

The size and shape of the Italian interest system between the 1980s and the present day

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Within interest group research, scholars following the population ecology perspective mainly look at the demographic features of populations and systems under scrutiny: density and diversity represent the main dimensions investigated. Even though, in recent years, an impressive amount of literature on this topic has been produced, there has been neither systematic analysis of, nor empirical research into, the Italian interest system so far. This article aims to address this lacuna. Following a diachronic perspective, we count how many politically active groups have populated the Italian interest system with regard to two different periods: 1984–88 and 2010–14. From 1984 to 2014 the number of interest groups almost doubled and the density of the system greatly increased; diversity, however, has remained relatively more stable.

Keywords: interest groups; population ecology; Italian politics; density; diversity

Introduction

The crucial role of interest groups in policymaking as well as in democracies more broadly is well documented. Thus, knowing how many interest groups are politically active and which among them result more active than others becomes very important: changes in both the number and distribution of organized interests reveals the patterns of organizational births and deaths, political mobilization, and – to some extent – interest group policy influence.

Within interest group research, population studies investigate these crucial topics both from an empirical and a theoretical point of view. Scholars following this perspective specifically focus on a few but essential research questions: where do groups come from? Which kinds of interests and concerns have more vigorous representation (Schlozman, 2010: 426)? And, by adding a diachronic dimension: how have interest communities been changing in recent decades? Does the strong representation of business interests – when compared to other economic or citizen groups – persist over time? In other words, this ‘newer’ literature mainly looks at the demographic features of populations and

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systems¹ under scrutiny: especially density and diversity represent the main dimensions investigated (Berkhout and Lowery, 2010; Schlozman, 2010; Wonka *et al.*, 2010; Halpin and Jordan, 2012).

The demography of interests is important for a number of reasons: first, there is a relationship between how crowded an interest system is and the interests that are born and die in such a situation (Gray and Lowery, 1997). Second, these dynamics also influence the mix of lobbying strategies interest groups are used to employing, as they face increasing (in the case of growing interest group density) or decreasing (in the case of diminishing interest group density) competition for policy-makers' attention (Gray and Lowery, 1998). Third, interest system density and diversity reveal many crucial elements of interest group politics (Messer, 2011), and the development of these dimensions over time is important for understanding interest system features and factors shaping them (Fisker, 2015). Fourth, the size of the interest system influences the potential bias found in the interest system itself (Lowery *et al.*, 2005), and interest group effectiveness in terms of political influence (Denzau and Munger, 1986). This is why this literature also deals with the crucial concepts of democracy and representation more broadly: indeed, the more a given interest system is biased, the less the democratic quality of the political system as a whole. Yet, it should be stressed that analysing demographic features is the necessary but insufficient pre-condition for studying bias in interest group representation.²

For all the abovementioned reasons, since the 1990s the so-called 'population ecology perspective' has gained higher analytical relevance in the United States, European, and EU literature with numerous empirical studies having been published (Berkhout, 2014). Notwithstanding, there has been neither systematic analysis of, nor empirical research into, the Italian interest system so far. This article aims to address exactly this lacuna. More precisely, the main added value of this study lies in presenting the first database that tries to capture the number and diversity of Italian interest groups which are active at the national level. No one has done anything like this to date: indeed, Italian scholars have only analysed interest groups with respect to the post-war period of democratic consolidation, and only then by focussing on party politics and electoral behaviour. Although policy analysts have revived the topic in recent decades, they have provided only sectional analyses.³

¹ This common approach has similar but not overlapping aims and objectives: population studies focus on all interest organizations which are formally active; differently, scholars studying interest systems pay attention to interest organizations revealing steady political activity in a given polity over time.

² This is because there is no way to know what unbiased group mobilization would look like (Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2015): in the end, it is simply not feasible to establish how the 'natural' presence of any group category in the whole group system might look (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998: 93).

³ More in detail, recent publications are Capano *et al.* (2014), Lizzi (2011). Furthermore, even though they are not exclusively focussed on interest groups, it also deserves mention the series of books on 'Policies in Italy', edited by Maurizio Ferrera and published by *'Il Mulino'*, Bologna.

Following a diachronic perspective – which is generally highly recommended when studying the demography of interests (Berkhout and Lowery, 2010; Fisker, 2015) – we are going to count how many politically active groups have populated the Italian interest system both in mid-1980s and the present day, therefore analysing a crucial political period.⁴ In doing so, we will provide a descriptive analysis of the Italian interest system that is still completely unknown to interest group scholars and absent from any comparative research. Therefore, we are now planting a seed for future ‘cautious comparison’ between the Italian case and other interest systems.⁵

Differently from the United States and the EU, lobbying registers do not exist in Italy: there has never been any formal registration nor official list of interest groups. This, of course, both represented a huge challenge for our research effort, as well as forcing us to follow alternative paths in order to provide a reliable picture. With regard to this, we first decided to recur to a very broad list of Italian public and private organizations as our starting point: ‘*Guida Monaci*’.⁶ We opted for this source because of its temporal continuity and recognized reliability. Second – within list of thousands of different organizations – we selected groups with a national relevance, while dismissing sub-national groups. Third, we conducted an empirical survey of groups’ appearances in the media, in order to validate our list of Italian interest groups that have been politically active over the decades under scrutiny. In other words, we ‘conceptualize’ media appearances as a proxy for interest group political activity.⁷ Our unit of analysis – the Italian interest system – thus consists of 594 interest groups.

This article is structured as follows: in second section we review the most important population ecology studies and present the main analytical concepts which we refer to in presenting our empirical analysis; in third section we introduce a crucial analytical model in population studies – the so-called ‘Energy-Stability-Area (ESA) model’ (Lowery and Gray, 1995) – which will be subsequently used to explain empirical findings; the research design is then outlined in fourth section,

⁴ Since the early 1990s, the Italian political system has been going through a period of deep change, with a never-ending transition from a consensual democracy to a quasi-majoritarian one (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007): the party system of the First Republic has disappeared and the ongoing changes might have affected interest group politics too (Lanza and Lavdas, 2000: 205).

