Do Strong Governments Produce ‘Good’ Policies? 
Decision-making capacity, policy design and policy innovation of three Italian governments

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ABSTRACT: The foremost task of all governments is to make decisions. Ultimately, governments must govern and should therefore be analysed based on what they did, what they did not do, and what they did badly. Over the course of the so-called ‘First Republic’, scholars generally referred to Italian governments as actors ‘surviving without governing’ because the quality of their policy design was very poor. This situation began to change in the early 1990s, when several empirical studies challenged the image of Italian executives as irremediably weak and unable to pass innovative legislation. This paper examines legislative performance and focuses on three Italian governments of the so-called ‘Second Republic’: the first Prodi cabinet (1996-98), the second Berlusconi cabinet (2001-05), and the Renzi cabinet (2014-). We compare governmental actions by measuring these governments’ political strength, political innovativeness, and design coherence. Through this analysis, we question the direct correlation between the political strength of a government and its policy design capacity. High political capacity does not necessarily imply good policy design. To produce good policies, something more is also needed.

1. Introduction

The primary task of all governments is to make decisions. Ultimately, governments must govern and should therefore be analysed (and, in turn, evaluated) on the basis of what they did, what they did not do, and whether they produced ‘good’ or ‘bad’ policy measures. Over the course of the so-called ‘First Republic’, scholars generally referred to Italian governments as actors ‘surviving without governing’ (Di Palma 1977); legislation often resulted in micro-distributive policies rather than in ‘big reforms’ (Lange & Regini 1986; Cotta & Isernia 1996). This phenomenon was due to the institutional arrangement that governed the country, which strengthened the legislature vis-à-vis the executive, as well as to a proportional electoral system that favoured multi-party governments and prevented alternation in office (Sartori 1982).

This situation began to change in the early 1990s (Capano & Giuliani 2001), a period of enormous political turmoil. Both endogenous1 and exogenous2 factors led to the re-organisation of the previous party system, and electoral and (micro-)institutional reforms turned party competition bipolar (Bartolini et al. 2004) and broadened the government’s agenda-setting powers (Cotta & Verzichelli 2007). After a brief period of uncertainty and deep crisis coinciding with the 1992-1996 transition, these changes greatly enhanced policymakers’ resources and, in turn, governments’ capability to approve (relevant) policy decisions (Pritoni 2015). Consequently, several empirical studies began to challenge the traditional picture of Italian executives as irremediably weak and unable to pass significant legislation (Kreppel 1997; Di Palma et al. 2000; Capano & Giuliani 2001), and scholars renewed their attention to government legislative performance (Curini & Zucchini 2011; Borghetto et al. 2012; Cotta & Marangoni 2015).

In the end, Italian governments seem to have become effective in their decision-making and thus capable of making timely decisions with regard to raising policy

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1 In particular, we are referring to the so-called ‘Mani pulite’ (clean hands) corruption scandal.

2 The end of the Cold War made the juxtaposition between communists (Pci) and anti-communists (Dc), which had structured the Italian party system for more than forty years, suddenly anachronistic. Consequently, the Communist Party (Pci) changed its name, and the Christian-democratic Party (Dc) lost its main raison d’être.
problems as well as introducing structural reforms in many policy fields. This political evolution led to the formation of the two research questions that this paper addresses:

Q1. Does high decision-making capacity imply high policy innovation? If so, all the governments of the so-called ‘Second Republic’ would have been able to substantially innovate the inherited policies.

Q2. Does high decision-making capacity imply high quality in policy design? This question is a logical consequence of the first question. Policy innovation (intended as a clear discontinuity with regard to previous policy arrangements) does not necessarily mean ‘good’ design in terms of the intensity of innovation or the coherence of policy design (that is, the congruity between the pursued goals and the interventions designed to achieve them).

To shed light on these two questions, this paper assesses the political strength, the policy innovativeness, and the quality of policy design of three Italian governments that are generally considered among the strongest of the last two decades. We also discuss different potential paths to explain the difference in the quality of policy design that emerges from the empirical evidence, and thus we focus on a very promising perspective that emphasises how (much) technical capacity matters in designing policies (the capacity to take decisions based on empirical evidence, learning, clarity of goals, etc.)

In doing so, the paper capitalises on two streams of literature. On the one hand, it draws on the classical political science literature on governmental decision-making capacity; on the other hand, it is inspired by the recent policy design literature that has investigated the factors that influence policy design during the formulation stage of the policy process. By placing these two streams of research into conversation with each other, the paper attempts to overcome the traditional borders between political science and public policy with regard to the way policies are decided and designed, and it provides a more complete picture of the drivers of governmental decision-making. We know from the political science literature that (especially) alternation in office (Döring 2001; Conley 2010; Zucchini 2011), government cohesion (Tsebelis 2002) and agenda-setting powers (Tsebelis & Rasch 2009) tend to increase government decision-making capacity. At the same time, public policy studies have emphasised the capacity of policy formulators to base their decisions mainly on evidence-based knowledge, learning, clear
goals, and consistent, coherent policy tools (Bendor et al. 2009; Sidney 2007; Radaelli & Dunlop 2013; Howlett 2014; Howlett et al. 2015).

Based on the integration of these two streams of research, this paper proposes a framework to analyse governmental decisions both quantitatively and qualitatively. On the one hand, the paper focuses on the assessment of the degree of cabinets’ legislative productivity and their capability to pass ‘big reforms’. On the other hand, it ‘measures’ how much policy innovation characterises their main political decisions as well as the extent to which policy measures are designed in a coherent way with respect to the pursued policy goals. Furthermore, the paper explores a policy design oriented explanation of the gap between political capacity and the quality of the content of the decisions made.

To do so, we focus on three Italian governments, namely, the first Prodi cabinet (1996-98), the second Berlusconi cabinet (2001-05), and the Renzi cabinet (2014-). We chose these governments because they are generally considered among the most ‘effective’ cabinets (with regard to decision-making) of the last twenty years.

The paper is organised as follows. In section two, the literature on government decision-making capacity is discussed. In section three, we present the research design and explain the relevance of the Italian case with regard to the topic under scrutiny. In section four, both the quantitative and the qualitative data are presented. In section five, the empirical evidence is discussed by focusing on potential explanations for the difference in policy innovativeness and in the quality of policy design emerging from the data. In the conclusion, general suggestions for further research are offered.

