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# Political Science in Italian Universities: Demand, Supply, and Vitality

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## Abstract

Political Science is widely considered to be an established academic discipline, even in a country like Italy, where the penetration of empirical social science has been deeply constrained historically and culturally, and where there has been a clear predominance of other academic disciplines, including history and constitutional law. Twenty years after the introduction of the so-called 'Bologna Process', and a few years after the implementation of the 2010 reform of the public higher education system, it is worth looking for a comprehensive description of the state of our academic discipline. This can be done by exploring some data about the role of Political Science within the Italian university system. More in detail, three aspects of the current state of Italian Political Science will be explored. Firstly, the dynamics of the educational 'demand' for Political Science is here explored through an analysis of its presence in relevant Bachelor's and Master's degrees. This is even more interesting given the two dangers in the academic presence of Political Science: reiterated criticisms against the uselessness of social sciences, and the effects of at least two decades of anti-political sentiment, particularly diffused among younger cohorts of students. The second aspect tackled here is the capability of Political Science practitioners to respond to these challenges by presenting a credible set of academic subjects and increasing its visibility among students. Third, we will discuss the overall reaction of the community of political scientists to these decisive challenges by looking at the magnitude and variance of academic recruitment in the Political Science academic community currently active in Italy. The evidence presented in the article will offer some reasons for optimism, namely, the stability of the student population and the crystallisation of Political Science in the overall teaching supply. However, some critical elements are also evident: a persistent geographical imbalance in the spread of Political Science and difficulty in adapting to some new professional and inter-disciplinary courses. This will lead us to discuss, in the final part of the article, a grid of more specific and fine-tuned research questions on the future of Political Science in Italy.

## 1. Introduction

More than half a century has passed since the foundation of modern academic Political Science in Italy by Giovanni Sartori with the fundamental support of Norberto Bobbio (Morlino 1989; 1992; Sartori 2004). Italian political scientists can now count on a reasonable academic presence. They teach quite a large number of

subjects and they ‘matter’ in several European and International professional associations, as well as in some relevant research networks at a global level.

However, political scientists know that there is no reason to celebrate this period as the embodiment of an academic ‘institutionalization’. Indeed, one can note the continuing relevance of long-term factors that determined a considerable delay in the development of the discipline in Italy. These were, in particular, the long Fascist regime in the twentieth century and the predominance of other disciplines, like history and constitutional law, at the core of the positivist normative vision of the Italian intellectual elite. Moreover, since the 1970s, the presence of professional political scientists in Italy has always been rather irregular, with a relevant number operating in the northern and metropolitan universities, while a shortage of human resources has characterized the peripheral and southern areas.

Several reasons may explain the inertia of the process of stabilization of the discipline and its persisting weaknesses (Capano and Verzichelli 2016). At the same time, recent years have also brought about opportunities for some momentary phases of expansion. Indeed, the long-term decline, dramatically impacted by the effects of the recent economic crisis, might have been somehow balanced by the rise of at least three relevant intervening processes:

1. The adjustments of the university curricula after the introduction of the so-called ‘Bologna Process’ in 1999. These new regulations may have determined interesting chances to consolidate the discipline in different programmes or, on the contrary, may have penalized Political Science in Italy.
2. The reforms of the whole academic recruitment system, increasingly based on the principle of ‘matching funds’ and the capacity of a given discipline to support new positions by raising resources through international research projects. This is another relevant intervening factor, especially if one looks at the elements of flexibility and the increment of non-tenure-track positions introduced by a first university reform in 2005 and then formalized by the systemic law (n. 240/2010) on university governance.
3. Finally, one may wonder if innovations in the system of public university funding could have had any effect on Political Science: the availability of some local and territorial resources, or the (still limited) ministerial bonuses provided during the last decade after the introduction of research quality assessments run by an independent agency (*Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema Universitario e della Ricerca*, ANVUR). These factors could potentially have a positive effect on a research-based, naturally internationalised, empirical social science, whose outcomes can also be transformed in ‘applied’ knowledge.

