The Influence of Coalition Parties on Governments’ Policy Agendas in Italy

Enrico Borghetto
enrico.borghetto@fsch.unl.pt

Marcello Carammia
marcello.carammia@um.edu.mt

Paper prepared to be presented at the XXVII Annual Conference of the Italian Political Science Association (SISP), University of Florence, 12-14 September 2013.
1. Introduction

With a single exception, post-war Italy has always been governed by party coalitions. The formation and governance of these coalitions, however, changed markedly between the First and Second Republic. Before 1994, all political parties competed against each other in electoral campaigns, and coalitions were formed after elections. Post-election negotiations were secretive, and coalition agreements were not made public. Throughout the entire First Republic there was no alternation to government, if one excludes the peripheral alternation of some small parties around the pivotal Christian Democracy. As a consequence, there were limited incentives for cabinets to adhere to the policy priorities spelled out during election campaigns.

The move to the Second Republic resulted in a broad change of the system. The introduction of a new electoral law in 1993, a key element of the transition to the so-called Second Republic, provided powerful incentives for political parties to form pre-election coalitions. Electoral contestation became clearer to voters, and so became the allocation of responsibility. In the first years, these coalitions were not formalized into coalition agreements. After two legislative terms, coalition parties started issuing coalition manifestoes, that beside the traditional function of party manifestoes also served the function of pre-electoral coalition agreements. Meanwhile, a number of reforms made governments stronger vis-à-vis the parliament.

These variations in the pattern of competition (with the introduction of alternation to government), in the strength of governments, and in the politics and governance of coalitions (with the shift from post-election coalitions without formal coalition agreement; to pre-election coalitions with or without formal coalition agreement) provide an ideal background against which to test hypotheses about the functioning of coalition governance. We take advantage from this quasi-experimental context to address the question of how coalition governments build their policy agendas once they take office, and particularly the extent to which their agendas relate to the priorities communicated to voters during election campaigns. We also explores the differential capacity of individual coalition parties (differing in size and ideological position) to influence the policy agenda of the government under different coalition governance mechanisms.

The paper is based on data on party manifestoes and investiture speeches produced by the Italian Agendas Project. In looking at the distribution of policy priorities in party manifestoes and government investiture speeches, the paper follows an agenda-setting approach, but it also tests the claims of an alternative approach, mandate theory. Rather than formalising a model and testing alternative hypotheses, however,
we take an explorative approach and formalise only some basic expectations. We proceed as follows. We first discuss coalition agenda-setting, with particular emphasis on mandate and agenda-setting theory. We then illustrate the relevance of coalition governance and the formation of coalition process within the context of Italy. Next we illustrate our expectations and discuss our research designs. Finally, we discuss our findings and reappraise them in the conclusions.

2. The formation of coalition governments’ priorities between mandate-effect and agenda-setting constraints

The broad theoretical question of this paper is how coalition cabinets select their priorities once they take office. A key question related to the formation of coalition priorities is whether and to what extent they are related to public priorities. At the hearth there is then the issue of representation, i.e. the extent to which governments represent citizens’ preferences. Representation, however, can be understood in different ways.

One approach to representation sees political elections as the fundamental mechanisms for the translation of public priorities in public policy: “Elections are the distinguishing institution of democracy, translating individual voter preferences into collective choices that can in some sense be said to reflect them” (McDonald and Budge 2005: 4). The baseline argument is that, during election campaigns, political parties compete on the basis of party platforms; a majority of voters confer a mandate to one or more political parties; those political parties will implement that mandate to avoid the sanction of voters in the next elections. The idea that, in democracies, governments are appointed to fulfil voters’ preferences is central to mandate theory: “At the core of the mandate thesis is the idea that individual elections shape policy outcomes” (McDonald and Budge 2005: 230). Citizens’ preferences are therefore selected and aggregated through votes, and translated in the governing platform of governing parties. Mandate theory also has a normative component: the “congruence between promise and performance is at the heart of what we mean by ‘democracy’” (Klingemann et al 1994: 2).

Evidence related to mandate theory, however, is mixed. Analyses have focused both on issue emphasis (that is, the extent to which issues that are prioritised during election campaigns are then prioritised in government policy) and policy positions (that is the extent to which the left-right orientation of governments reflect the positions claimed during electoral campaigns). Earlier studies found little evidence for a mandate effect in terms of left-right policy position (Laver and Budge 1992). However, the use of
different methodologies led other scholars to claim that a mandate effect makes government declarations reflect the ‘weighted mean’ of cabinet parties’ positions, that is, the mean ideological position of the political parties in government, weighted by their seat share (Warwick 2001; 2011). Studies analysing issue emphasis rather than policy positions, and comparing priorities in party manifestoes with government expenditures, also found evidence of a mandate effect (Klingemann et al. 1994).

There are several theoretical reasons not to expect representation to be based on a mandate effect only, however. Agenda-setting studies emphasise a number on constraints to the smooth translation of electoral priorities into government outputs. Since space on the political agenda is limited, governments need to prioritise some issues over others (Jones 1994). Government priorities, in turn, are the outcome of a variety of factors that interact in complex and often unpredictable ways (Kingdom 1984). Policy subsystems of interest groups, experts, bureaucrats, also influence the action of governments (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Even when one narrows down the focus on the role of political parties and their decision-making role, governing parties are not the only relevant player, as the political opposition has a strong role in setting the political agenda. Evidence of the role of the opposition has been found to hold at the level of both individual MPs (Sulkin 2005) and the broader party system (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010).

