

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Italian Government in Pandemic Times

Between Centralized Decision-Making and Coalitional Compromises

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Abstract

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Italy went through a severe health crisis, which put national political institutions and public services to the test. In response to this challenge, policy-makers implemented specific health policy measures as well as policies in other fields to contain the circulation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and to mitigate negative economic effects. In this context, conflicts between coalition parties and single cabinet members arose. Against this background, this article deals with the way in which the Italian political executive made its pandemic policy-related decisions during the pandemic. In particular, it aims to test the viability of existing theoretical models of coalition governance to account for actual cabinet decision-making. The work uses formal decrees (by the prime minister, by ministers, or by the cabinet as a whole), approved between February 2020 and February 2022, as proxies of coalition governance models. It answers the following questions: when do PMs centralize or decentralize decision-making? How do crises affect power delegation in cabinet? Four hypotheses result from the integration of literature strands on presidentialization of politics, party behavior in coalitions, and crisis management. Findings show that centralized decision-making prevailed when the prime minister enjoyed greater party support and especially in the most acute phases of the pandemic. However, the 'coalition compromise' model of coalition governance was more common when the intra-coalition heterogeneity of policy preferences was higher. The article contributes to the debate about mechanisms of mutual party control within coalition governments and their determinants under the pressure of exogenous shocks.

Keywords: Cabinet government; Coalition governance; Ministerial government; Prime ministerial government; Covid-19

Introduction

This article investigates the Italian executive's¹ management of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, from the confirmation of the first cases of infection in Italy to February 2022. Its focus is on cabinet decision-making and not on policy outputs.²

Cabinet decision-making in parliamentary democracies is a key topic in Comparative Politics. In this regard, scholars not only describe ministerial behaviors, but they also discuss their main causes and implications for democratic accountability (Andeweg et al., 2020). A cabinet is a formally collegial institution made up of a prime minister (PM) and a set of ministers, who are bounded together by the principle of collective responsibility

¹ For the sake of simplicity, henceforth I will use 'executive', 'government', and 'cabinet' as synonymous.

² On decision-making styles and policy outcomes, see, for example, Casula and Malandrino (2023).

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(Barbieri & Vercesi, 2013). Against this background, the analysis of intra-governmental interactions is especially important when the executive is a coalition government, in that policy responsibilities are hard to attribute to single coalition partners. It is thus not surprising that '[p]erhaps the most important substantive development in the field over the past decade or so has been a growing interest in coalition *governance* as opposed to coalition *governments*. If we want to understand the making and breaking of governments then we have to understand what happens in between these defining events' (Laver, 2012, p. 113, emphases in the original).

Parallely, the literature on crisis management highlights that 'common' dynamics and power delegations within governments are likely to change when exogenous threats to the polity require quick political responses. One reason is that citizens change their expectations towards public decision-makers. In this regard, the scholarship highlights that exogenous crises open windows of opportunity for the centralization of political power, because the population demands fast, direct, and efficient responses from political leaders (Boin et al., 2012). At the same time, voters expect government members to work hard to solve the crisis, but ministers may be inclined to 'pass the buck', in order to avoid public blame due to unsatisfactory policy outcomes (Traber et al., 2020). From this viewpoint, the Covid-19 crisis – as well as the consequent health, economic, and social challenges – was a case in point (Musella, 2020a; Bolleyer & Salát, 2021; Hinterleitner et al., 2023).

This article applies extant theories of coalition governance in parliamentary systems to understand if and to what extent the Covid-19 crisis affected intra-coalitional party dynamics, in times of presidentialization and party government decline (Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Samuels & Shugart, 2010). According to the principal-agent model of democratic delegation (Müller, 2000), parties increasingly tend to delegate government responsibilities to strong leaders enjoying ample popular support.; these leaders, rather than being 'party-agents', are the 'principals' of these parties (Müller-Rommel et al., 2022). The main research questions are thus: when do strong PMs centralize or decentralize cabinet decision-making? How does power delegation change during crises? In light of the prominent role of individual leaders relative to party organizations that characterize its political system (e.g., Musella, 2020b; Pasquino, 2014), Italy is used as a case study.

Before going deep into the analysis, a clarification is necessary. This article is interested in internal cabinet decision-making. For this reason, it overlooks relationships between the political executive and other institutional and non-institutional actors, which defined the overall governance of the pandemic in Italy (e.g., Casula et al., 2020). However, the findings will not be substantially affected: there is evidence that, after an initial moment of bewilderment, the political executive – assisted by policy experts – took the undisputed lead in the management of the pandemic. This was true even in relation to regional governments, which usually enjoy extensive autonomy when it comes to defining health policy (e.g., Casula & Pazos-Vidal, 2021; Salvati, 2022; Ieraci, 2023).