Hence, twenty years after the Bologna Process, and a few years after the implementation of a systemic reform of the whole public higher education system, it is worth looking for a comprehensive description of the state of this academic discipline. We will do this by providing a first analysis of fresh data on the current shape of Italian Political Science collected by the *Società Italiana di Scienza Politica* (SISP) (Italian Political

Science Association).<sup>1</sup> Such data aim to provide a real-time analysis of the state of the discipline and allow us to explore, in a potentially novel way, different paths of Italian Political Science. Three research questions, in particular, are at the core of this explorative work.

First, we aim to assess what can be defined as the rough ‘demand’ for Political Science, by looking at the dynamics of the flow of students within the Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees where Political Science is present. This is a potentially fruitful research question, in light of two dangers that emerged during a phase of crisis (from 2008 onwards) following a period of relative academic establishment of the discipline (1999–2008) (Capano and Tronconi 2005; Capano and Verzichelli 2008). These dangers would come from criticisms of the social sciences and their usefulness, and the spread of anti-political sentiment, especially among younger cohorts of (potential) students. The potential effects of these challenges will be measured by looking at the trend of the overall number of students enrolled in classic Political Science degrees.

Secondly, we want to measure the capability of the ‘supply side’ of the Italian Political Science academic market. The discipline may have responded to the multiple challenges that have emerged during the past decades by putting forward a modern and competitive set of subjects offered to students. The overall visibility of the ‘motherhouse’ discipline can somehow be assessed by looking at the recent evolution of the presence of Political Science subjects in some Bachelor’s and Master’s programmes offered in Italian generalist universities.

Our third question has to do with the reaction of the whole community of Italian political scientists to these decisive challenges. The vitality of Political Science in contemporary Italian universities will be analysed by looking at the recruitment and the career-related variance within the Political Science community of untenured and tenure-track academics.

In the next section, we will approach the first two questions, while the third section will cover the problem of the vitality of Italian Political Scientists. A short conclusive section will summarise our findings and present elements of reasonable optimism, as well as the persisting challenges, and will also refine a few questions about the future academic evolution of Political Science in Italy.

## **2. Political Science in the Italian University System: Demand and Supply**

As mentioned above, the first goal of this article is to assess the effective relevance of Political Science according to the magnitude of students selecting one of the dozens of Political Science related degrees activated in Italian universities. A first rough indicator of the pool of students to be exposed to the discipline is the number of people enrolled in the degrees included in the ministerial class *Scienze Politiche e Relazioni Internazionali* (Political Sciences and International Relations, code: L36), the only BA programme

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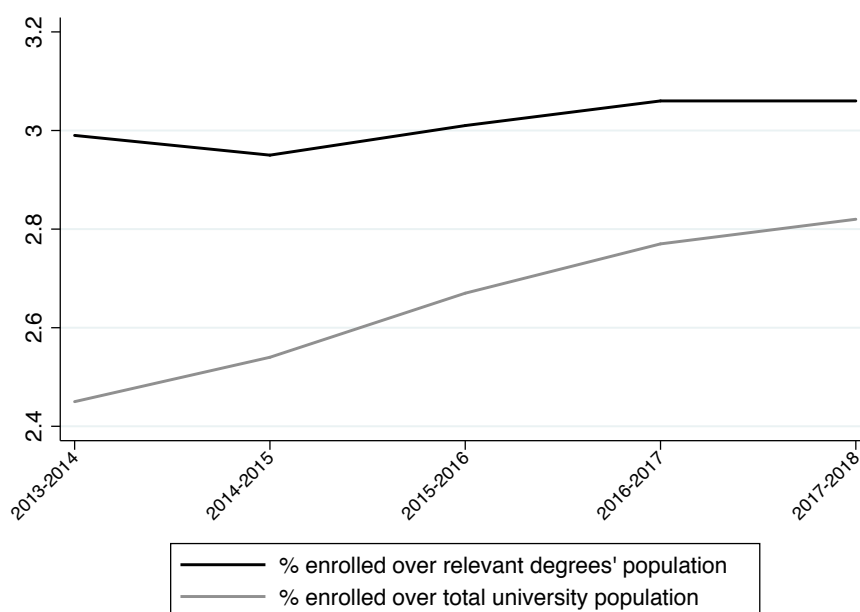
<sup>1</sup> The SISP project started in 2017 and has been collecting data on the presence of political scientists and Political Science subjects in the main Italian university programmes. All the data presented in this article are based on three datasets - *subjects, teachers, students* - at the core of the project. A first version of the database is expected to be released in 2020.

