

## **Regionalist Party Formation in Italy: A Case Study of the Valle d'Aosta**

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*Abstract: Using a case study approach, the paper attempts to explain the formation and strategies of two recent regionalist parties (Stella Alpina Valle d'Aosta and Renouveau Valdostain) in the Valle d'Aosta. Theoretical models, which emphasise the role of institutional incentives, such as the electoral system or the role of established parties, are shown to have explanatory value within this regional context, particularly in the case of Renouveau Valdostain. In addition, the influence of developments in Italy's national politics and the legacy of the regional Christian Democrats are relevant to the formation of Stella Alpina.*

Keywords: Valle d'Aosta; regionalist parties; incentives; Christian Democracy

This article focuses on the formation of new political parties through a qualitative case study of the relatively under researched Italian special statute region, the Valle d'Aosta. The paper therefore attempts to contribute to the debate on new parties and to Italian regional politics. To achieve this I draw from the literature on the emergence of new parties which emphasises the importance of incentives to informing political actors' decisions to engage in electoral competition.

The Italian and French speaking Valle d'Aosta, situated in the north-west bordering France, Switzerland, and Piedmont is Italy's smallest region by geography and population. Politics in the Valle d'Aosta is shaped by its special statute, granted in 1946, which provides for additional powers over legislation and administration. Although recent moves towards a more decentralised Italian state have made the five special statute regions less distinctive, in the Valle d'Aosta political elites jealously guard the special statute. The region is an interesting one for observers of new parties because several new ones have formed in the past decade as a consequence of developments at the national level in Italy's politics but also as a result of dynamics within the Valle d'Aosta. My discussion focuses on two regionalist parties, *Stella Alpina Valle d'Aosta* (SA) and *Renouveau Valdostain* (RV) both of which won seats in the current Regional Council elected in

2008. SA forms part of the governing coalition with *Union Valdotaïne (UV)* and the small regionalist *Federation Autonomiste (FA)* party, while RV formed part of the opposition until March 2010 when it merged with the greens and the *Valle d'Aosta Vive* party (itself the consequence of a split in UV during 2005) to form *Autonomie Liberté Participation Ecologie (ALPE)*. The UV is the dominant party in the Valle d'Aosta and although I do not focus on it in detail due to Sandri's (2008) recent study, as the following sections show, the formation and strategies of SA and RV cannot be understood without reference to UV.

### **Theoretical hypothesis**

To explain the emergence of these parties I use the theoretical frameworks put forward by Brancati (2008), Cox (1997), Hug (2001), and Tavits (2008). These authors argue for explanations which emphasise the role of institutional incentives in the formation of new parties. The definition of institutions is often broad but stresses the idea that they consist of established, regularised patterns of activity and behaviour sanctioned by norms, which can be more or less formal in character. This kind of definition can cover institutions like parliaments, parties, and electoral systems, but also more diffuse activity such as voting behaviour which can be influenced by norms of class or religious affiliation.

Within the context of this paper, Brancati's (2008: 139) hypothesis about the effect of decentralised institutions is relevant: 'Political decentralization encourages politicians to form regional parties, and voters to vote for them, because decentralized systems of government have regional legislatures in which regional parties have a greater opportunity to govern...' Hug's game theoretical model of party formation is relevant too because he addresses the 'opportunity pull' (2001: 37) provided by institutions for the creation of new parties. Hug hypothesises that the behaviour of established parties, and often one particular party, has a strong influence on whether new parties form (2001: 38; 54; 62). He argues that the catalyst for this process is the extent to which established parties respond to neglected demands or new issues. If a demand or issue is politically costly for an established party to accommodate it will do so only when it perceives the new party which is articulating the demand to be an electoral threat. If there is no threat perception the established party will reject the demand but this decision can then prompt the formation of a new party (2001: 54). While emphasising the role of established parties Hug is also aware of other institutional factors which act as incentives or disincentives to new parties (2001: 88). Cox (1997: 151-72) and Tavits (2008: 115; 133; 116) refer to these as costs-of-entry factors and identify several as important: the rules governing registration of parties before they can compete in elections; provision for the direct or indirect election of a

president as head of the executive; and the type of electoral system. New parties may believe they have a better chance of success when the executive is directly elected or in elections using proportional electoral systems rather than majoritarian ones. Cox hypothesises that a decision to enter the electoral arena is also influenced by two additional considerations: the benefits of office and likelihood of electoral support. Benefits of office include patronage and influence, while likelihood of electoral support refers to expectations about performance on polling day. This final variable links with Hug's hypothesis about an established party's evaluation of the possible support for a new party. In a mature democracy patterns of voting and competition mean such evaluations can be based on experience but in new democracies these judgements are less certain (Tavits, 2008: 117).