2. Government decision-making capacity in the literature

One of the most important tasks of all governments – possibly the most important one – is to make decisions and thus to design and re-design policies. However, some countries have a long history of governments that decide, whereas other countries have governments that do not. Important differences can also be found not only among countries but within them; some governments give rise to large reforming projects, whereas others only manage what they inherited when they took office (Zucchini 2011).
In other words, not all parliamentary governments display the same style in their decision-making process. What are the reasons for these different patterns?

In the literature, the decision-making capacity of parliamentary executives has been linked to many facilitating conditions. Above all, scholars have focused on i) ideological cohesion among governing parties; ii) the number of veto players; iii) alternation in office; iv) government agenda-setting powers; v) the size of the parliamentary majority; and vi) the characteristics of parties in opposition.

First, some scholars have argued that the more that parties in office are spread across the ideological left-right continuum, the less capability the executive branch they sustain is to modify the public policy status quo (Tsebelis 2002; Conley & Bekafigo 2010). This is the result of an excessive number of petitions (some aimed in opposite directions) the executive branch must consider.

Second, especially over the last fifteen years, the so-called veto players theory has gained ground in comparative politics (Tsebelis & Rasch 2009), and many academics have hypothesised an indirect correlation between the number of veto players and the government’s capability to produce (significant) policy changes (Kreppel 1997; Franzese 2002). Specifically, Tsebelis (2002) distinguishes between institutional and partisan veto players. The former are institutional actors whose support is necessary to approve any laws. The latter, in contrast, are represented by the parties that compose the parliamentary majority. Because Tsebelis assumes that any decisions made by each parliamentary majority need to be approved by all parties in it as well as by all institutional actors whose agreement is formally required, it follows that the greater the number of veto players, the lower the chances that a decision will be made.

Third, some scholars have considered the ideological baricentrum of the parliamentary majority (i.e., the midpoint resulting from the comparison between the most conservative party and the most progressive party in office). Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that the greatest incentive of a right-wing government is to

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3 In presidential systems, the main determinant of legislative productivity is usually assumed to be ‘divided’ or ‘unified’ government (Edwards et al. 1997; Howell et al. 2000).

4 In other words, they are the second chambers (where such exist) and the heads of State (if and only if they have the power to send laws back to Parliament for a second reading).
modify the public policy *status quo* if it defeated a left-wing coalition that was previously in office. In other words, the government must have a good reason to use its decision-making powers to modify a situation that may be considerably distant from its own policy lines (Tsebelis 2002; Conley 2010; Zucchini 2011).

Fourth, since the seminal work by McKelvey (1976), scholars attempting to explain government decision-making capacity have focused on agenda power, considering it a major determinant of policy outcomes. For example, the cabinet’s authority to determine the plenary agenda of parliament or control over the timetable of legislative committees is usually considered quite strong *vis-à-vis* the parliament, which increases the cabinet’s ability to force its policy decisions (Döring 1995; Döring & Hallerberg 2004; Tsebelis & Rasch 2009).

Fifth, because parliamentary governments depend on a trusting relationship (whether implicit or explicit) with parliament (Strøm 1990), some authors have argued that each parliamentary government – in its daily work – needs the largest possible parliamentary majority to overcome the broadly acknowledged problem of internal defection\(^5\). Therefore, in the literature, a limited-majority government has been assumed to be less likely to modify the public policy *status quo*, whereas a large-majority government has been assumed to be more likely to make decisions (Pizzorno 1977; Baccaro & Simoni 2006).

Finally, in its daily dealings with legislative power, a parliamentary government may be affected not only by the size and nature of its parliamentary majority but also by the size and nature of the parliamentary opposition. Taylor and Herman (1971) claimed that the greater the number of parties opposing the government and, above all, the broader the political spectrum they encompass, the greater chance the government has of achieving its policy aims. In particular, a highly fragmented opposition may gloss over the difficulties within government due to the lack of co-ordination and discipline necessary to effectively oppose governmental proposals and the difficulty – if not the impossibility – of formulating a unified/single policy programme (Strøm 1990).

\(^5\) This is a common problem in Italy as a result of the importance in the past (and, to some extent, in the present) of members of the majority coalition who fail to toe the party line and vote against governmental proposals.
Therefore, the literature on the decision-making capacity of parliamentary governments shows that where particular conditions are in place, executives may be more or less capable of leading the decision-making process and thus of being effective in having their own policies approved. Yet, this literature mainly refers to quantitative indicators, such as the number of governmental bills that are approved by the parliament, the rate of success of government legislative initiatives, and the duration of parliamentary scrutiny for those government initiatives (Döring 1995; Döring & Hallerberg 2004; Rasch & Tsebelis 2009). Scholars have convincingly claimed that a distinction should be made between ‘everyday legislation’ and ‘significant legislation’ (Tsebelis 2002). However, the debate concerning what constitutes legislative significance is ongoing (DiPalma 1977; Döring 1995; Mayhew 2005; Clinton and Lapinsky 2007). At best, Huber and Shipan (2002) proposed differentiating between ‘vague’ legislation and ‘detailed’ legislation, assuming that the more detailed a law is, the less substantial discretion bureaucrats have in implementing it.

Therefore, what this literature completely ignores is the ‘quality’ of the content of the decisions made. In other words, there has been a hidden assumption that stronger governments are also more innovative (in terms of both the quantity and quality of innovation) than weaker governments are. Unfortunately, this assumption is not necessarily true from a theoretical perspective or, as we will see, from an empirical perspective.


3.1. The relevance of the Italian case

Because of our main research question (do strong governments produce good policies?), our research focuses not only on governments’ political capacity to steer the policy-making process but also on the capability of those governments to introduce well-designed policy innovation. We assume that this capability does not depend directly on the political strength of governments. Put simply, in our view, producing
many policy decisions is different from producing innovative decisions\textsuperscript{6}. In the Italian case, for example, during the so-called ‘First Republic’, the low quality of law-making and its intrinsic distributive character have been considered as the effects of a weak governmental role due to the features of the institutional arrangements and the dynamics of the party system (Di Palma 1977; Sartori 1982; Lange & Regini 1986; Cotta & Isernia 1996). Thus, starting from the early 1990s, the radical transformation of some inherited features has been considered the way governments, as they become stronger, can finally decide and introduce effective policy innovation by escaping from the distributive trap (Capano & Giuliani 2001).