On a more general level, agenda-setting studies emphasise the operation of a number of frictions hindering government control of the political agenda. Cognitive limitations force government to make a selection among the multiplicity of problems demanding their attention. Ideology also act as a cognitive boundary for political parties: parties cannot easily adapt to a changing context because they hold on to structured belief systems which are not easy to update or overcome (Walgrave and Nuytemans 2009). In addition, institutional frictions constraints political actions. Such institutional frictions stem from the transaction costs associated to policy change, such as the majorities required to take decisions. In parliamentary democracies with multi-party governing coalitions, institutional frictions can be even more compelling (Jones et al 2009).

Finally, a powerful constraint to the government capacity to fulfil a political mandate is incoming information signalling new problems to be addressed. To mandate theory’s normative claim that the respect of electoral promises is key to the democracy of the political process, agenda-setting studies contrast the argument that, beside fulfilling the electoral mandate, “governments must also govern” (Baumgartner et al 2011: 954). They need to solve relevant problems, and problems often cannot be anticipated at times of elections. Agenda-setting studies do not deny that governments seek to act responsively (Jones and Baumgartner 2004; Chaques and Palau 2011). However, as policy problems change, public priorities shift over time, and so does government action too. Studies of ‘dynamic
representation’ found consistent evidence for such patterns in a number of political systems (e.g. Stimson et al 1995, Soroka and Wlezien 2010, Bevan and Jennings forth.)

To be sure, mandate and agenda-setting approach to the study of representation do not need to be put in stark contrast. To claim that an electoral mandate operates to orientate government does not imply that it dictates its action entirely, and no study has never claimed that. Conversely, to argue that a number of factors act against the implementation of the electoral mandate does not mean that governments do not seek to respect their electoral promises (cfr. Borghetto Carammia Zucchini forth). The key question is thus the extent to which governments are able to implement electoral priorities, and the mechanisms and extent to which they are constrained in their capacity to do so.

We contribute to this question by analysing the formation of the agenda of multiparty coalition governments, and the impact of formal and informal institutions on the process. We look at a key moment for the translation of electoral priorities: the genesis of governments and the translation of parties’ electoral priorities into the agenda of coalition cabinet; and the way changes to the functioning of the political system impact upon the process. In the next section, we provide an overview of the politics of coalitions and its relevance in Italy. We argue that Italy represents an ideal case to explore these dynamics. While it has always been governed by multiparty coalitions, the formation and governance of coalitions changed sharply with the system-change associated to the shift from the First to the Second Republic. Italy thus provides a quasi-experimental context to make sense of how formal and informal political institutions and expectations about government behaviour impact on the formation of coalition agendas.

3. The politics of coalitions in Italy between the First and Second Republic

Post-war Italy has always been governed by coalitions of political parties. The single exception was the unicolor Christian Democratic governments of ‘national solidarity’ during the dramatic years 1976-79. That was not only the response to a dramatic political, economic and social crisis; it was also the result of a parliamentary grand-coalition between the two main parties of the time: the Christian Democracy and the Italian Communist Party. So while looking at the partisan composition of cabinets there has been a single exception to coalition governments, modern Italian governments have always relied on the support of multi-party coalitions in Parliament.

While coalitions have been a constant, the way they were built changed markedly with the passage to the so-called Second Republic. Before 1994, all political parties competed against each other in electoral
campaigns; coalitions were only formed afterwards. To be sure, the convention ad excludendum against the Communist Party and the post-Fascists of the Italian Social Movement made the range of coalitionable parties relatively predictable. Particularly since the 1980s, when Italy was invariably governed by the Pentapartito (Five Party) coalition. Still, First Republic elections formally were an everyone-against-everyone contest. It was only after elections that a selected number of competitors negotiated to divide the spoils of government.

Post-election negotiations for allocating cabinet portfolios is the standard way for parliamentary regimes. Indeed, “[m]uch of the fascination that parliamentary regimes hold for students of democratic government resides in their non-transparency. Unless voters give a single party a parliamentary majority (...), it may be far from obvious which party or parties will form the next government” (Warwick 2001, 1212). An additional element of non-transparency in First Republic coalition-building was the secrecy of negotiations – and of their outcomes. While coalition agreements were increasingly becoming standard practice in post-war parliamentary systems (Muller and Strom 2008), Italian coalitions never formalised the outcome of their negotiations. Moreover, the exclusion of anti-system parties from the range of ‘coalitionable’ parties (Sartori 1976) resulted in “constrained coalitions” (Verzichelli and Cotta 2000). This contributed to the perception of extremely unstable governments, marked by continuous negotiations between (and within) coalition members in search of ad hoc agreements on a decision-by-decision basis.

In sum, unstable and secretive coalitions resulted in short-lived governments, fuelling an increasing (and increasingly widespread) perception of ineffectiveness and misgovernment. To this, a further key element must be added. The convention ad excludendum against the Communist Party resulted in the total lack of alternation, so that the Christian Democrats were pivotal to all First Republic cabinets, most of the time in coalition with the same parties. The total lack of alternation to government resulted in the lack of responsibility of both majority and opposition parties (Sartori 1976), adding to the perception of non-responsiveness of Italian governments.

It is against this background that the coincidence of overlapping shocks made an apparently stable system collapse suddenly in the early 1990s (Cotta and Isernia 1996), resulting in the dramatic transformations that paved the way to the advent of the so-called Second Republic. The joint action of the Mani Pulite (Clean Hands) investigations, the end of the Cold War, and the budgetary and fiscal crisis of the early 1990s, precipitated a longer-term trend of broadening dissatisfaction with the functioning of Italian politics. The governance of coalition governments was generally understood as a crucial weakness of the system. It is not a case that the renewed social activism during the transition from the First to the Second Republic was catalysed by the ‘Referendum Movement’, a successful attempt to impose a systemic change
based on the popular promotion of a majoritarian electoral system. The idea behind the movement, which soon escalated into general consensus, was that the ‘transmission belt’ between public demands and government’s output was malfunctioning; and that a plurality rule would lead to a more direct connection between public and governments, thus improving government performance in terms of both responsiveness and accountability.