⁵ In particular, we are referring to a recent book – edited by Halpin and Jordan (2012) – on the populations of interests in Britain (Jordan and Greenan, 2012), Denmark (Christiansen, 2012), and Scotland (Halpin *et al.*, 2012).

⁶ Since 1870, ‘*Guida Monaci*’ is a Business Information Company publishing periodic registers of Italian organizations, associations, and companies that operate in economic, social, cultural, professional, and public administration areas. Currently, ‘*Sistema Italia*’ is the data set of *Guida Monaci* (GM) and represents the state of the art on ‘Who does what’ in Italy. It is thus very similar to other sources – encyclopaedias, handbooks, directories – which have been used in the literature so far (see e.g. Berry, 1999; Schlozman, 2010; Nownes, 2012).

⁷ In making this choice our research design mimics that of Berry (1999), Binderkrantz and colleagues (Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2015; Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2016), and Fisker (2015).

while the main empirical results are presented and discussed in fifth section; finally, sixth section contains some preliminary concluding remarks and suggestions for future research.

The 'population ecology perspective' in the literature

The population ecology perspective specifically investigates the inequality of political voice of interest organizations starting from data of the whole interest population. Differently from the 'pressure system' of Schattschneider (1960), population studies focus on all types of organizations active in seeking to influence public policy and take into account the actions taken by organizations in order to enter the political fray (Schlozman, 2010: 430).

From this perspective it comes to light that organizations seeking political influence are not only associations of individuals, but also corporations, firms, and institutions. Furthermore, the composition of interest communities is affected by decisions – taken by organized interests – on whether to mobilize and lobby policymakers; yet those same decisions may vary over the course of years. As a result, exploring the composition of interest systems in a systematic way and over time becomes a principal analytical task (Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2015).

This perspective has become analytically and empirically relevant in the last two decades. Scholars now know that populations matter a great deal in terms of defining the severity of the collective action problems organizations face. They also know that interest system density influences the mortality risks of interest groups, as well as the kind and number of issues they lobby on. Finally, they are well aware that the level of bias of a system is a complex result of ongoing factors rather than the simple product of wealth as power. Political scientists currently focus on not only explaining where the groups come from, but also on the kinds of interests and concerns that have vigorous representation and those that do not (Schlozman, 2010: 426). As a consequence, empirical studies focussing on interest systems and populations have become both more numerous, as well as more theoretically refined (Lowery and Gray, 1995; Lowery *et al.*, 2008; Berkhout and Lowery, 2010; Messer *et al.*, 2011; Halpin and Jordan, 2012).

Yet, the population ecology perspective and related research designs become feasible only where data sets are accessible and group categories can be investigated (Poppelaars, 2009). This is why in Europe it has only been since the last decade that this perspective has gained ground. Indeed, as Berkhout (2014: 1) underlines in a review article on this literature, scholars have only very recently started data collection on interest group systems and populations. Yet, the lack of public registers and data sets is still the main challenge for interest group scholars in many European countries. Apart from the Danish case, which has been the subject of several studies (Christiansen, 2012; Beyers and Braun, 2014; Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2015), scholars have carried out very few investigations into national systems (see e.g. Halpin *et al.*, 2012; Jordan and Greenan, 2012). On the other hand, precisely

due to the availability of official sources on interest groups that are active at the supranational level, many scholars have recently developed interesting and fine-grained analyses of the EU interest system (Berkhout and Lowery, 2010; Wonka *et al.*, 2010; Messer *et al.*, 2011).

Regardless of either their national or supranational focus, all these new studies take into account the interest system as the unit of analysis; they thus differ from ‘traditional’ interest group research, which generally focussed on organizational and membership features of individual groups or group categories. Any interest system – at the national, local, EU level, or issue level – consists of the entirety of all organized interests that are steadily activated and seek to influence public policy.

A shared preliminary belief of all these studies is that ‘assessing the size and shape of the organised interest system is crucial to addressing a range of fundamental questions about the plurality of interests voiced in policymaking arenas that potentially shape policy outputs’ (Halpin and Jordan, 2012: 9). Therefore, empirical works look at system density and diversity, not only with respect to interests populating a given political system, but also with regard to its sub-units, such as, for example, policy domains and economic sectors (Halpin and Jordan, 2012; Nownes, 2012; Berkhout, 2014).

An essential dimension of any given interest system is thus represented by its (potential) bias in representation, which is generally analysed in terms of inequality or overrepresentation of privileged groups such as business interests (Danielian and Page, 1994; Schlozman, 2010). With respect to this, scholars have identified clear patterns over time: citizen groups (Berry, 1999; Jordan *et al.*, 2012), as well as health and institutional interests (Schlozman, 2010) are now better represented than they were in the past. Yet, an equal/unbiased representation for all group types – a fundamental principle to democracy – remains a sort of chimera in contemporary interest systems.

However, studies that follow the abovementioned perspective also differ in some relevant analytical and theoretical respects. The first relates to the definition of what a population is: indeed, that same definition varies on the basis of theoretical questions to be answered (Lowery, 2012: 50). A second difference relates to the types of interest group included; with respect to this, scholars can use either a behavioural or a structural definition of interest group (Baroni *et al.*, 2014): of course, this choice directly affects both the selection of cases and the classification of interest organizations (Berkhout, 2014). Third, within this bulk of literature, different theories have been used to explain the size and shape of interest communities: ‘bottom up’ vs. ‘top down’ models or supply vs. demand explanations privilege social and organizational features in the former view, with policy- and political-related factors privileged in the latter. Even within the population ecology perspective developed by Gray and Lowery (1997, 1998) we can encounter different modes/approaches in examining group environments.

