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The Italian Agendas Project

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Because of its particular features and for its capacity to alternate stability and radical transformations, the Italian political system has traditionally been a source of interest for researchers and practitioners alike. This chapter provides a brief overview of the main characteristics and turning points of the Italian Republic, illustrates the Italian datasets contributed to the CAP database so far, and provides a simple illustration of how CAP data can be used to investigate key aspects of the Italian political system.

13.1 The Italian Political System

In 1946, after the end of World War II, Italian citizens voted in a popular referendum to replace the monarchy with a republican democracy. In 1948 the new Italian Constitution entered into force, designing a parliamentary form of government with a rather weak executive and a redundant bicameral system. One of the main peculiarities of this system was the necessity for governments to win a confirmatory confidence vote in both the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate before taking full powers (Russo, 2015). With regard to the electoral system, a proportional rule with preference votes was adopted for both chambers.

From 1948 to 1993, the Italian party system did not experience major changes: Christian-Democracy (DC) was always the leader of the governing coalitions, and the Communist Party (PCI) the main opposition party. However, Italian membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was not compatible with a governing role of the communists: accordingly, all other parties formed coalitions to prevent that possibility. The medium-sized Socialist Party (PSI) remained in opposition until the early 1960s, but then joined forces with the DC and entered the governing

coalitions. A set of smaller parties (from left to right: social democrats, republicans, liberals) alternated in government as junior partners of the Christian Democrats. Finally, the small neo-fascist party (MSI) was always excluded from the governing coalitions because its democratic credentials were not trusted by the other parties.

To understand the pre-1993 Italian political system it is essential to consider that, although pivotal to the system, the DC was an extremely factionalized party in which factions were united by their anti-communism but ideologically distant on the left–right axis. In summary, both the constitutional design and the fragmentation of the party system dispersed power among several actors and institutional veto-players to form what has been defined as a system of "bargained pluralism" (Hine, 1993). It is worth noting that in this period the average cabinet duration was about eleven months.

The post-war party system collapsed at the beginning of the 1990s due to the combined effect of the disappearance of the communist threat, the disclosure of a pervasive network of corrupt exchanges between the main political parties and the business community (the Clean Hands investigation), and a severe economic crisis that undermined the capacity of governing parties to distribute particular benefits (Cotta and Isernia, 1996). By 1994, all three major Italian parties (DC, PCI, PSI) had disappeared or changed name, while new parties emerged to contest the status quo, most notably the regionalist anti-immigration Northern League and "Go Italy" founded by the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi.

In the same years, the idea that the proportional electoral rule was partly responsible for maintaining fragmentation and instability in the Italian political system gained increasing popularity (Katz, 2001). After two referenda held in 1991 and 1993 to repeal parts of the existing electoral system, the parliament introduced a mixed-member system in which 75 percent of the seats were allocated in Single-Member Districts with plurality vote and 25 percent through proportional representation. In 2005 this system was replaced by a proportional representation system with a majority bonus correction for both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Both systems strongly encouraged the formation of pre-electoral coalitions.

From 1994 to 2013, Italy experienced alternation in government between centre-left and centre-right coalitions (for a comprehensive account see Almagisti et al., 2014). In the six general elections that were held in this period, several leaders alternated at the helm of the centre-left coalition, while the centre-right was always led by Silvio Berlusconi. The average duration of governments increased from eleven to nineteen months, and executive agenda-setting powers became stronger vis-à-vis other institutions. Although the Constitution remained largely unaltered, commentators refer to the post-1994 period as the "Second Republic."

Other features of the "First Republic," however, proved more resilient. The legislative process remained dysfunctional, as evidenced by the executive's abnormal reliance on decree laws, delegated legislation, and confidence motions to implement its legislative agenda (Kreppel, 2009). Furthermore, the party system continued to be polarized and fragmented. Moreover, party switching became endemic as parties did not prove to be capable of consolidating their organizational machine.

The unfinished transition (Morlino, 2013) from the First to the Second Republic was exposed, once again, at the beginning of the 2010s by the joint occurrence of a financial crisis, corruption scandals, and international instability. The 2013 elections following the technocratic government led by Mario Monti saw the unexpected success of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, and crisis in the mainstream parties such as the Democratic Party and Go Italy as they struggled to redefine their leadership and ideological profile.

