

## Introduction to the Special Issue

# Changing Politics: Government, Parliament and Parties in Italy at the Dawn of the 18<sup>th</sup> Legislature

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### The Italian Parliament: A delegitimised institution?

The public's distrust of the Italian parliament has spread like a pandemic over the past few years. According to the Eurobarometer data, in the last fifteen years the portion of the Italian population declaring a measure of trust in the country's highest representative institution has never exceeded one third.<sup>1</sup> Apparently, the Italian political system has proven unable to tackle citizens' distrust, as the gap between those who tend not to trust the Italian parliament and those who tend to trust it still amounts to more than 20 percentage points, also after the start of Legislature XVIII in March 2018. This is perhaps surprising, as the Italian elections held in 2018 brought about a number of novelties in the party system and in the institutional framework. At the same time, however, some political dynamics in the Italian parliament did not change after the 2018 elections, and this has probably helped to preserve the image of the Italian parliament as a 'delegitimised' institution. It is especially on these patterns of continuity and discontinuity with the past that could be observed at the start of Legislature XVIII that the present Special Issue focuses.

Trust in the Italian parliament began to visibly decline in 2007, well before the effects of the economic crisis were felt. The image of parliament probably deteriorated due to a combination of various factors, some long-term and others of a contingent nature. 2007 was the year of the agony of the second Prodi government, which lacked a legislative majority in the Senate and was exhausted by continuous internal conflict. It was the year

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<sup>1</sup> Data retrieved from the webpage of the Eurobarometer Interactive Research System: <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/chartType/lineChart//themeKy/18/groupKy/89/savFile/201> (last accessed 7 January 2021).

of V-day<sup>2</sup> in the squares of many Italian cities, an event that launched Beppe Grillo's party, the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S). But 2007 was also the year of publication of a best-selling book entitled 'La Casta', written by Gian Antonio Stella and Sergio Rizzo, which was devoted to documenting and stigmatizing the less than honourable behaviour of the Italian political class. A second marked fall in the level of trust in the Italian parliament took place in the autumn of 2011 when the effects of the Eurozone crisis became visible in Italy and a technocratic cabinet led by Mario Monti was sworn in after Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi had to resign. It seems hard to distinguish between factors such as the actual performance of the Italian parliament, citizens' disaffection with political institutions, the narratives put in place by political actors and how the media frame political events. These factors are intertwined and feed into each other by building an image of parliament that is perhaps more negative than what the institution deserves.

Undoubtedly, the functioning of Italian political institutions during the so-called Second Republic has not fulfilled the expectations of many. Seen through the eyes of scholars, the 'alternation' period appears marked by contradictory tensions. Just to limit ourselves to the institutional aspects, we can mention the repeated and unsuccessful attempts to enact a 'big reform' aimed at giving parliament a structure compatible with the majoritarian aspiration of the party system and, on the other hand, the adoption of various measures to increase transparency and efficiency in the decision-making process. The general elections of 2013 marked another turning point, with the entrance into parliament of the Five Star Movement, a new anti-establishment political force (at that time) that presented itself as an alternative to all political parties. The M5S was strongly opposed to the existing political elites, considered as being mainly responsible for the country's poor economic performance and moral conditions. Once in government, since 2018, the M5S has tried to carry out its radical reform programme of the representative institutions, but its main achievement has been to enact a reduction in the number of parliamentarians – a constitutional reform which was then approved in a referendum by Italian citizens in September 2020.

## Why this special issue

The low levels of Italian citizens' trust in representative institutions and the political events just mentioned that have occurred in recent years may lead one (especially scholars of Political Science) to wonder whether this deficit can be attributed not only to politics in its strictest sense but perhaps also to how politics is studied and reported. Back in September 2018, we – the Standing Group on Government, Parliament and Representation – organised a panel on the study of representative institutions at the Annual Conference of the Italian Political Science Association (SISP) in Turin. At the basis of that panel was the belief that going beyond the rigid boundaries between disciplines and the distinction between academics and professionals can improve our understanding of representative institutions in Italy and abroad.

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<sup>2</sup> 'V' stands for an Italian offensive exclamation. On V-day, this exclamation was generally addressed to Italian politicians.

A second event, held in Rome again under the aegis of the SISP, was devised and organised with the same aim. That workshop, which took place in June 2019, involved a number of scholars (from Political Science and other disciplines) and professionals interested in understanding if and how the Italian parliament has changed in Legislature XVIII. The current legislature indeed presents some elements of novelty if compared to the previous ones, both in terms of party system configuration and in terms of the institutional framework. The collection of articles in this Special Issue is a first output of the workshop we held in Rome in 2019. This Special Issue involves not only Political Science scholars, but also practitioners in the Italian political institutions. The contributions benefit from insights from disciplines such as public law, data science, political communication and linguistics. Combining different skills is indeed essential to create a more complete, multi-faceted analysis of parliament and, more in general, of representative institutions.

