
The “Administrative” Territory from the Unity of Italy to the Present

Orietta Gargano and Tiziana Clary

Abstract

This work is intended to be an analysis of the historical changes occurred over time and space in the constitution of municipalities and provinces (administrative units) from the Unification of Italy up to now. For the first time in the last few years a systematic and accurate work was carried out for a full recovery of sources and acts tracing the historical path of the Italian administrative units.

All data were collected and organized in an information system providing their integrated management and availability on-line.

1 The Evolution of the Territory and Administrative Units

At the time of the unification of Italy, the administrative organization model of the Kingdom of Sardinia, established by Rattazzi Decree (Law no. 3702, October 23rd 1859), was extended to the whole Kingdom of Italy, which from the administrative standpoint was divided into Provinces, Districts, Surroundings and Municipalities. At the time of the first census in the history of our Country, that was on December 31st 1861, the national territory corresponded to the current 59 provinces and 15 departments, now regions (see Fig. 1). The municipalities were 7,720 (see Table 1), while the total area, according to the present provincial boundaries, amounted to 256,240 km².

This framework has evolved through different historical periods. Following the war between the Kingdom of Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (the third war of Independence), in 1866 the territory of Veneto—Friuli included—and the

O. Gargano (✉) • T. Clary
Istituto nazionale di statistica, Rome, Italy
e-mail: gargano@istat.it; clary@istat.it



Fig. 1 Italy provinces at the date of first census in 1861

Table 1 Number of existing municipalities at the time of censuses classified by geographic areas

Geographic areas	1861	1871	1881	1901	1911	1921	1931	1936	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
North-west	4,064	3,769	3,686	3,681	3,699	3,702	2,689	2,689	2,960	3,057	3,064	3,064	3,064	3,061	3,059
North-east	364	1,118	1,115	1,515	1,125	1,968	1,436	1,429	1,412	1,484	1,482	1,481	1,481	1,480	1,480
Centre	707	927	901	907	915	927	937	943	982	992	998	1,000	1,001	1,003	996
South	1,855	1,840	1,836	1,838	1,860	1,873	1,625	1,648	1,752	1,771	1,638	1,787	1,789	1,790	1,790
Isles	730	728	721	721	724	724	624	630	704	731	738	754	765	767	767
Italy	7,720	8,382	8,259	8,262	8,323	9,194	7,311	7,339	7,810	8,035	8,056	8,086	8,100	8,101	8,092

province of Mantua were annexed. After the union of the former Hapsburgic provinces (Belluno, Padua, Rovigo, Treviso, Venice, Verona, Vicenza) and the annexation of Rome in 1870, the total number of provinces amounted to 69 (Direzione Generale della Statistica 1889).

The provinces of the present Trentino-Alto Adige and Venezia Giulia were annexed in 1920, while three new provinces (La Spezia, Trieste and Ionian) were established in 1923. In 1924, with the annexation of Zara (Zadar), Istria (Pula) and Carnaro (Rijeka)—a total land area of 8,953 km² the number of provinces raising to 76, Italy reached its largest territorial extent (Direzione Generale della Statistica 1925).

This extension would permanently settle down with the end of World War II, in 1947. After the Treaty of Paris, a total of 7,625 km² were surrendered to foreign state and Italy suffered major territorial losses mainly in favour of ex-Yugoslavia and, to a lesser extent, of France.

In the north-east, Venezia Giulia, Istria and Dalmazia lost 105 municipalities: 33 municipalities were detached from the province of Gorizia; 15 from Trieste (whose territorial district, with the remaining 6 municipalities, responded to the boundaries of Zone A of the Free Trieste territory, under the allied forces administration); Fiume and Zara provinces were suppressed having lost 13 and 2 municipalities, respectively. As a result of the Peace Treaty, even the province of Istria (Pula) was extinguished by ceding 31 municipalities to the ex-Yugoslavia while the remaining 11 municipalities were incorporated within the Zone B boundaries of the Free territory of Trieste, which being under the control of the Yugoslav administration would no longer be subject to census survey. In the north-west it was Piedmont to suffer losses in favour of France. The province of Turin lost 6 municipalities, while Cuneo gave up Briga and Tenda as well as parts of the land belonging to 3 other municipalities (Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia 1939-XVII).

At the present time, the total land area of Italy is of 301,336 km².

Once consolidated the national boundaries, only the internal disposition of the administrative units, relating to the number of provinces and municipalities, has been modified.