The introduction of a new electoral law in 1993 was therefore a key element of the transition to the Second Republic. Yet the graft of a quasi-majoritarian law in a fragmented and polarised party system – which was also in a process of transition following the collapse of the main First-Republic party, the Christian Democrats, and the radical transformation of its main opponent, the Communist Party – did not result in a change toward bipartism. Quite the opposite, it resulted in further fragmentation. However, the renewed multi-partism would feature a key departure from the old one: consistent with the dominant mood, a key element of the new electoral law was that it provided powerful incentives for political parties to form pre-election coalitions.¹

The structure and functioning of coalition governments thus remained key to Second Republic politics. In its early stage, coalitions were still rarely formalized into coalition agreements. They were declared before elections, but each party still issued its own electoral manifesto. Against the background of party fragmentation, the governance of coalitions proved difficult. In four out of five Second-Republic legislative terms covered in this study, electoral coalitions collapsed (at times long) before the natural end of the legislative term. Because of the electoral investiture that pre-election coalitions were believed to enjoy, in the best cases their collapse was followed by extremely weak governments; in the worst, it resulted in the early termination of the legislative term.

Against this background, political parties sought to improve the governance of coalitions. Key to these attempts was the formulation of coalition agreements. Different from the common standard of parliamentary democracies, however, coalition agreements were not negotiated after elections. Since transparency and stability of coalitions was a major concern of both political parties and the public opinion, the agendas of coalition parties were the object of pre-electoral agreement. As a consequence, Second Republic coalitions increasingly issued coalition manifestoes, that beside the traditional function of party

¹ This also explains why the move back to a proportional law in 2005 did not result in a major change to the pattern of coalitions. Not only had this law an in-built disproportionality which is hardly found in proportional representation systems; it also provided powerful incentives for the formation of pre-electoral coalitions, such as a system of thresholds which favoured pre-election aggregations, the indication of coalition leaders, and the presentation of coalition manifestoes.
programmes came also to serve the function of pre-electoral coalition agreements. It is no surprise that this practice, which was eventually made mandatory with the change to the electoral law in 2005, was first implemented in the more riotous centre-left-coalition.

In sum, while multi-party coalitions have been central to the Italian Republic experience, their governance has generally been rather inefficient, resulting in instability and limited governing capacity. The lack of transparency, accountability and effectiveness of First Republic coalitions was a crucial weakness of the system. To this, one must add the lack of responsiveness of governing parties, which were perceived to ignore their policy promises and public priorities. Accordingly, the Second Republic was built on mechanisms that sought to improve the accountability, governance, and responsiveness of coalition governments. Key to accountability, governance, and responsiveness is what coalitions (plan to) do, that is, the formation of coalition agendas: how individual parties select policy problems and draw list of priorities; communicate them to the public; and compose them into broader coalition agendas. The change in the formation of coalition agendas is the focus of this paper. In the next section, we raise some expectations about the formation of coalition cabinet priorities in Italy.

4. Expectations about the formation of the coalition agenda in Italy

For the electoral mandate to operate, a key prerequisite is that a transmission belt exists that translates public priorities from the public to government. The widespread perception in Italy during the First Republic was that this transmission was hindered by a number of factors, directly or indirectly related to the inefficiency of coalition politics. The proportional electoral system was believed to promote fragmentation and enhance the power of small parties. Moreover, by deferring the government formation process to the post-election stage, it provided negative incentives to the formulation and fulfilment of clear policy promises. In addition, the lack of alternation to government resulted in a generalised lack of responsibility in both government and opposition parties.

The translation of inputs into outputs is actually mediated by a number of factors. These factors can make the translation smoother, or they can complicate it. Coalition governments as such are one of the institutional frictions limiting control of the political agenda (Jones et al. 2009: 865). The way coalition cabinets act on the translation of public priorities into government output, however, is ambiguous. In contrast to directly elected executives, which are generally associated to higher responsiveness (Perrson and Tabellini 2007), coalitions can be thought to complicate the clear allocation of political responsibility. Yet coalition governments are likely to cover a wide ideological spectrum, thus providing representation to
a broader electorate (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008). Proportional electoral systems, which are generally associated to coalition governments, permit the representation of larger constituencies (Liiphart 1999; Shugart and Carey 1992). Therefore, coalition cabinets could also be associated to increased responsiveness.

We test the operation of these mechanisms on Italy between the First and Second Republic. We first explore the structure of both party manifestoes and government speeches, and then pass on to the analysis of the correspondence between the two. Next we focus on the genesis of coalition priorities, looking at the agenda of multiparty coalition cabinets as spelled out during investiture speeches in front of parliaments, and contrasting them to the priorities presented by political parties during election campaigns. In focusing on declarations instead of decisions or public policy outputs, we exclude the operation of a number of frictions limiting the mandate effect such as the limitations to government action. In a sense, we look at pure agenda-formation. However, the variation inherent to the Italian case under the period of study permits us to test the effect of important variables on the coalition agenda.

Our broad expectation is that the move to the Second Republic increased the correspondence between the agendas of coalition governments on the one side, and the priorities spelled out by political parties during election campaigns on the other side. We have several reasons to expect this. First, the shift from post- to pre-election coalitions made the system similar to directly elected executives, which generally have higher degrees of responsiveness (Perrson and Tabellini 2007). The public discussion of the programmes of coalition parties is key to election campaigns of the Second Republic. Therefore, we should expect coalition cabinets in the Second Republic not to move too far from electoral priorities when they take office and declare their agendas.