In conclusion, the research questions that population studies pose are not new; yet they are differently posed. Within this perspective, size (density) and shape

(diversity), volatility and turnover, interest group stability, become the main analytical dimensions and basic features of any interest system. These dimensions are correctly considered as being crucial: indeed, counting interest groups and how to count them does not only follow descriptive purposes. On the contrary, demographic features are directly connected to crucial political science concepts such as interest representation and democratic quality more broadly.

The application of the 'ESA model' to the Italian case: a 'plausibility probe'

As we have repeatedly said, the main aim of this work is to present and discuss the size and shape of the Italian interest system over the course of the last three decades: it thus represents a case study. Generally, the term 'case study' is used loosely in the literature, as an impressive but redundant synonym for 'study'. Yet, the difference between a case study and a study helps to clarify the nature of comparative politics itself. A case is an instance of a more general category. To conduct a case study is therefore to investigate something that has significance beyond its boundaries. By contrast, a study is undertaken for its own sake, without any pretence to wider relevance. Therefore, between case studies and theory testing, there is a clear (but often neglected) link. With respect to this, more than 40 years ago Eckstein (1975) suggested running a sort of trial test of a given theory on a particular case: in his words, this test should represent a 'plausibility probe' for that same theory to be empirically validated (Eckstein, 1975: 108).

Within population ecology studies, one of the main theoretical models (maybe the most famous one) is represented by the so-called 'ESA model', which was originally proposed by Lowery and Gray (1995) more than 20 years ago. More specifically, this framework is premised on the expectation that environmental constraints ultimately determine the contours of interest populations by bringing selective pressures to bear so that not all interest groups survive (Messer *et al.*, 2011: 166). In Lowery and Gray's view, three environmental factors positively influence the carrying capacity of interest systems for numbers of interest groups: the number of potential constituents of an interest (the 'area' or 'supply' term of their model); the level of legislative activity in the interest group's field of interest (the first of the two 'energy' terms of their model); the policy uncertainty of the given field of interest (the second 'energy' term of their model). In more detail, this theoretical model assumes that: (i) the broader the 'area', the higher the number of interest groups that mobilize; (ii) the more the government is active in a given interest field, the more interest groups 'occupying' that same interest field can readily mobilize their constituents; (iii) policy uncertainty or the likelihood that policy will change provides 'energy' that interest groups can use in order to mobilize.

While the ESA model was initially conceived by American scholars and tested within the American state interest systems, it is not an 'American' theory *per se*, and its theoretical concepts are quite general (Messer *et al.*, 2011: 169). Indeed, in recent years many scholars resorted to the ESA model in order to explain variation, not

only in density and diversity, but also in mobilization and stability, as well as in the ‘degree of pluralism’ characterizing both different interest systems (Lowery, 2012), as well as their sub-units, such as, for example, policy domains and economic sectors (Halpin and Jordan, 2012; Nownes, 2012; Berkhout *et al.*, 2015).

Following Eckstein (1975), we therefore believe that the Italian interest system might represent a good case to conduct a ‘plausibility probe’ for the ESA model. In other terms, we are quite confident that Lowery and Gray’s theoretical approach – albeit with some specifications – could help very much in understanding long-term features of the Italian case. Indeed, many sources of ‘energy’ (in authors’ terms) became active in recent decades in Italy. As for the level of legislative activity (the first of the ‘energy’ terms of the Lowery and Gray’s model), in the so-called ‘Second Republic’ (since 1996) governments have started to pass ‘significant’ legislation (Pritoni, 2015a). With respect to this, many authors have convincingly demonstrated that laws have become bigger and more heterogeneous in their content⁸ (De Micheli and Verzichelli, 2004; Borghetto and Visconti, 2014). Moreover, both the necessity to pass wide-ranging reforms in complex policy areas, as well as the need to repeatedly strike deals among parties in office, led to perpetual modifications of legislative agreements, in order to mirror a continuously changing balance of power among those same governing parties. This type of legislative productivity should therefore push more and more interest groups into activation in order to monitor – and when possible to influence – the law-making process and the policymaking as a whole.

Where policy uncertainty (the second of the ‘energy’ terms of the ESA model) is concerned, alternation in government – which was virtually impossible during the First Republic (Sartori, 1976) – has boosted the likelihood that right-wing executives change what left-wing executives previously decided, and *vice versa* (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007). Therefore, this new bipolar logic of political competition, as well as the necessity for governments to gain legitimacy also through policy responses to their respective constituencies, have produced a growing policy uncertainty.

In our view, the abovementioned tendencies should have led to relevant transformations in both interest system density and diversity: on the one hand, the number of politically active interest groups is likely to grow over time; on the other (and in turn), the more an interest system becomes crowded (i.e. the more it increases its density), the more we should expect that only well-off interest groups (namely, business groups and large unions) survive. In other words, the application of the ESA model to the Italian case results in the following theoretical expectations:

- i. a growing density of the Italian interest system over the course of time;
- ii. a changing diversity of the system too, with more and more business groups and large unions (which are usually considered to be groups with more resources), on one

⁸ In more detail, many recent policy reforms pushing towards market liberalization and privatisation have led to a growing differentiation and fragmentation of the Italian interest group system (Koff and Koff, 2000; Carrieri, 2009; Fabbrini, 2009; Capano *et al.*, 2014).

side, and fewer and fewer identity groups and public interest groups (which are usually considered to be groups with fewer resources), on the other.

The more empirical findings resemble those expectations, the more the ‘plausibility probe’ will be considered successfully passed.

Research design

As we claimed in the introduction, we focus on the Italian interest system as a whole, which consists of all interest groups revealing some political activity in Italy over time. But what kind of interest groups? In the literature, scholars tend to choose one definition of interest group over another (Baroni *et al.*, 2014). A key distinction can be made between a ‘behavioural definition’ (Baumgartner *et al.*, 2009) and an ‘organizational definition’ (Jordan and Greenan, 2012; Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2015). In the first case, groups are defined based on their observable, policy-related activities; in the second case, the ‘interest group’ term is reserved only for membership associations. The most recent studies applying the ESA model recur to the so-called ‘behavioural definition’ (Messer *et al.*, 2011; Berkhout *et al.*, 2015): therefore, with the aim of developing future ‘cautious comparison’ between the Italian case and other interest systems, we have decided to make use of this definition, too.