13.2 Codebook and Datasets

All Italian datasets have been coded using both the CAP Master Codebook and the Italian agendas codebook (which contains 21 major and 239 minor topics). The latter includes a few additional minor topic codes to take into account some specificities of the Italian case. These country-specific codes capture issues related to freedom of religion (and more general matters related to relationships between the state and religious organizations) or references to criminal organizations (such as the Sicilian Mafia or the Camorra of Naples). Moreover, a number of immigration-related and culture-specific minor topics were created under major topics 9 and 23, respectively.

All documents were coded by two trained coders. Cases where the coders disagreed were discussed and solved jointly with one of the three principal investigators. At present, the Italian Policy Agendas Project includes six datasets (see Table 13.1). In four cases, the time span of the datasets encompasses the last legislative terms of the First and about two decades of the Second Republic.[1] This time frame allows us to inspect, through the lenses of issue attention, to what extent this transition resulted in change or continuity in party competition and policymaking processes.

Party manifestos represent our indicator of party priorities.[2] In total, forty-nine manifesto documents were analyzed covering all the significant parties that contested Italian parliamentary elections between 1983 and 2008 (the parliamentary term ending in 2013). The text of each manifesto was broken down into quasi-sentences (logically autonomous sections of a sentence),

Table 13.1. Datasets of the Italian Agendas Project

Dataset (unit of analysis)	Period covered	No. of observations	Source
Party manifestos (quasi-sentences)	1983–2008 (9th–16th legislature)	39,268	Every electoral manifesto available in an election
Investiture speeches (quasi-sentences)	1979–2014 (8th–17th legislature)	12,910	Every speech made by a candidate prime minister before the investiture vote
Parliamentary questions (every tabled question)	1997–2014 (13th–17th legislature)	4,317	Every oral question to the cabinet asked on the floor
Primary laws (every adopted act)	1983–2013 (9th–16th legislature)	4,555	Italian Law-Making Archive
Legislative decrees (every adopted act)	1988–2013 (10th–16th legislature)	1,267	Italian Law-Making Archive
Budget (yearly spending per category)	1990–2012	897	Eurostat

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Italy

which were taken as the unit of analysis and assigned content-specific codes. This resulted in a dataset of more than 42,000 quasi-sentences, about 39,000 of which were coded by policy content.

The cabinet agenda is captured through the quasi-sentence coding of Italian investiture speeches (Borghetto et al., 2017).[3] After being appointed by the president of the Republic, every candidate prime minister is required to deliver a speech in front of both houses and to secure a vote of confidence on both occasions before officially taking office. In part, these declarations contain a political analysis of the events leading to the cabinet investiture; in part they set officially and publicly (these are highly mediatized events) the cabinet agenda for the rest of the mandate. The time horizon of cabinets can vary and this affects the content of speeches. Some are delivered at the beginning of the five-year parliamentary term (first government formation after the elections) and are normally longer and wider in scope. Others follow a coalition crisis and the withdrawal of confidence by the parliament. In such circumstances, the Constitution allows the president of the Republic to explore the feasibility of new parliamentary coalitions before calling for early elections. Historically, political forces often preferred these "parliamentary" solutions, so it has been rather common to have cabinet reshuffles and new investiture votes during the same legislative term. The agenda scope and diversity of the cabinet agendas is affected by the time frame.

Among the many available documents apt for measuring the parliamentary agenda, we opted for the Italian question time,[4] officially referred to as "parliamentary questions with immediate answer" (*interrogazioni a risposta immediata*).[5]

The question time is generally held once a week on Wednesdays and, depending on the topic of the tabled questions, it envisages the intervention of either the president/vice-president of the Council or the minister/s in charge of the portfolio under debate. Each parliamentary group is allowed one question per session, so this can be considered a party-driven activity. The questioner has the obligation to submit the question in writing one day in advance through the president of his/her parliamentary group. Questions are expected to be concise (less than a minute) and to address a topic of general interest. The cabinet representative is allowed a three-minute answer, followed by a two-minute response from the questioner.