In the years of fascism, in particular, the internal outline of the administrative boundaries underwent profound changes, with shifting, merging, suppressing municipalities and establishing new provinces. The most significant event was recorded in 1927 when, following the Royal Decree no. 1, January 2nd 1927, 17 new provinces were established and the province of Caserta was suppressed (though re-established in 1945).

By the same Decree, in 1927, all the districts which had undergone downsizing since 1926 were definitively abolished. In the first decade of the twentieth century, by the R.D. no. 554, May 19th 1912, and R.D. no. 148, February 4th 1913, the districts commissariats still existing in Veneto and Mantua provinces were abolished and transformed into unified districts, while the R.D. no. 1890, October 21st 1926, decreed the elimination of 94 districts and, consequently, of the less important sub-prefectures (Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia 1927).

At the birth of the Republic, there were 91 effective provinces in Italy.

As regards Aosta province, the power was transferred to the newly formed region with special status, in 1948. In 1974, even considering Aosta Valley, 95 provinces could be counted. Their number increased further on with the establishment of eight new provinces, in 1992; four new provinces became operative in Sardinia in 2005 and finally, three more units (Monza e della Brianza, Fermo, Barletta–Andria–Trani) were added in 2009. At the present time, the provinces are 110 (see Fig. 2).

There were 8,382 municipalities in 1871 (see Table 1). Through various fluctuations they reached 9,194 units in 1921. In the following decade 2,189 municipalities were suppressed (23.8 %), then they increased again in 1951 (+6.8 % compared to 1931) and they amounted to 8,035 units in 1961 (+2.9 % over the previous decade). Since then there has been a slight but steady increase up to a substantial stabilization starting from 1991 onward. Dating from March 1st 2011, the municipalities are 8,092.

1.1 Administrative Variations

Over time, from an administrative standpoint, there has been a rather lively dynamics involving the actual existence of municipalities, the establishment of municipalities and provinces, the setting up of new regions, naming changes—variously concerning all types of administrative entities—and variations in municipality districts (acquisition and/or disposal of land portions).

Any variation occurring and being recorded is bound to a formal act ratifying it and identifying its starting (temporal, or administrative, validity). Six different types of variation have to be pointed out: establishment and/or annexation to the national territory (CS); suppressions (ES); land disposal and acquisitions between municipalities (CE/AQ); variations in the composition of provinces (AP); denomination changes (CD). See Fig. 3.

Over the 150 years of life of our Country since the Unity, the geographical area with the highest number of territorial and administrative changes, occurred and known, has been the north-west (6,776) followed by the north-east (3,320), the Centre (1,632), the South (2,302) and the Islands (1,173).

From a regional standpoint Lombardy shows the highest numbers of variations (3,525), with a record for each type of classified change, exception made for changes in the belonging to province and/or region (AP), where Piedmont stands high (529 events), followed by Venezia Giulia (516). The region with the lowest values is Basilicata, with 120 occurrences.

As refers to provinces, at present the sum of different types of changes shows the predominance of the Autonomous Province of Trento¹ with 701 occurrences, while the province of Prato, with 9 events, has the lowest rate.

The distribution of variations by type, year and territorial reference has not a uniform trend either in time or territory.

¹In the computation of the variations we have to take into account that Trento first belonged to Venezia Tridentina compartment, later to Trentino-Alto Adige region and is finally an autonomous province.