imposing a minimum number of academic credits (*Credito Formativo Universitario*, CFU) in Political Science in Italian universities.

More in detail, the percentage of all Italian BA students who selected an L36 degree from 2013-2014 until 2017-2018 oscillated around 4% (a minimum of 3.98 in 2013-2014 and a maximum of 4.11 in 2016-2017). In absolute terms, the number of BA students enrolled in an L36 degree reached a peak of more than 38,000 people in 2017-2018.

These numbers give us a measure of the potential exposition of students to Political Science but they do not assess the real ‘demand’ for this discipline, for the simple reason that a relevant percentage are likely not to know precisely what this discipline is before entering a university. A better idea of the real degree of attention paid to Political Science is the trend of students populating the whole ‘chain’ of BA and MA programmes where Political Science is typically offered. So, we have focused on the above-mentioned L36 BA class and two Master’s classes: *Relazioni Internazionali* (International Relations, code: LM52) and *Scienze della Politica* (Political Sciences, code: LM62).

**Figure 1.** Evolution of students enrolled in Political Science degrees (L36, LM52, and LM62), Italy (2013/2014-2017/2018)



Note: relevant degrees include data on students enrolled in the degrees belonging to the following ministerial classes: 'L', 'LM', 'LM4 C.U.', 'LM85 bis', 'LM/SNT1', 'LM/SNT2', 'LM/SNT3', 'LM/SNT4', 'LMG/O1', 'LMR/O2'.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the students enrolled in L36, LM52, and LM62 ministerial classes<sup>2</sup> represent a small yet stable percentage of the students enrolled in what we have called ‘relevant degrees’ (black line in Figure 1). Such relevant degrees correspond to the

<sup>2</sup> Roughly corresponding to the old four-year degree in Political Sciences offered to Italian students before 1999. This is why we have considered L36, LM52, and LM62 degrees as the most typical programmes for the teaching of Political Science.

entire academic path leading to a Master's degree in any subject, thus excluding, for instance, professional training programmes (e.g., nursery programmes).

Conversely, if one considers the entire Italian university population, the situation is undoubtedly brighter for Italian Political Science: the grey line of Figure 1 shows an increase in the percentage of students enrolled in our three classes over the total population of Italian universities. In other words, from this specific viewpoint, the demand for Political Science in Italian universities has undergone a certain increment over time.

Also by looking at the absolute figures, the number of students enrolled in L36, LM52, and LM62 degrees grew from some 41,500 in 2013-2014 to more than 47,500 in 2017-2018. Admittedly, this population remains limited, but these numbers do not point to a decline in Political Science, as the arguments for the 'end of social sciences' would suggest.

In any event, we are writing about a thin minority of students. Moreover, in absolute terms, in 2017-2018, while the L36 BA degrees enrolled more than 38,000 students, in the same year, the number of students enrolled in two Master's degrees – LM52 and LM62 – was just higher than 9,500. In relative terms, if we disaggregated Figure 1's data (black line) for BA and Master's degrees, the percentage of L36 students over the 'relevant BA degrees' population would be slightly more than 4% in 2017-2018, while the same percentage of LM52 and LM62 students over the 'relevant Master's degrees' population would be just above 1.5%. All in all, the demand for Political Science in Italian universities is higher in BA degrees than in Master's degrees.