With these considerations in mind, my study aims to answer the following questions: To what extent did costs-of-entry considerations influence the decisions to form *Stella Alpina* and *Renouveau Valdostain*? Is there evidence to suggest incentives related to the benefits of office motivated formation of these parties, and what role did established parties play in the creation and strategies of SA and RV? To answer these questions I use primary sources from party literature and press reports. I focus mainly on decisions made by regional elites but with reference to other local and national actors where illustrative.

### **Valle d'Aosta political system: Overview**

The Valle d'Aosta's main political institutions are the Regional Council (*Consiglio Regionale*), the Cabinet (*Giunta*), and the President (*Presidenza*). The Regional Council consists of thirty-five members, known as Councillors (*Consiglieri*), elected every five years by a system of proportional representation. This electoral system, regulated by a 1993 regional law and revised most recently in 2007, includes provision for allocating twenty-one of the thirty-five seats to an electoral coalition which has won fifty per cent of the vote but not twenty-one seats. The law also provides for a second round of voting between the two coalitions which won the most votes in the first round but failed to win a minimum of eighteen seats (Consiglio Regionale della Valle d'Aosta, 2011). The nine-member Cabinet comprises representatives from the parties that form a majority in the Regional Council. The President is not directly elected, as this power lies with the Regional Council, but he is responsible for the strategic direction of the administration.

The features of the Valle d'Aosta party system have been highlighted by Tronconi and Roux (2009: 158-60) who show that, along with Trentino Alto Adige, the Valle d'Aosta is more distinctive and less fragmented than other regions. UV's dominance accounts for this distinctiveness because apart from 1990-92, it has been in government continuously since 1974 and

since 1993 it has held a majority of seats in the Cabinet (Sandri, 2008: 9). The increasing support for *UV* during the last forty years, peaking in 2003, has been accompanied by growing support since 1983 for other regionalist competitors, so that at the 2008 Regional Council election, regionalist parties, including *UV*, won 74.5 per cent of the vote. By focusing on *Stella Alpina* and *Renouveau Valdostain* my discussion aims to give detail to these developments, particularly to those occurring in the past decade when these two regionalist parties emerged. However, it is important not to overlook other parties because the Valle d'Aosta has not been immune to developments in Italian politics. The region's voters have supported the Christian Democrats (*DC*) and the Communists (*PCI*) in the past and the heirs to these parties affect the region's politics. For example, during the period 1978-98 the *DC* (and successor *CDU*) won an average of nineteen per cent of the vote, while the *PCI* polled seventeen per cent between 1978 and 1988.

During the past decade the Valle d'Aosta party system has exhibited tripolar features with *UV*, *SA* and *FA* in the centre; *RV*, *Valle d'Aosta Vive* (*VdA Vive*) and the national *Partito Democratico* (*PD*) on the left; and Berlusconi's *La Casa delle Libertà* and *Il Popolo della Libertà* (*PdL*) to the right. This tripolarity was apparent at the 2003 and 2008 Regional Council elections when two coalitions, *Autonomie Progrès Fédéralisme* (*APF*) containing the centre parties and *Autonomie Liberté Démocratie* (*ALD*) comprising the left parties, competed against each other. Berlusconi's party contested both elections alone winning 9.4 per cent and three seats in 2003, rising to 10.6 per cent and four seats in 2008. The Valle d'Aosta party system therefore bears similarities to Italy's national party system before 1994 with a broadly based catch-all party, the *UV*, directly or indirectly influencing strategies of the other parties as did the *DC*.

### **Stella Alpina Valle d'Aosta**

*Stella Alpina* was founded in November 2001. There is evidence to support a view that its leaders were influenced in their decisions by costs of entry considerations and specifically the region's proportional representation electoral system which gave the new party an expectation that it would win seats in the Regional Council. The evidence also shows that *SA*'s strategy contained ambitions to exercise policy influence in government and that the role of *UV* was important to the fulfillment of *SA*'s aims. I try to support these claims in the following paragraphs.