In doing so, we started from ‘*Guida Monaci*’, which is to date the only available data set collecting basic information on Italian companies, associations, public administrations, non-territorial bodies, and non-profit organizations in Italy. This periodical publication relies upon voluntary registration and general information provided by organizations themselves. Broadly speaking, ‘*Guida Monaci*’ mimics encyclopaedias and directories which are available in other countries, such as the Encyclopedia of Associations and the UK Directory of British Associations (Jordan and Greenan, 2012), or the Washington Representatives directory (Berry, 1999; Schlozman, 2010).

The main advantages of this source lie in both its inclusiveness – thousands of different organizations are listed – as well as in its periodicity: indeed, ‘*Guida Monaci sul Sistema Italia*’ is available for the years 1971, 1979, 1986, 2001, 2005, and for 2013 there is an online edition. Our first sample of interest groups thus derives from the editions of 1979 and 2013: more precisely, we originally collected all interest groups (i.e. all interest associations listed in one of the following sub-categories: (i) Associations; (ii) Committees; (iii) Confederations; (iv) Federations; (v) Foundations; (vi) Leagues; (vii) Unions; (viii) Professional Orders) that were either listed in the 1979 edition, or in the 2013 edition, or both. Yet – as scholars usually suggest (Jordan and Greenan, 2012; Nownes, 2012: 102–103) – each empirical analysis dealing with national interest systems has to focus on interest groups that are politically active at the national level.⁹ Therefore, we first excluded all interest groups that were/are sub-nationally focussed. Second, we ignored

⁹ Following Lowery (2012: 54), we focus on those groups who are competing or potentially competing for common resources which are necessary for organizational survival. As a consequence, we deal with

multiple entries (many groups were listed in more than one sub-category). Third, we chose to include not only associations and groups with individual membership, but also big companies. However, we established a threshold for the inclusion of corporations: only big firms have the opportunity to lobby at the national level, whereas small firms usually focus on their territorial niche; therefore, among the thousands of firms that are registered in ‘*Guida Monaci*’, we selected only the ones listed on the Italian Stock Exchange.¹⁰ Fourth, in order to distinguish between interest groups that are politically active and interest groups that are not, we decided to conduct an empirical analysis of interest group appearances in the media. Put differently, our choice has been to recur to media appearances as a checking procedure for actual interest group mobilization and policy activity over a given time span.

We are well aware that this research design is both challenging and risky: above all, not all interest groups are equally ‘newsworthy’ (Binderkrantz, 2012); furthermore, some interest groups might seek not to appear in the media. Yet, we think these are not insurmountable issues. First, by developing a diachronic analysis which focusses on evolutionary trends, we can sterilize the ‘newsworthiness bias’: labour unions – for example – were probably more newsworthy than business groups in the 1980s as well as nowadays. Secondly, many empirical analyses have demonstrated that interest groups, rather than employing *either* direct lobbying strategies *or* indirect lobbying strategies (i.e. appeal to the media), usually recur to a mix of both (Thrall, 2006; Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2015): especially where an extended time span is concerned, it is virtually *impossible* that an interest group systematically tries not to appear in the media for decades. Third, this procedure is anything but exceptional: indeed, other scholars have so far followed a similar research design (Berry, 1999; Nownes, 2012; Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2015; Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2016).

More precisely, we chose to focus on national newspapers. This is because their archives are easily accessible and provide an extremely reliable source for our investigation. With respect to this, we selected two national dailies – ‘*la Repubblica*’ and ‘*il Sole 24 Ore*’ – on the basis of three criteria. First, we need to take into account different editorial lines: in this regard, we opted for two newspapers with quite clear opposite political leanings, one in favour of business groups (‘*il Sole 24 Ore*’), and one in favour of labour unions and public interest groups (‘*la Repubblica*’). The second criterion deals with the national prestige of the newspaper,¹¹ while the third concerns the reliability and completeness of its historical archive.

politically active interest groups and we prefer the label ‘Italian interest system’ to the label ‘Italian interest population’.

¹⁰ We are well aware that our choice might be considered arbitrary. However, we are convinced that other options – for example, taking into account all firms – could be even more questionable.

¹¹ The selected newspapers are indeed two of the four dailies with the largest distribution in Italy (see <http://www.primaonline.it/2012/03/19/quotidiani-dicembre-2012/>).

As for the search terms, we resorted to both the exact name (e.g. *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*) as well as the usual acronym (e.g. *CGIL*). Where alternative spellings of the same interest group were possible (e.g. *Snals-Confsal*, which is also known as simply *Snals*), we searched for each of them. Finally, we collected data separately and solved potential contradictions by looking carefully at the web site of the interest group under scrutiny; in this way, we believe that data reliability is very high.

Consequently to this complex procedure, our unit of analysis – the Italian interest system – thus consists of 594 interest groups,¹² sampled into six categories (business groups; identity groups; groups of institutions and authorities; labour unions; other sectional groups; public interest groups), which in turn can be further differentiated in 30 sub-categories (Table 1).¹³

As for the time span, we compare two different periods of 5 years: 1984–88 and 2010–14. This choice is easily justifiable, both theoretically as well as pragmatically. From a theoretical point of view, we have already mentioned how many political, as well as institutional features have changed in Italy during the last 30 years: it is therefore extremely interesting to verify whether similar transformations occurred in the Italian interest system as well. Pragmatically, the data we obtained from ‘*Guida Monaci*’ are available and reliable from late 1970s onwards, while the archives of the most important national newspapers start precisely in 1984: thus, it is impossible to broaden the analysis further back in time. However, we are convinced that our time span is sufficiently far-reaching as to highlight substantial diachronic trends.

