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Political Instability, Economic Inequality and Social Conflict: The Case in Italy

Summary: Rising economic inequality may produce a contraction of political stability and a spread of social conflict, as suggested by the theory of relative power. Following this approach, participation in the political arena depends on the distribution of incomes, because the relative rich use their power to ensure that the status quo do not change, while the relative poor are likely to abandon the public arena when they realize that their demands will not be discussed. Through the implementation of an index of political stability on the Italian general elections of 2008 and 2013, this study empirically tests whether political instability is linked with economic inequality. The results of the analysis, which examines the sub-regional level, show that the strengthening of economic inequality is a decisive factor affecting the weight of the elites in the determination of economic and political choices, and that it influences the distribution of votes between political blocks. This comes at the disadvantage of the poorest who, aware of their lesser chances to have influence, choose to change the character of their participation.

Key words: Political participation, Social conflict, Relative power theory.

JEL: D31, D72.

Among the many issues related to economic inequality, those concerning its repercussions in the political arena generate a number of concerns about the stability of democratic political systems. The rising impact of inequality, especially in the most industrialized economies (Timothy M. Smeeding 2005), may have an effect on the modalities of social conflict (Nicholas Kaldor 1959). The failure to improve economic performance and reduce economic inequality could cause social erosion (Giorgio Liotti and Marco Musella 2018) and a break in the connection between institutions and citizens that “might lead to less willingness on the part of citizens (and businesses) to obey the law, to make sacrifices during crises or to pay taxes. This could raise costs for government – resulting in declining efficiency – or erode revenues” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2013). Furthermore, despite the importance that the relationship between economic inequality and the various forms of political participation assumes today, what we know is still insufficient to identify its dynamics (American Political Science Association 2004).

Following other works that performed a similar analysis in Europe (Lorenzo Cicatiello, Salvatore Ercolano, and Giuseppe Gaeta 2015), our purpose is to link the

literature on inequality and political participation by providing an empirical analysis of the Italian case. Comparing the national political elections in Italy of 2008 and 2013, this work assesses whether a disproportional distribution of incomes at sub-regional level is related to lower political stability and a higher level of social conflict.

The phenomenon of social conflict arises from the power struggle between two or more groups with different amounts of resources (Robert Goodin and John Dryzek 1980). In other words, social conflict is understood as a “tension between two or more social entities which arises from incompatibility of actual or desired responses” (Bertram H. Raven and Arie W. Kruglanski 1970, p. 70). The power held by the subjects located higher up in the distribution of income is used to ensure that the status quo does not change. The more wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small group, the stronger their power will be (Larry M. Bartels 2016). In societies characterized by a high level of economic disparity, subjects with low incomes will find it unproductive to participate in political activities, preferring other channels to express their grievances. The emergence of social conflict depends on the strength with which the cleavages between different factions, parties or groups are made explicit.

Among industrial economies, Italy shows some peculiar traits directly related to economic inequality and political participation: on the one hand, the strong and persistent distance between the north and south of the country, which react differently to the manifestation of inequality (Kaldor 1980); on the other, the weakness of the state, which results in limited claims to the redistribution of income (Timothy Besley and Torsten Persson 2010). These two characteristics of the Italian context are among the chief causes of the significance that inequality is assuming in the country (Gabriele Ballarino et al. 1979).

Italy therefore offers an interesting framework where the link between economic inequality and political participation can be tested at the provincial level (NUTS-3). We perform three analyses in order to: (1) assess whether a higher level in inequality is correlated with higher electoral volatility; (2) assess the relation between the top share of income and electoral volatility; (3) investigate the relation between economic inequality and the distribution of votes among political blocks. We find that inequality has an impact on the stability of the Italian political system, with marked differences among political parties.

The paper proceeds as follows: in the first section the principal theories dealing with the relationship between economic inequality and political participation will be reviewed; the second section will focus on the peculiarities of the Italian case; the third part describes data and the methodological approach; results are included in section four; and the last part is devoted to the conclusion and discussion.

1. Review of the Literature on Economic Inequality and Political Participation

In recent decades, most of the theoretical approaches on political participation and voting behavior have adopted an individualistic methodological approach. Resource theory (Henry E. Brady, Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman 1995) maintains that participation in the political system depends on the availability of the following

individual resources: time, money and civic attitudes. This model has been validated in numerous empirical works (Robert H. Salisbury 1975; Verba, Norman H. Nie, and Jae-On Kim 1978; Ballarino et al. 1979; Alan C. Acock and Wilbur J. Scott 1980; Nie et al. 1988; Jan E. Leighley 1990; Margaret M. Conway 1991; Christopher B. Kenny 1992; Verba et al. 1993).