Is the picture we have just depicted any different if we disaggregate the data according to geographical areas? Figure 2 below helps us to answer this question.

**Figure 2.** Evolution of students enrolled in Political Science degrees (L36, LM52, and LM62) by geographical area and type of degree, Italy (2013/2014-2017/2018)

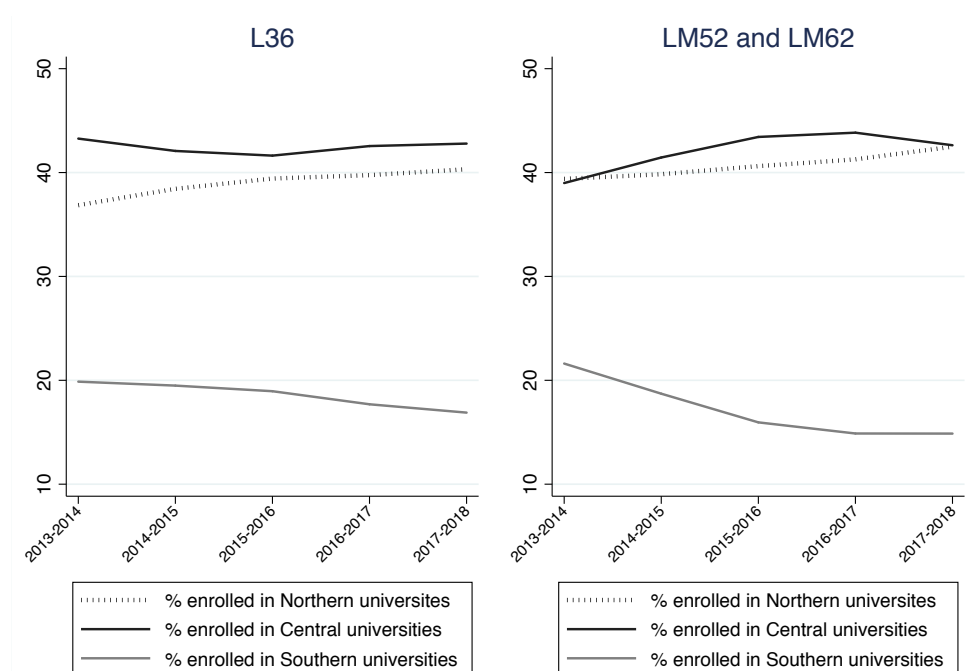


Figure 2 tells us that the relative majority of Political Science students are enrolled in central Italy.<sup>3</sup> This is not surprising, considering that this category includes Rome universities, which are among the biggest academic venues in Italy. On the other hand, some northern universities (in particular, the University of Milan and the University of Bologna) are among the most populated ones. In some years, the students enrolled in the north for relevant Master's programmes (LM52 and LM62) surpass or equal those enrolled in central Italy. A different picture is that of southern universities: in the *Mezzogiorno*, there is a substantial decline in the proportion of Political Science students over time. Such a decline is evident solely in this area of the country, and is particularly evident when analysing the right part of Figure 2, which includes data for our two Master's degrees.

All in all, the demand side does not seem to have dramatically changed over the past few years, with the noticeable exception of southern Italy, which seems less and less attractive to Political Science students. This decline is even more relevant if we underline that the absolute number of students enrolled in these three degrees has actually increased over time.

We have just analysed the demand side of Political Science in Italy in the past few years. What about the position of Political Science on the 'supply side' of Italian academic organisation?

A first look at the presence of Political Science subjects in a broad set of Italian academic programmes can give us a first rough answer to our second research question, related to the supply side of Political Science in Italy. We have considered as a Political Science course all those courses labelled with the SPS/04 Scientific Sector code (*Settore Scientifico Disciplinare*).