*SA*'s origins lay in the *DC*'s collapse when part of it reformed as the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (*PPI*). In the late 1990s, the Valle d'Aosta *PPI* joined with *Pour la Vallée d'Aoste* to create the *Autonomistes*. To complicate matters, the separate *FA* later combined with the *Autonomistes* to found *SA*. However, *FA* reasserted its independence in 2004 though some supporters

later returned to SA. This schism reportedly occurred because of disagreements concerning policy and internal policy-making processes (*AostaSera.it*, 15 March 2004). SA's Regional Council group is currently led by former *Partito Repubblicano Italiano (PRI)* member Francesco Salzone. He was among those who left SA for FA in 2004 only to return in 2006. Two members of the group, Andre Lanièce and Marco Viérin, were first elected in 1993 for DC, while Dario Comé's background lies in the *Autonomistes*.

A recurring theme for SA is centrism as political strategy and doctrine. As a strategy, SA's aim has been to build a competitive centre in the Valle d'Aosta, (acknowledging this requires continued UV dominance), able to control the Regional Council and win seats in the Italian parliament without the support of national parties. SA has argued that the Valle d'Aosta has been overlooked in Rome because it is perceived as a left-wing 'red region'. Evidence for this includes the Italian legislative election victories by ALD in 2006 and their holding of the Chamber of Deputies seat in 2008. The red region argument could also be interpreted as a criticism of UV which has governed with the left notably during the 1990s. As a doctrine, SA contrasts its centrism with socialism and reformism by articulating a conservative, Catholic perspective which emphasises pragmatic government intervention in the economy and support for the traditional family unit based on marriage (Lanièce; 2009: 4). SA does not consider the centre to be equivalent to socialism and reformism because they are characterised by SA as ideologies whose slogans and rhetoric of equality and freedom fail to translate into policy reality. This claim highlights SA's view that national parties focus excessively on ideological and party rivalry which neglects the Valle d'Aosta's needs. In contrast, SA presented its centrism as a practical approach to politics, a 'new point of equilibrium in the political landscape', one willing to work with other parties sharing a commitment to the region's autonomy (Marguerettaz, 2008: 1-2).

Explaining SA's origins and strategy has to include consideration of the influence exercised by Christian Democrat perceptions of their political position after the fall of the DC. The strategy of reconstituting the centre of Italian politics was attempted during the late 1990s and early 2000s but with limited success. The PPI played a central role but the strategy was ambiguous because it was unclear whether centrism aimed to recreate a 'third pole' in the party system or to act as a moderating influence on Berlusconi in his competition with the left. Indeed, some Christian Democrats conceived trying to shape the emerging bipolar party system as one where the competition was between the centre and the left (Donovan, 2008: 421). These developments are relevant to the Valle d'Aosta context because with its PPI origins, SA is Christian Democracy's heir and the centre strategy, unsuccessful at the national level, has been realised to a degree within the region. This strategy has depended on pursuing a

political relationship with *UV* but this is inverse to the strategy pursued at the national level because it aimed not at moderating the centre right but at weakening *UV*'s centre-left tendency as shown by its coalitions with the *PCI*'s successor party, the *Democratici di Sinistra (DS)*.

*SA*'s attitude to ideological politics and to the left reflects the divergent paths taken by *PPI* members after the party's 1994 split when some joined with Berlusconi while others had, by 2002, allied with Prodi in the centre-left *La Margherita* and subsequently joined the *PD* (Di Virgilio, 2008: 434). *SA*'s conservative Catholic discourse explains some of its reluctance to work with the left but *SA* also has an aversion to Berlusconi. This was illustrated at the 2004 European elections when *SA* criticised *FA* for reportedly meeting with *Forza Italia* thereby jeopardising support for a *UV* candidate by creating uncertainty about *FA*'s commitment to electing a regionalist representative (Grange, 2004). Similarly, at the 2009 European elections, when *APF* allied with the *PdL*, it was discernible that *SA* had agreed to this alliance reluctantly emphasising that it was the most effective means to secure a regionalist Member of the European Parliament. *SA*'s view of the *PdL* is shaped by several factors. Both are of similar electoral strength in the region and compete for support among former *DC* voters. Perhaps more important, *SA* sees *PdL* as an ideological party that is alien to *SA*'s pragmatic conception of itself. In turn, this relates to *SA*'s hostility to the emergence of bipolarism in Italian politics and Berlusconi's role in promoting it, which *SA* associates with instability. A final point of relevance is *SA*'s relationship with *Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e di Centro (UDC)* which has included statements by both parties highlighting shared centrist orientations and the presence of *UDC* candidates among those of *SA* at the 2008 Regional Council elections. The *UDC*, although allied with Berlusconi, has been critical of his leadership (Donovan, 2008: 423) and *UDC*'s relationship with *SA* has likely reinforced *SA*'s perception of *PdL*.