According to the specialised literature, three main conditions have changed and have favoured a clear path to a stronger role of Italian governments in policy-making (and, above all, in law-making, which represents the main path for policy design): alternation in government, growing agenda-setting powers, and increasing internal cohesion. These factors have been considered major determinants of increasing government decision-making capacity. Specifically, alternation may represent the fundamental political transformation of the so-called ‘Second Republic’ (Cotta & Verzichelli 2007). Since 1994 (and even more so since 1996), a new electoral rule has encouraged two main (pre-electoral) coalitions competing for government (D’Alimonte & Bartolini 1997). Thus, electoral competition became bipolar and (substantially) centripetal, and electoral programmes began constraining parties and coalitions once in office (Moury 2010). As a result, the system moved from a substantial deadlock to a sort of permanent alternation in government (Pritoni 2011), which, in turn, made a substantial difference in government decision-making capacity.

With regard to agenda-setting powers, a gradual build-up in the standing orders of the chambers provided the government with relevant tools to protect its own legislation (Zucchini 2009). Furthermore, governments increasingly began to recur to urgent decree laws, which must be approved (or rejected) by parliament within sixty days once they are passed by the cabinet, and ‘delegating laws’, through which parliament, after having defined the general principles, gives power to the government to regulate a broad policy

\textsuperscript{6} As noted, this focus is very often denied in political science; on the contrary, the government political capacity to steer the law-making process is considered as the main driver for the quality of decision-making.
area with decrees that have the same strength as laws (Cotta & Verzichelli 2007, 131). In particular, these latter tools have recently proved particularly effective in helping the executive branch to overcome its traditional weaknesses in the law-making process (Vassallo 2001).

Finally, the bipolar dynamics of the party system seem to have decreased the ideological distance among the ruling parties, thus increasing governmental internal cohesion (Conti & Marangoni 2015). The broad five-party coalition (formed by Christian-democrats, liberals, socialists, republicans and social-democrats) that ruled the country during the 1980s was replaced by two opposing coalitions situated on the left and on the right of the political spectrum (Cotta & Verzichelli 2007).

Thanks to these transformations, Italian governments have become more capable of leading the law-making process (Kreppel 1997; Capano & Giuliani 2001; Pritoni 2015). Did this change also imply a clear watershed in the content of the policy design? Have Italian governments become more innovative in modifying the status quo and more coherent in pursuing their policy goals?

From this perspective, the Italian case could be considered an emblematic case with respect to the long-lasting debate around the factors that influence the quality of law-making in terms of policy innovativeness and effectiveness. In other words, it represents the perfect case to explore whether being a ‘strong government’ is a sufficient condition to produce highly innovative and effective policy design.

3.2. Research design

We have selected the three Italian governments that are generally considered among the most ‘effective’ cabinets (with regard to decision-making) of the last twenty years: the first Prodi government (1996-98), the second Berlusconi government (2001-05), and the Renzi government (2014-).

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7 We must be clear on this point: we are not comparing the policy innovativeness and the quality of policy design of governments in the First and Second Republics. We know from the literature that the former were very weak and were almost always substantially unable to produce significant policy change (Di Palma 1977). On the contrary, the same literature stresses that the latter have become stronger and more able to steer the policy-making process (Capano & Giuliani 2001). However, it is unclear whether this acquired strength is sufficient to produce ‘good’ policies.
We have chosen to analyse and compare these governments for many politico-institutional reasons. Specifically, we are comparing a centre-left government (Prodi I), a centre-right government (Berlusconi II) and a grand-coalition government (Renzi). Moreover, whereas the Prodi cabinet was a minority government\(^8\), the second Berlusconi cabinet was a minimum winning coalition\(^9\), and the Renzi cabinet is an oversized coalition. Finally, these governments represent, respectively, the first cabinet of the so-called ‘Second Republic’ (Prodi I), the government that is generally considered the most powerful of that political period (Berlusconi II), and the incumbent government (Renzi), a cabinet that is called to manage a political contingency that is strongly influenced by the political watershed of the general elections held in February 2013 (Chiaramonte & Emanuele 2013)\(^{10}\). Pragmatically, to ensure comparability, we opted for three governments that lasted at least two years in office, and we compare precisely the first 24 months of their legislative activity.

Our comparison is twofold, both quantitative and qualitative. From a quantitative point of view, we aim to assess which government is the ‘strongest’ in legislative terms and thus the most capable from a political perspective. From a qualitative point of view, we also aim to differentiate between cabinets that approved ‘good’ reforms and cabinets that approved ‘bad’ reforms in terms of policy design and thus to identify the most innovative and coherent government from a policy design perspective. This is the main added value of this paper: making many decisions is different from making innovative and internally coherent decisions.

With regard to quantitative indicators of legislative productivity, we opted for ‘traditional’ ones: \(i\) the number of bills presented by the cabinet; \(ii\) the number of government legislative initiatives approved by the parliament and, in turn, \(iii\) the rate of success characterising government legislative initiatives; and \(iv\) the average duration of parliamentary scrutiny of government legislative initiatives. In the literature, these

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\(^{8}\) At the Chamber of Deputies, it relied on external support from an extreme-left party: *Rifondazione Comunista*.

\(^{9}\) At the Senate, the party with the lowest number of seats – *Lega Nord*, with 17 senators – was still necessary to ensure the parliamentary majority to the government.

\(^{10}\) The extraordinary success of the Five Star Movement and the electoral collapse of the PdL (People of Freedom) and the PD (Democratic Party) deeply transformed the landscape of the Italian party system, which is now fully tri-polar.
indicators are among those most used for assessing government decision-making capacity; in other words, they represent common standards for scholars studying government legislative productivity from a comparative perspective (Döring 1995; Döring & Hallerberg 2004). In this regard, this paper is not exceptional.

Instead, the originality of this work lies in the qualitative analysis of government legislation. Specifically, to compare governments qualitatively and thus to assess their policy design capacity, we refer in this paper to eleven ‘big reforms’ that have been approved in three policy sectors: education, the labour market, and public administration. For these reforms, we conduct an in-depth analysis of their policy design in terms of policy innovation and coherence of policy design.

In our view, the possibility of measuring how much policy change a particular policy design involves depends on the reliability and validity of characterising the identification of two fundamental policy positions, namely, the public policy status quo and the policy output of the decision-making process. Whereas the public policy status quo represents what happens if no policy innovation occurs, it is the final policy output that must be quantified with respect to ‘how much’ policy innovation it implies. However, deciding how policy change is to be defined is not an easy task (Capano 2009).