However, the structure of resource theory shows some limitations (Paul Whiteley and Patrick Seyd 2002), with the main concern related to its intrinsic predictions. Indeed, it fails to explain the decline of political participation in developed countries over the last fifty years, which has happened despite the tendency for educational levels to increase (Russel J. Dalton, Scott E. Flanagan, and Paul A. Beck 1984). Furthermore, the individualistic approach of resource theory brings out other types of limitations. In fact, it is hard not to observe how most of the activities linked to political participation involve some kind of collective action, which helps the transition from willingness to participation to the concreteness of the individual's political involvement (Leighley 1995). Moreover, concerning the main point of analysis of our study, resource theory does not explicitly define the relationship between the distribution of income and political participation.

Rational choice theory (Anthony Downs 1957) owes its name to the assumption that individuals behave rationally in pursuit of their self-interest, even in the political arena. Since its formulation, rational choice theory has had to deal with the so-called paradox of participation (Mancur Olson Jr. 1965), which highlights that political participation arises from the willingness to obtain collective goods. However, the aim of participation would clash with the impossibility of making the consumption of this good exclusive. In fact, the characteristics of public goods are non-rivalry and non-exclusivity (Paul A. Samuelson 1954). Facing this situation, a rational individual, instead of contributing through his participation, would naturally be led to non-participation, as nobody could prevent him from benefiting from the aforementioned good. In other words, a rational individual trying to maximize his or her utility will adopt a free-rider behavior.

We can identify four hypothetical solutions to the problem: (i) when the costs of collective actions are low, a rational individual might decide to ignore them (Brian Barry 1970; Richard G. Niemi 1976). Thus, the paradox of participation is solved, but at the cost of rational individuals; (ii) if no one votes, then the rational individual could decide to cast the ballot because, being the only voter, hers would be the decisive vote (Paul E. Meehl 1977); (iii) the rational individual puts into the rational calculation attitudes defined as altruistic (Howard Margolis 1982; Dennis C. Mueller 1989). The inclusion of altruism would be part of a more general propensity to pursue individual interest. In doing so, however, the problem encountered in the first approach is re-examined: the paradox is solved by participation, abandoning the perspective of rational choices; (iv) an individual may decide to participate on the basis of the different incentives that may arise from this type of action. This is the approach used by Olson himself; however, the impact of these incentives on political participation is not yet clear (Whiteley and Seyd 2002).

Another paradigm that combines political participation with individual choice is conflict theory. The starting point of conflict theory is that there is a link between

economic inequality and income redistribution (Torsten Persson and Guido Tabellini 1991; Roberto Perotti 1992, 1993; Alberto Alesina and Perotti 1994; Alesina and Dani Rodrik 1994; Giuseppe Bertola 1994). Supporters of conflict theory argue that high levels of inequality would cause an increase in the political involvement of individuals (Frederick Solt 2008), especially those positioned at the lower end of income distribution. The conflict would be caused on the one hand by the poorer, who are mobilized by redistributive policies, and on the other by the wealthier, who would be contrary to the application of these policies.

However, even this approach relies on some particularly restrictive assumptions, as is often the case with utility-maximization theories. Furthermore, conflict theory does not come to terms with the phenomenon of fiscal illusion (Amilcare Puviani and Franco Volpi 1973), which highlights how an individual will hardly be perfectly aware of the functioning of the state and its funding channels. As a consequence, they will also be unable to know how redistributive policies would be implemented.

Relative power theory adds to the explanation of political participation the idea that comparisons between individuals are relative rather than absolute. The basic thesis of this approach is that political participation decreases as economic inequality increases, because of the relative power of individuals within society (Goodin and Dryzek 1980). The power held by the subjects located at the top in the distribution of income is intrinsically linked to the economic resources held and is used to ensure that the status quo does not change. When the relatively poor acknowledge that their demands will unlikely be discussed in the political arena, they abandon the field of political participation (Steven Lukes 2005). The relative power of the richest can be explained in two ways: first, their ability to prevail in every kind of conflict through the resources they hold; second, their ability to exclude the most critical issues from public debates (Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz 1970). Although this approach does not theorize a form of coordination between the richest to ensure that they prevail over other individuals in society, the wealthiest have the economic resources to be sure that the political system does not go against them (Elmer E. Schattschneider 1960). In this particular paradigm the role of competition between parties become crucial in determining the impact of the political participation of the poorest.

The voters are those with the perception that their political involvement can be decisive in government agendas, while the others, the poor, simply consider the vote a waste of time. The economic separation between rich and poor is also reproduced in the political system. It is worth noting that the exclusion of large sections of individuals from political choices depends on uncoordinated actions of the subjects who hold more relative power, which produce unconscious reactions on the rest of individuals. In short, the relatively powerless do not consider abstention as an instrument of conflict but are rather induced to this behavior.