More in detail, the 1984–88 Italian interest system thus consists of all interest groups (of our sample) which were cited at least once from 1 January 1984 to 31 December 1988, whereas the 2010–14 Italian interest system consists of all interest groups (of our sample) which were cited at least once from 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2014. We opted for this solution – rather than simply comparing two particular points in time (i.e. 1984 and 2014) – because in this latter case empirical findings could suffer from some random fluctuation: for example, a given interest group which received media coverage in both 1983 and 1985, while having no citations in 1984, would have been put out of the picture; the same in the case of an interest group receiving media coverage in both 2013 and 2015, but not in 2014. In other words, comparing 2 years would have unduly restricted the number of interest groups which we consider as ‘politically active’: being cited in only 2 years is logically more difficult than being cited just once over the course of 10 years. Therefore, the simple comparison between 1984 and 2014 would have made little sense.

¹² Our sample is significantly narrower than interest populations analysed in similar studies, where interest groups are generally thousands rather than hundreds. Nevertheless, we are quite confident that our threshold for being considered a ‘politically active interest group’ is low enough to guarantee that no relevant interest groups have been excluded.

¹³ With respect to the coding process, it was developed as follows: first, each interest group was coded separately by the two authors; second, contradictory cases – that is, interest groups included in different categories by the two coders (6.9% of the whole sample) – were solved jointly.

Table 1. Interest groups with at least one citation either in the 1984–88 or in the 2010–14 period

Categories	Sub-categories	Number of interest groups	%
Business groups		233	39.2
	Corporations	208	35.0
	Entrepreneurs and artisans	11	1.8
	Finance and insurance	10	1.7
	Trade associations	4	0.7
Identity groups		36	6.1
	Elderly	3	0.5
	LGBT	3	0.5
	Patients	7	1.2
	Religious	8	1.3
	Women	15	2.5
Groups of institutions and authorities		34	5.7
	Judiciary institutions	3	0.5
	Local institutions	12	2.0
	Professional orders	19	3.2
Labour unions		63	10.6
	Confederations of workers	10	1.7
	Sectional unions	53	8.9
Other sectional groups		177	29.8
	Agriculture	16	2.7
	Chemistry	15	2.5
	Culture	5	0.8
	Education	14	2.4
	Energy	15	2.5
	Food and beverage	10	1.7
	Health care	21	3.5
	Housing	17	2.9
	Manufacturing	18	3.0
	Professional associations	13	2.2
	Tourism and sports	10	1.7
	Transport	23	3.9
	Public interest groups		51
Animal rights		8	1.3
Civil rights and solidarity		18	3.0
Consumers		19	3.2
Environment		6	1.0
Total		594	100.0

National newspapers *'il Sole 24 Ore'* and *'la Repubblica'*.

Italic values indicate the value in % of every category (or value aggregated in % of sub-categories within each category).

Empirical findings

In the literature, scholars have mainly analysed Italian interest groups because of their subordinated role to parties: in particular, empirical studies have focussed on the main organizations (of farmers, workers, and business) with respect to the

period of Italian democratic consolidation (Morlino, 1991). ‘Clientelism’¹⁴ between groups and bureaucracies (LaPalombara, 1964) and ‘collateralism’¹⁵ between groups and parties, as well as the role of policy gatekeepers exercised by the latter, represented for decades the dominant analytical framework within which interest group politics was explained.

Starting from the early 1990s, some scholars revived the topic of interest groups by focussing on trade unions and – above all – entrepreneurial associations (Lanzalaco, 1990; Mattina, 1991); at the same time, empirical analyses on legislative production and public policies provided wider but sectional knowledge about dynamics characterizing interest group access to policymakers and interest group policy success (Lange and Regini, 1986). With the remarkable exception of Lanzalaco (1993), who defined the Italian interest system as characterized by a distorted version of pluralism – that is, ‘oligopolistic pluralism’¹⁶ – there is no empirical research on the unequal representation, differentiated mobilization capacity, lobbying, and influence of Italian interest groups. In other terms, the Italian interest system has never been considered a research subject *per se* to date.

Therefore, this work represents the first attempt to describe and analyse the size and shape of the Italian interest system over the last 30 years. It can also provide the starting point for a broader research project, which has Italian interest groups as its units of analysis. Even though this could be considered deserving, the simple presentation of the Italian case is not sufficient to avoid considering aspects common to other countries as if they were Italian peculiarities; therefore, all the empirical findings we are going to present will be compared to those of similar analyses developed by scholars who focussed on other cases. That said, please see Table 2, which highlights how the Italian interest system changed from 1984–88 to 2010–14.

By examining Table 2, several interesting considerations can be made. First of all, the Italian interest system has experienced a real explosion in the last 30 years: in 1984–88, only 316 interest groups (of the 894 associational groups and big companies listed in ‘*Guida Monaci 1979*’) appeared at least once in at least one out of the two surveyed dailies, whereas in 2010–14 this number is almost double that, and equal to 564 (+78.5%) (of the 1759 associational groups and big companies listed in ‘*Guida Monaci 2013*’). This expansion is both greater than the one

¹⁴ ‘Clientelism’ should be conceptualized as a stable exchange of special privileges between certain groups, on the one hand, and ministerial bureaucracies, on the other.

¹⁵ ‘Collateralism’ broadly indicates that interest groups originated from, and were closely affiliated to, one’s own parties; the former became organizational arms of the latter within a given interest area; differently from many other countries, Italian *collateralism* was more than a political affinity; rather it was a clear overlapping between parties and groups, and gave rise to ‘a specific type of pluralist pressure on political processes and policy outcomes’ (Ferrante, 1998: 88).

¹⁶ This distortion of pluralism has emerged from the diffuse connections among main interest organizations, political parties, and public administrations granting interest groups privileged and stable access to decisions and policymaking. This, in turn, reduced competition among interest groups in many policy sectors.