In addition, the introduction of alternation should have made cabinets more sensitive to the possibility of future electoral sanctions. Against a political discourse and a public mood increasingly focused on the respect of a political mandate, the clear allocation of political responsibility to pre-electoral coalitions should push governments to translate their electoral priorities onto the government agenda. In short, the introduction of (perfect) alternation to government introduced real electoral contestability, which also is associated to higher responsiveness (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008). Finally, the increased decision-making power of the government vis-à-vis the parliament should have made governments more confident that they will be able to implement their agendas. Of course, even in the Second Republic we do not expect coalition agendas to be the mere reproduction of election platforms, as we assume that some constraints will still operate. For instance, post-election negotiations still take place between political parties. Especially in the absence of coalition agreements, these can lead to readjustments of the electoral agenda.
We also expect the appointed cabinet to uptake some of the priorities of the opposition. Yet overall we have strong reasons to expect an increase in the translation of electoral priorities on to cabinet priorities.

We take profit from the rich variance in our cases to go deeper in the analysis of the governance of coalitions. While coalition governments have long been the subject of scholarly interest, the main focus has mainly been on issues related to the formation of coalition governments and the allocation of government portfolios among coalition members (see e.g. Laver and Shepsle 1996, Riker 1962; on Italy, Giannetti and Laver 2001). The governance of coalition cabinets, in turn, is a more recent object of study – not least because of the difficulty to analyse the actual functioning of coalitions. To address this question, studies of coalition governance have looked into the ‘keys to togetherness’ (Strom and Muller 1999): the coalition agreements that hold together individual political parties. The study of coalition agreements has furthered the understanding of the governance of coalition governments. Agreements have been found to be crucial to the governance of coalition cabinets. In permitting to address the crucial problems of bargaining and delegation (Strom and Muller 1999: 256; Strom et al 2008), agreements reduce policy conflict among coalition parties (Timmermans 2003, 2006). Recent research has gone even further than that. In a comparative study of four countries, Moury (2012) found systematic evidence that, as contracts between coalition members, agreements are implemented to a significant extent.

As we detail below in the discussion of our research design, the small N limits our possibility to pursue a comprehensive statistical test. However, beside the degree of transposition of electoral priorities on to government agendas, we also explore how individual parties contribute to setting the agenda of the coalition. In particular, we explore the agenda-setting role of small and large parties, the influence of the formateur, and the impact of the introduction of coalition agreements on the coalition government agenda. Different roles for individual (types of) parties in the formation of the coalition agenda mean different models of coalition agenda-building. A pure mandate model would imply that single parties’ influence on the coalition agenda should be proportional to their electoral share (Warwick 2001, 2011). If the main party of the coalition – which in Italy has the median position in the coalition’s ideological space – has a dominant influence on the coalition agenda, then a median party mandate model would apply (McDonald and Budge 2005). A proposer or formateur model would result in a greater influence for the party of the Prime Minister (Baron and Ferejohn 1998). Finally, a veto-player model would assign disproportionate agenda-setting power to small parties (Tsebelis 2002).
5. Data and research design

To empirically examine our expectations, we use two datasets constructed within the Comparative Agendas Project, following a uniform approach to content code data sources across countries. We developed an Italian version of the topic classification scheme which include a limited number of subtopics that are specific to the Italian context (Borghetto and Carammia 2011). We content coded all sentences and quasi-sentences of all manifestos and PM investiture speeches (only those immediately following the election of a new parliament) between 1983 and 2006. Both data sources were coded by trained coders working in pairs but coding independently and comparing and discussing cases of coding disagreement. This resulted in an inter-coder reliability of over 90% in both data collection projects.

In coding sentences in PM investiture speeches, we also used a variable indicating whether statements actually had policy content. We excluded from this study those statements referring to the government formation process or to some very general point about government with no substantive agenda relevance. The datasets of party manifestos and PM investiture speeches contain respectively some 41000 and 7000 content coded sentences. Both datasets are analysed at the level of 21 major topics.

In the following two sections, we begin with mapping the general empirical picture of both types of agendas, with findings at aggregate level, and briefly discuss their meaning. Then we proceed with the analysis of convergence between the priorities set in manifestos and in the PM speech during the seven legislatures under exam and confront our hypothesis with the findings.

6. Analysis: the formation of government agenda

6.1 Evolution of party agendas: manifesto data

One of the most apparent elements of change between the two periods was the substitution of individual party manifestos with pre-electoral coalition agreements. Before 1993, classical party manifestos fulfilled their purpose by reinforcing the elements of identification of voters to specific parties. The predisposition to vote for one party instead of another was then traditionally based on social identities, political cleavages (mainly religion and class), and territorial factors (DIAMANTI) rather than on either the content of policies on offer, the reputation of the candidates or the competence shown in government (Segatti and Bellucci 2010). Nothing precluded these documents to include references to concrete measures to be taken once elected in office, but party elites knew from the origin that voters could hardly hold them accountable for

\footnote{Conti’s paper in this volume examines more closely the 2008-2011 period.}
not fulfilling their promises. The heterogeneity of Italian coalitions and, above all, the blocked system of government formation (with a dominant centrist party and with alternation in government virtually impossible) prevented voters to punish-reward their representatives through a retrospective evaluation.

The new electoral system brought about a change – albeit gradual – in the political supply. In 1994 Berlusconi won the elections by creating a coalition of ‘variable geometry’ (with right-wing forces in the South and with regionalist separatist parties in the North). Faced with different and untested rules of the game, parties adopted a conservative strategy and no official coalition manifesto was drawn up to sanction the alliances. In 1996, the centre-left forces united behind Prodi’s leadership and created the Ulivo (Olive Tree) coalition. Their manifesto was the first instance of large programmatic platform and did not find any equivalent in the centre-right camp. The reasons underlying these different approaches were mostly rooted in post-electoral rather than on pre-electoral calculations. Since the beginning of the Second Republic, the creation of electoral cartels has been a necessity in the left coalition due to the lack of a predominant party (Ds and Margherita had more or less the same electoral weight) and the high degree of fragmentation (coalition-building was traditionally very inclusive, with parties ranging from the centre to the extremes of the political spectrum). Conversely, the right could boast a strong leadership, Berlusconi, at the helm of a comparatively bigger party, Forza Italia, dealing with a lower number of satellite coalition partners.