In the next section, the article presents the theoretical framework and four expectations. Subsequently, it introduces the Italian case and highlights its most relevant features for the article's purpose. The fourth section operationalizes the variables and clarifies the data basis. The empirical analysis leads to the conclusion. The findings have implications for the study of the relationship between changes in political leadership and democratic governance at large.

Coalition Governance, Presidentialization of Politics, and Crisis Governance and Delegation within Coalition Government

Any party coalition is made up of two or more political parties, which temporarily join to achieve certain common goals. Nevertheless, these parties have diverging policy preferences and remain competitors in the electoral arena (Lupia & Strøm, 2008). This means that the coalition is defined by cooperative and conflictual drives at the same time (Vercesi, 2016). How, while in government, can parties avoid the political costs of the conflict?

In this regard, the literature detects a set of institutional and behavioral mechanisms, which parties use for mutual control. These mechanisms can be activated before (*ex-ante* mechanisms) or after (*ex-post* mechanisms) the government enters office. The range of options goes from careful portfolio allocation to drafting coalition agreements, from parliamentary questions to the establishment of coalition committees for conflict resolution (Strøm et al., 2010; Ecker et al., 2015; Kamm & Siegenthaler, 2022; Klüver et al., 2023). One of the most common mechanisms is sharing policy responsibilities among cabinet members, for example through inter-ministerial committees or in the full cabinet (Vercesi, 2020). This especially holds when coalition partners consider a policy field salient (Klüser, 2022).

Overall, political parties try to benefit from the participation in government, without being controlled by their allies. A party's chance 'to win' in the cost-benefit calculus depends on its strategic strength in the coalition, which is a function of the number of its parliamentary seats as well as its 'position relative to the other parliamentary parties in policy space' (Müller & Strøm, 2000, p. 7). That said, even the 'weakest' coalition partner can block any governmental decision, by (plausibly) threatening to leave the coalition and make the cabinet fall (Tsebelis, 2002).

Therefore, party leaders (who are sometimes also cabinet members) need to solve problems of collective action within the coalition (Olson, 1965). One solution is to endow the PM with the power to settle cabinet agenda (Luebbert, 1986). For examples, PM are expected to solve cabinet conflicts; to define public policy; to provide solutions to exogenous crises (Grotz et al., 2021, p. 1915-1916). Yet, a weak PM leading a coalitional government will hardly centralize cabinet decision-making; rather, she will delegate tasks to the cabinet as a whole or to individual ministerial heads (Dewan & Hortala-Vallve, 2011).

Three models to organize cabinet internal procedures stand out. The first is the *prime ministerial* model: it depicts a cabinet where the PM dominates, defining the agenda and shaping policy decisions (Dunleavy & Rhodes, 1990).³ The second model is the *coalition compromise* model. In this case, ministers take part jointly in the decision-making process, usually on behalf of their parties (Martin & Vanberg, 2014; Dragu & Laver, 2019; Ie, 2022). Finally, each minister may benefit from large policy autonomy within her departmental jurisdiction; this scenario recalls the *ministerial government* model (Laver & Shepsle, 1990, 1996).

It is worth noting that power concentration characterizes the prime ministerial model, whereas the coalition compromise and the ministerial models are defined by power sharing and power fragmentation, respectively. Moreover, in first model the PM is the principal and the ministers are her agents. In the third, ministers act as agents of their

³ According to Jahn (2016, p. 59-61), this model describes a context in which political parties do not have any policy incentive to be part of the government, unless they nominate the PM. For this reason, he suggests to understand it as a 'negotiated prime ministerial model' (p. 61), whereby the PM uses bilateral meetings to lead and control cabinet decision-making. However, a PM can exercise her influence within collective arenas as well, as the British Prime Minister Edward Heath (1970-1974) did (Vercesi, 2012, p. 18-19).

party. Finally, the coalition compromise model implies that ministers are ‘double agents’: of the cabinet as well as of their party (Andeweg, 2000).

Presidentialization, Ideological Heterogeneity, Crisis

Why does a model of coalition governance prevail over the others? Below, the article proposes four hypotheses, based on the literature on executive politics and the impact of crises on political leadership. All hypotheses are valid in relative terms; in other words, they refer to trends.

The first expectation derives from the presidentialization of politics thesis. In a nutshell: since the late 1990s, PMs have gained political authority and policy autonomy to the expense of collective political actors. The internationalization of politics, the growth of the state, the end of cleavage politics, and the transformation of media have fostered this change (Poguntke & Webb, 2005). The outcome has been the emergence of ‘personal’ governments, whose support depends on the personal traits and performance of the leader, rather than on party programs (Berz, 2020). Eventually, the presidentialization process is conducive to monocratic leadership (Musella, 2022b).