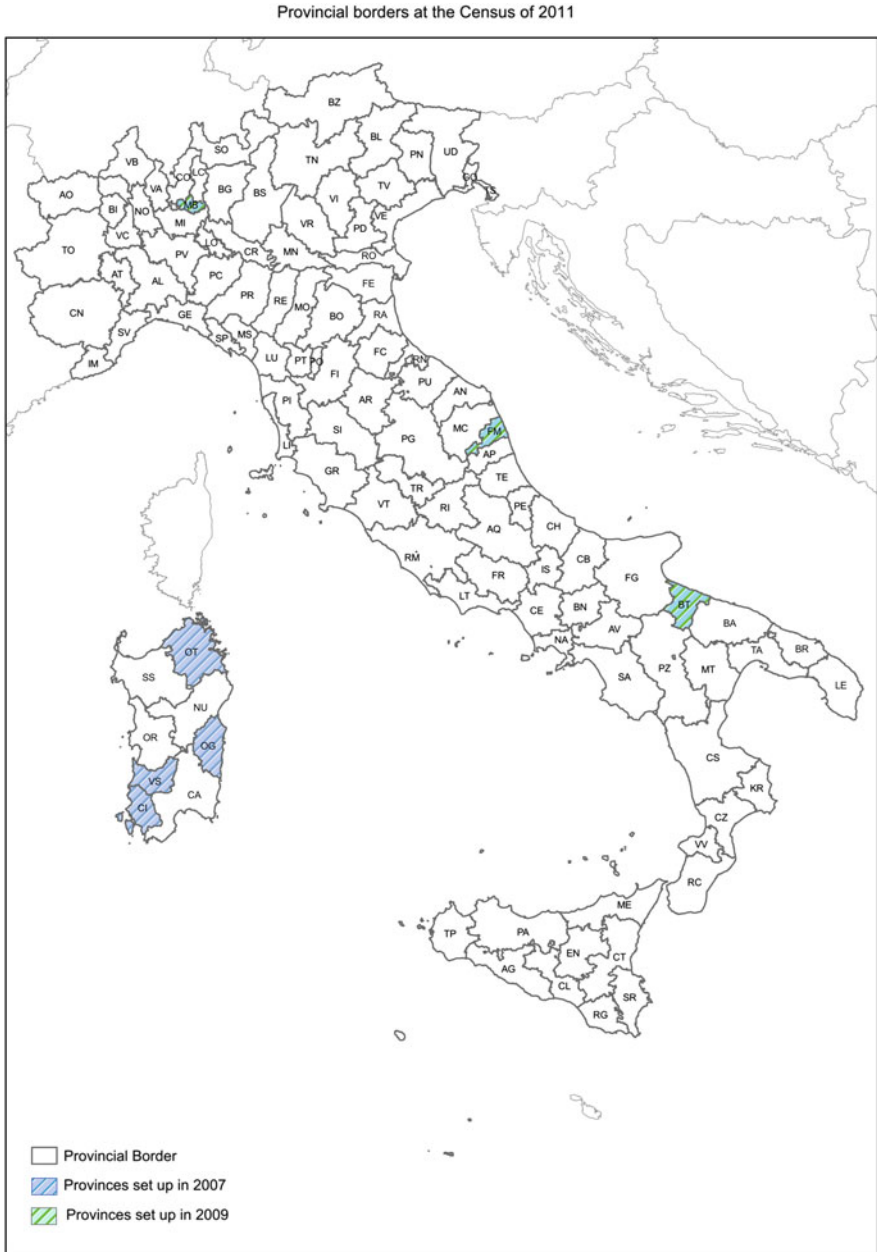


Fig. 2 Italy provinces at the date of the last census in 2011

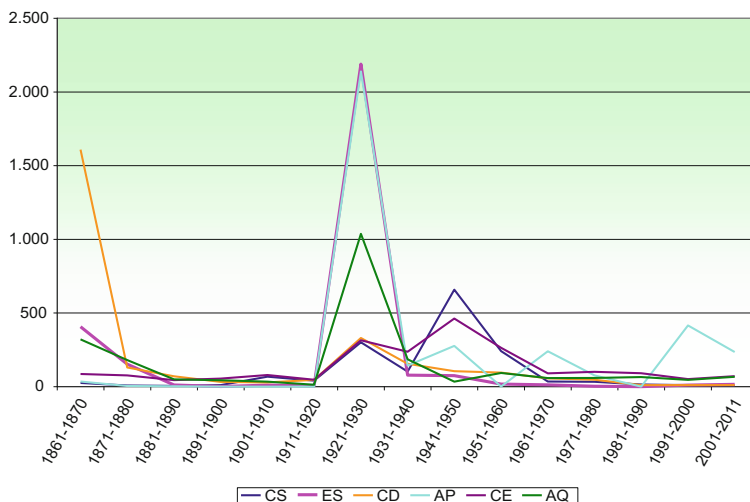


Fig. 3 Variations range from 1861 to 2011

There are two main times standing out with reference to the amount of occurred changes. The first corresponds to the decade between the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy and the proclamation of Rome as capital of the kingdom (from 1861 to 1871). In this period many changes were applied in order to reach the administrative uniformity of the Country.

The second period lasted almost twenty years, coinciding to Fascism government (from 1922 to 1943). In this period lots of laws were enacted in order to reform local government and strengthen the centralizing role of the state (Direzione Generale della Statistica e del lavoro 1911).

These were the years which witnessed: a deep reorganization of the administrative territory, due to the redesigning of Provinces and Districts, in order to strengthen the role of the Prefect; the establishment of the Podestà, a chief executive, appointed by the King, in place of the Mayor.²

Denomination changes (see Table 2) took place mostly in the years from 1861 to 1870 (1,609 cases, 59 % of the total). The geographical area with the highest occurrence was the north-west (707 events); the highest figure (394) in Lombardy (Direzione Generale della Statistica 1889, 1900).