The advent of government alternation occurred in 2001 with the victory of the centre-right Casa delle libertà (CdL, House of Freedoms) over a re-edition of the Olive tree. It was the first campaign to witness the diffuse reference to excerpts drawn from the respective coalition manifestos as communicative devices. The tone of the campaign was set by Berlusconi himself and his unorthodox use of media, which culminated in the symbolic “Contract with Italians”, a document signed during a television show where he committed himself to respect the five most salient measures presented in the CdL’s manifesto. Finally, the 2006 elections saw a renewed confrontation between the 1996 candidates for the two poles, Prodi and Berlusconi, but the new electoral law and its majority prize provided new incentives for building even larger coalitions. Berlusconi opted for a minimalist programmatic platform, bolstered by his and his party’s pivotal position in the centre-right. By contrast, the centre-left had to deal with usual problems of internal fragmentation. It has been suggested that the solution to the problems of coalition-management may have been found in a large and articulated coalition manifesto, used by coalition partners to minimise agency loss when delegating to ministers of other parties (Moury 2011). In fact, specifying the details of each policy commitment allowed coalition partners to keep ministers into account in case they decided to deviate too much from what had been agreed in the manifesto.
The dramatic evolution of the party agenda in the run-up to elections, as captured by party manifestos, is described through a range of indicators in Figure 1. First, the introduction of coalition manifestos was associated with a significant increase in the size of these documents. An upward trend starts from the XII Second Republic legislative term and increases over time. The trend peaks in coincidence with the XIV and XV terms, which were respectively one and two times longer than the average manifesto in the previous elections. The XV legislature stands out as well for the extremely large standard deviation in the length of documents, resulting from the centre-left manifesto being eleven times longer than the centre-right one (346 vs 3960 (quasi-) sentences). The average length of manifestoes then decreases in the last term we analyse, the XVI. This coincided with an attempt of both left and right coalitions to exclude smaller parties and simplify the system.

The greater detail of coalition documents does not necessarily stem from a greater heterogeneity in the range of covered topics. The agenda space (the absolute number of policy issues touched upon in a document) of an average party manifesto in the First Republic is already quite extensive. Rather, it is doubtful whether all policy sectors were given equal importance in the manifesto. The measurement of policy entropy, namely the diffusion of attention in manifestos across policy topics, shows that coalition manifestos in the XIV, XV, and XVI legislatures are in a class of their own. The normalised Shannon’s entropy score, ranging from 0 to 1, increases from an average of around .8 up to around .95, meaning that the spread of attention across all issues became more equal. Finally, an analysis of the longitudinal change in the composition of the agenda reveals that the most notable change in an otherwise remarkably stable agenda is the decrease in the attention devoted to foreign policy matters. This resulted partly from the end of the Cold War, which decreased the urge for political actors to take a deliberate stance on most events occurring in the international arena. Partly, it stems from a gradual shift of European policies from the realm of foreign to that of domestic policy.

A combined reading of these indicators reveals the profound mutation of manifesto documents. Confronted with the necessity to speak to larger audiences of voters and win the support of the medium voter, the two cartels of parties opted for diversifying their policy offer to a level unknown in the past. In the new era of government alternation, elections and not parties after election decide who gets into office. Manifestos are one of the weapons in the hands of large coalitions to reach an electorate which is: 1)

---

3 To improve the understanding of the graph, the 21 CAP issue areas were collapsed into 6 macro-categories.
diversified, given the heterogeneity of partners making up the coalition; 2) giving increasing relevance to valence factors in their voting choice (in other terms, the evaluation of candidates is more and more based on the perception of party leaders, their effectiveness in government and the policies parties commit to pursue once in power (Bellucci 2012)).

Yet, there is evidence of a divergence between how the two coalitions made use of this tool. Being coalition manifestos the minimum common denominator of different party profiles and being in the interest of party leaders to minimize the number of promises to keep in front of their voters, the expectations are that the lower the level of fragmentation, the more concise the document. In this case, leaders of the centre-right coalitions were favoured, given the presence of a clear leadership in their camp. The same reasoning cannot apply to the centre-left, whose internal heterogeneity is reflected in long and detailed documents laying down in details the terms of the compromise.

6.2 Evolution of cabinet agenda: government declarations

Italian cabinets in the first Republic did not use to issue a distinct cabinet programme, committing them to a specific set of policies in front of their electors and providing civil servants with a unitary policy direction (Verzichelli and Cotta 2003). To be true, the requirement for the Prime Minister designate to deliver a speech in front of both chambers before the confidence vote has been existing since the first years of the Republic. Yet, the main addressees were not voters or administrators, but rather coalition parties (Villone and Zuliani 1994). A content analysis of government declarations from the period reveals that for the most part, they were filled with symbolic and general references aimed at sanctioning the post-electoral pact among coalition partners. Decisions on specific measures were left to other arenas, either informal meetings of party leaders or the meetings of parliamentary committees, where deals could be brokered not only with coalition partners but also with the opposition (Di Palma 1977).