Therefore,

1. *when the government is ‘presidentialized’, the prime ministerial model of (coalition) governance prevails.*

The second and third expectations ensue from theoretical arguments about intra-coalition ideological heterogeneity. A coalition of parties with divergent policy preferences is, all else equal, a coalition that face more obstacles in changing the policy status quo, relative to a homogenous coalition (Zucchini, 2013). As observed by Andeweg and Timmermans (2008, p. 276), intra-coalition policy heterogeneity jeopardizes cabinet decision-making and government stability, in that parties aim at different policy outputs.

In this situation, political parties try to contain the policy influence of ministers who belong to their allies and check that these allies do not drift away from the coalition program. To this end, coalition parties implement *ex-post* mechanisms of mutual control (Bowler et al., 2016; Höhmann & Sieberer, 2020). In particular, they promote the sharing of policy responsibility – as well as the blame – across ministries (Shpaizman & Cavari, 2023). According to this argument,

2. *coalitions that are characterized by high ideological heterogeneity will adopt the coalition compromise model of governance more frequently than coalitions with low heterogeneity.*

In contrast, when heterogeneity is low, coalition partners will avoid the costs of mutual monitoring and will concentrate on the *ex-ante* allocation of policy responsibilities (Falcó-Gimeno, 2014). It follows that

3. *coalitions that are characterized by low ideological heterogeneity will resort to the ministerial model of governance more frequently than coalitions with high heterogeneity.*

The just presented three expectations apply to ‘normal’ times. What about times of crisis? In their *Governing the Pandemic*, Boin et al. (2021) argue that crises – including the Covid-19 crisis – make governance capacity particularly urgent; at the same time, they profoundly challenge it (e.g., Capano, 2020). This happens because decision-makers need

to provide fast responses, but the existing governance capacity of the system cannot be expanded quickly enough. To overcome this problem, one efficient solution is – in the short run – to ‘streamline the governance capacity that already exists. Two typical streamlining strategies are increasing executive power and centralizing authority (Boin et al., 2021, p. 53).

In this regard, Greer et al. (2022) distinguish between two types of centralization that states relied on during the Covid-19 pandemic: centralization within and centralization between governments (see also Hegele & Schnabel, 2021). While the former means centralization of authority in the hands of the head of government, the latter refers to a shift of authority from sub-national governments to the national executive. For the reasons mentioned in the introduction, the following investigation will take only the former into consideration. In this regard, the most relevant observation by Greer et al. (2022) is that, during the pandemic, heads of government pursued centralization when citizens expected decisive and effective responses. However, they tried to decentralize when times were less ‘demanding’ and no fast exceptional decisions were necessary: the underlying logic was blame avoidance for unsolved and long-lasting problems linked to the detrimental effects of the pandemic.

On a more specific note, and looking at the Israeli cabinet during the Covid-19 pandemic, Shpaizman (2023) finds that ministers whose jurisdiction was not directly linked to the field of the crisis hardly shared policy responsibility. At the same time, those who were expected to be key to manage the crisis were the most active actors.

Among these actors, the PM is central, it that one of her most important delegated tasks is in fact crisis resolution (Grotz et al., 2021, p. 1915). In fulfilling this task, PMs are expected to be particularly proactive in cabinet decision-making (Boin et al., 2012).

Therefore, the fourth expectation is that

4. *during crises, governments will tend to adopt the prime ministerial model of governance more frequently than in normal times, irrespective of the usually adopted model.*

Before the empirical assessment of the four expectations, the next section introduces the case study.

The Case Study

Italy as an ‘Experimental’ Case

Italy is a suitable case study for four reasons. First, it allows reaching generalizable findings under ‘quasi-experimental’ conditions: two cabinets coped with the Covid-19 crisis from its outbreak to the formal end of the state of emergency on 31 March 2022. The first, led by Giuseppe Conte, was in office from September 2019 to February 2021; the second, led by Mario Draghi, entered office in February 2021 and terminated in October 2022. These cabinets were both led by a non-partisan PM, but they diverged in terms of party composition and ideological heterogeneity. Second, Italy was the first European country to go through a rapid growth of confirmed cases of SARS-CoV-2 infections: this made Italy implement, to contain the virus, earlier restrictions to constitutional liberties, such as freedom of movement and association (Bol et al., 2021; Engler et al., 2021). Third, crisis management soon turned into a source of prime ministerial personalization in the context of cabinet decision-making (Rullo & Nunziata, 2021), notwithstanding the usual significant political weight of Italian ministers (Zucchini & Pedrazzani, 2021). Finally, any ‘rally ‘round the flag’ effect in support of the PMs was weak compared to the effect in other

Western democracies, making Italian ministers more autonomous from the PM (Altiparmakis et al., 2021; Giovannini & Mosca, 2021; Vercesi, 2022).