Following relative power theory, higher levels of concentration of incomes should be associated with lower levels of political engagement. In order to test whether this hypothesis holds, we will perform an empirical test on the Italian elections of 2008 and 2013. More precisely, we will test whether provinces with higher inequality show a lower level of political stability; we will then test whether there is a relationship between the share of top incomes and political stability, as predicted by conflict theory.

Finally, since we expect that higher inequality may stimulate social conflict, we will test whether high inequality is associated with a higher preference for parties with radical and extreme positions.

2. Peculiarities of the “Italian Case”

Since its unification in 1861, Italy has remained a country characterized by high levels of internal heterogeneity (Valeria Cirillo and Dario Guarascio 2014, 2015; Mariana Mazzucato et al. 2015; Giovanni Dosi and Guarascio 2016; Guarascio and Annamaria Simonazzi 2016; Matteo Lucchese, Leopoldo Nascia, and Mario Pianta 2016). This peculiarity was strengthened by the economic crisis of 2008, which further accentuated regional gaps. Rather than mitigating these differences, the economic policies launched as a result of the economic recession resulted in an exacerbation of the polarization, as they brought increased unemployment, a reduction of the productive capacity of the country, as well as a drive to wage moderation (Mazzucato et al. 2015).

This picture describes the economic trends at the national level, but it is particularly representative of what happened in Southern Italy, which, in comparison with other regions of the country, suffered an absolute decline after the crisis (Cirillo, Marta Fana, and Guarascio 2016). In particular, the economic policy measures that were applied in the context of labor markets, such as the Fornero reform of 2012, have had strong repercussions on economic inequality (Maurizio Franzini 2017). The approval in 2012 of the Fornero reform was not intended as an isolated measure, and was preceded by the Treu Law in 1997 and the Biagi Law in 2003, and followed by the Jobs Act in 2015. The transformations that occurred in the labor market are useful for understanding the dynamics of the growth of Italian economic inequality, but they are not the only ones. The period from 2008 until 2013 also marked the transition from the Berlusconi government to the Monti government. The beginning of the technical legislature of Mario Monti marked a leap in quality not only in the process of labor market flexibility and facilitation of layoffs but also in liberalizations, public funding for large companies (e.g. Finmeccanica) and reduction of public spending, known as the Spending Review (Pasquale Tridico 2014).

The technical government of Monti also approved the Fiscal Compact, which included the constitutional obligation to have a balanced public budget. The combination of these measures has decisively reduced the capacity of the country to redistribute resources. Therefore, we think Italy could be a particularly interesting case study when it comes to analyzing the relations between economic inequality and political stability.

3. Data and Methodology

The 20 regions of Italy are divided into 110 sub-regional institutions (NUTS-3) called provinces, which will be the unit of the empirical analyses. The main objective of this study is to identify the relation between economic inequality and political stability. In order to measure economic inequality, we rely on a Gini index built on individual disposable pre-taxed income extracted from the Italian Ministry of Economics and

Finance for 2012 (Ministry of Economics and Finance 2019)¹, which is the year before elections. The Gini index can vary from zero to one, where zero is associated with perfect equality and one with maximum inequality. The lowest level of inequality in our sample is 0.29 and is observed in the province of Crotone, while the highest level is observed in the province of Milan and is equal to 0.41. Indeed, metropolitan areas are the most unequal among the provinces (Paolo Acciari and Sauro Mocetti 2013). On average, the Gini index of the Italian provinces is 0.35.

In order to measure political stability, we rely on a modified Pedersen index (Mogens N. Pedersen 1979). The Pedersen index measures the change in percentage of votes collected by a party between an election and the previous one. Elections are not the only way to study changes in the political system, however “they are still the best available vantage point for a study of change, because change will either be a result of elections, or elections will register any change which may occur in the party system” (Pedersen 1979). Therefore, this particular index contains information on political stability (Matthieu Bussière and Christian Mulder 2000). The mechanism underlined is “that higher levels of volatility would be associated with more abbreviated policy distance, and that more divided systems would be characterized by lower levels of electoral interchange” (Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair 1990).