The relative dearth of programmatic references in one of the most publicized and significant interventions of the Prime Minister in parliament is indicative of its peculiar weight in the balance of power characterizing the first forty years of Republican history. Italy was then an emblematic case of strong party government (Vassallo 1994). Parties played a pivotal role not only by filling political institutions with their candidates, but also by directly influencing executive decision-making processes. Given these conditions,

4 For instance, they could do so by “opposing initiatives of ministers from another party, or defending explicitly the action of ‘their’ ministers during a conflict with the PM about a specific policy competence” (Verzichelli 2006, 449).
the leadership role formally bestowed on the Prime Minister by the Constitutional Chart varied extensively, depending on the presence of multiple facilitating factors: their own and the ministers’ respective political stature, the minister’s portfolio, the political leverage of their party and the political support they could elicit within it. As a result, Italian PMs were traditionally depicted as weak in comparison to other heads of governments (Hine and Finocchi 1991).

It has been argued that the majoritarian turn of the early 1990s contributed to strengthen the PM figure both in its positive power of policy direction and in its negative powers of limitation of ministerial discretion (Verzichelli 2006). The PM can now rely on a direct mandate from electors as leader of the electoral cartel they vote for, so much that some scholars speak of a presidentialisation of Italian politics (Venturino 2001). Yet, three further factors might be said to have contributed to this unprecedented visibility. On the one hand, a series of reforms (i.e. law 400/1988) provided the PM with new tools to control the cabinet agenda and coordinate the actions of ministers. Second, the personalistic and centralizing interpretation of the role of PM by Berlusconi created a strong precedent. Third, the greater frequency of European and international meetings between heads of state and government increased the need for strong and durable leaders representing the country.

Once again, we make recourse to a range of indicators to read the evolution of the instrument of the PM speech (see Figure 2). The analysis which follows compares the first two legislatures (IX and X, illustrating First Republic speeches) with the last four (XIII to XVI, illustrating Second Republic speeches). The XI and XII legislatures are considered legislatures of transition and will be dealt with separately. In terms of length, we can notice a clear increase in the last three legislatures. The average number of sentences shifts from around 225 in the First to more than 350 in the Second Republic, though Berlusconi opened his fourth government during the XVI term with an exceptionally short speech. Second, speeches cover a considerably wider range of topics. The average agenda space is almost twice as big in the Second Republic (from around 12 to more than 18). Thirdly, the average distribution of attention across policy sectors rises from 0.65 to around 0.8. Finally, similarly to manifestos, there is a decrease of attention devoted to foreign policy issues, while domestic matters like the welfare state are given more consideration. Overall, PM’s speeches became not only longer and larger in scope, but also more detailed when mentioning a new topic. In sum, there is evidence that their format mutated over time, taking more and more the shape of

---

5 Article 95 of the Italian Constitution states that the President of Council of Ministers conducts and is responsible for the general policy of the government. He is to ensure the unity and consistency of the political and administrative programme ‘by promoting and coordinating the activity of ministers’.
articulated accounts of the cabinet’s stance on a variety of issues. Exactly what one would expect from programmatic platforms in a majoritarian system.

REPORTED FIGURE 2 HERE

Reported scores point to a significant increase in many indicators already in the XI legislature. We argue that these increases largely stemmed from the exceptional circumstances characterising those years. Italy had just signed the Maastricht treaty and was under constant pressure from international markets and European partners to keep its national debt under control. In the meanwhile, the national currency, the Lira, was undergoing a period of wild fluctuation, which eventually led to its withdrawal from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (September 1992). Finally, traditional political parties were weakened by both the unsatisfactory results obtained in the last elections and the allegations of corruption against a large number of their most prominent members.

We argue that these extraordinary conditions both constrained and gave a freer rein to the Amato government in setting the agenda. On the one hand, he had to implement a range of budget cuts and austerity reforms advocated by European partners. Their presentation as externally imposed conditions allowed Amato to introduce them safely in the agenda. On the other hand, the dire state of the political forces supporting his government might have pushed him to present a more articulated speech, where he tried to bind coalition partners (DC, PSI, PSDI and PLI) and external supporters (RP) to the mast in support of his “weak” cabinet, that would eventually last 10 months only. The exceptional character of the period stands out if one considers the dramatic change occurred in the subsequent legislature, XII, where the speech delivered by the new PM Berlusconi exhibited lowest scores in all indicators but already showed most features of the new format of government declarations in the Second Republic.

6.3 Congruence between party agenda and cabinet agenda

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the link between the issues attended in party/coalition manifestos and at the moment of the government investiture. Previous works have examined this link from a positional perspective: are the preferences expressed in party manifestos reflected in the cabinet agendas (McDonald and Budge 2005; Warwick 2011)? Here, we look at the correspondence between the pre-electoral issue priorities of parties/coalitions and the policy priorities of the government. In the previous sections, we outlined the significant metamorphosis both in the format of party manifestos and
PMs’ investiture speeches occurred in the mid-1990s as a consequence of the change in the Italian party system. This section aims at exploring whether this passage increased also the congruence between the priorities declared in party manifestos and those set by the PM at the beginning of the legislature.

In order to quantify the similarity between the two agendas we applied the measure of “issue convergence” developed by Sigelman and Buell (2004) to capture how much attention each candidate devoted to every potential issue in presidential campaigns. The maximum level of congruence is 1. For instance, a score of 0.5 would indicate a 50% overlap between the two agendas (for an application of this measure to agenda-setting research on executive speeches, see Mortensen et al 2011).

Since the first four government coalitions under observation did not issue a common manifesto before elections, we computed three different versions of it. In this way, we can capture different forms of agenda-building. Firstly, “formateur” represents the agenda of the party which is called to form the government, namely the party of the Prime Minister. According to the “proposer” model delineated by Baron and Ferejohn (1989), the formateur is in a more favourable position with respect to coalition partners and thus will get a greater payoff in terms of cabinet posts. We explore this hypothesis in the setting of the cabinet agenda (see also Curini and Ceron Forthcoming). Second, we measure the coalition agenda as the sum of (relative measures of) salient issues in each party manifesto. Here, all party agendas are considered as having equal importance, irrespective of the size and relevance of each party in the coalition. Indeed, this approach over-represents the agendas of smaller parties. The idea behind this measure can be related to a veto-player view of coalitions, where all actors are assumed to have the same relevance (Tsebelis 2002). Finally, we consider the coalition agenda as a sum of (relative measures of) salient issues in each party manifesto, but adding a weight to each party agenda based on its share of parliamentary seats. Smaller parties are considered here, but the relevance of their programmes is weighted to take into account their leverage within the coalition (cfr. Warwick 2001 and 2011). This captures the variation in the “blackmailing power” of small parties, which can threaten to exit from the coalition and withdraw their support to the government (Sartori 1976).