The Italian Cabinets of the Crisis: Conte II and Draghi

The Conte II cabinet sworn in after the early termination of the post-electoral cabinet led by the same PM and made up of the 5 Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) and the League. The Conte II cabinet included the M5S, the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD), and the small left-wing Free and Equal (*Liberi e Uguali*, LeU); it passed a positive vote of confidence from both parliamentary chambers, on September 9 and 10. However, on September 18, the PD suffered from an internal split led by the then senator and former PM Matteo Renzi, whose followers formed a new parliamentary group supporting the executive: Italy Alive (*Italia Viva*, IV) (Cotta, 2020, p. 134-136).

Almost one year later, Matteo Renzi strongly criticized Mr. Conte's leadership, disapproving the alleged PM's actions against collegial forms of cabinet decision-making. Plagued by internal conflicts, the Conte II cabinet fell in late January 2021. On February 13, a new cabinet led by the former president of the Central European Bank Mr. Draghi sworn in. Supporting this cabinet, the former coalition was broadened up to including also the center-right Silvio Berlusconi's party Go Italy (*Forza Italia*, FI) and the right-wing Matteo Salvini's League. Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FdI), a far-right party led by the future PM Giorgia Meloni, was the only relevant party that stayed in the opposition. The Draghi cabinet had two main policy goals: to organize a mass vaccination campaign against Covid-19 and to define a national plan to benefit from the Next Generation EU funds, according to the schedule of the European Commission (Marangoni & Kreppel, 2022).

With regard to their parliamentary support and ideological profile, the Conte II and Draghi cabinets were substantially different. The former was supported by a minimum winning coalition both in the Chamber of Deputies (lower chamber) and the Senate (whose confidence is necessary for the cabinet to stay in office as much as the Chamber's); the latter, in turn, was backed by an oversized coalition. Moreover, the Conte II cabinet was relatively more left-wing: on average, the position of the parties in the Conte II along an ideological scale from 1 (left) to 20 (right) was 7.94; the Draghi cabinet scored 11.48. Moreover, the distance between the two most 'extreme' parties on the same scale, which is a proxy of intra-coalition heterogeneity, was 7.21 in the Conte II cabinet and 14.01 in the Draghi cabinet.⁴ Adding a further key dimension of party competition (i.e., integration or 'open borders' and demarcation or 'closed borders'), the picture does not change: within a hypothetical bidimensional space, the Euclidian distance between the PD and the League was higher than their own distance from the largest party, the M5S (Giannetti et al., 2022). In other words, the 'Pareto set' of the Draghi cabinet was considerably larger than the set of the Conte II cabinet (Russo & Valbruzzi, 2022, p. 179).

Prime Ministers Conte and Draghi were both non-partisans, yet they differed in their relationships with the parties supporting their cabinets. Professor of Private Law, Mr. Conte was initially selected in 2018 as a populist political outsider close, yet not affiliated to the M5S. His only relevant political activity before his investiture in 2018 had been a public endorsement to this party; the M5S, in turn, had proposed him as the possible future minister for public administration during the 2018 electoral campaign. When the Conte I cabinet fell, however, Mr. Conte tried to redefine his profile and to present himself as an autonomous political leader, who could be the reference figure of the M5S (Cotta,

⁴ Values indicate the party positions in 2018, as measured in Giannetti et al. (2018, p. 31).

2020).⁵ In fact, he successfully gained support within the party as well as in the electorate; this allowed him to exercise a very personalized leadership in government (Amoretti et al., 2021; Rullo, 2021). In contrast, Mr. Draghi was a fully-fledged technocratic PM, whose appointment was strongly supported by the head of state. Although, when he took office, popular approval was high, his legitimacy derived primarily from his policy expertise and his technical profile, rather than from a party-based representative function (Barbieri & Vercesi, 2022).

The Conte II and Draghi cabinets faced different phases of the pandemic. Mr. Conte governed during the pandemic outbreak and the new upsurge of the virus circulation of winter 2020. Mr. Draghi, in turn, was invested soon after the start of the anti-Covid-19 vaccination campaign, which began with the delivery of the first doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech *Comirnaty* vaccine in December 2020.⁶

Table 1 summarizes the differences (and similarities) between the two cabinets, which are relevant for this article's purpose. Moreover, it indicates where each coalition governance model is expected to be more frequent.