*SA* contested its first Regional Council elections in 2003. The results were encouraging as it won 19.8 per cent and seven seats but the party split in 2004 depleted *SA*'s representation to four seats. In this election *SA* appeared to benefit from an incumbency effect because their candidates were experienced Councillors who attracted notable levels of personal support through voters' ability to give preferences for individual candidates. For example, Marco Viérin won 3,700 votes, while La Torre polled 1,800 votes (Regione Autonoma Valle d'Aosta, 2011).

Perhaps the most politically significant event of 2003-08 occurred in February 2006 with the fall of the Regional Council coalition, comprising *UV* and the *DS*, following disagreement about candidates for the 2006 Italian parliamentary elections. Although the incumbent Senator, Augusto Rollandin, was the likely *UV* choice, there was less agreement on a Chamber-of-Deputies candidate, with *DS* favouring a figure from the left.

*DS* had governed with *UV* since 1993 and the fall of the administration caused acrimony, with *DS* claiming to be unaware of the reasons for the coalition's demise and accusing *UV* of causing political instability (Vignolini, 2006b). The administration was then reconstituted as a *UV-FA* coalition with *SA* providing support without Cabinet representation. This decision reflected continuing tensions between *FA* and *SA* following their split but *SA*'s absence from the Cabinet caused internal unrest, particularly in July 2006, when a *UV* Councillor was appointed education minister following the incumbent's departure. Although *SA* remained outside the Cabinet, a meeting between the three parties, in September 2006, agreed to take more account of *SA*'s views during decision-making and to continue the coalition until 2008. These tensions occurred within the context of failure at the Italian parliamentary elections. Interpreted by the opposition as a rejection of the new regional administration, Rollandin lost his seat to Carlo Perrin of *ALD*, while *SA*'s Marco Viérin was defeated by *ALD*'s Roberto Nicco for the Chamber of Deputies.

At the 2008 Regional Council elections, *SA*'s vote fell to 11.4 per cent and four seats reflecting negative voter perceptions following the 2004 split although *SA* thought it a satisfactory result. *SA* participated in a formal *APF* alliance with *UV* and *FA* with the intention of forming an administration, including Cabinet representation for *SA*, if they won. The results were a success for *APF* as it won sixty-two per cent of the vote and twenty-three Councillors, with *UV* gaining seventeen seats and *FA* two seats. *SA* currently holds one portfolio in the Cabinet, with Viérin responsible for public works and housing. This appointment was not without contention because *FA* was allocated one portfolio too despite *SA* arguing that, with more votes and seats than *FA*, it should have additional representation (Vignolini, 2008).

To conclude this section several aspects of the evidence should be highlighted in relation to my earlier questions. In costs-of-entry terms, *SA*'s participation in the *APF* electoral coalition demonstrated its importance for *SA* as a vehicle to maximise the chances of winning seats under proportional representation either for *SA* itself or parties, like the *UDC*, that shared similar political goals. But it can also be argued that these coalition decisions were linked to prior expectations about *SA*'s potential performance as a new party. With experienced Councillor candidates and a centrist political programme, *SA* calculated that it could win seats. Why might it have believed this? One answer is that its leading candidates seeking re-election appeared to enjoy solid levels of personal support at previous elections. Second, *SA* saw itself as continuing the region's Christian Democratic tradition and anticipated that this appeal would win support from former *DC* voters. *SA*'s leadership was therefore making the kinds of decisions based on past experiences in an established democratic context that Cox and Tavits highlight as influential in new party formation.