In the literature, there have been various suitable ways of rendering the concept of policy change operational, such as the tri-partition suggested by Hall (1993) and by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) or the taxonomy by which Cashmore and Howlett (2007) design six possible orders of policy change. However, the main shortcoming of both of these conceptual proposals is that operational definitions give rise to ordinal scales rather than cardinal ones, which makes it more difficult to measure policy change quantitatively. In this case, the connection between concept formation and empirical measurement (Gerring 2012; Goertz & Mahoney 2012) is not straightforward. Consequently, we need an operational definition that allows for continuous rather than discrete measurement.

With regard to this issue, we thus first decomposed the legislative documents under scrutiny by hand-coding\textsuperscript{11}. Second, we decided to ‘rate’ each policy issue with

\textsuperscript{11} Specifically, the hand-coding process was developed as follows. First, each policy document was coded separately by both authors on the basis of a shared a priori criterion, namely, the decision to divide
respect to its relative degree of policy innovation as well as the entire policy document with regard to its overall policy coherence; thus, a survey of specialists in each policy field under scrutiny was conducted. The experts were asked to provide a synthetic evaluation of the overall coherence\(^\text{12}\) characterising the policy design, and the ‘amount’ of policy change characterising the policy measures under analysis is individualised by summing how much policy innovation each issue implies. However, if the quantitative measurement of policy change depends on the ‘policy innovation’ characterising each issue, the meaning of the concept of ‘policy innovation’ must be clarified. Is this the amount of substantive change in policy, or does it refer to the adoption of innovative policy instruments? With respect to this issue, the starting point in concept formation is the public policy status quo: the more any given policy issue implies a ‘deviation’ from the previous path, the more it must be considered innovative. Put differently, innovation refers to the structure of opportunities and constraints that characterise the policy sector. The more a particular intervention/design modifies that structure of opportunities and constraints, the more it must be considered innovative.

As previously noted, to link (qualitative) concept formation to (quantitative) measurement, we decided to employ an expert survey. The first step in each survey is to identify the population of experts whose judgement is available. This selection must be conducted very carefully; many scholars have correctly noted that the quality of expert survey data is directly influenced by the quality of the expert panel (Benoit & Laver 2006). Thus, the experts were selected based on their (undisputed) reputation. We contacted scholars who are almost unanimously considered the most esteemed analysts in each policy field: thirty-six academics (twelve for each policy field) specialising in education policy, administrative reform policy and labour market policy. From May to July 2016, twenty-five of them completed the questionnaire (response rate: 69.4\%)\(^\text{13}\). Despite the traditional criticisms usually directed at expert surveys (Budge 2000, 103-104), it is important to emphasise that the number of respondents was in line with what

\(^{12}\) Intended as the causal relationship between policy aims and the adopted policy measures.

\(^{13}\) Detailed response rates are as follows: 8 out of 12 for education policy (66.7\%); 9 out of 12 for public administration policy (75.0\%); and 8 out of 12 for labour market policy (66.7\%).
is generally considered acceptable for party positioning (Laver & Hunt 1992; Benoit & Laver 2006).

It seems that evaluating policy issue innovation and the quality of policy design by means of an expert survey is less challenging than resorting to the same analytical tool to spatially place political parties. First, one of the main criticisms concerning the use of expert surveys in party positioning relates to the fact that whenever experts place parties on policy dimensions, they are affected by the parties’ political alliances. In other words, specialists are used to placing parties that join a coalition too close together, whereas parties belonging to opposing alliances are placed too far apart. Obviously, this is not a risk that characterises the evaluation of policy issues and – more broadly – policy documents. Second, because it is generally accepted that a country’s specialist is able to place many (from three or four to more than ten) parties on many (usually from eight to twelve) very different policy dimensions (Benoit & Laver 2006), her/his capability to evaluate the policy innovation and coherence of a few issues within a well-defined policy field should be barely questionable.\(^{14}\)

In the questionnaire, the experts were asked to attribute to each issue a quantitative value from 0 (insignificant policy change/innovation) to 10 (very significant policy change/innovation) depending on the evaluation of its impact on the public policy status quo. The total amount of policy innovation implied by the legislative measure(s) therefore equals the sum of all average experts’ evaluations.

Overall, we adopted three measures with regard to the analysis of policy design: two dealing with policy innovation and one accounting for the coherence of the policy design.

The first measure is the previously mentioned total amount of policy innovation that characterises each policy document.

The second measure is the intensity of policy innovation of the legislative initiative. It refers to that same total amount of policy change divided by the number of issues in which the document was hand-coded. This particular measure helps in

\(^{14}\) The first prescriptive suggestion in the future is to increase the audience of experts called in to evaluate the hand-coded issues. The greater the number of specialists/experts, the higher the level of reliability of the data (especially if the variability of their responses is not particularly high, which would be an important signal of homogeneity in valuing the policy issues under investigation).
distinguishing between a reform characterised by a great number of relatively less innovative issues, on the one hand, and a reform characterised by a lower number of relatively more innovative issues, on the other hand. The former regulates many aspects of the policy field under scrutiny but implies little deviation with regard to any of the same aspects from the previous public policy status quo, whereas the opposite holds true for the latter.

The third and final measure addresses the perceived coherence of the policy design rather than policy innovation. In the questionnaire, the experts were also asked to attribute a quantitative value, again, from 0 (totally incoherent) to 10 (totally coherent), depending on their evaluation of the potential capacity of the reform to achieve its declared policy objectives. In other words, the experts were asked to evaluate to what extent policy aims and policy instruments were in accordance with one another. In this case, the purpose was to ascertain whether the policy reform was internally coherent or represented contradictory recommendations as well as whether it made explicit any cause-effect mechanisms.

