for example, members of national or local selection committees are elected, drawn or both in various combinations; the need to obtain a qualification as a necessary condition to apply for a post vs free ability to apply for a post). This is done in a context in which, since the beginning, the pillar of the system has been the so-called ‘concorso pubblico’, a type of formal competition that is based on the selection of the best candidates without any specific reference to the strategic plan or mission of the hiring institution, and based on apparently strict formal procedures.

However, what is interesting in this diachronic evolution is that it has been characterised by a never-ending process of changes to the rules (Moretti and Porciani 1997). This is due to the fact that the system has always been considered unsatisfactory because it is characterised by particularism, nepotism, favouritism and patronage due to the prevalence of the interests of academic guilds (Giglioli 1979; Moscati 2001; Palermo 2010). It has been underlined that these characteristics have been a favourable condition for a high rate of academic inbreeding, especially after the reforms to recruitment in 1998 (see below).

The major relevant changes for political science in Italy are those starting from the 1970s. However, it is relevant that in 1970 the old system of recruitment, established in 1933, was abolished. One of the pillars of that system was the so called ‘libera docenza’, a national qualification (similar to the German Privatdozent) granted in a national contest by a committee composed of full professors. Earning this qualification was a prerequisite for applying for the position of professor, as well as being granted tenure in the position of ‘assistente ordinario’ (a mix of the assistant and associate professor positions). When this qualification was abolished, there were in Italy around 3,200 professors in the university system, while the number of those qualified to be professors (‘liberi docenti’) was around 17,000, even though only 6,114 were actually giving courses in the university system (Martinotti 1972).

During the 1970s there were various innovations in the recruitment system, and there was also an increase in the number of professorial positions. Therefore, there were chances to appoint new professors in political science, and the positions were more numerous than the candidates. In 1980, a structural reform to career paths and the process of recruitment was approved, providing for a tripartition of academic careers and for a recruitment process based on national competitions for a fixed number of posts established by the Ministry of Education, which were assigned by committees of professors chosen through a mixed procedure (elections and draw). This system has been highly

criticised because it was considered a way to reproduce the power of academic guilds, schools and networks, while it left little choice to the universities. However, it has to be observed that if we focus on how this system impacted the development of Italian political science, these cons were partially counterbalanced by two pros. First, the system was obliged to have some level of mobility (very often, the posts of associate and full professor were at different universities from those to which the winners belonged). Second, in the case of political science, unlike many other disciplines, this centralised procedure and the related power in the hands of the national ‘barons’ did not produce significantly negative outputs as seen from an aggregate and diachronic perspective.<sup>1</sup> This system was abandoned in 1998 with law 210 (the so-called Berlinguer reform) that deeply re-decentralised the recruitment system. This law provided for a system in which the competition for posts became local and universities could decide in which disciplines to activate positions. For each competition, the elected committees should choose the two best candidates (three for the first two years following approval of the law) who thus obtained the qualification to be appointed. Those qualified could be directly appointed by the universities. This new system was in force until 2007 when, under the pressure of Italian rectors, who could not resist the pressure of those who were qualified and who wanted to be appointed, it was established that there could be only one qualified candidate per each local competition.

The 1998 reform was highly impactful for the university system because it delegated all powers locally. This implied a significant decrease in mobility as well as a dramatic asymmetry in the chances of being promoted because the possibility of being appointed at a higher rank was dependent only on the financial capabilities of single universities and local academic logics and games of power. These general effects also applied to political science. First of all, the decentralisation of the recruitment system deeply weakened the previous national coordination dynamics. On the one hand, this could be considered positive because the new local-centred processes favoured the possibility of developing local strategies based on specific choices of specialisation and development. On the other hand, there has been a negative effect, which is the easing of the requirements to earn a professorial promotion/position. Under centralised coordination, the criteria of assessment were negotiated between all the major ‘barons’, while in the decentralised system, all the decisional powers are in the hands of the local ‘barons’. The consequence was a mix of local practices that have fragmented standards and weakened disciplinary identity. Political scientists also experienced the asymmetric distribution of chances for promotion and a dramatic freezing of mobility.

Finally, the 1998 reform has been highly criticised because it is considered coherent with the historical vices of the Italian system. While it was designed to escape from the logics of power of national academic guilds and give more power to institutions, its implementation produced a triumph of local patronage and institutionalised a high level of academic inbreeding. This paradoxical effect was not unexpected: in the absence of any rule to avoid inbreeding (by law as in France or by institutionalised practices as in the Anglo-Saxon systems) there is a structural incentive to promote scholars belonging

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<sup>1</sup>Anyone can view the lists of the winners of the national competitions for associate and full professors held from 1980 to 1998 (there were three rounds for associates and three rounds for full professor); unlike in other disciplines, there are very few questionable cases.

to the same institution (this is also due to the fact that internal promotions cost much less than external recruitments).

After 2010, the pendulum swung again, with the new system designed by the Gelmini reform attempting to contrast localism. It was decided to establish a national system for earning the qualification for associate or full professor which became a requirement to apply for local competitions. Furthermore, the 2010 law changed the career structure: from the three tenured positions introduced by the 1980 reform to a system based on two tenured positions (associate and full professor) and with the establishment of the assistant professor tenure track position (after three years, associate tenure is substantially guaranteed if the assistant professor has the national qualification to be an associate).