Table 2. Italian interest system over time (1984–2014)

Categories	Sub-categories	N (84–88)	% (84–88)	N (10–14)	% (10–14)	Diff. N	Diff. %	
Business groups		122	38.6	227	40.2	105	1.6	
	Corporations	106	33.5	202	35.8	96	2.3	
	Entrepreneurs and artisans	7	2.2	11	2.0	4	-0.2	
	Finance and insurance	5	1.6	10	1.8	5	0.2	
	Trade associations	4	1.3	4	0.7	0	-0.6	
Identity groups		17	5.4	30	5.3	13	-0.1	
	Elderly	1	0.3	0	0	-1	-0.3	
	LGBT	1	0.3	3	0.5	2	0.2	
	Patients	3	0.9	7	1.2	4	0.3	
	Religious	7	2.2	8	1.4	1	-0.8	
	Women	5	1.6	12	2.1	7	0.5	
Institutions and authorities		20	6.3	34	6.0	14	-0.3	
	Judiciary institutions	2	0.6	3	0.5	1	-0.1	
	Local institutions	5	1.6	12	2.1	7	0.5	
	Professional orders	13	4.1	19	3.4	6	-0.7	
Labour unions		39	12.3	61	10.8	22	-1.5	
	Confederations of Workers	6	1.9	10	1.8	4	-0.1	
	Sectional unions	33	10.4	51	9.0	18	-1.4	
Other sectional groups		95	30.1	162	28.7	67	-1.4	
	Agriculture	5	1.6	13	2.3	8	0.7	
	Chemistry	5	1.6	5	0.9	0	-0.7	
	Culture	9	2.8	12	2.1	3	-0.7	
	Education	8	2.5	15	2.7	7	0.2	
	Energy	5	1.6	16	2.8	11	1.2	
	Food and beverage	15	4.7	19	3.4	4	-1.3	
	Health care	5	1.6	10	1.8	5	0.2	
	Housing	6	1.9	10	1.8	4	-0.1	
	Manufacturing	13	4.1	17	3.0	4	-1.1	
	Professional associations	9	2.8	14	2.5	5	-0.3	
	Tourism and sports	6	1.9	12	2.1	6	0.2	
	Transport	9	2.8	19	3.4	10	0.6	
	Public interest groups		23	7.3	50	8.9	27	1.6
		Animal rights	3	0.9	7	1.2	4	0.3
Civil rights and solidarity		6	1.9	18	3.2	12	1.3	
Consumers		10	3.1	19	3.4	9	0.3	
Environment		4	1.3	6	1.1	2	-0.2	
Total		316	100	564	100	248	0	

Italic values indicate the value in % of every category (or value aggregated in % of sub-categories within each category).

highlighted by Berkhout and Lowery (2010) with respect to the EU interest population, and the one stressed by Schlozman (2010) with respect to the US interest system.¹⁷ Moreover, similar studies on the British (Jordan and Greenan, 2012),

¹⁷ Yet, the time spans are different: Berkhout and Lowery (2010) analyse 14 years (from 1991 to 2005); Schlozman (2010) analyses 25 years (from 1981 to 2006).

Danish (Christiansen, 2012), and Scottish (Halpin *et al.*, 2012) interest system evidence significantly lower growth rates.¹⁸

In our view, this empirical finding represents a first – preliminary but remarkable – confirmation for our ‘probability probe’: as expected, more legislative productivity and more policy uncertainty have led to a huge increase in the Italian interest system density. More and more interest groups mobilized in order to monitor – and when possible to influence – the law-making process and policymaking as a whole, in a context in which competing governments succeeding one another have produced many more wide-ranging reforms touching many policy areas.¹⁹

However, we are also convinced that the original ESA model could benefit from a further refinement that takes into account a fundamental Italian peculiarity; in our view, this peculiarity has multiplied the effect of original sources of energy, such as legislative activity and policy uncertainty. More precisely, we do believe that policy uncertainty, in particular, has been increased by the political turmoil of the early 1990s, as well as by the never-ending transition that derived from it. Differently from the past, when only interest groups that were ‘collateral’ to parties could have a role in the policymaking (Lanzalaco, 1993), now a growing number of interest organizations can realistically expect to exert influence in the policy process. This more autonomous role of interest groups can be convincingly linked to the fact that political parties have lost their previous role of policy gatekeepers (Koff and Koff, 2000; Lanza and Lavdas, 2000; Fabbrini, 2003), in so powering up the release of interest groups (Mattina, 2011). In more detail, over the course of the last 20 years ‘traditional’ parties disappeared, whereas new and different ones appeared. While ‘old’ parties were characterized by clear ideological stances, ‘new’ ones display less neat positions in terms of political and policy preferences. Furthermore, both parties and the party system are more and more fragmented (Fasano and Pasini, 2014: 114). For all these reasons, political parties in the Second Republic have been defined as ‘*partiti liquidi*’ (fluid parties) (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2016). This is why the policy-making process appears to be now more chaotic and more open to different actors than it was in the First Republic (Capano *et al.*, 2014) and, in turn, is probably why our empirical analysis has shown such an impressive growth in the number of politically active interest groups: the ‘unregulated’ nature of the policy process acted as a multiplier for traditional sources of energy.

¹⁸ However, both Jordan and Greenan (2012), on a side, and Christiansen (2012) as well as Halpin *et al.* (2012), on the other, recurred to the so-called ‘organizational definition’ of interest group (in so taking into account only associational interest groups), while we count firms as well.

¹⁹ Yet, one could also argue that such a growing density depends on the fact that dailies enlarged their formats from 1984–88 to 2010–14, which is true. In other words, nowadays it would be easier for interest groups – all other conditions being equal – to be quoted in national newspapers, which have more space at their disposal. However, this claim does not take into account the fact that associational interest groups and big companies simply listed in ‘*Guida Monaci*’ increased from 894 in 1979 to 1759 in 2013. This growth is even more impressive (the ratio between groups in GM and groups with at least one media appearance declined from 0.35 to 0.32 over the time span), demonstrating that – differently from what is generally assumed – nowadays it is *not* easier for interest groups to be quoted.