The existing literature that uses this index of political stability has largely focused on the investigation of contexts such as the USA (Gerald H. Kramer 1971) and the United Kingdom (C. A. E. Goodhart and R. J. Bhansali 1970), traditionally characterized by the presence of a two-party political system, or other countries, such as Switzerland (Friedrich Schneider, Werner W. Pommerehne, and Bruno S. Frey 1981), characterized by the traditional governmental union of all the existing parties. However, a modified Pedersen index has recently been used for multi-party systems (François Facchini and Mickael Melki 2013). Italy is among the countries that have the most suitable characteristics to use this modified index, given the conspicuous presence of non-government parties². We build our political participation index by examining the national political elections for the Chamber of Deputies and for the Senate of the Republic in 2008 and 2013, analyzing the volatility of the vote on a provincial level³.

Descriptive statistics regarding our interest variables and the covariate variables are reported in Table 1.

¹ **Ministry of Economics and Finance.** 2019. Income Tax Declaration, Open Data.

https://www1.finanze.gov.it/finanze3/analisi_stat/index.php?search_class%5B0%5D=cCOMUNE&open-data=yes (accessed January 05, 2019).

² Unlike the USA and UK, where just two parties gain seats in parliaments, in Italy there is a long tradition of non-governmental parties of various sizes. Furthermore, governments are often formed by means of a coalition. For example, more than 30 parties competed in the 2013 elections, of which 11 gained at least one seat in parliament.

³ **Italian Government - Ministry of the Interior.** 2019. <http://elezionistorico.interno.it/index.php?tpel=C> (accessed January 05, 2019).

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Source	Unit of measure	Obs.	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Political volatility index	Ministry of Interior	0 to 1	110	0.31	0.04	0.21	0.41
Unemployment rate 2012	Istat	0 to 1	110	0.13	0.06	0.04	0.27
No participation rate 2012	Istat	0 to 100	110	20.12	10.44	5.67	42.77
Relative variation of abstention	Ministry of Interior	0 to 1	110	.63	1.22	-0.38	7.84
Value added <i>per capita</i> 2012	Istat	Thousand euro	110	21905.30	5869.59	12493.58	44959.89
Gini index 2012	Min. of Economics and Finance	0 to 1	110	0.35	0.03	0.29	0.41
Share of provincial rentier 2012	Min. of Economics and Finance	0 to 1	110	0.01	0.02	0	0.15
Political volatility far left block	Ministry of Interior	0 to 1	110	0.01	0.01	0	0.05
Political volatility far right block	Ministry of Interior	0 to 1	110	0.01	0.01	0	0.07
Political volatility extreme block	Ministry of Interior	0 to 1	110	0.01	0.01	0	0.06
Political volatility center block	Ministry of Interior	0 to 1	110	0.05	0.01	0.03	0.07
Political volatility populist block	Ministry of Interior	0 to 1	110	0.13	0.02	0.04	0.19

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Index construction

The Pedersen index is calculated by summing the absolute value of changes in the percentage of votes taken or lost by each party between the two elections and dividing by two, because the vote earned by one party is always a loss for another:

$$Vol_{index_t} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n \{|vote_{i,t} - vote_{i,t-1}|\}}{2}, \quad (1)$$

where *vote* represents the vote taken by party *i* in election *t*.

The Pedersen index can vary from 0 to 1, with a lower level of the index corresponding to a more volatile political system. An advantage of this index is that it takes into account both the aspects related to the demand side, which is expressed in terms of voters' preference, and those related to the supply side, such as the creation of new parties or the disappearance of old ones (Pedersen 1979). In fact, between elections some parties can split or disappear and others can be founded. In order to take such changes into account, the Pedersen index can be corrected through the creation of groups of parties characterized by ideological homogeneity (Bartolini and Mair 1990; Allan Sikk 2005; Ruth Dassonneville and Marc Hooghe 2011).

In order to build our index, we assign the parties competing in the Italian national elections of 2008 and 2013 to blocks (Bartolini and Mair 1990). We identify eight blocks, as reported in Tables 2 and 3: Center-Left, Center-Right, Far-Left, Populist, Far-Right, Southern separatists, Northern independents, Center. Tables 2 and 3 show party blocks based on their ideology and their political coalition for the 2008 and 2013 Italian general elections. Our index is one of the main components of total aggregate volatility and it measures the political distance between the blocks identified. The average in our sample is approximately 0.3.

Given that some party formations do not appear for both wings of the parliament, in the calculation of the volatility of the vote, an average between the Chamber of the Deputies and the Senate of Republic will be calculated.

A preliminary analysis of the relation between our main variables of interest is plotted in Figure 1, where the provincial values of the Gini index in 2012 are plotted against the volatility index in the same provinces, with an added line representing the linear fit between the two variables. The negative inclination of this line suggests that there is an inverse relation between economic inequality and political volatility. However, this relation should be tested by keeping in consideration other confounding variables that have been shown to affect political volatility.