Table 1. Composition, leadership, and coalition governance of the Conte II and Draghi cabinets.

| | Cabinet | |
|------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------|
| | Conte II | Draghi |
| Features | | |
| Day of entry into office | 5 September 2019 | 13 February 2021 |
| Parties in the coalition | M5S, PD, IV, LeU | M5S, Lega, PD, FI, IV, LeU |
| Coalition type | Minimum winning | Oversized |
| Ideological heterogeneity | 7.21 | 14.01 |
| Prime ministerial background | Independent | Technocratic |
| Party resources of the PM | Medium | Null |
| Leadership personalization | High | Moderate |
| Expectations | | |
| Prime ministerial model | X | |
| Ministerial government model | X | |
| Coalition compromise model | | X |

Notes: parties are listed from the largest to the smallest in terms of parliamentary seats; data refers to the Chamber of Deputies and to the parties in cabinet only. The classification of the prime ministerial background is based on Vercesi (2019). X indicates where – relatively to the two cabinets – the model is expected to be more frequently used.

Cabinet Decision-Making in Italy During the Pandemic Operationalization and Data Basis

As outlined in the introduction, this article investigates the use of coalition governance models, *in the context of the (pandemic) crisis*. It is not interested in cabinet decision-making at large; rather, it focuses on the decision-making that specifically developed in

⁵ After the termination of the Conte II cabinet, he became the new president of the M5S. See 'M5S, Conte confermato leader con il 94% dei voti.' *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 28 March 2022.

⁶ See 'Il 27 dicembre le prime 9.750 dosi vaccino in tutta Italia.' *Ansa.it*, 19 December 2020.

response to the health, economic, and social challenges of the pandemic. Moreover, the analysis is limited to cabinet members and excludes junior ministers.

To follow every single cabinet decision-making step is hardly impossible (Blondel & Müller-Rommel, 1993). Therefore, this work uses the actors from whom a policy formally originated as proxies of the use of a coalition governance model. More specifically, it counts the number of governmental decrees issued to contrast the effects of Covid-19, according to the online classification of the Italian Prime Minister's Office and Health Ministry.⁷ To focus on the decrees allows concentrating on law-making instruments that are key normative sources in the Italian political system (Tarli Barbieri, 2019).⁸ Moreover, the production of these decrees entirely develops within governmental and/or coalitional decision-making arenas; this means that the findings will not be 'distorted' by the possible impact on laws of the opposition in parliament.

The analysis posits that prime ministerial decrees (*decreti del presidente del Consiglio dei ministri*, DPCM) are indicators of the use of the prime ministerial model of coalition governance.⁹ Ministerial and inter-ministerial decrees, in turn, are indicators of the ministerial model, in that they originate from ministers working autonomously as departmental heads. Finally, the formal approval of decrees by the full cabinet indicates the adoption of a coalition compromise-like model of governance.¹⁰ The specific content of the counted decrees is not relevant for the article's purpose, since all of them referred indiscriminately to the same issue (the pandemic and its effects on the Italian polity), whose salience for the executive remained relatively constant over time.

The period of the analysis goes from 31 January 2020 to 28 February 2022. This implies that also the first phase of the pandemic crisis is assessed and that the Conte II and Draghi cabinets are compared under a similar time span (i.e., one year for each cabinet).

Finally, the seriousness of the pandemic crisis is operationalized as the daily number of hospitalizations for million inhabitants. This number provides a reliable indication of the level of 'stress' of the health national system as well as of the quantity of serious positive cases, more than the daily number of infections do. Daily infections, indeed, sensibly grew after the introduction of the vaccines and the spread of more contagious SARS-CoV-2 variants; however, this increase did not lead to a proportional worsening in terms of hospitalizations (Figure 1). Data comes from the Covid-19-related dataset of the *Our World in Data* observatory (Ritchie et al., 2020). Overall, the days on which the number of hospitalizations for million inhabitants exceeded 500 were 83 out of a total of 760.