What about interest system diversity? With regard to this crucial aspect, many considerations can be proposed: first, as many other interest systems (Berkhout and Lowery, 2010; Schlozman, 2010; Halpin and Jordan, 2012; Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2015), the Italian system appears to be biased in favour of economic groups: both in 1984–88 as well as in 2010–14, in fact, more than two-thirds of interest groups that entered our survey are either business groups or other sectional groups. This empirical finding largely confirms what has been repeatedly argued in the literature (Danielian and Page, 1994; Schlozman, 2010; Berkhout, 2014). Second, the enlargement of the Italian interest system has not been particularly uneven across various categories of interest groups. On the contrary, the overall picture shows a good deal of stability.²⁰ At first glance, this empirical finding appears to be the legacy of a past interest system that – in the words of Lanzalaco (1993) – was characterized by ‘oligopolistic pluralism’ and, in turn, by long-lasting centrality of some groups and some policy sectors. Simultaneously, this apparent stability contrasts with our theoretical expectations, which postulated a growing presence of well-off groups (i.e. business groups and large labour unions) to the detriment of groups that are relatively less well-equipped (i.e. identity groups and public interest groups).

Yet, even in a context of clear stability, some interesting diachronic trends have to be stressed. But do those trends confirm or contradict our hypotheses? Answering this question is not an easy task: empirical results are rather contradictory. On the one hand, business groups have indeed experienced a larger growth, going from representing 38.6 to 40.2% of the interest system, thus confirming what we expected. On the other hand, a similar increase is the prerogative of public interest groups – increasing from 7.3% in 1984–88 to 8.9% in 2010–14 – which is precisely one of the group categories that, on the contrary, was supposed to present declining numbers. Finally, even large unions and identity groups do not follow the expected path: indeed, both group categories appear impressively stable (–0.1%), but the former should have increased its percentage with respect to the whole interest system, whereas the latter was expected to have a lower percentage.

These patterns do not seem to give sufficient support to our theoretical expectations, but are completely in line with what has been stressed by other scholars with regard to other interest systems: business groups continue to represent a great part of interest communities (Schlozman, 2010; Christiansen, 2012; Jordan and Greenan, 2012), while the growth of public interest groups is anything but an Italian peculiarity (Kohler-Koch, 2007; Berkhout and Lowery, 2010).

Yet, we should not be too precipitous in claiming that density patterns do not follow the ESA model’s theoretical hypotheses in the Italian case. In fact, Lowery and Gray (1995) argued that there is an indirect correlation between interest system density and underprivileged interest group survival ‘when interest

²⁰ This stability at the system level is mirrored by an equivalent stability at the policy sector level: groups, once they mobilize, rarely disappear. In other words, over the time span, we have counted many *births* but much fewer *deaths*.

systems become crowded'. However, as Wonka *et al.* (2010: 468) noted, the Italian interest system is less crowded than not only the EU system, but also in comparison to the German, British, and French cases. In other terms, competition for resources among interest groups still appears to be relatively low in Italy and there is sufficient room of manoeuvre for 'new' (and relatively 'poor') interest groups that want to mobilize.

Several further considerations can be made if we look at sub-categories of interest groups. We would like to stress three aspects in particular. First, where business groups are concerned, the overall growth is the result of two opposite trends: on the one hand, the number of corporations has increased very much in the last 30 years; on the other, business associations (of entrepreneurs, artisans, and merchants) have grown at a slower pace. With regard to other sectional groups, organizations in the energy sector showed an extraordinary growth rate, whereas in particular groups in the food and beverage sector, as well as in the manufacturing sector, diminished their relative weight over the course of time. Finally, the increase of public interests depends almost exclusively on the extraordinary growth rate characterizing interest groups populating the 'civil rights and solidarity' sub-category.

Without any doubt, at this stage of our research any potential explanation of these trends cannot be statistically tested and, in turn, might be considered as substantially impressionistic. However, many of the abovementioned long-period trends seem to give some support to our theoretical expectations: for example, as for interest groups in the energy sector, their remarkable increase has probably been favoured by huge legislative activity. In recent decades, different pieces of legislation have indeed restructured the policy field by incentivizing renewable energy (Farinelli, 2004). As a result, more and more interest groups emerged in order to politicize both sides of the 'renewable issue': traditional groups with the aim of limiting investments in renewable energy, as opposed to newer groups with the aim of taking advantage from those same new investments.

As claimed above, a declining trend characterizes interest groups populating both the manufacturing sector as well as the food and beverage sector. In Lowery and Gray's terms, these findings are perfectly in line with a decline of 'supply' in the former case (the Italian manufacturing sector still going through a long-lasting economic crisis), and with the fact that both sectors were already crowded 30 years ago. As predicted by the model, in other terms, the number of interest groups decreases (or, in this case, grows at a slower pace when compared to other policy sectors) when there is less supply and/or when the system is *too* crowded.²¹

Finally, the main reason for the 'explosion' of civil rights associations might also be linked to the recent policy agenda in Italy and, in turn, to Lowery and Gray's analytical framework. Although the Italian parliament has legislated on issues such as same-sex marriage and common law couples only very recently

²¹ Indeed, both the 'manufacturing' policy sector and, above all, the 'food and beverage' policy sector were by far the most populated ones within the 'other sectional groups' category in 1984–88.

(i.e. in March 2016), these issues have indeed entered the political agenda many times over the last 15 years (Paternotte and Kollman, 2013).