Municipalities suppression (see Table 3) was also a significant phenomenon in the above said decade (407 cases, 13,6 % of the total) but the peak was reached in the years from 1921 to 1930: 2,189 cases, for the most part in the north (1,199 in the north-west; 601 in the north-east, of which 384 in Venezia Tridentina, now

²The Law no. 237 of 4th February 1926, decreed the Podestà take-over of municipalities with a population of less than 5,000 inhabitants and the R.D.L. no. 1910 of September 3rd 1926 extended the order to all municipalities.

Table 2 Numbers of denomination changes classified by geographic areas

1861–	1871–	1881–	1891–	1901–	1911–	1921–	1931–	1941–	1951–	1961–	1971–	1981–	1991–	2001–
1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2011
707	24	22	14	15	20	88	81	61	40	21	30	1	2	3
229	12	18	4	5	11	194	34	11	30	18	11	3	2	5
146	65	12	4	3	8	15	13	14	10	5	2	1	–	2
432	20	14	10	6	6	23	17	13	9	9	2	3	3	–
95	9	4	–	–	1	10	10	6	6	3	2	2	3	–
1,609	130	70	32	29	46	330	155	105	95	56	47	10	10	10

Table 3 Number of suppressions of municipalities classified by geographic areas

	1861–	1871–	1881–	1881–	1891–	1901–	1901–	1911–	1921–	1931–	1941–	1951–	1961–	1971–	1981–	1991–	2001–
Geographic areas	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2011	
North-west	322	108	7	–	4	5	1,199	32	45	14	2	–	–	–	5	6	
North-east	15	6	1	–	–	–	601	19	13	2	7	2	–	–	4	10	
Centre	48	26	2	1	1	–	74	9	3	1	0	1	–	–	1	–	
South	17	6	–	–	2	–	196	10	11	–	3	–	–	–	–	–	
Isles	5	7	1	–	3	–	119	8	3	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	
Italy	407	153	11	1	10	5	2,189	78	75	17	12	3	–	10	16		

Trentino-Alto Adige), (Direzione Generale della Statistica 1925 e Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia 1930).

The decade 1921–1930 even holds a record regarding changes in belonging to provinces or to regions: 2,139 cases, 60 % of the total, a result mostly due to the creation of 17 new provinces, in 1927, involving the whole national territory (see Table 4), (Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d'Italia 1934, 1937).

The second high value (311 municipalities) is to be found in more recent years (1991–2000) when eight new provinces were established, largely in the north-west.

The setting up of new municipalities was more frequent through the years 1941–1950: 658 new municipalities were set up, of which about half in the north-west (333), 103 in the north-east and 103 in the South (see Table 5). In the post-war period, this phenomenon is linked to the cancellation of the fascist measures and the restoration of a democratic order (Istituto Centrale di Statistica 1950).

Such an occurrence can also be observed in the periods 1921–1930 and 1951–1960. In both times, a greater number of new municipalities were in the north-west. Territorial variations or exchange of territories between municipalities are not a prominent phenomenon. Yet, even acquisitions show a very high frequency in the decade 1921–1930 (Istituto nazionale di Statistica 2001).

In that period of time, assignments ranked second in frequency while the largest amount of land disposal is remarked from 1941 to 1950.

In short, the density of events is basically focused in the twenties, particularly in the north; only as regards name changes, the maximum density occurs in the period 1861–1870, particularly in the north-east, with 43.9 %.

Variability, however, showed a downward trend from the end of the war to more recent years. Starting from 1960 there has been some stability both in the distribution of administrative units and in their territorial composition. The only exception is the change in the belongings of municipalities to provinces and regions, a phenomenon in turmoil even in more recent decades, due to the establishment of new provinces.

2 Future Prospects

The availability of information on-line³ will be of great benefit to researchers and practitioners making it possible for them to know in real time the exact consistency of administrative units and the “n” decision made over time for each of them.

Last step, but not least, is the pursuit of an objective not achieved yet, though planned, that is the unique coding of all the instances taken by the administrative units of the system, with reference to the relevant administrative area at the time of the change. The code, structured, will have a purely statistical significance and will contain references to the year of variation, the Istat coding standard of the territorial administrative unit and the type of variation.

³See the following link: <http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/6789>; <http://sistat.istat.it/sistat/>.