4. Descriptive analysis

4.1. The Political Capacity in Policy Design

With regard to the comparative assessment of the political capacity displayed by each of the three governments under scrutiny, Table 1 presents data on their legislative productivity.
Table 1  Government legislative production during the first two years in office (ratifications and budget bills excluded)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Prodi I</th>
<th>Berlusconi II</th>
<th>Renzi</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bills presented by the cabinet</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decree laws</td>
<td>131 (36.3%)</td>
<td>95 (49.2%)</td>
<td>46 (61.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bills</td>
<td>230 (63.7%)</td>
<td>98 (50.8%)</td>
<td>29 (38.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government legislative initiatives approved by the parliament</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decree laws</td>
<td>80 (52.6%)</td>
<td>87 (63.0%)</td>
<td>44 (86.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bills</td>
<td>72 (47.4%)</td>
<td>51 (37.0%)</td>
<td>7 (13.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of success of government legislative initiatives (%)</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
<td>68.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decree laws</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
<td>91.6%</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bills</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average duration of parliamentary scrutiny (days)</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decree laws</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bills</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first aspect that should be emphasised when looking at Table 1 is that, over time, governments appear increasingly ‘selective’ in their parliamentary initiatives. The number of bills presented by the Prodi I cabinet is almost double the number of bills initiated by Berlusconi and is four times the number of bills presented by the Renzi government. As previously noted (Capano & Giuliani 2001), this tendency goes far beyond the three cabinets analysed here. Generally, executives in the Second Republic have shown a continuous trend towards a ‘simplification’ of government legislative activity (Marangoni 2016). In other words, we can emphasise a long-term tendency for governments to focus their legislative action on a relatively limited number of initiatives with dense policy content.

Second, it should be highlighted that the Renzi government further consolidated another long-term trend in Italian law-making: forcing the ordinary legislative process through the systematic resort to decree laws. This tendency is far more evident with regard to government legislative initiatives approved by parliament (86.3% of which are, in fact, decree laws) than for legislative initiatives presented by the cabinet (61.3% of decree laws). Thus, the Renzi cabinet confirms the chronic difficulty of Italian governments in achieving their goals in parliament through the ordinary legislative process.
This consideration leads to the following one, which concerns the rate of success of government legislative initiatives more broadly: with 68.0% of its proposals approved during the first two years in office, the government led by Renzi has certainly achieved a good result. This rate is much higher than the one characterising the first Prodi cabinet (42.1%) and almost equal to Berlusconi’s rate (71.5%).

A final quantitative consideration relates to the average duration of parliamentary scrutiny in days for a government’s legislative initiatives. On this issue, see also Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Average duration of parliamentary scrutiny for government’s legislative initiatives (first two years in office)

Figure 1 provides further proof of the difficulty – shown by the Renzi cabinet – of managing the ordinary legislative process: on average, Renzi’s legislative initiatives take less time to be approved by parliament (81 days compared to 115 days for Berlusconi II and 128 days for Prodi I). However, this finding originates from the fact that Renzi has been able to approve a larger percentage of decree laws than his predecessors. However, the government’s bills, in this case, need more time than Prodi’s and Berlusconi’s ordinary bills (254 days compared to 233 days for Berlusconi II and 209 days for Prodi I).

Overall, to obtain a comprehensive evaluation of how ‘strong’ each government is in law-making, we can propose an index that jointly takes into account i) the absolute
number of governmental legislative initiatives approved by the parliament; ii) the success rate of those governmental legislative initiatives; and iii) the average duration of parliamentary scrutiny for government legislation. Each of the previously mentioned three dimensions are weighted equally, and each coefficient varies between 0\textsuperscript{15} and 1\textsuperscript{16}. Thus, the index of legislative strength ranges from 0 (least strong government) to 3 (strongest government). To compare quantitative results to qualitative results, which are expressed by the experts on a scale from 0 to 10, the same scale characterises the final index (Table 2).

Table 2  \textit{Index of legislative strength (first two years in office)}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Legislative initiatives approved by parliament (0-1)</th>
<th>Success rate (0-1)</th>
<th>Average parliamentary scrutiny (0-1)</th>
<th>Index (0-10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prodi I</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>6.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlusconi II</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>7.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renzi</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>6.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 2, the quantitative analysis can therefore be summarised as follows: as expected from the literature, the second Berlusconi government is the strongest in steering the law-making process, whereas the first Prodi cabinet faced greater difficulty in approving its policy proposals. The Renzi government is much more similar to the first Prodi government than to the second Berlusconi cabinet in that it is more selective in choosing its legislative initiatives and more inclined to ‘force’ the ordinary legislative process than its predecessors, and it is able to see its policy proposals approved by parliament. However, both the average rate of success and the average time required by parliament to scrutinise government proposals are deeply influenced by the specific legislative process typical of decree laws in Italy. Therefore, much of the decision-making capacity shown by Renzi depends on his ability to limit parliamentary legislative prerogatives through a massive resort to emergency law-

\textsuperscript{15} The ‘zeroes’ correspond with 0 government legislative initiatives approved by the parliament, a 0% government success rate, and 180 days of parliamentary scrutiny for government legislation, respectively.

\textsuperscript{16} The ‘ones’ correspond to 120 government legislative initiatives approved by the parliament, a 100% government success rate, and 60 days of parliamentary scrutiny for government legislation, respectively.

We are well aware that these thresholds – like any others – could be considered arbitrary; nevertheless, we are convinced that they help in identifying the ‘essence’ of the dimensions to which we refer.
making processes. In other words, the Renzi cabinet has shown itself capable of imposing its own agenda of legislative priorities; however, it has been able to do so mainly through increasingly extensive recourse to procedures that, although they should be considered ‘exceptional’, have become ‘normal’.

4.2. The content of the policy design: policy innovativeness and perceived design coherence

We have identified the ‘political’ capacity of the three analysed governments. What is their capacity to design innovative and effective policies? Table 3 summarises the results of our experts’ survey.

Table 3  What kind of policy change? Policy innovation and perceived efficacy in comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Policy field</th>
<th>Total innovation</th>
<th>Intensity of innovation</th>
<th>Perceived design coherence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prodi I</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>6.61</td>
<td>7.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public administration</td>
<td>144.3</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>7.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labour market</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total/average</td>
<td>235.8</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>6.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlusconi II</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>5.64</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public administration</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>5.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labour market</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>4.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total/average</td>
<td>223.3</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>5.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renzi</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>86.8</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public administration</td>
<td>187.8</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>6.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labour market</td>
<td>101.1</td>
<td>7.80</td>
<td>6.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total/average</td>
<td>375.7</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>6.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 contains three fundamental results: i) the government that has produced the greatest amount of policy change (‘total innovation’); ii) the government that has scored the highest ‘intensity of innovation’; and iii) the government that is perceived as the most effective in producing coherent policy design by experts (‘perceived design coherence’).

