

Intra-party Politics and Party System. Factional Conflict, Cooperation and Fission within Italian Parties

The present work analyzes the interaction between intra-party politics and party system, focusing on inter-factional bargaining dynamics within Italian parties (from 1946 to 2010). We provide a game-theoretic model based on the 'exit, voice and loyalty' framework that helps to understand intra-party decision-making and factional bargaining under the threat of a party fission. Starting from our theory we derive several hypotheses concerning the degree of factionalism, the patterns of portfolio allocation (office payoffs) and party position-taking (policy payoffs) and the determinants of faction breakaways. These hypotheses will be tested thanks to data gathered from party congresses. These data allow to shed light on how factional bargaining shape the party and, through it, the whole political system.

We will focus on the impact of internal rules, assessed by looking at party statutes, as well as on the effect of divergent factional preferences, measured through a quantitative text analysis applied to congress motions presented by party factions. We also take into account the impact of exogenous elements like the electoral rules or party system competitiveness.

Our results shown that factions are driven by policy, office and electoral motives. For the sake of preserving party unity the whole amount of payoffs available within a party is shared among all factions in proportion to their strength in party body. Consensual dynamics are enhanced when the need for party unity increases, such as in competitive party systems or when new general elections approach. Under very competitive conditions, powerful minorities may even exploit their blackmail power by threatening to break away in order to increase their quota of payoffs. On the contrary in low competitive environments the party leader will trade unity for cohesion, and will overpay the mainstream faction no matter the danger of a split carried out by internal minority. This effect is even more clear among parties whose leader is selected by party members through a direct election. By appealing directly to members and voters, the leader is able to get rid of factional constraints and she will exploit this larger degree of autonomy to reward her followers. However, when party unity is an issue at stake even autonomous leader will revert to fair dynamics of payoffs allocation in order to keep the party together. Consensual dynamics are in fact a deterrent for party fission. On the other side other elements contribute to preserve party unity. Among them, disproportional electoral systems, preference voting and the loyalty effect, while low democratic party statutes and centralized decision-making processes tend to increase the probability of party breakup.

To conclude, our research shown the effect of factional politics on policy-making, coalition bargaining and in the electoral market. Intra-party division seems to decrease MPs cohesiveness in roll call votes lowering party effectiveness in policy-making. Heterogeneity jeopardizes also party's chance to get in office, unless autonomous leaders manage to solve the problem of credible commitment. In addition, when factional strife ends up in a party splits, the party will suffer a loss that seems to be proportional to the strength of the splinter group. To sum up, going beyond the assumption of party as unitary actor, we proved that parties are the output of an inter-factional bargaining where factional preferences, leader autonomy and party system conditions interact and impact on the internal decision-making process wielding effects on the whole political system.