It also seems apparent that *SA* has pursued an office-seeking strategy akin to Clemente Mastella's post-*DC Unione dei Democratici Europei* in regions such as Campania during the same period (Di Virgilio, 2008: 438). Given *SA*'s lineage to the *DC*, and the presence of former *DC* politicians among its elected elite, one dimension of the benefits of office incentive, the distribution of patronage (Tavits, 2008: 116), would seem influential given the importance of clientelism in the *DC*'s approach to governing. Although my evidence does not directly support this conjecture, it may be more persuasive when it is recalled, first, that the *DC* governed with *UV* during periods from the late 1950s, including much of the 1980s (Sandri, 2008: 9). Second, it has been argued that *UV*'s dominance has enabled it to penetrate regional institutions through clientelism (Sandri, 2008: 15). Criticism of this penetration has formed part of *Renouveau Valdotaïn*'s political message but clientelistic opportunities may also have provided an incentive for *SA* to enter a *UV*-led administration. A final point relates to the role of new issues or neglected demands in the creation of new parties. The evidence is that neither factor was important in the case of *SA*. However, it is clear that an established party, namely the *UV*, provided an opportunity pull for *SA* because of its dominance and its record of governing with the centre and the left. The appearance of *SA* also provided *UV* with new coalition options.

### **Renouveau Valdotaïn**

By contrast to *Stella Alpina*, *Renouveau Valdotaïn*'s creation can be traced to factors that do accord with Hug's hypothesis. In addition, these factors overlapped with costs of entry considerations as demonstrated by the controversy surrounding a 2007 referendum on political reform and decisions relating to participation in the *ALD* electoral coalition.

*RV* was a moderately populist, anti-establishment party of the left whose anti-establishment discourse was directed primarily at *UV*. *RV* was founded on 15 July 2006, a few months after a split in *UV* that saw the departure of Carlo Perrin, a popular former Regional President. He had not supported *UV*'s decision to form a coalition with *SA* and *FA*, preferring to continue talks with *DS* to resolve their disagreements (Vignolini, 2006a). For context, it is also useful to remember that Perrin had resigned as Regional President in 2005 in part because he opposed moves within *UV* to bring *SA* and *FA* into the governing majority (*AostaSera.it*, 22 June 2005). Perrin indicated his estrangement in February 2006, a few weeks before *DS* left the coalition, by publishing '*Pour une Union Valdotaïne Libre*'. This implicitly criticised *UV*'s policy-making by urging greater involvement of party members in decisions and closer alignment between *UV*'s ideals and policies. Eight other *UV* figures signed Perrin's document and some later joined *RV*.

Perrin's break with *UV* was confirmed when, in March 2006, he accepted nomination as *ALD*'s Senate candidate (Savoye, 2006). Perrin's decision meant his supporters included communists and greens while his fellow candidate for the Chamber of Deputies, Roberto Nicco, represented *DS* (and later *PD*). Following pre-election discussions both men supported Prodi's centre-left *L'Unione* government between 2006 and 2008 and later claimed they had been able to advance the region's interests in Rome. Perrin aligned with regionalist senators and successes cited as a consequence of these alliances included agreements to modernise the Aosta-Turin rail link and legislative proposals, drafted by an inter-parliamentary group, to address the socio-economic needs of mountain areas (Perrin, 2007: 3).

Perrin's victory over Augusto Rollandin, the *UV* incumbent, provided the catalyst for *RV*'s creation, with Perrin's document expanded to provide a rationale for *RV* by continuing the criticism of *UV* but connecting this to proposals for political reforms. *RV* characterised *UV* as a party that had lost its political ideals because the maintenance of its position as the main governing party had become its central objective. The most forceful accusations made against *UV* were that it had become like *DC*; an 'Italian' party that used patronage to influence political activity (Andrione, 2006: 1). To this were added claims that an elite dominated *UV* decisions, and that political loyalty had become the criterion for candidate selection or appointment to the Cabinet rather than concern for voters' interests or administrative competence (Vallet, 2006: 1). These developments explain *RV*'s origins but also illustrate persistent problems of party democracy within *UV*. The party has a tradition of decision-making by figures holding public office, which has been periodically challenged by the membership during the past forty years with varying degrees of success, so that *UV* continues to be an, 'elite-centred and hierarchical cadre party in which the party in public office, ...keeps control of the party's agenda' (Sandri, 2008: 12).