**Table 1.** Number of Italian universities offering at least one Political Science (SPS/04) course for each ministerial class, Italy (2017-2018 and 2018-2019)

Ministerial class	2017-2018	2018-2019
<b>BA degrees</b>		
L36	37	37
Other BA ministerial classes	60	58
TOTAL BA	97	95
<b>Master's degrees</b>		
LM52 and LM62	42	44
Other Master ministerial classes	81	85
TOTAL Master	123	129

Table 1 presents the situation, for the last two academic years, in terms of the number of universities offering at least one Political Science course (i.e., one SPS/04 course) for each Ministerial class. The overall number of universities in each class has certainly increased in comparison to the pioneering times between the foundation of the discipline and the late 1980s (Morlino 1989). A little improvement is also visible when comparing these figures with those of the first decade of the twenty-first century (Capano and Verzichelli 2010).

<sup>3</sup>Northern Italian universities include those located in Piedmont, Aosta Valley, Liguria, Lombardy, Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, and Emilia Romagna; central Italian universities include those in Marche, Tuscany, Umbria, Lazio, and Sardinia; finally, southern Italian universities include those in Campania, Abruzzo, Molise, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, and Sicily.

However, the presence of Political Science in the academic teaching supply side still looks residual. Above all, the discipline still looks too concentrated in the L36 class, while the other entry-level degrees show a somewhat limited presence in comparison to the former. Although stable in the last couple of years, just a minority of BA degrees in Public Administration, Communication, Social Work, and Sociology, among others, (included in the row ‘Other BA ministerial classes’) have offered a minimum of courses in Political Science.

The situation looks a little more articulated if one analyses the Master’s level, where some Political Science courses have been added, with a positive surplus for the 2018-2019 academic year. For instance, we have counted some Political Science courses in ministerial classes like Territorial, Urban, Landscape and Environmental Planning (L21), Geography (LM80), Historical Sciences (LM84), European Studies (LM90), and in some hybrid programmes built by using the minimal requirements of two ministerial classes. For instance, Sociology (L40) plus Social Studies (L39), Administration and Organisational Sciences (L16) plus Political Sciences (L36), and so on.

These data suggest two things. First, there is still a certain reluctance in conceiving Political Science as a ‘vital discipline’ to be anchored at the core of a comprehensive chain of studies. The very fact that, still now, there is no trace of Political Science in the BA classes of History, Geography, and in the Master’s class in Pedagogy is a clear indication of the difficulty of Political Science being considered a credible option for many students. As a result, Italian students may just meet Political Science in a myriad of Master’s programmes in social sciences and humanities, without having had any background in the discipline in their earlier BA academic career.

The second suggestion, to be better verified and discussed based on more consolidated evidence, is about the average role of Political Science within Italian universities. Only a handful of programmes in Italy show a presence of Political Science courses, and only in those universities where a critical number of practising political scientists is active, typically in central and northern Italy. In this very last regard, let us discuss some provisional data for the 2018-2019 academic year.

In the L36 BA ministerial class, there are just 12 universities where Political Science related courses (again, those with an SPS/04 Scientific Sector code) sum up to at least 36 academic credits<sup>4</sup>. Out of these 12 universities, 9 are located in northern Italy and 3 in central Italy. Then, moving to Master’s degrees, in the LM52 class, Political Science courses sum up to at least 24 credits<sup>5</sup> in 11 universities: 8 in northern Italy, 2 in central Italy and 1 in the southern part of the country. Finally, concerning the LM62 class, 9 universities are offering Political Science courses for at least 24 credits: 3 for each Italian macro-region (northern, central, and southern Italy).

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<sup>4</sup> This sum includes *all* the Political Science courses offered in a specific university, regardless of the number of degrees present in that university. We have selected 36 credits as a cut-off point representing 20% of the credits required to obtain a BA degree. A caveat is necessary: while it is likely, especially in Political Science-related ministerial classes, that more degrees lead to more Political Science courses, we contend it is useful to consider the aggregate number of courses offered to a specific population of students in a given university.

<sup>5</sup> We have selected 24 as a cut-off point because it is equal to the 20% of credits needed to obtain a Master’s degree. See also fn. 4 above.