Table 2 Ideological Blocks for the 2008 Elections

Parliament 2008	
Blocks	Parties
Center-Left	Partito Democratico – Italia Dei Valori – M.E.D.A. – Partito Socialista – Il Loto – Unione Democratica Dei Consumatori – Aut. Lib. Democratie
Center-Right	Il Popolo Della Libertà – Partito Liberale Italiano – Lista Dei Grilli Parlanti – Ass. Difesa Della Vita Aborto? No, Grazie
Far-Left	La Sinistra L'Arcobaleno – Sinistra Critica – Partito Di Alternativa Comunista – Partito Comunista dei Lavoratori
Populists	Per Il Bene Comune
Far-Right	La Destra – Fiamma Tricolore – Forza Nuova – Azione Sociale Mussolini
Southern separatists	Movimento Per L'autonomia Alleanza Per Il Sud – Sardinia Nazione – Lega Sud – Partito Sardo D'Azione
Northern independents	Die Freiheitlichen – Südtiroler Volkspartei – L'Intesa Veneta – Union Fur Sud Tirol – Lega Nord – Lega Per L'Autonomia – Lega Veneta Repubblica – ValleeD'Aoste
Center	Unione Di Centro – Movimento Partito Pensiero Azione
Senate 2008	
Blocks	Parties
Center-Left	Partito Democratico – Italia Dei Valori – M.E.D.A. – Unione Democratica Dei Consumatori – Aut. Lib. Democratie – Partito Socialista
Center-Right	Il Popolo Della Libertà – Partito Liberale Italiano – Popolari Uniti – Lista Dei Grilli Parlanti
Far-Left	La Sinistra L'Arcobaleno – Partito Comunista Marxista Leninista – Sinistra Critica – Partito Comunista Dei Lavoratori
Populists	Per Il Bene Comune
Far-Right	La Destra – Fiamma Tricolore – Forza Nuova – Azione Sociale Mussolini
Southern separatists	Movimento Per L'Autonomia Alleanza Per Il Sud – Sardinia Nazione – Lega Sud – Partito Sardo D'Azione – Partito Del Sud Alleanza Meridionale – Sud Libero
Northern independents	Lega Nord – L'Intesa Veneta – Lega Per L'Autonomia – Lega Veneta Repubblica – Fronte Indipendentista Lombardia – Südtiroler Volkspartei – Die Freiheitlichen – Union Fur Sud Tirol – Insieme Per Le Autonomie – Vallee D'Aoste
Center	Unione Di Centro – Movimento Partito Pensiero Azione

Source: Authors' elaboration.

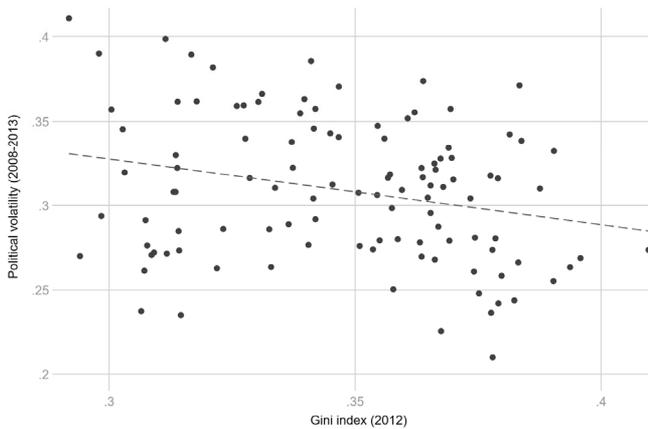
Table 3 Ideological block for the 2013 elections