Similarly to other CAP teams, primary laws were among the first documents to be coded.[6] Two types of legislative acts were considered. First, we coded all primary laws adopted by the Italian parliament. Bills can be introduced by the cabinet, any MP, at least 50,000 voters, the National Council of the Economy and Labor or by Regional Councils. In order for a bill to become law, both Chambers have to agree on an identically worded text. Bills can be adopted either on the floor plenary (ordinary procedure) or at the committee level (abbreviated procedure). The second procedure cannot be invoked for specific categories of laws[7] and can be called off by the government, by 10 percent of deputies, or by a fifth of committee members, which results in the bill going back to the ordinary legislative procedure. The president of the Republic has to sign each adopted law before it can enter into force. In case of presidential veto, the act has to go through a new parliamentary review and adoption process. If the bill is approved a second time, the president is obliged to promulgate it. Ordinary acts vary extensively in terms of content and political saliency. Laws ratifying international treaties are usually adopted without generating much debate in parliament. Other acts present themselves as complex and heterogeneous texts regulating a variety of policy areas (they are also referred to as "omnibus laws"). In these cases—representing a small proportion of the totality—we scanned the whole text and selected the code capturing the most prominent policy area regulated by the act.

According to article 76 of the Constitution, the parliament can decide to authorize the cabinet to legislate in a particular area for a defined period. These delegating acts are adopted through the ordinary procedure and can contain more than one delegation (Borghetto 2018). The decrees passed by the cabinet (legislative decrees) have the force of primary laws and do not need formal approval from parliament before being submitted to the attention of the president for their promulgation. Because of their sheer number and importance (primarily as instruments used for the legal adaptation to EU law and for passing important structural reforms), we opted for the codification of all legislative decrees issued since 1988.[8] Besides those acts adopted through the ordinary legislative procedure, the dataset comprises three other categories of

"special" legislation: laws converting decree-laws,[9] Constitutional laws,[10] and budget laws.[11]

With regard to budgetary data, at present the Italian team relies on public expenditure data collected by Eurostat (1990–2012), the official statistical office of the European Union.[12] These figures are communicated on a yearly basis from the Italian Statistical Institute and harmonized to be comparable at the European level. The dataset contains yearly data on public expenditure at the general government level (defined as total payments recorded in the annual final balance of payments) categorized according to the COFOG system (classification of the functions of government) developed in 1999 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Data are expressed at current prices but a deflator is reported to adjust for inflation. The COFOG scheme classifies expenditures on the basis of their objective: it is a three-level classification with ten divisions at the first level and sixty groups at the second level. Levels are further divided into multiple classes, but these data are not available for the Italian case. The ten divisions are: general public services; defense; public order and safety; economic affairs; environment protection; housing and community amenities; health; recreation, culture, and religion; education; social protection.

13.3 Specificities and Perspectives

The Italian political system is sometimes regarded as eccentric, if not fully chaotic. And yet, it has attracted the attention of a wide international scholarship and has been the subject of studies that have developed seminal notions—for example, on political cultures (Banfield, 1967) or social capital (Putnam et al., 1994). The intrinsic relevance of the Italian case is certainly due to the complexity of its political and social history, but also to the Italian tendency to anticipate certain patterns and changes. Take—just to mention some recent examples—the mediatization and personalization of politics, the crisis of mainstream parties, and the advent of anti-establishment and populist parties as key actors in the political game.

In addition to its intrinsic interest, the developments of the last few decades made the Italian case particularly relevant to the understanding of the consequences of broad processes of political change. Few established democracies have recently experienced a comparable radical change in political institutions and party systems. Although not codified in a constitutional revision (and arguably unfinished, see Morlino, 2013 and Russo, 2015) the experience of within-democracy transition from the "First" to the "Second" Republic is a real laboratory of political change. In this respect CAP data are uniquely well

placed to analyze the quasi-experimental Italian context and empirically observe the effects of political change (see Borghetto et al., 2018).

Drawing on the Italian CAP dataset, recent studies have started addressing questions about the effect of the introduction of alternation in power on the congruence between party electoral priorities and government legislative outputs (Borghetto et al., 2014); the consequences of the shift from post- to pre-electoral coalitions on the composition of the priorities of the coalition (Borghetto and Carammia, 2015); the policy content of the question time (Russo and Cavalieri, 2016), and the relation between party priorities and public-spending changes (Russo and Verzichelli, 2016). Drawing on Borghetto et al. (2014), Figure 13.1 provides a simplified illustration of a possible application of CAP data to the study of Italy. The bar graph shows the correlation between the policy agendas declared by political parties during election campaigns (based on party manifesto data) and the legislative agendas implemented by those parties during their term in government; and it observes such correlations over the last two terms of the First Republic and the first two terms of the Second Republic.