During its first eighteen months, *RV* identified political reform as a priority, illustrating both its populist and anti-establishment messages. *RV* argued that reform would loosen the influence of party elites and promote independent-minded candidates, while also limiting a governing majority's ability to reconstitute the Regional Council between elections by a legal requirement on parties to reveal coalition partners before elections. *RV* did not advocate abolishing proportional representation despite experiences of instability because it viewed such problems as arising from *UV* manoeuvrings. To achieve political reform *RV* was prominent in gathering support for a referendum which made use of recent legislation permitting citizen-initiated referenda. The referendum itself proposed separating the executive from the Regional Council by directly electing the Regional President and the Cabinet; limiting candidates to two terms as Regional

President, and giving the Regional Council power to pass no confidence motions in the President. Given *RV*'s attacks on *UV* and *RV*'s intention that the referendum proposals would constrain *UV*'s alleged political manoeuvrings, it was unsurprising that *UV*, together with *SA* and *FA*, urged voters to reject the proposals.

*UV*'s response to the referendum initiative caused controversy and perhaps indicated that *RV*'s criticisms of *UV* contained some truth. In April 2007 the Regional Council voted to reject the referendum initiative and to request legal opinions on its constitutionality. These decisions were interpreted by referendum supporters as attempts to prevent reform and the Regional President, the *UV*'s Luciano Caveri, was identified as the principle protagonist. *RV* accused coalition Councillors of inconsistency because many had voted for the referenda legislation and questioned why they had not expressed doubts about its constitutionality at that time (Vallet, 2007a: 1; 4). The decision to seek legal advice was controversial because the opinion of lawyers advising the administration was that the referendum was constitutional but this was contradicted by external lawyers who argued it was incompatible with the special statute. Soliciting legal advice, particularly external opinions, was interpreted by the opposition as a politically motivated delaying move. Calveri defended the decisions arguing that there were genuine constitutional questions to be addressed but, in June, following further analysis by administration lawyers he signed decrees permitting the referendum (Vignolini, 2007), which took place on 18 November 2007. Unfortunately for *RV* and the others, (*Lega Nord*, *UDC* and *VdA Vive*), who supported the referendum the results were a disappointment (Grange, 2007). The law required a turnout of at least 45 per cent for success but this was not achieved.

*RV* lost political momentum after the referendum, which culminated in Perrin's defeat by *APF* candidate Antonio Fosson at the 2008 Italian parliament elections. Although Nicco retained his seat, Perrin's loss was a disappointment for *RV* and *ALD*. Before the elections *RV* had feared that *APF* would focus their campaign on alleged policy failings and the undoubted instability of the *L'Unione* coalition to show the ineffectiveness of Perrin and Nicco (Vallet, 2008: 1; 4). However, the 2008 Regional Council elections results were reasonable for *RV*. In alliance with *VdA Vive*, they won 12.5 per cent of the vote and five seats, with three of the candidates elected representing *RV*: Giuseppe Cerise, Albert Chatrian and Patrizia Morelli were all former *UV* members and Morelli had served as vice-president.

A merger with *VdA Vive* had been a topic of discussion since *RV*'s founding but the early consensus was that they should remain independent. This opinion changed somewhat after the Regional Council elections when some *ALD* members called for the creation of a left party committed to regional autonomy, reflecting a belief that the election had

been disappointing for *ALD* (Albiero, 2008). The idea of a new party to compete more effectively with *UV* had been around for some time. In May 2007, *RV*'s Franco Vallet reflected on the political forces emerging in the region during recent years. Although *ALD* had proved effective he doubted the number of parties within it could govern effectively without fragmenting and believed that rationalisation was required (Vallet, 2007b). Vallet's reflections occurred within the context of a May 2007 split within *DS* over electoral reform, which led to the departure of two *DS* Councillors to form *Per il Partito Democratico in Valle d'Aosta* and their call for the creation of a unified left party in the region. The launch of *ALPE* in February 2010 was the culmination of these debates. Vallet played a public role in the formation of *ALPE* which has continued the themes of political reform; safeguarding regional autonomy; and promoting economic development associated with *RV* (Vignolini, 2010).