---

6 It is measured as follows: \(1 - \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n}} | \text{PercM}_i - \text{PercS}_i | / 2\) where PercM and PercS are the percentages of the total attention devoted to a particular issue respectively in manifestos and speeches, and the absolute differences between them are summed over all n of the potential issues.

7 The formateur in the seven legislatures under observation were respectively: IX(PSI), X(DC), XI(PSI), XII(Forza Italia), XIII(Ulivo), XIV(Casa delle Libertà), XV(Ulivo).

8 The three measures coincide in the XV legislature where only the centre-left and centre-right coalition issued a manifesto.
Figure 3 illustrates the longitudinal variation of issue convergence between our three measurements of coalition agenda and the cabinet agenda outlined in the course of the investiture debate. The first remarkable finding is the jump in the score of issue convergence between the two last legislatures of the First Republic and the subsequent period. First the dismantling of the old party system (XI and XII) and then the instauration of a system of bipolar alternation in government (XIII, XIV, XV and XVI) introduced a shift in the pattern of agenda formation. After the 1993 reform of the electoral law, citizens express a preference not only for a party but also for a governing coalition which shares a common leader and often also a common programme. In addition, as we argued above, the PM evolved toward a role as coalition leader rather than mediator.

An analysis by legislature permits to make more specific comments on the differential impact of the three distinct measurements of majority coalition priorities on the cabinet agenda. In the IX legislature, the highest convergence score is associated with the agenda of the formateur, the Socialist party manifesto led by the Bettino Craxi. This result is consistent with accounts of the peculiarly strong interpretation of premiership by the PSI leader (Hine 1986). His “presidentialist” approach in conjunction with the creation of a first version of core executive (an inner cabinet composed of the party leaders) strengthened his political coordination of the executive.

The low convergence score recorded during the X legislature, a re-edition of the pentapartito coalition, is emblematical of the disconnection between the government agenda and the issues debated in party manifestos. Aware of its “political weakness” the government headed by the Christian Democratic leader Goria opted for a low-profile speech, postponing the debate on the most critical decisions to other venues. Although the Amato government (XI legislature) could rely on a similarly flimsy majority, the high convergence scores (the highest in our study period) signals that other “external” factors might account for this result. First, we mentioned the existence of strong European and international pressures on its government to push forward a restructuring of the Italian budget (which he did in his short term in office). Second, we made reference to the state of political disarray experienced by Italian party elites in those months, which might justify the emergence of a PM with a well-defined mandate written in conjunction by coalition partners (higher levels for majority and weighted majority scores).

Remarkably, irrespective of the measure of coalition agenda that we use, the convergence scores after 1992 has not declined below the 0.7 level. The strong imprinting given by Berlusconi (XII) to its first cabinet agenda is reflected by the substantial congruence with the manifesto of his own party (.81). Even though the overall level of convergence is lower when we look at the Berlusconi government of the XIV legislative term, we still find that as the formateur he gave much higher prominence to the electoral priorities
declared by his own party. The influence of smaller parties in the cabinet agenda of his coalition was lower, as comes out from the lower degree of convergence between the cabinet agenda and the unweighted electoral agenda of coalition parties. It is when we weight the relevance of parties in the construction of the coalition manifesto, thus assigning a larger role to big parties and a smaller role to smaller parties, that we find the higher correspondence. We read the comparatively lower score of the un-weighted Manifesto priorities in the second Berlusconi executive as evidence of his presidential style and the lower level of fragmentation of his coalition. In turn, the last Berlusconi government appointed after the 2008 elections shows opposite evidence: the smaller coalition party – in that case, the only ally formally separated from the Berlusconi party was Lega Nord – enjoys a disproportionate agenda-setting power when confronted to the main coalition party. This was the result of the Lega Nord capacity to mainstream some key points of its programme, such as migration and federalism, in the cabinet agenda.

When we look at centre-left governments, both Prodi’s speeches (XIII and XV) share a strong proportion of topic with the two manifestos of the centre-left coalition. During the first Prodi government (XIII), the Ulivo coalition of centre-left enjoyed external support from the post-Communists, which issued an autonomous electoral manifesto. Interestingly, adding the priorities of the Communists does not increase nor decrease markedly the convergence between the cabinet agenda and that of the Ulivo coalition. This indicates that in his investiture speech Prodi incorporated the priorities of the external supporting party, resulting in similar convergence scores with the three versions of coalition agenda. The centre-left coalition which won the 2006 election (XV term) issued a single coalition manifesto. This does not permit us to explore the influence of individual parties in the coalition agenda. What is interesting here is the striking similarity between the degrees of manifesto-speech convergence for the two centre-left governments, which indicates that the introduction of a public pre-election coalition agreement did not affect substantially the translation of electoral priorities on the government agenda; though it moved negotiations forward to the pre-election stage.