Overall, empirical findings point out that, even though the Italian interest system has greatly increased in size over the course of the last three decades, it has substantially maintained the structural shape of an ‘oligopolistic pluralism’. Interest groups are now more numerous than they were 30 years ago; however, there is no real competition among them yet. Moreover, the abovementioned growth has benefited business groups and, above all, big corporations, in so maintaining what has been defined in the literature as an ‘enduring imbalance’ (Mattina, 2011).²²

Therefore, what is really interesting in our results is that – following a different (we would say an ‘original’) path – we still came to the same conclusions that many policy studies have proposed so far: in fact, scholars who focussed on the many transformations that have occurred in Italy since the early 1990s had already noted the growing fragmentation (balkanization?) of interest representation in many policy sectors (Carriero, 2009; Fabbrini, 2009: 39; Capano *et al.*, 2014; Pritoni, 2015b). We can thus confirm from a broader perspective what these sectional analyses originally evidenced: this growing fragmentation (in population ecology terms, the increasing density of the system) characterizes the *whole* Italian interest system. Furthermore, we are also convinced that this ‘balkanization’ of policymaking is going to be a long-lasting feature of the Italian interest system, mainly because of the absence of either new political parties with a gate-keeping role, or of institutionalized procedures of consultation and inclusion of interests in policymaking: neither the former, nor the latter, seem to be particularly likely in the near future in Italy.

In any case, with this article we have only conducted a ‘probability probe’ (Eckstein, 1975) for the ESA model: its theoretical hypotheses need much more research for them to be fully validated. More precisely, a statistical test of the ESA model among policy sectors could be very interesting in the Italian case and will be undoubtedly object of future research. Yet, our preliminary results appear to be both reasonable and promising.

Concluding remarks and future research

Even though, in recent years, a substantive amount of empirical research on interest groups has been produced (Hojnacki *et al.*, 2012; Bunea and Baumgartner, 2014), Italian scholars have not paid sufficient attention to interest group politics and the Italian case is still absent in any comparative research. More and more international

²² Neo-pluralists ascribe this ‘enduring imbalance’ to different lobbying capacity, as well as to greater resources owned by economic groups; on the contrary, neo-corporatists attribute it to the incorporation of a few major interest groups into the decision-making processes. More recent approaches explain this imbalance mainly with respect to the path dependency generated by public policies, stable networks, and institutional organization of policymaking. These factors maintain the privileged status of some groups even if politico-institutional changes or policy reforms occur.

scholars – following a new ‘population ecology perspective’ – have focussed on the size (density) and shape (diversity) of interest systems (Berkhout, 2014 for a review). Yet, there has been neither systematic analysis of, nor empirical research into, the Italian interest system so far. We are convinced that the population interest approach is important for a number of reasons, so the aim of this article has been precisely to focus on the demographic features of the Italian interest system over the last 30 years.

With respect to this, the main added value of this study therefore lies in presenting the first database capturing the density and diversity of the Italian interest system over a period characterized by intense political and institutional change. We are rather proud of our research effort, for at least three reasons: first, no one has done anything like this to date. In other words, our study could represent a sort of ‘landmark’ for all scholars who will focus on the Italian interest system from now on. Second, our database represents the final outcome of a very demanding and methodologically rigorous procedure: differently from the United States, the EU, and many other European countries, in fact, lobbying registers do not exist in Italy. Therefore, in order to provide a reliable description of all interest groups that were/are politically active in Italy, we have been forced to find an original path, which has been mainly based on the interrelation between two different sources: ‘*Guida Monaci*’ and newspapers archives. Third, this study addresses a literature that is more and more relevant within interest group research: that of interest systems and interest populations.

As for our empirical findings, they may be summarized as follows: first, from 1984–88 to 2010–14, the number of interest groups that were politically active (i.e. which received media coverage by at least one out of the two most relevant Italian dailies) increased from 316 to 564 (+78.5%). This impressive growth has probably been due not only to the factors originally highlighted by Lowery and Gray through their well-known ‘ESA Model’ – above all, legislative activity and policy uncertainty – but also to the unique combination of those factors with some Italian peculiarities: in particular, we would like to cite the long-lasting policy legacies of an interest system previously characterized by ‘oligopolistic pluralism’ (Lanzalaco, 1993), the fact that political parties irremediably lost their previous role of policy gatekeepers (Koff and Koff, 2000; Lanza and Lavdas, 2000), and the consequences of the never-ending Italian politico-institutional ‘transition’ (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007). These ‘intervening factors’ in particular entailed a much more chaotic policy-making process. Policy opportunities have been growing impressively over the last decades, thus Italian interest groups are now more unrestrained than they were in the past in their competing and mobilizing in order to get what they want.

Second, the expansion of the Italian interest system has not been particularly uneven across various categories of interest groups: thus, the diversity characterizing the Italian case has not changed so much over time. Business interests and other sectional groups still dominate the picture. However, similar to other interest systems (Berry, 1999; Berkhout and Lowery, 2010; Schlozman, 2010), public interests and, above all, civil rights associations have gained ground.

Yet, this study represents a preliminary and mainly descriptive analysis. In order to accurately analyse and explain the demography of the Italian interest system, further research into a number of issues is required. First of all, our data set – as representing the first attempt of listing politically active interest groups in Italy to date – would benefit from a further validation: in particular, we are going to examine interest groups participating in parliamentary and governmental hearings, as well as interest organizations which are engaged in the bureaucratic arena. In other words, the aim is to cross-check different data collected and, in doing so, to aggregate groups which were previously absent and to remove duplicates, following the example of Halpin *et al.* (2012). Furthermore, in order to take a further step towards ‘cautious comparison’ (Lowery *et al.*, 2008), it could be interesting to apply Lowery and Gray’s ESA model to the analysis of policy sectors in Italy. With regard to this, more data are thus required, differentiated per policy guild: data on potential constituents, on legislative activity, on policy uncertainty. In conclusion, still much has to be done in order to fully explain demographic features of the Italian interest system. Yet, this article may well represent the first step forward in this direction.

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Data

The replication data set is available at <http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/ipsr-risp>.

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