As Figure 13.1 shows, such correlation is consistently higher during the Second Republic terms observed, which seems to indicate an increased agenda effect of the policy priorities declared during election campaigns. This would
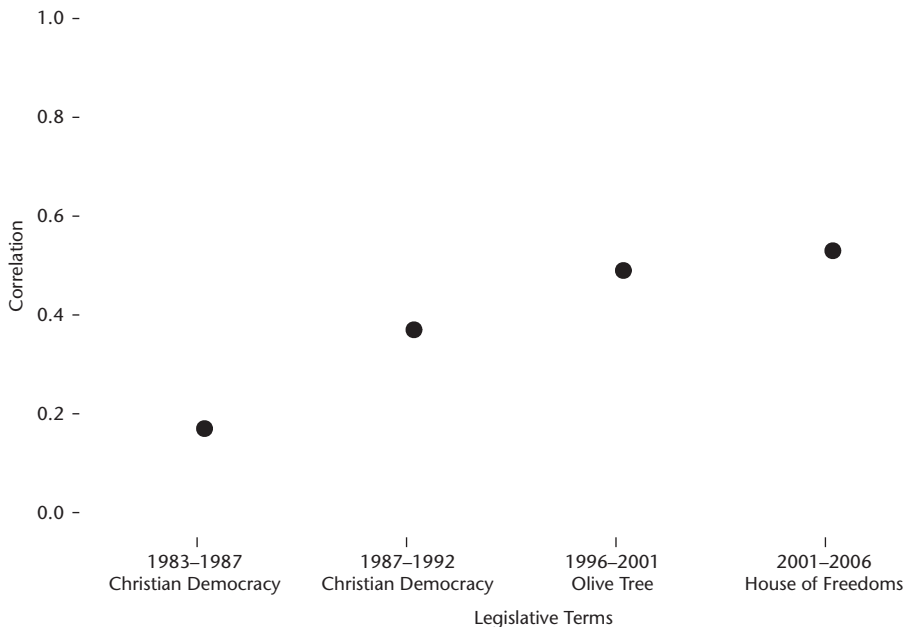

Figure 13.1. Correlation between electoral manifestos and legislative agendas
Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Italy

be consistent with the changed incentives provided by the introduction of alternation in government. Things are probably more complicated than that. It is questionable whether the degree of correlation reached in the Second Republic marks a clear shift toward "mandate politics" (Borghetto et al., 2014); and a focus on opposition parties shows that their agenda-setting power also increased (Carammia et al., 2018). This, however, only shows a need for further research, and the potential contribution of CAP data to provide new answers to old questions about Italian politics and comparative politics at large.

Notes

1. Oral questions to the cabinet have been institutionalized since 1993. A major reform occurred in 1997, so for the sake of longitudinal comparability we started coding questions only since this date.
2. Manifestos were coded at the University of Catania under the supervision of Marcello Carammia.
3. Speeches were jointly coded by Enrico Borghetto, Francesco Visconti, and Marco Michieli.
4. Data were retrieved from dati.camera.it and coded under the supervision of Federico Russo at the University of Siena.
5. Only question time in the lower house (Chamber of Deputies) was coded and examined. The Rules of Procedure of the Senate introduced a procedure named in the same way, but the content of the questions is predetermined by the conference of party group leaders.
6. The coding was carried out at the University of Milan as part of a wider project named "Italian Law-Making Archive" (ILMA). ILMA is a web database facilitating access to Italian legislative data for research purposes (Borghetto et al., 2012).
7. These include electoral laws, constitutional laws, laws ratifying international treaties, budget laws, and delegating legislation.
8. Law 400/1988 disciplined their adoption procedure and distinguished them from other executive acts.
9. Decree-laws can be adopted by the executive in case of "extraordinary urgency" (Article 77 Constitution). They enter into force on the day of their issuance. Their validity expires after sixty days if, in this interval, they are not converted into law by the parliament through an executive-sponsored act.
10. Laws amending the Constitution have to be passed through an aggravated procedure (Article 138 Constitution).
11. Budget laws are presented by the executive and discussed, amended, and approved in the autumn of each year by the parliament according to a tight schedule (Article 81 Constitution).
12. An alternative dataset covering a longer period (1948–2009), but with much less detailed categories, is available form Russo and Verzichelli (2016).

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