Summing up, we find strong support for our main expectation. In comparison to the First Republic, the priorities that political parties use as a basis for their election campaign are taken into much higher consideration by coalition cabinets of the Second Republic. This holds consistently for all governments, with the partial exception of the formateur appointed at the beginning of the IX term who managed to have his own party dominate the cabinet agenda.
We would be inclined to expect that the introduction of coalition agreements would increase the correspondence between electoral priorities and cabinet programmatic priorities. This is not what we find. While the correspondence is higher during the Second Republic, an increased correspondence is found when a coalition manifesto was not issued. This comes out by comparing the centre-right coalition, which either did not present a coalition manifesto or complemented it with the manifestoes of single parties, with the centre-left coalition, which always presented a coalition manifesto: the correspondence between electoral and government priorities is always higher for centre-right governments.

When we look at the specific way the coalition agenda is ‘built’ – relating more closely to the role of the formateur/large/median party; or rather to the veto-power of smaller parties – we do not find a clear pattern. During the First Republic, the Socialist leader Bettino Craxi managed to give his own (rather small) party disproportionate influence on the government agenda. In contrast, the formateur appointed after the next elections had very little influence on the cabinet agenda. We find inconsistent evidence for Second Republic governments too. In two cases (XII and XIV), Berlusconi’s party was successful in dominating the government’s agenda, as was clearest in the XIV term when the notorious ‘Contract with Italian’ was formalised during the election campaign. In other cases, the Lega Nord acted as a veto player that exercised disproportionate influence. In contrast, the centre-left always presented a pre-election coalition manifesto, even when it was not required by the electoral law, and the correspondence to government priorities was always lower than it was with the centre-right. We are not able to reconstruct the priorities of individual parties, as they are watered-down in the coalition manifesto. Perhaps the latter hides the higher influence of single parties within the coalition, which could have resulted in an higher degree of correspondence if those priorities were observed. The lack of a systematic finding seems to point to the creation of ad hoc equilibria in the governance of individual coalitions, rather than systematic patterns of agenda-building.

7. Conclusions

This paper analysed how the priorities of the components of coalition governments are composed in the construction of coalition agendas. Italy represents an ideal case to explore the dynamics behind the formation of coalition agendas in a quasi-experimental context. The passage from the First to the Second Republic marked a radical shift toward a majoritarian model of democracy. Before 1993, each party ran its own electoral campaign by presenting itself before electors with a distinct profile of priorities, mostly synthetized in individual party manifestos. The failure for a single party to win an absolute majority of seats led inevitably to the post-election creation of oversized coalition governments, or more rarely (Christian democrat-led) minority governments. The programmatic platform of Italian governments was therefore
decided by party leaders only after elections. The consolidation of a bipolar pattern of party competition in the early- to mid-1990s made governments more accountable to the public opinion. This had a great impact on how coalition governments and their policy priorities are formed, resulting in the shift from post-electoral coalitions with no coalition agreements to pre-electoral coalitions with (pre-electoral) agreements, increasingly sanctioned in coalition manifestoes.

We first explored the consequences of this change on the structure and content of both party and coalition agendas, looking respectively at party (and later coalition) manifestoes and investiture speeches. We found that both changed in a way consistent with the context and institutional background. From the First to the Second Republic, party manifestoes became first of all longer in size, which is consistent with their evolution toward pre-electoral coalition agendas. The changing function of party manifestoes also affected their policy scope, which became broader, also reflecting the consolidation of a bi-polar pattern of competition and the related need to catch larger portions of the electorate. Finally, party manifestoes gradually moved toward the inclusion of a more policy-oriented content. We found similar changes in the structure and content of investiture speeches. Moving from a largely symbolical role addressed to coalition members during the First Republic, investiture speeches increased in length and in the breadth of policy issues covered, and the distribution of attention across policy topics became more even.

We also tested an hypothesis about the translation of party policy priorities on to the agenda of coalition governments. We expected that the combination of the shift to public, pre-electoral coalition agendas, and the increased public accountability of governments, would in turn increase the correspondence between the policy priorities of coalition parties’ agendas as made public during election campaigns on the one side, and the priorities of coalition governments declared in investiture speeches on the other side. The findings corroborate our expectations: in comparison to the governments of the First Republic, the distribution of priorities declared in the investiture speeches of Second Republic governments is far more congruent with the (coalition) party agendas issued before elections.

When we explored the agenda-setting power of individual coalition parties, we did not find consistent evidence for any model of agenda-building. We found differences within rather than between the First and Second Republic. We also found differences within blocks in the Second Republic. Finally, when coalition manifestoes were issued before elections and we could compare the relevance of pre-election priorities with those of individual parties in influencing the coalition cabinet agenda, we did not find consistent evidence for an increased transposition of the priorities issued in the coalition manifesto. Overall, this suggests that individual coalitions seek ad hoc equilibria in building their cabinet agendas rather than following systematic agenda-setting patterns.
REFERENCES:


Figure 1. Evolution of party/coalition manifestos

- **Length of avg. manifesto**
  - X-axis: IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI
  - Y-axis: Avg. number of sentences (1000 to 4000)

- **Agenda space in avg. manifesto**
  - X-axis: IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI
  - Y-axis: Avg. number of issue in the agenda

- **Shannon’s Entropy score (normalized)**
  - X-axis: IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI
  - Y-axis: Entropy score (0.75 to 0.90)

- **Agenda composition**
  - X-axis: IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI
  - Y-axis: Agenda proportion
  - Categories: Eco, Envir, Foreign, Govern, Justice, Welfare
Figure 2. Evolution of government speeches

- **Length of government declarations**
  - Number of sentences
  - IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI

- **Agenda space**
  - Number of issues in the agenda
  - IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI

- **Shannon’s Entropy score (normalized)**
  - Entropy score
  - IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI

- **Agenda composition**
  - Agenda proportion
  - IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI

- Categories: Econ, Envir, Foreign, Govern, Justice, Welfare
Figure 3. Convergence scores between party agendas and government agendas over time

Convergence scores between party agendas and government agenda over time

- M. of majority
- M. of weighted majority
- M. of formateur