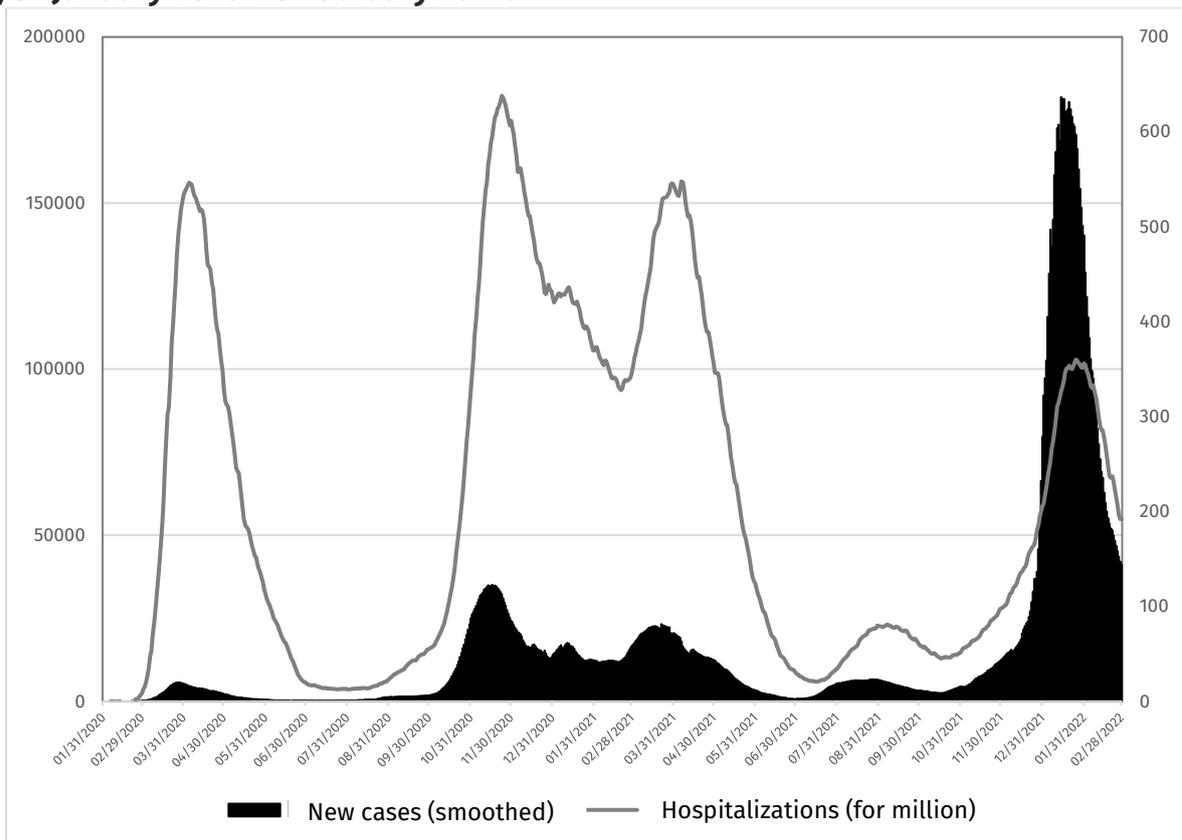
⁷ See the following archives: 'Coronavirus, le misure adottate dal Governo' on the PM's Office (<https://www.governo.it/it/coronavirus-misure-del-governo>) and 'Norme, circolari e ordinanze' under 'Documentazione' of the Health Ministry (<https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/archivioNormativaNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?lingua=italiano&testo=&tipologia=DECRETO&giorno=&mese=&anno=&btnCerca=cerca>), accessed on 1 June 2022.

⁸ Ministerial circulars and ordinances are excluded.

⁹ As discussed in the debate between law scholars, a frequent use of DPCMs is 'a "clue" [...] of the importance of the president of the Council of Ministers – and thus a further element of the executive "presidentialization" that has characterized the most recent period' (Tarli Barbieri, 2019, p. 187, own translation).

¹⁰ The idea to use ministerial and full cabinet decrees to pinpoint specific models of coalition governance extends – *mutatis mutandis* – the practice of counting prime ministerial decrees to assess the level of 'monocratization' of the political system. In this regard, see Fittipaldi (2020); Musella (2022a); Criscitiello (2023).

Figure 1. Daily cases (smoothed) of Covid-19 infections and related hospitalizations in Italy, 31 January 2020-28 February 2022.



Note: the number of cases is on the left axis, whereas hospitalizations are on the right axis.
 Source: See fn. 7.

Centralization and Delegation in the Conte II and Draghi Cabinets

In the first fifty years of the republic, Italian political executives were characterized by weak PMs and fragmented decision-making process. After the breakdown of the party system in the early 1990s, cabinet decision-making has become relatively more collective, party leaders have become ministers more frequently, and PMs have taken part in the decision-making process more substantially (Vercesi, 2019). Coalition governance has been defined by, on the one hand, a balance between the coalition compromise model and the ministerial government model and, on the other hand, a limited yet significant increase in prime ministerial power (Bergman et al., 2021, p. 717).

What happened during the pandemic crisis? Did this picture change? Were the Conte II and the Draghi cabinets different? Table 2 shows the type and number of decrees issued between February 2020 and February 2022, by month of signature. Moreover, the table indicates the seriousness of the pandemic crisis as a function of the level of stress of the health national system.