Hence, this preliminary analysis shows that the two features of the mere presence and relevance of Political Science in Italy are today evident only in a selected group of universities, and almost all of them are located in the northern or the central area of the country. This means that the traditional marginality of Political Science is far from being overcome.

As mentioned, the two historical steps of the 1999 reform imposing the ‘Bologna Process’ and the reform of 2010 represented two opportunities to include a broad and attractive set of Political Science subjects in a galaxy of programmes.

However, the resilience of the old faculties (then transformed into broader ‘departments’ by the 2010 reform) has somehow prevented the transformation of several programmes (Capano, Turri and Regini 2016) by introducing a number of non-compulsory Political Science courses (Capano and Verzichelli 2008). Another reason for persisting weakness, however, may be attributed to the negligence of political scientists themselves: their typical attitude to ‘clone’ standard and repetitive academic profiles and research agendas may indeed work as a negative sign of evolution and an indicator of lack of eclecticism (Capano and Verzichelli 2016).

### 3. The Vitality of Italian Political Scientists

Let us now focus on the third research question discussed in the Introduction. More in detail, can we say something about the vitality of the Italian Political Science community? Has there been any evolution in the composition of such a community over time? Has the recent wave of recruitment changed something in the proportion of tenure-track or untenured scholars? To answer these questions, in this section, we focus on those scholars belonging to the SPS/O4 Scientific Sector.

A first hint is given by the distribution of different academic positions within the Italian Political Science community.

**Table 2.1.** Distribution of academic positions within the Italian Political Science community. Absolute values and percentages, 2017-2019. Post-doctoral research fellows included.

	2017	2018	2019
<i>Assegnisti di ricerca</i> (Post-doctoral Research Fellows)	n.a.	63 (21.9%)	59 (20.3%)
<i>RTD-A</i> (Non-tenure-track Researchers)	17 (7.8%)	20 (7%)	21 (7.2%)
<i>RTD-B</i> (Tenure-track Researchers)	11 (5%)	14 (4.9%)	27 (9.3%)
<i>Ricercatori</i> (Old tenure-track Assistant Professors)	52 (23.7%)	48 (16.7%)	43 (14.8%)
<i>Associato (Confermato)</i> (Senior Lecturers / Associate Professors)	88 (40.2%)	85 (29.6%)	85 (29.2%)
<i>Ordinari</i> (Full Professors)	50 (22.8%)	54 (18.8%)	54 (18.6%)
<i>Straordinario TD</i> (Temporary Full Professors)	1 (0.5%)	3 (1.1%)	2 (0.7%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>287</b>	<b>291</b>

Note: the category *RTD-A* includes all the non-tenure-track positions introduced in 2005 (Law 230) and confirmed with the organic reform of 2010.

A first element emerging from Table 2.1 is the progressive increase in the numerical consistency of the Political Science community. Nonetheless, this increase is mainly due to the presence of post-doctoral research fellows for 2018 and 2019. If we excluded this category, there would be a substantially less strong upward trend in the number of Political Science academics in Italy. This is made evident by Table 2.2, which reports the same



data as Table 2.1 with the exception of post-doctoral research fellows, which are excluded from the calculus.

**Table 2.2.** Distribution of academic positions within the Italian Political Science community. Absolute values and percentages, 2017-2019. Post-doctoral research fellows excluded.

	2017	2018	2019
<i>RTD-A</i> (Non-tenure-track Researchers)	17 (7.8%)	20 (8.9%)	21 (9.1%)
<i>RTD-B</i> (Tenure-track Researchers)	11 (5%)	14 (6.2%)	27 (11.6%)
<i>Ricercatori</i> (Old tenure-track Assistant Professors)	52 (23.7%)	48 (21.4%)	43 (18.5%)
<i>Associato (Confermato)</i> (Senior Lecturers / Associate Professors)	88 (40.2%)	85 (37.9%)	85 (36.6%)
<i>Ordinari</i> (Full Professors)	50 (22.8%)	54 (24.1%)	54 (23.3%)
<i>Straordinario TD</i> (Temporary Full Professors)	1 (0.5%)	3 (1.3%)	2 (0.9%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>232</b>

Note: the category *RTD-A* includes all the non-tenure-track positions introduced in 2005 (Law 230) and confirmed with the organic reform of 2010.