Regarding the qualification procedure (Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale, or ASN), the new rules substantially propose a new systemic application of the ‘qualification’ procedure, mixing together the previous system of the ‘libera docenza’ and the local procedure established with the 1998 reform. The logic behind this choice was to impose some minimal standards for potential candidates applying for local competitions and thus to limit the discretion of committees and universities. This new system did not change the prevalence of localistic interests or the asymmetric chances of being promoted. At the systemic level, 83% of the competitions for associate or full professor posts have been won by scholars belonging to the institutions that launched the calls. Substantially, the new system works mostly to promote internal candidates (Abramo and D’Angelo 2020). The results at the systemic level are confirmed for political science: out of 21 positions open from 2010 to December 2020, 13 were won by internal candidates and the other eight by external ones, but in the latter cases there were no internal candidates with the right qualifications to be full professors.<sup>2</sup> The same dynamics are seen in the competitions for associate professor posts (only those without internal candidates with qualifications were won by external candidates). The new system significantly limited any kind of mobility and further increased the inbreeding dynamics. It appears that the new procedure has developed like the ‘libera docenza’ system, in which many obtained qualifications without any real chance of attaining positions. For example, at this time, there are around 50 scholars (mostly associate professors) working in Italy with the qualifications for full professor: without some extraordinary national funding, very few of them will have the chance of promotion. The chances of being promoted in the same institution depend on its financial wealth, while the chances of being promoted in another institution depend on the eventuality that the competition is not constrained by the presence of internal candidates.

All in all, the new career system, together with the new recruitment and promotion procedure, may allow some real room to recruit only at the level of assistant professor, while at the levels of associate and full professor, the institutional constraints drive universities to use the local competition to upgrade their internal members when they possess the national qualifications.

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<sup>2</sup> These data refer to open contests, while the law provides also for another procedure allowing also for internal calls where only internal candidates can apply (in effect a promotion procedure). This type of internal call has been used only four times in three universities since 2012.



It has to be remembered that the ASN has also provided for the establishment of a national list of scientific journals in which scholars (including political scientists) are incentivised to publish in order to reach the minimal standards required to apply for the national qualification for a professorship. This institutional provision has further pushed Italian political scientists to reach for international publishing targets for the results of their research. As is shown by the VQR data, Italian political scientists have been forerunners in social sciences in the country regarding the internationalisation of their publications. So, the effect of this new rule has been to boost one of the constitutive elements of foundational identity (a strong propensity to internationalisation): indeed, in the last rounds of the ASN the candidates presented a massive number of international publications. This is surely a positive effect because it shows a full inclusion of the discipline in the international debate. On the other hand, however, this would call for a change in methods of assessing the scientific profiles of new generations of political scientists. In other words, if most people publish their research outputs in international venues, the added value of being internationalised, which was rewarding until a decade ago, is nullified. Therefore, there should be a collective reflection on what quality is and how to assess it to become a tenured political scientist.

## **5. We did well enough, but we should not forget the core of our foundational identity**

Contemporary Italian political science has the luck of having been founded by a group of highly distinguished scholars who had a strong vision of what the discipline should be. The original imprinting based on empiricism and internationalisation imposed a demanding standard for becoming a political scientist and has contributed to institutionalising the discipline as a clearly distinct way of knowing that has persisted across different systemic contexts and maintained a relevant, shared sense of belonging to a national community. This is because at every age of the diachronic development of the university system, political science has been capable of performing well enough in terms of training, recruiting and promoting and internationalisation. The standard was always above average until the centralisation of the recruitment system.

With the full working of the autonomistic policy and with recruitment and PhD systems being decentralised, the situation has become more complex. The national community of political scientists has been weakened by these changes, and now it is more fragmented not only in terms of hierarchy but also in terms of standards and disciplinary practices. It is more local. However, to counterbalance these dynamics, political science's constitutive propensity for internationalisation has increased the number of Italian political scientists involved in international networks and research groups. Thus, the hegemony of the national dimension has been substituted by a plurality of differentiated local networks and practices (with a general individual propensity to internationalisation in publishing and a few scholars being highly internationalised) that sometimes are in competition or conflict with each other. This result is indicative of the richness of Italian political science: varieties of perspectives and research practices can reinforce the scientific progress of a discipline and make it more competitive and reputed in an international environment (Baliatti, Maas and Helbing 2015). At the same time, this fragmentation can originate too many differences in standards of assessment

and in career paths that can undermine the persistence of the original identity of the discipline. These dynamics of localisation are common in other disciplines and are reinforced by the pressure for interdisciplinarity. These phenomena are unavoidable, but this does not mean that they should structurally determine specific consequences for Italian political science.

All in all, we have done well enough, and we are still doing well, notwithstanding the structural conditions and dynamics in higher education policy. Contrary to the notion that the conditions of political scientists (in terms of quality and career chances) are better today compared to the past, I have tried to show that this judgement is misleading. Italian political science has been capable of performing well enough in the different systemic contexts that have characterised the university system in the last 50 years.

However, if we are not aware of where we come from, of what has been done and of what (and why) the situation is, we risk being unable to maintain a common way of knowing and developing an excessive amount of local practices. Thus, there is a high risk of losing that ‘common background knowledge about key figures, conflicts and achievements’ (Trowler, 2014, p. 25) that is fundamental to maintaining disciplinary identity and the capacity to preserve the foundational core of Italian political science.

This is something on which a community of scholars should reflect and try to determine if there is room for a collective attempt to influence the destiny of the discipline against structural and environmental changes.

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