Parliament 2008	
Blocks	Parties
Center-Left	Partito Democratico – Sinistra Ecologia Libertà – Centro Democratico – Lista Amnistia Giustizia Libertà – Movimento Progetto Italia – Tutti Insieme Per L'Italia – Staminali D'Italia – Democrazia Atea – Autonomie LibertèDemocratie
Center-Right	Il Popolo Della Libertà – Moderati In Rivoluzione – Partito Pensionati – Intesa Popolare – Liberi Per Un'Italia Equa – Futuro e Libertà – Fare Per Fermare Il Declino – Liberali Per L'Italia – Riformisti Italiani
Far-Left	Rivoluzione Civile – Partito Comunista Dei Lavoratori – Partito Di Alternativa Comunista – I Pirati
Populists	Movimento Cinque Stelle – Voto Di Protesta
Far-Right	Fratelli D'Italia – La Destra – Forza Nuova – Casapound Italia – Fiamma Tricolore – Io Amo L'Italia – Rifondazione Missina Italiana – Progetto Nazionale
Southern separatists	Grande Sud – Partito Sardo D'Azione – Indipendenza Per La Sardegna – Meris
Northern independents	Lega Nord – Südtiroler Volkspartei – Die Freiheitlichen – Indipendenza Veneta – Lega Veneta Repubblica – Veneto Stato – Vallee D'Aoste – Union Valdotaïne Progressiste – Nation Val D'Outa
Center	Scelta Civica – Unione Di Centro – Partito Repubblicano Italiano – Popolari Uniti – Movimento Partito Pensiero Azione – Unione Popolare
Senate 2008	
Blocks	Parties
Center-Left	Partito Democratico – Sinistra Ecologia Libertà – Centro Democratico – Il Megafono – Partito Socialista Italiano – Moderati – Lista Amnistia Giustizia Libertà – No Alla Chiusura Degli Ospedali – Tutti Insieme Per L'Italia – Movimento Eudonna – Movimento Progetto Italia – Verdi – Autonomie Libertè Democratie
Center-Right	Il Popolo Della Libertà – Partito Pensionati – Moderati In Rivoluzione – Intesa Popolare – Cantiere Popolare – Basta Tasse – Liberi Per Un'Italia Equa – Fare Per Fermare Il Declino – Viva L'Italia – Civiltà Rurale Sviluppo – Riformisti Italiani – L'Alto Adige Nel Cuore
Far-Left	Rivoluzione Civile – Partito Comunista Dei Lavoratori – Partito Comunista Marxista Leninista – I Pirati – Partito Di Alternativa Comunista
Populists	Movimento Cinque Stelle – Dimezziamo Lo Stipendio Ai Politici – Donne Per L'Italia – Partito Azione Sviluppo Fermiamo Le Banche e Le Tasse – Costruire Democrazia
Far-Right	Fratelli D'Italia – La Destra – Forza Nuova – Fiamma Tricolore – Io Amo L'Italia – Casapound Italia – Progetto Nazionale – Rifondazione Missina Italiana
Southern separatists	Grande Sud – Partito Dei Siciliani – Partito Sardo D'Azione – Rialzati Abruzzo – Indipendenza Per La Sardegna – Meris – La Base – Partito del Sud – Comunità Lucana
Northern independents	Lega Nord – Indipendenza Veneta – Lega Veneta Repubblica – Veneto Stato – Unione Padana – Südtiroler Volkspartei – Die Freiheitlichen – Partito Per Tutti – Vallee D'Aoste – Nation Val D'Outa
Center	Con Monti Per L'Italia – Partito Repubblicano Italiano – Popolari Uniti – Movimento Naturalista Italiano – Scelta Civica – Unione Di Centro

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Therefore, we will perform three regression analyses that include the most frequently used control variables in the literature between economic inequality and political participation: added value (Dani Rodrik 1999); unemployment rate (Facchini and Melki 2011); non-participation in labor markets, which is a quantity that summarizes the proportion of people who are not actively seeking a job; relative variation of abstention⁴; and macro-regional dummies (North, Center and South of Italy).

⁴ It can be written as: $(\text{non-voters}_{2013} - \text{non-voters}_{2008}) / \text{non-voters}_{2008}$.



Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from Italian Government - Ministry of Interior (2019).

Figure 1 Scatter Plot with a Linear Fit Line of Gini Index and Political Volatility Index in the Italian Provinces

4. Results

The empirical test consists of three different analyses, performed by linear regressions with standard errors clustered by regions. The first specification includes the modified Pedersen index as dependent variable and the Gini index as main regressor. The second has the same dependent variable but the share of top incomes as main regressor. The third specification includes a Pedersen index calculated only on the extreme parties (far-left and far-right, first alone and then combined) as dependent variable and the Gini index as main regressor. All the specifications include the control variables specified in the previous section (observed one year before the last elections) and have been tested for multicollinearity. The analyses are performed with cluster robust standard error by region.

First step: What is the relation between economic inequality and political volatility?

As reported in Table 3, the two variables are significantly correlated at the 10% level (the p -value is equal to 0.05), meaning that our dependent variable, which is the index of political participation, changes with a change in the independent variable, which is the income concentration index. The correlation has a negative sign, meaning that an increase in the Gini index will result in a reduction of the Pedersen index. This means greater volatility and thus more political instability. Therefore, economic inequality hampers political stability in the arena of conventional political participation. As regards the control variables, non-participation and relative variation of abstention are correlated to our political volatility index through a significant and negative correlation (with p -values of 0.07 and 0.04 respectively). On the other hand, the unemployment rate turns out to be positively correlated to political volatility (p -value 0.07), while the coefficient associated with non-participation has a negative sign and is significantly different from zero at the 10% level. Political volatility is related to the ideological