A second element shown in Table 2.1 is that, in 2019, 27.5% of academics do not have tenure-track positions (post-doctoral research fellows plus untenured researchers). Although the lack of longitudinal data prevents us from presenting a comprehensive analysis of the presence of non-tenure-track scholars, it is quite clear that having temporary positions has become an important feature for a relevant percentage of the Italian Political Science community. Nonetheless, this can also signal the presence of some vitality in the discipline, given that as many as 60 post-doctoral research fellows, that is, scholars in the early stage of a prospective academic career, worked in Italian universities in 2018 or 2019.

Third, and as a somewhat counterbalancing element, there is a growing presence of tenure-track researchers (*RTD-B*). Incidentally, let us recall this category is made up of scholars with a lower average age than that of old tenure-track Assistant Professors or even Associate/Full Professors. All in all, there has surely been an injection of fresh blood into the veins of the Italian academic community in the past few years, possibly also due to the presence of Political Science in the excellence grants (*progetti di eccellenza 2018-2022*) provided to a few Social Science departments by the Italian Ministry of Education and Research.

A further point of discussion is the geographical distribution of Italian Political Science scholars. Let us focus our attention on Tables 3.1 and 3.2 below.

**Table 3.1.** Geographical distribution of the Italian Political Science community, absolute values and percentages, 2017-2019. Post-doctoral research fellows included.

	2017	2018	2019
Northern Italy	121 (55.2%)	155 (54%)	164 (56.4%)
Central Italy	65 (29.7%)	92 (32.1%)	91 (31.3%)
Southern Italy	33 (15.1%)	40 (13.9%)	36 (12.4%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>287</b>	<b>291</b>

Also in this case, a clear prevalence of northern and central universities is evident. Let us again recall that 2018 and 2019 data include post-doctoral research fellows: if we excluded this category for these two years, the percentages would be slightly higher for northern and southern Italy, even if the general picture would not change, as shown in Table 3.2 below.

**Table 3.2.** Geographical distribution of the Italian Political Science community, absolute values and percentages, 2017-2019. Post-doctoral research fellows excluded.

	2017	2018	2019
Northern Italy	121 (55.2%)	125 (55.8%)	133 (57.3%)
Central Italy	65 (29.7%)	66 (29.5%)	67 (28.9%)
Southern Italy	33 (15.1%)	33 (14.7%)	32 (13.8%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>232</b>

Is there, instead, any difference if we show the distribution of post-doctoral research fellows, RTD-A, and RTD-B? Data from Table 4 help us in addressing this task. To make figures comparable, we show data just for 2018 and 2019, given that no data on post-doctoral research fellows is available for 2017.

**Table 4.** Geographical distribution of post-doctoral research fellows, RTD-A, and RTD-B, 2018 and 2019.

	2018				2019			
	Post-doc Research Fellows	RTD-A (Non-tenure-track Researchers)	RTD-B (Tenure-track Researchers)	TOTAL geographical area	Post-doc Research Fellows	RTD-A (Non-tenure-track Researchers)	RTD-B (Tenure-track Researchers)	TOTAL geographical area
Northern Italy	30	6	9	45 (46.4%)	31	8	18	57 (53.3%)
Central Italy	26	11	3	40 (41.2%)	24	9	7	40 (37.4%)
Southern Italy	7	3	2	12 (12.4%)	4	4	2	10 (9.3%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>107</b>

Note: the category RTD-A includes all the non-tenure-track positions introduced in 2005 (Law 230) and confirmed with the organic reform of 2010.