Table 2. Number of executive decrees and level of pandemic crisis in Italy, February 2020-February 2022.

| Cabinet and month | Decrees | | | Total decrees | Crisis level |
|---|-------------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Prime ministerial | Ministerial | Full cabinet | | |
| Conte II | | | | | |
| February 2020 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 5 | Low |
| March 2020 | 6 | 5 | 3 | 14 | Medium |
| April 2020 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 7 | High |
| May 2020 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 4 | Medium |
| June 2020 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | Low |
| July 2020 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | Low |
| August 2020 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | Low |
| September 2020 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | Low |
| October 2020 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 6 | Low |
| November 2020 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | High |
| December 2020 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 4 | High |
| January 2021 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | High |
| February 2021 (until 12 th) | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | Medium |
| <i>Sub-total</i> | 22 | 12 | 26 | 60 | <i>Medium</i> |
| Draghi | | | | | |
| February 2021 (from 13 th) | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | Medium |
| March 2021 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 6 | High |
| April 2021 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | High |
| May 2021 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | Medium |
| June 2021 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Low |
| July 2021 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | Low |
| August 2021 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | Low |
| September 2021 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | Low |
| October 2021 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 | Low |
| November 2021 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | Low |
| December 2021 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | Low |
| January 2022 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 6 | Medium |
| February 2022 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 | Medium |
| <i>Sub-total</i> | 4 | 11 | 18 | 33 | <i>Low</i> |
| Total | 26 | 23 | 44 | 93 | Medium |

Note: the level of crisis is defined 'low' when the number of hospitalizations is below 200, 'medium' between 201 and 400, and 'high' when the number is above 400. Numbers indicate the arithmetical mean of the daily hospitalizations in the month at issue; February 2021 is bipartite, i.e., before and after the entry into office of the Draghi cabinet.

Source: own elaboration, based on data gathered from sources indicated in fn. 7.

During the pandemic, the Italian cabinets drifted away from their common patterns of coalition governance. The coalition compromise model remained frequent, but authority delegation to individual ministers considerably decreased. At the same time, PMs became more proactive. In a nutshell, cabinet decision-making moved from decentralization to centralization, either in the hands of the PM or in the full cabinet.

However, there are substantial differences between the two cabinets. The Conte II cabinet is in line with the general pattern, while the Draghi cabinet is more similar to the

pre-pandemic cabinets (i.e., characterized by little prime ministerial centralization, ministerial fragmentation, and integration mostly through the full cabinet). Moreover, the Conte II cabinet produced almost twice as much decrees as the Draghi cabinet. Third, the level of crisis was medium under the Conte II cabinet and low under the Draghi cabinet: while the Conte II had to face four high-level crisis months, the Draghi cabinet experienced it only for two months.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the crisis was conducive to changes in the patterns of coalition governance, especially fostering prime ministerial centralization. In this regard, it is worth noting that, after a year of relatively more acute crisis and significant monocratization of cabinet decision-making under the Conte II cabinet, the Draghi cabinet went back to ‘normal’ practices as the general level of crisis decreased.

Table 3 presents more systematic evidence, providing the relative frequencies of the use of the three coalition governance models by cabinet.

Table 3. Frequency of the models of coalition governance in the Conte II and Draghi cabinets.

| Governor | Model of coalition governance | | |
|--------------|-------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| | Prime ministerial | Ministerial | Compromise |
| Conte II | 36.7% | 20.0% | 43.3% |
| Draghi | 12.1% | 33.3% | 54.6% |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>28.0%</i> | <i>24.7%</i> | <i>47.3%</i> |

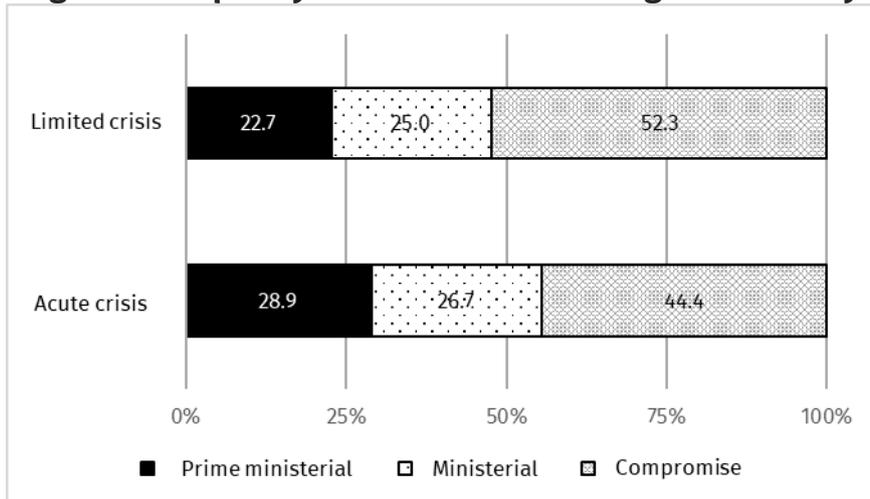
Source: See Table 2.