Table 4 Political Volatility and Inequality - Regression Results, Standard Errors Clustered by Province

	(1) Political volatility index	(2) Political volatility index
Gini 2012	-0.515* (-2.05)	
Share of prov. rentiers 2012		-0.274** (-2.21)
Unemployment rate 2012	0.386* (1.86)	0.421* (1.97)
No participation 2012	-0.00338* (-1.89)	-0.00309* (-1.86)
Relative variation of abstention	-0.00659** (-2.21)	-0.00630* (-2.02)
Value added <i>per capita</i> 2012	-0.00000208 (-0.32)	-0.00000258 (-0.39)
South	0.0181 (0.90)	0.0328 (1.54)
Center	0.0299* (2.00)	0.0390** (2.39)
_cons	0.506*** (5.21)	0.313*** (11.87)
<i>N</i>	110	110
AIC	-391.6	-390.2
BIC	-370.0	-368.6
<i>R</i> ²	0.195	0.185

Notes: *** = p -value < 0.01; ** = p -value < 0.05; * = p -value < 0.10.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from Italian Government - Ministry of Interior (2019).

system and trust in the political system, which would seem lower for those who do not actively seek a job. In this sense, the results of the regression indicate that the unemployed recognize the channel of political participation as useful, while those who do not participate in the labor market either do not use the channel of political participation or they are not involved in political participation at all. The relative variation of abstention has a negative sign and is statistically significant, while the coefficient associated with value added *per capita* is not statistically different from zero.

Second step: What is the relation between the top share of income and the index of political volatility?

In the first step we observed that it is possible to assert the existence of a negative relation between economic inequality and electoral volatility. In other words, we have shown that increases of economic inequality are associated with lower political stability. The Gini index provides useful information, but it synthesizes the information contained in the distribution. For this reason, it could be interesting to find the specific relation between the political volatility index and the highest tail of the income distribution. Therefore, we build a variable that represents those we consider provincial rentiers (who earn more than 120,000 euros) over the total rentiers in all the provinces of Italy. Using this variable as a dependent variable allows us to assess the impact of

rentiers in the determination of electoral volatility and their contribution to the instability of the party system. The results, printed in column two of Table 4, show that political stability is correlated negatively with the share of high income, confirming that a higher inequality is associated to a lower political stability.

Third step: What is the relation between economic inequality and the political volatility of extreme parties?

Building our political participation index, we aggregated the parties into ideological blocks. Here we want to assess how single blocks are contributing to the relation between economic inequality and political volatility. In particular, we want to assess whether higher inequality is associated with a significant change in participation in the radical and extreme parties, i.e. far right and far left blocks. Therefore, we perform a number of regressions: (a) inequality and the far-left block; (b) inequality and the far-right block; (c) inequality and the aggregation of both the extreme blocks (far-left and far-right together); (d) inequality and the central block; (e) inequality and the populist block. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Political Volatility by Ideological Blocks and Inequality - Regression Results, Robust Standard Errors

	(1) Pol. volatility far-left block	(2) Pol. volatility far-right block	(3) Pol. volatility extreme blocks	(4) Pol. volatility center block	(5) Pol. volatility populist block
Gini 2012	-0.00443 (-0.12)	-0.154** (-2.62)	-0.0791* (-1.92)	-0.151** (-2.48)	-0.360** (-2.13)
Unemployment rate 2012	0.0351 (0.94)	0.000293 (0.01)	0.0177 (0.44)	0.0744** (2.10)	0.187* (1.72)
No participation 2012	-0.000114 (-0.80)	-0.000152 (-0.56)	-0.000133 (-0.84)	-0.000596** (-2.58)	-0.00110 (-1.54)
Relative variation of abstention	0.000532 (1.33)	-0.000240 (-0.69)	0.000146 (0.51)	-0.000829* (-1.81)	-0.00457** (-1.99)
Value added <i>per capita</i> 2012	-4.13e-08 (-0.49)	-8.57e-08 (-0.73)	-6.35e-08 (-0.72)	-4.67e-08 (-0.38)	-0.000000196 (-0.47)
South	-0.00531* (-1.81)	-0.000584 (-0.11)	-0.00294 (-0.88)	0.00335 (0.88)	-0.00456 (-0.48)
_cons	0.0116 (0.82)	0.0647*** (2.71)	0.0381** (2.43)	0.103*** (4.36)	0.258*** (3.86)
<i>N</i>	110	110	110	110	110
AIC	-812.3	-720.4	-796.5	-727.3	-508.1
BIC	-793.4	-701.5	-777.5	-708.4	-489.2
<i>R</i> ²	0.129	0.109	0.0450	0.216	0.174

Notes: *** = p -value < 0.01; ** = p -value < 0.05; * = p -value < 0.10.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from Italian Government - Ministry of Interior (2019).