Several features of this evidence are notable in relation to the theoretical considerations outlined earlier. The hypothesis put forward by Hug appears supported because the emergence of *RV* was clearly linked to interaction between opposing elements of *UV* and the explicit criticism and reformist demands made by Perrin and his allies. *UV*'s rejection of these demands was an important contributory factor to the formation of *RV*. Cost-of-entry calculations appeared positive for *RV* because of Perrin's popularity together with the opportunity to join the *ALD* coalition. As with *Stella Alpina*'s elite, the experience of political office and the prospect of retaining it, or regaining it, seem to have been another motivating factor in *RV*'s formation.

These aspects of the evidence suggest that *RV*, like *Stella Alpina*, made the decision to contest elections as a new party to a degree based on previous experiences. Although both parties were 'new', they were also in an important way 'established' too because of the individual political backgrounds of their respective elites. *RV*'s role in promoting the referendum before the 2008 Regional Council elections was significant in several respects. The proposals to directly elect the regional President and Cabinet would have provided Perrin or other prominent former *UV* politicians with the opportunity to test their voter appeal against the *UV*'s personalities. However, more important it showed that *RV* was arguably attempting to shape the region's political institutions to its advantage in a way familiar to political scientists who argue that directly elected presidents with influence over policy provide an incentive to new-party formation. This is because presidential systems can provide opportunities for popular individuals to form organisations to support their candidacy (Tavits, 2008: 116). Although *RV* had emerged by the time of the referendum, a successful vote would have potentially provided the context and opportunity for *RV* to consolidate a position in the party system. Within the Italian context, this point links to Diamanti's (2007: 735)

argument that ‘personalisation’, defined as a focus on the leader as a unifying figure for diverse party alliances, is a characteristic of Italian politics today. The *ALD* coalition that supported Perrin accords with Diamanti’s observation. However, the evidence suggests that *UV* felt confident enough to face down Perrin’s challenge. Although *UV*’s approach to the referendum, and *ALD*’s victories, perhaps showed *UV*’s confidence to be fragile or misplaced it defeated the referendum initiative and retained control of the Regional Council.

## Conclusion

My study of *Stella Alpina* and *Renouveau Valdostain* indicates a fair degree of explanatory value provided by the theoretical frameworks outlined above. Brancati’s hypothesis about decentralised institutions appears to be confirmed because both *SA* and *RV* focused their strategies on the Regional Council context. A further hypothesis (Brancati, 2008: 139) on the benefits that can accrue to regional parties who challenge national parties at elections to national legislatures, and thereby appear to voters as defenders of regional interests, also seems supported. Neither *SA* nor *RV* neglected national elections and *RV* in particular succeeded in them. This hypothesis is also given weight by the specifics of Valle d’Aosta politics. *UV* has historically presented itself as the defender of the region’s interests in Rome (Sandri, 2008: 15) so that any new regional party is compelled to adopt a similar discourse to be credible, and both *SA* and *RV* have done so. The *UV* also played a central role as a catalyst for the formation of *RV* as predicted by Hug’s model and although it did not influence the creation of *SA*, its dominant position provided an opportunity pull for *SA* by opening the space to create a centrist coalition.

The proportional electoral system provided a positive cost-of-entry context for both new parties in that there appeared to be confidence among their respective elites that they could win seats in coalition with others. Indeed, the presence of *UDC* candidates among those of *SA* illustrated the latter’s confidence as the principal post-*DC* centrist force in the region. *RV* also perceived possible advantage due to Perrin’s popularity and the presence of former *UV* elites among its ranks. Although this perception was a little misplaced given the set backs of 2007, and to a degree 2008, *RV* did establish itself in the politics of the region. It is also clear that both parties focused attention on seeking office. This was apparent in *SA*’s centrist strategy and in Perrin’s decision to accept nomination as a Senate candidate. Despite a lack of direct evidence, it seems plausible to believe that these decisions were in part motivated by the experiences of both parties’ elites, many of whom were established politicians searching for opportunities to continue their political ambitions within a changing Italian and Valle d’Aosta political context. The developments I have focused on

here indicate that SA is likely to remain a feature of the Valle d'Aosta political system in the near future but this will depend on how UV continues to respond given its pragmatic accommodation of SA. By contrast, UV has effectively absorbed the challenge of RV as illustrated by the decision to create ALPE. However, this new force containing, among others, former UV politicians highlights dissatisfaction with the UV among its members, but which has not expressed itself in the decisions of voters. If this division between experiences and perceptions can be maintained, then the UV's position in the Valle d'Aosta will continue to remain dominant.

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