Table 4 tells us that a huge bulk of the younger cohorts of Italian political scientists work in northern and central universities. Two pieces of data are worth underlining: first, there is a certain balance between northern and central universities in 2018 which becomes a more pronounced imbalance towards the former in 2019. In other words, in 2019, Italian universities operating in the north employed more than half of post-doctoral research fellows, RTD-A, and RTD-B. Second, Table 4 confirms the severe geographical imbalance between, on the one hand, northern and central universities and, on the other hand, southern ones, which, in 2019, employ less than 10% of early-stage political scientists.

All in all, Tables 3.1 and 3.2, along with Table 4, tell us that there is a crystal-clear northern-central predominance in the places where the Italian Political Science community operates. Moreover, in 2019, northern universities alone employed more than

half of all Italian political scientists and more than half of the ‘new generations’ of Political Science scholars.

These data will be connected with those presented in the previous section, and unequivocally tell us that the lion’s share of Political Science in Italy is that of northern and central Italy. On the contrary, southern Italian universities have a more peripheral position: a declining trend both concerning students enrolled in Political Science degrees and Political Science scholars is quite evident.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this article, we have dealt with three research questions. The first related to the demand for Political Science in terms of students enrolled in relevant BA and Master’s degrees. The second connected to the supply side of the discipline (i.e., the general presence of Political Science courses). Finally, the third aims to investigate the vitality of Political Science concerning the number and the career status of Italian political scientists.

First of all, we have shown that, despite some apocalyptic predictions, in Italy there is a stable demand for Political Science courses. In terms of rough figures, the number of students exposed to the discipline have increased over time. Hence, the crisis does not seem to have led to a sharp decline in the demand for Political Science programmes. However, a problem of ‘critical mass’ remains, since the overall percentage of university students who have attended or are going to attend some Political Science courses remains quite limited. This might be connected to a persisting deficit of Political Science subjects in many programmes, especially at BA level, and to the long-term numerical weakness of the Italian Political Science community.

This brings us to the second point emerging from the analysis: the patent disequilibrium in the academic presence of Political Science in different Italian macro-regions. In particular, we have stressed the persistence of a centre-north/south divide: with some remarkable exceptions (e.g., the University of Catania, the University of Naples ‘Federico II’), the presence of political scientists in southern Italy is limited to isolated personalities who can guarantee just a ‘minimum offer’ in terms of teaching and training.

As for the third point, our analysis of the recent development of the academic community reveals that a new generation of Political Science researchers has been recruited, notwithstanding the difficult financial period experienced by the discipline. As one could easily expect, there is a growing role of temporary positions. This can be read in two very different ways. One may argue, indeed, that the difficulty of political scientists to achieve a full professorship or at least a tenured position is evidence of the persistence of a limited institutionalisation (Sartori 1986; Freddi and Giannetti 2007). On the other hand, the availability of a growing number of non-tenure-track positions might also be related to the availability of research grants from the European Union or even from private institutions. This is just speculation to be empirically supported in more fine-grained research, but could point towards a sort of acknowledgement of Italian Political Science as a source of ‘good research’. Therefore, future research might empirically verify the thesis of an overall good outlook for a discipline that shows growing competitiveness, although suffering from a ‘critical mass’ problem in a number of departments and universities (Verzichelli 2014).

All in all, the survival – and possibly the consolidation – of a discipline which is now strong, but certainly non-unitary and quite uneven, can be a realistic perspective only when its practitioners are able to extend their room for manoeuvre within the academy and society at large. This is the big challenge for the years to come: preserving the good quality of Political Science research and, at the same time, becoming more central in university programmes and within academic organisations. The strategies to be implemented to reach this goal will be, of course, discussed in more appropriate contexts. However, it seems clear that three elements will be crucial to assess the health of Italian Political Science in the future: research eclecticism, a growing presence of the discipline in different inter-disciplinary and applied programmes, and an adequate diffusion of its subjects in all the relevant degrees in social sciences.

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