The results indicate that the relation between economic inequality and the far-left political block is not statistically distinguishable from zero. On the other hand, the association with the Gini index is negative and significant for the far-right block and for the aggregation of the far-left and far-right blocks. This seems to indicate that an

increase in economic inequality is associated with lower stability for the parties of the electoral system at the extremes of the distribution. Economic inequality also seems to be correlated with two other blocks of parties, namely the parties in the center block and the populists, with the latter having the stronger association with economic inequality. Regarding the populists, the Appendix (Tables A.1 and A.2) demonstrates that votes for the populist block increased consistently between 2008 and 2013. This substantial difference is due to the candidacy of the Five Star Movement in 2013. The figures of the vote share for the 2008 and 2013 elections are shown in the Appendix, both for Italy and the macro-regions of north, center and south. Therefore, these results provide evidence that economic inequality has the potential to change the distribution of votes among political blocks.

5. Closing Remarks

Economic inequality is one of the core economic themes of this century. In this work, we provide an analysis of the link that economic inequality has with domains outside economics, namely political participation. In fact, it has been suggested that rising inequality has a harmful potential for democracies because it fosters social discontent and conflict (Amartya Sen and James E. Foster 1997, p. 1). It is no simple task to find the interaction between inequality and the rise of social conflict (Debraj Ray and Joan Esteban 2017) and we do not presume here to have a complete picture that defines the relation; however there are proofs that some correlation exists. Where incomes are unequally distributed the separation between the wealthy minority and the poor majority becomes relevant for the approach to political participation. As suggested by relative power theory, the uneven distribution of resources may result in an unfair public debate and could create instability in the party system that leads to the exit of the most disadvantaged from the political arena.

The empirical analysis contained in this study provides some support that this mechanism was at work in Italy between the elections of 2008 and 2013. In fact, the analyses performed in this paper show that political stability is negatively associated with income inequality, meaning that where the distribution of income is more uneven there is less political stability. Furthermore, we find that the same negative correlation exists between political volatility and the share of top income. By inspecting the variation of votes between blocks, we also find that economic inequality affects the distribution of votes with different magnitudes among political blocks, and that the magnitude of this association is larger for populist parties.

Our results are coherent with the framework proposed by relative power theory, and suggest why the topic of economic inequality is often neglected. In order to maintain their power, it is in the interest of economic elites to settle a public policy agenda on other issues (Robert H. Wade 2014). In this way, citizens that suffer from economic deprivation start to consider the institutional political participation a waste of time, and perhaps move their interest to other political channels.

This study has been performed on the Italian provinces between the elections of 2008 and 2013. Italy is an interesting case study, where geographical and economic peculiarities provide a good range of variability in the distribution of incomes at the sub-regional level. On the other hand, the results of this work cannot be generalized to

other countries, where more specific analyses should be provided. Another indication for future research could be extending the analysis to a longer time-span, which could also help in providing a causal relation. This research could unveil innovative aspects of the relationship between economic inequality and political stability.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Mean of Votes per Blocks in Italy - Elections: 2008 and 2013

Blocks	Votes percentage 2008	Votes percentage 2013
Center-Left	39.49%	30.79%
Center-Right	39.14%	23.72%
Far-Left	4.30%	2.60%
Populists	0.41%	25.56%
Far-Right	2.58%	3.49%
Southern separatists	1.36%	0.91%
Northern independents	8.39%	4.91%
Center	5.93%	9.40%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from Italian Government - Ministry of Interior (2019).

Table A.2 Mean of Vote per Blocks in Macro-Regions - Elections: 2008 and 2013

Blocks	2008			2013			
	South	Center	North	South	Center	North	
Center-Left	38.58%	43.66%	38.77%	Center-Left	28.82%	27.99%	31.66%
Center-Right	45.80%	42.19%	34.12%	Center-Right	27.12%	23.67%	21.78%
Far-Left	3.98%	4.48%	4.49%	Far-Left	3.29%	2.70%	2.10%
Populists	0.30%	0.34%	0.52%	Populists	27.21%	29.09%	23.91%
Far-Right	2.21%	3.76%	2.63%	Far-Right	3.91%	5.25%	2.84%
Southern separatists	3.58%	0.13%	0.00%	Southern separatists	2.19%	0.02%	0.01%
Northern independents	0.00%	1.08%	15.69%	Northern independents	0.20%	0.49%	8.69%
Center	7.84%	5.62%	4.79%	Center	8.67%	8.75%	10.27%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from Italian Government - Ministry of Interior (2019).

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