Another ‘exceptional’ legislative tool that has been used at length by Renzi is the vote of confidence. The government made its legislative initiatives matters of confidence on 53 occasions within the first two years in office, which means that questions of confidence as a proportion of government bills (excluding those to ratify treaties but including those to give effect to the budget) are equal to 0.62 (Marangoni 2016, 7).
coherence’). Before proceeding with the analysis, a preliminary consideration should be made: in the experts’ view, although policy innovation and perceived design coherence are quite similar to one another, they do not appear to be clearly correlated. The first Prodi cabinet shows the highest level of intensity of policy innovation with regard to education (l. 59/1997), whereas its highest level of perceived design coherence is achieved in public administration (l. 59/1997 and l. 127/1997). For the second Berlusconi government, the highest level of intensity of policy innovation characterises the labour market (l. 30/2003), whereas the government is perceived as mostly coherent in designing education (l. 53/2003). Finally, the Renzi cabinet shows the highest level of intensity of policy innovation with respect to the labour market (l. 183/2014), whereas its highest level of perceived design coherence is achieved in public administration (l. 114/2014 and l. 124/2015). This is good news: it means that the experts clearly understood that they should value policy design on a bi-dimensional basis. They did not determine the former from the latter or vice versa. This represents an initial – very preliminary – confirmation of data reliability.

Specific observations can be drawn if we consider both Figure 2, which shows the total amount of policy innovation for each government (and each policy sector), and Figure 3, which presents similar data with regard to perceived design coherence and the intensity of policy innovation.
Figure 2  The total amount of policy innovation: Prodi I, Berlusconi II and Renzi in comparative perspective

Figure 3  Perceived design coherence and intensity of policy innovation: Prodi I, Berlusconi II and Renzi in comparative perspective
The first reflection that stands out when considering the figures above is that the Renzi government is the most innovative cabinet in absolute terms. Its four policy measures analysed here – ‘Buona Scuola’ (l. 107/2015) in education, the two so-called ‘Madia Laws’ (l. 114/2014 and l. 124/2015) in public administration, and the ‘Jobs Act’ (l. 183/2014) in the labour market – account for an impressive 375.7 of all policy innovation. This result is almost double that of the first Prodi cabinet (235.8) and the second Berlusconi government (223.3). However, the leadership in policy innovation achieved by the Renzi cabinet does not depend on the number of issues constituting the four reforms we consider. Those reforms, taken together, are also characterised by the highest level of intensity of policy innovation. In other words, the Renzi cabinet is the most innovative government in both absolute terms and in ‘intensity’ terms. However, this result is mainly due to the experts’ evaluation of the so-called ‘Jobs Act’. In fact, in education policy as well as in public administration policy, the first Prodi cabinet is considered by the experts as being more capable of introducing intense innovation than the Renzi cabinet.

The opposite trend characterised the extent to which governments are perceived as capable of coherent policy design by our panel of experts. In this case, the supremacy of the first Prodi government is clear, both in absolute terms and with regard to education and public administration, whereas Renzi’s cabinet has legislated very ‘well’ on labour market issues (at least in the experts’ view).

To summarise these findings, see Table 4, which differentiates among policy sectors with regard to total policy innovation, intensity of innovation, and perceived design coherence.

Table 4  Total innovation, average innovation and perceived efficacy in each policy sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy sector</th>
<th>The most innovative govmt</th>
<th>The govmt with the highest intensity in innovation</th>
<th>The most (perceived) coherent govmt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Berlusconi II</td>
<td>Prodi I</td>
<td>Prodi I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration</td>
<td>Renzi</td>
<td>Prodi I</td>
<td>Prodi I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour market</td>
<td>Renzi</td>
<td>Renzi</td>
<td>Renzi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As said, Renzi is the prime minister who has produced the greatest amount of policy change with his four reforms analysed here. This leadership originates from the fact that he passed two comprehensive and complex reforms on public administration (l.
114/2014 and l. 124/2015) and an innovative bill on the labour market (l. 183/2014). Moreover, his ‘Buona Scuola’ is considered as innovative as the so-called ‘Moratti Reform’ (l. 53/2003), which assures leadership in education policy to the second Berlusconi government. However, whereas Renzi’s leadership in total innovation is impressive, his leadership in the intensity dimension mainly depends on the so-called ‘Jobs Act’. In both education and public administration, the government that shows the highest degree of intense innovation is the first Prodi cabinet. On average, Prodi is also the prime minister who was able to pass the most (perceived) coherently designed reforms. This is far more evident in education and public administration, whereas in the labour market, the ‘Jobs Act’ by Renzi is considered by the experts as both the most intensively innovative and the most coherent policy measure.

Taking the quantitative and qualitative findings together, we can characterise the three governments under scrutiny as follows: i) the first Prodi cabinet faced more challenges in approving its legislative initiatives, but when it proved able to do so, it approved innovative and coherently designed policy measures; ii) the second Berlusconi cabinet did not have to overcome similar difficulties in policymaking, making it the government with the highest decision-making capacity; however, it mainly approved reforms that were considered by the experts as both scarcely innovative and coherent; and iii) the Renzi cabinet is similar to the Berlusconi II government with regard to decision-making capacity, mainly thanks to systematic recourse to exceptional legislative procedures (decree laws); this made it able to produce complex and innovative reforms that were evaluated by the experts as slightly less coherently designed than Prodi’s reforms but more coherent than Berlusconi’s initiatives.

In sum, all three governments have shown different capacities to lead the law-making process and varying aptitudes to produce ‘good’ policy measures. An interesting point in our empirical analysis is that the strongest government in quantitative terms – the second Berlusconi cabinet – is also the least capable of producing innovative and coherent policy design. Therefore, it is clear that there is no causal relation between ‘political’ strength and ‘good’ reforms.
5. Discussion: how to explain the different quality of policy designs of strong governments

The findings of our analysis are not completely surprising for those scholars who have followed the political and policy dynamics of the Italian political system over the last two decades. In fact, as clearly shown in the literature, during the 1990s (starting from the dissolution of the First Republic), the existing arrangements of many policy fields have progressively changed. At the end of the decade, everything was transformed in terms of existing policy design and adopted policy instruments (Cotta & Isernia 1996; Di Palma et al. 2000; Capano & Giuliani 2001). Moreover, the two years of the first Prodi government probably represented the peak of this wave of changes in policy design. Therefore, the results of our analysis appear to be reliable according to the existing literature.