Table 4 Number of variations in the composition of provinces by geographic areas

	1861–	1871–	1881–	1891–	1901–	1911–	1921–	1931–	1941–	1951–	1961–	1971–	1981–	1991–	2001–
Geographic areas	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2011
North-west	35	3	–	–	–	–	711	109	65	–	–	–	–	311	55
North-east	–	–	3	–	–	–	636	–	129	–	52	–	–	20	7
Centre	–	–	–	–	–	–	396	31	1	–	–	–	–	7	40
South	–	1	–	–	–	–	206	3	82	–	188	1	–	77	10
Isles	–	–	–	–	–	–	133	–	–	1	0	75	–	–	123
Italy	35	4	3	–	–	–	2,139	143	277	1	240	76	–	415	235

Table 5 Number of establishment of municipalities by geographic areas

	1861– 1870	1871– 1880	1881– 1890	1891– 1900	1901– 1910	1911– 1920	1921– 1930	1931– 1940	1941– 1950	1951– 1960	1961– 1970	1971– 1980	1981– 1990	1991– 2000	2001– 2011
North-west	11	7	1	1	21	10	192	15	333	111	9	–	–	2	4
North-east	4	–	–	1	9	4	49	9	103	76	4	2	–	3	3
Centre	4	–	4	5	9	12	13	16	39	10	7	3	1	2	1
South	3	1	–	2	24	11	33	49	103	19	6	13	2	1	–
Isles	3	–	–	1	5	4	14	13	80	25	9	15	12	2	–
Italy	25	8	5	10	68	41	301	102	658	241	35	33	15	10	8

References

- Direzione Generale della Statistica – Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio: Variazioni nel nome, nel territorio o nella dipendenza amministrativa dei comuni, dei circondari (o distretti) e delle province avvenute dal 1° gennaio 1862 al 31 dicembre 1888. Roma, Tipografia Fratelli Centenari (1889)
- Direzione Generale della Statistica – Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio: Variazioni avvenute nelle circoscrizioni amministrative del Regno dal 1° gennaio 1882 al 31 dicembre 1899. Roma, Tipografia Nazionale di G. Bertero (1900)
- Direzione Generale della Statistica e del Lavoro – Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio – Ufficio Centrale di Statistica: Variazioni nelle Circoscrizioni amministrative del Regno avvenute nell’intervallo fra il Censimento del 10 febbraio 1901 e quello del 10 giugno 1911. Roma, Tipografia Nazionale di G. Bertero (1911)
- Direzione Generale della Statistica – Ministero dell’Economia Nazionale: Variazioni di territorio e di nome avvenute nelle circoscrizioni amministrative del Regno durante il periodo fra il V e il VI censimento (10 giugno 1911 – 1° dicembre 1921) e il periodo dal 1° dicembre 1921 al 31 dicembre 1924. Roma, Libreria dello Stato (1925)
- Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d’Italia: Variazioni di territorio e di nome avvenute nelle circoscrizioni amministrative del Regno dal 1° gennaio 1925 al 31 marzo 1927. Roma, Stabilimento Poligrafico per l’Amministrazione dello Stato (1927)
- Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d’Italia: Variazioni di territorio e di nome avvenute nelle circoscrizioni comunali e provinciali del Regno dal 1° aprile 1927 al 15 ottobre 1930. Roma, Tipografia Operaia Romana (1930)
- Istituto Nazionale di Statistica: Popolazione e circoscrizioni amministrative dei comuni. Variazioni territoriali e di nome dal 1° gennaio 1950 al 31 dicembre 1954. Roma, Tipografia F. Failli (2001)
- Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d’Italia: Variazioni di territorio di nome e di confine delle circoscrizioni comunali e provinciali del Regno disposte con Leggi e Regi decreti emanati dal 16 ottobre 1930-VIII al 31 marzo 1934-XII. Roma, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato (1934)
- Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d’Italia: Variazioni di territorio di nome e di confine delle circoscrizioni comunali e provinciali del Regno disposte con Leggi e Regi decreti emanati dal 1° aprile 1934-XII al 30 aprile 1936-XIV. Roma, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato (1937)
- Istituto Centrale di Statistica del Regno d’Italia: Variazioni delle circoscrizioni comunali, provinciali e delle zone agrarie dal 21 aprile 1936 – XIV al 31 dicembre 1938-XVI. Spoleto, Arti Grafiche Panetto and Petrelli (1939–XVII)
- Istituto Centrale di Statistica: Variazioni di territorio e di nome delle circoscrizioni amministrative e delle zone agrarie dal 1° gennaio 1939 al 31 dicembre 1949. Roma, Tipografia Fausto Failli (1950)