As expected, the frequency of the prime ministerial model is appreciably higher in the Conte II cabinet, which was – as noticed above – more ‘presidentialized’. In turn, the use of the coalition compromise model was more frequent in the Draghi cabinet, whose supporting coalition was more heterogenous. However, the difference in percentage terms regarding the coalition compromise model is 11.3 percent, whereas the difference concerning the use of the prime ministerial model is 24.6 percent.

In contrast, data do not support the expectation about the use of the ministerial government model. The Conte II cabinet used this model in one fifth of the cases; while the quantity grows up to 33.3 percent (i.e., in more than one third) in the Draghi cabinet. Therefore, there is no evidence of the expected positive relation between low ideological heterogeneity and the ministerial government model. Yet, the figures might also confirm the monocratization trend of the Conte II cabinet. The educated guess is as follows: a strong PM who centralizes authority will hardly want to delegate power to her cabinet colleagues. Rather, this PM will try to control the decision-making process, either by her own or, when not viable, through collective arenas.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis of this article suggests a positive relation between the seriousness of the crisis and the frequency of the prime ministerial model of governance. In this regard, Figure 2 compares the relative frequency of each coalition governance model and the level of the pandemic crisis. The crisis is classified serious in those months characterized by a high level of crisis (see Table 2) as well as in the month before them. The assumption is that, before the level of crisis becomes high, there are signals of a significant worsening shortly to come already one month earlier; these signals prompt the cabinet to act to preempt the foreseen negative consequences.

Figure 2. Frequency of models of coalition governance by level of crisis.



Source: See Table 2.

Findings support the theory: the prime ministerial model is more frequent (+6.2 percent) during phases of acute crisis. At the same time, the frequency of the ministerial government model does not vary significantly (+1.7 percent), whereas the percentage of the coalition compromise model even decreases of almost eight percentage points during the worst phases of the crisis.

Conclusion

This article has investigated the behavior of Italian cabinets during the Covid-19 crisis. Its focus has been on the decision-making process under the Conte II and Draghi cabinets. Four expectations derived from the literature on executive politics in times of crisis have informed the empirical analysis. Five key findings have emerged.

First, Italian cabinets centralized the decision-making process in time of crisis. This finding corroborates the theoretical arguments of the literature on the relationship between exogenous crises and political leadership.

Second, the Conte II cabinet was more ‘presidentialized’ and this is reflected in a more frequent use of the prime ministerial model of coalition governance.

Third, the Draghi cabinet, whose ideological heterogeneity was higher, was characterized by a higher frequency of the compromise model. This may be explained by the desire of the coalition partners to exercise mutual control.

Fourth, the less heterogenous Conte II cabinet did not use the ministerial government model more frequently. A plausible explanation is that a strong PM tends to avoid authority delegation to the ministries and to centralize cabinet decision-making.

Fifth, centralization and collective cabinet decision-making correlate, respectively, positively and negatively with the crisis level.

Overall, the investigation contributes to the debate about the effects of serious crises on democratic governance at large. It has supported the argument that a substantial threat to the political system is likely to create functional pressures towards authority centralization. Moreover, political leaders need to develop a discursive legitimation of the concentration of power. In this regard, the empirical scholarship shows that personalistic rhetoric used to legitimize executive authority is significantly linked to a long-term deterioration of the quality of democracy, or even to autocratization. Yet, advanced liberal democracies have higher chances to escape this autocratization trap (Brunkert & von Soest, 2023). Therefore, the take-home message may be that democracy can cope with the rationalization of governance capacity fostered by exogenous shocks, without jeopardizing

its constitutive traits in the long-term. However, liberal democracies should prepare themselves in advance, when not under stress, by making their core institutions strong.

Future studies can broaden the focus of the investigation, both longitudinally and cross-sectionally. The increase in the number of the units of analysis and observations is a necessary condition to apply rigorous research methods to test general hypotheses in a more systematic way. From a theoretical viewpoint, a possible research outlook is the inclusion of a higher number of variables, which may affect the choice of the coalition governance models. In this regard, scholars can assess the conditional effect of the policy field at issue. Finally, the scholarship would benefit from the use of a more fine-grained set of proxies of coalition governance models, which should take also the dynamic facet of the decision-making process into due consideration.

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