The Prodi government, a stronger government compared to the executives of the previous political ‘era’ but a weaker one compared to both the Berlusconi II cabinet and the Renzi cabinet, has been quite effective in terms of policy innovation and coherence between its goals and the policy instruments it adopted. At the same time, the results of the second Berlusconi government are unsurprising. Notwithstanding its political strength, its performance in terms of policy design has never been evaluated highly by contemporary observers (Cotta & Verzichelli 2003; Donovan 2004; Guarnieri & Newell 2005). Finally, the performance of the Renzi government confirms what many scholars have observed with respect to the content of its reforms (Piattoni 2016; La Spina 2016; Ferrera 2016). Thus, although the final individual results are not particularly unexpected, the broader picture can be considered challenging and deserving of more attention and deeper discussion.

In fact, the differences among the three governments in terms of policy innovation and design coherence are clear and striking.

With regard to this, our analysis must be divided into two different paths. It is clear that all three governments introduced enormous policy innovations but with different quality of design. We assume that the quality of design is not only based on design coherence but also on the intensity of the innovation designed. This is due to the assumption that – ceteris paribus – the more intense a designed innovation is, the more
the government bases its policy on strong paradigms and causal theories. Thus, we need to consider the driver(s) of the quantity of policy innovation, on the one hand, and the quality of policy design (which is assumed to be composed of both the design coherence and the intensity of the innovations introduced), on the other.

With regard to the total amount of policy innovation, the gap in the performance of the second Berlusconi government is striking. In fact, although its legislative strength is the highest among the three analysed cabinets (see Table 2 above), its score in policy innovation is the lowest: very poor compared to the Renzi executive branch and lower than the Prodi government, which is consistently weaker at the legislative level than the other two governments. Thus, although the correlation between decision-making capacity and policy innovation is confirmed in two out of three cases, it does not work precisely for the strongest government.

Obviously, there may be various motivations for the differentiation that emerges from our analysis with respect to the total amount of policy innovation. At least two alternative factors can be suggested: i) ideational diversity within the ruling coalition (different policy positions) and ii) policy legacies and the timing of policies.

With regard to ideational diversity among ruling parties, we know from the literature that all three governments have similar spatial configurations.

Table 5  Party positions of ruling parties: Prodi I, Berlusconi II and Renzi in comparative perspective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Left-right cohesion (0-1)</th>
<th>Taxes-spending cohesion (0-1)</th>
<th>Deregulation cohesion (0-1)</th>
<th>Social policy cohesion (0-1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prodi I</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlusconi II</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renzi</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Benoit & Laver (2006); Di Virgilio et al. (2015)

As shown in Table 5, it is evident that all governments were similarly fragmented and differentiated. Consequently, each prime minister had to address the problem of managing the internal policy/ideational conflict and to reach compromises during the formulation process, both with interest groups and, in particular, with parliamentary groups supporting the cabinet. However, this factor seems relatively insignificant in explaining the variation in policy innovation.
For the policy legacies and the timing of the policy development, it could be assumed that governments, despite being very strong from a political perspective in leading the law-making process, introduce less policy innovation simply because things are going well in a specific policy field or because the previous governments made many changes, thus making it unnecessary to intervene again. This explanation obviously cannot work for the Prodi government (because it had to address the policy arrangements inherited from the First Republic and faced many potential changes), but it may work for other governments. The low performance in policy innovation of the Berlusconi government could be justified by the fact that many policy reforms were introduced in the previous decade. However, this argument conflicts with the logic of alternation as well with the ideological basis of the Berlusconi cabinet. Furthermore, the logic of policy development over time may also work in the opposite way: in the medium run, the decisions made by the previous governments could be ineffective and could represent an incentive to re-intervene. This may be the case for the Renzi government, which inherited the results of previous reforms and thus had a structural incentive to (re-)intervene. However, the policy legacy argument seems to be rather weak and not definitive.

Therefore, to understand the unexpected result that the strongest government (Berlusconi II) was the worst performer in terms of the quantity of policy innovation, it is necessary to examine the contextual factors that the government had to address. This, of course, will merit further research.

Yet, what is (even) more striking is the empirical evidence concerning the quality of policy design. In fact, according to our experts, the Prodi government, the weakest one in political terms, is the best performer in terms of policy design. The Renzi government is slightly higher with regard to the intensity of innovation but is clearly lower with respect to coherence design. Finally, the Berlusconi government – the strongest in terms of political capacity – is evidently the least innovative and coherent among the three cabinets analysed (Table 6).
Table 6 Legislative strength, intensity of innovation and (perceived) design coherence: Prodi I, Berlusconi II and Renzi in comparative perspective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Legislative strength (0-10)</th>
<th>Intensity of innovation (0-10)</th>
<th>(Perceived) design coherence (0-10)</th>
<th>Average intensity-coherence (0-10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prodi I</td>
<td>6.17</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>6.84</td>
<td>6.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlusconi II</td>
<td>7.53</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>5.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renzi</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>6.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many potential explanations could be presented, but we prefer to focus – in accordance with recent proposals from policy design studies – on the ‘technical’ capacity dimension.

When dealing with the design of policies, governments are faced with a multi-dimensional conundrum consisting of diverse aspects, including motivational (the presence of the real will to attempt to solve a policy problem), political (regarding consensus in the ruling party or coalition); knowledge (the quality of policy information available), contextual (the specific socio-economic conditions that could prevent the adoption of a specific policy solution), and historical (the nature of diachronically institutionalised interests and expectations) aspects. The way in which this multidimensional conundrum is addressed may lead to a government that either generates a real policy design or has a weak/null design.

According to the most recent policy-design studies, a distinction needs to be made between design and non-design processes. Policy design-oriented processes are characterised by the capacity of policy formulators to base their decisions mainly on evidence-based knowledge, learning, clear goals, and consistent, coherent policy tools (Bendor et al. 2009; Sidney 2007; Radaelli & Dunlop 2013; Howlett 2014; Howlett et al. 2015; Capano, Regini and Turri 2016). On the contrary, there are processes that are non-design oriented because they are exclusively the results of political dynamics (partisan/ideological conflict) or of the lock-in effects of previous policy decisions.

This distinction does not mean that policy-making based exclusively on political factors equates to no policy design. It simply means that in the absence of any counterforces (a strong, policy-oriented governmental attitude accompanied by the strong political capacity of governments themselves and a forceful, evidence-oriented bureaucratic attitude), policy design remains the result of contingency, negotiation, bargaining and policy legacy and thus may be very poor or null. Moreover, even if there
is a strong will and the political capacity to formulate a genuine policy design, the result may be mediocre or unsatisfactory in terms of effective policy innovation if the government does not possess sufficient technical and knowledge-driven capacities.

The main consequence of this divide is that real policy design is more effective in terms of its impact on reality. Based on causal theory, although non-design processes may involve a high level of policy innovativeness because of decision-makers’ strong powers or ideological drive, they may produce potentially ineffective decisions. Thus, from a policy design perspective, two fundamental dimensions matter in defining the quality of policy design: the political capacity and the technical capacity to formulate a genuine policy design.

The former assumes the government’s capacity to force the status quo, to build enough consensus, and thus to overcome the features of the policy legacy as well as the actual system of vested interests and veto players. Thus, this dimension may be empirically analysed through what we previously conceptualised as ‘legislative strength’: it is fair to say, in fact, that the more a government is characterised by political capacity, the higher its legislative strength.

A government’s technical capacity represents the actual presence of evidence-based knowledge (and thus of a structured process guaranteeing such knowledge) regarding the decisions to be made. This dimension is fundamentally important, according to Pressman and Wildavski (1973), if an adequate causal theory is to be produced to drive policy design and effective subsequent implementation. Therefore, this dimension may be empirically analysed through what we previously conceptualised as design coherence and, to some extent, intensity of innovation. It is perfectly reasonable to assume, in fact, that the higher the technical capacity characterising a given government, the more that same government is able to design innovative and coherent policy measures.

According to this perspective, good policy design is not necessarily the product of strong government but also requires sufficient technical capacity to design new policy solutions. Furthermore, the interaction between these two dimensions (the levels of political and technical capacity, which are intended as a continuum) can be assumed to delimit specific spaces of policy design. In Figure 4, these spaces are presented, and the
three governments under scrutiny are placed according to the evidence from the empirical analysis.

Figure 4  *Governmental spaces in policy design*

The result is a division of the design space into four areas in which the possible types of policy design are placed, representing the ‘real’ arenas in which governments formulate their policies. In each space, specific types of design (distinguished by their content in terms of intensity of innovation and design coherence) are delimited.  

*Space 1* is the optimal policy design space in which a government can almost freely pursue a new design. Thanks to high political capacity and high technical capacity, governments produce good policy design in terms of intensity of innovation and design coherence.

*Space 2* is the space in which strong governments fail to deliver good policies because they lack sufficient technical capacity. In this case, although a government has a high political capacity to redesign existing policy solutions, its poor technical support and knowledge do not allow it to introduce highly innovative and coherently designed policies.
Space 3 represents the situation in which a government, although technically well supported, cannot overcome the problem of its political weakness. In this case, intense innovation is inhibited, and policy formulators can only calibrate the actual design (by adding a few instruments or by changing the balance of instruments in the existing design) in a coherent and consistent way.

Space 4 is where a government scores poorly in both dimensions (technical as well as political capacity). Here, the design can only proceed by way of marginal interventions, which involve adding new instruments without clearly reflecting on whether they are in keeping with the pursued goals and with the potential effectiveness of the chosen tool. In this space, no policy innovation should be expected.

The fact that technical capacity should matter when governments attempt to do their job in designing policies is commonplace although often forgotten by political scientists. In our exploratory and descriptive analysis, it seems that this factor clearly matters, at least by the exclusion of the others. The findings that emerge push scholars to investigate which conditions favour or disfavour the technical capacity of governments when they have the opportunity to really lead policy-making. The presence and the quality of technical capacity and, in turn, of sufficient knowledge about the policy issues on which decisions should be made helps substantially in presenting a convincing causal theory and, therefore, policy solutions.

In the case of the three governments under scrutiny, the information at our disposal is limited and cannot be used to offer a clear-cut explanation. However, we must emphasise the following points:

1. the first Prodi government was characterised by the support of the most relevant policy communities in the three fields analysed here (and the three ministers were highly reputed members of those same communities); this allowed the government to design innovative and coherent plans of policy reforms (Capano 2000);

2. the second Berlusconi government could not enjoy the same favourable situation; very few policy experts were involved in the main formulation processes\textsuperscript{18};

\textsuperscript{18} This topic is not well investigated by the literature. However, it is well known that the sectional policy communities in education and labour policy were excluded by the formulation of the reforms, and
3. the Renzi government has based its policy innovation on the suggestion of a newly established policy task force mainly composed of economists (most of whom belong to the same university or to the same school of thought). This task force has been relevant in supporting the design of labour market reform, whereas the reforms of education and public administration have been characterised by a new policy style: public consultation, marginalisation of the main Trade Unions, involvement of individual experts on a random basis; and ‘verticalisation’, in the hands of the prime minister, of the final decision on the policy goals to be pursued (Piattoni 2016; La Spina 2016).

Thus, we find that three different types of arrangements in the advocacy and expertise supporting the governments have been in place. These arrangements have made the difference in terms of policy design, especially regarding the depth of policy innovativeness and the coherence of the decisions made.

6. Remarks for further research

In this paper, we have explored the relationship between governmental political capacity and the capacity to produce innovative and coherent policy design. We have shown that three of the most powerful governments in the recent history of the Italian political system have performed quite differently on this issue. By using an expert survey, we have assessed their total policy innovativeness, the intensity of the innovations introduced, and the perceived design coherence. The final results, although partial, are quite interesting and require further research to understand the conditions under which governments can produce high innovation and ‘good’ policy design. The finding that clearly emerges from our exploratory analysis is that the political capacity
of a government is not a sufficient condition for good policy design. Also relevant are the government’s technical capacity and the way governmental decisions are supported by specific knowledge, information, and expertise.

It is clear that our observations are inductive and thus are not exhaustive. At the same time, a focus on the analytical and technical dimension of government action seems promising to enrich the analysis of governmental capacity and effectiveness and to extend this analysis with respect to its actual status. Having the power to decide does not guarantee the capability to make good decisions and to design good policies.

This evidence provides an incentive for further research, especially on the following topics: i) increasing the number of experts involved in the survey and the number of policy fields analysed; ii) analysing, from a diachronic perspective, the evolution of governmental advisory systems; and iii) gathering data on the process by which governments design policies in the formulation stage in addition to the usual intra-coalitional dynamics and government-parliament relationships. Studies of these issues could contribute to better understanding how governmental policy design moves from one space to another as well as within the same space.

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