## **Contents and findings of the Special Issue**

All the articles in this Special Issue highlight elements of continuity and discontinuity with the past that characterize the start of Italian Legislature XVIII. The Special Issue opens with Alice Cavalieri's article, showing that changes and inertia survive mixed together. In spite of the electoral victory of 'populist' parties – the Five Star Movement and the League – in the 2018 elections, the budget law approved at the beginning of Legislature XVIII, probably the most important policy appointment and contentious moment of the year, did not testify unambiguously to an enduring radical change taking place. As Cavalieri points out in her article, the most disruptive feature of the Conte I cabinet's budgetary process was the attempt to openly infringe the European Commission restraints of the multiannual deficit. On the one hand, such an attempt was pretty successful in terms of symbolic position taking but much less successful in terms of concrete 'financial' outcomes. The prompt reaction of financial markets led the government to partially revise the planned deficit size. On the other hand, the budgetary law enacted by the so-called 'yellow-green' cabinet fulfilled two crucial policy promises made by the coalition parties – the Five Star Movement and the League – during the electoral campaign, by increasing the financial amount spent on social protection, in particular on the 'citizenship income' and on the extension of pension eligibility criteria.

According to Cavalieri's definition, the coalition between the Five Star Movement and the League was 'irresponsible' as regards domestic and international systemic constraints, even if less so than in its intent, but perfectly 'responsive' towards the electorates of the two ruling parties. Nevertheless, the 'index of transformativeness' used by the author shows that the overall rate of change associated with Conte I's original budget proposal with respect to the previous budgetary law was lower than the change brought about by other governments' budgetary bills during the Second Republic in similar circumstances, namely after a government alternation at the beginning of a new legislature. Interestingly, despite its different political nature, the Conte II government – formed in 2019 involving the Five Star Movement together with the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) and other left and centre-left parties – was almost unable to correct the budget structure decided by the previous government, while it was sensitive to and respectful of the supra-national restraints. In other words, the coalition between

the Democratic Party and the Five Star Movement, contrary to the previous one, was not very responsive (above all towards PD voters), but it was responsible. The season of radical changes seemed to have already expired. However, the aspect that reveals the greatest continuity with the past is the strong agenda-setting power of the government vis-à-vis parliament. This continuity can be seen not only between the two governments led by Giuseppe Conte, but also between these and the other governments of the last few years. The index of transformativeness computed by Cavalieri shows that the budgetary law is always very similar to the budget scheme originally proposed by the government. In other words, what the Italian government proposes in terms of budget structure is always substantially confirmed by parliament, no matter which parties are in government.

Italian Legislature XVIII was different from the previous ones not only with regard to the type of government formed after the elections but also in terms of formal rules. While several scholars have focused on the electoral system adopted for the first time in the 2018 elections, in their article Andrea Pedrazzani and Francesco Zucchini turn their attention to the reform recently made to the internal rules of the Senate. In 2017, an extensive reform of the Rules of Procedure of the Italian upper chamber was enacted, revising over one-third of the articles of the standing orders. The revision was celebrated as a crucial reform which would bring discontinuity in the way parliamentary business is conducted in the Senate, as it was expected by many to make decision-making in the upper house more efficient and rapid. This is because the reform introduced more restrictive rules for forming new parliamentary party groups, rationalized several steps of bill examination, strengthened the role of permanent committees in the legislative process and modified the rules for bill assignment to committees.

After summarizing the main contents of the reform and the process leading to its approval in 2017, Pedrazzani and Zucchini focus on the new rules for bill assignment in the Senate. According to the new assignment rules, bills are now normally sent to committees acting in a drafting capacity or a legislating capacity, and not in a reporting capacity (as was the case under the previous rules in the Senate and under the current rules in the Chamber of Deputies). This change was widely expected to enhance the legislative ‘efficiency’ of the Senate. Analysing the law-making data available so far, the authors offer a preliminary evaluation of the impact of the new rules, showing that the Senate’s legislative efficiency has not (yet) increased since the reform. More specifically, two findings are highlighted in the article. Firstly, the political circumstances at the start of Legislature XVIII have often led senators to resort to committees acting in a reporting capacity in order to approve bills – a procedure that has become more costly since the reform. Hence, the new rules have failed to speed up the approval of bills through committees acting in drafting or legislating capacity. Secondly, the post-reform Senate of Legislature XVIII has systematically lower levels of legislative productivity if compared with the pre-reform Senate of Legislature XVII. Quite unexpectedly, the productivity ‘gap’ seems wider when bills are examined in the same committees, well before being considered for approval on the floor.

In her article, Chiara De Micheli analyses whether and how the unprecedented political landscape which emerged after the 2018 elections has affected the functioning of key aspects of the Italian political system. In particular, the article offers a preliminary assessment of the impact of changes in the party system on dynamics observed in the so-

called ‘government-parliament sub-system’. In so doing, patterns of continuity and change are highlighted with regard to law-making in the Italian parliament at the beginning of Legislature XVIII. Expanding on a growing research programme on the evolution of the Italian political system during the Second Republic, the author examines the use of a number of law-making instruments and procedures such as ordinary laws, law-decrees, delegations, votes of confidence and the decentralized approval of bills. Within the conceptual framework developed in the article, frequency in the use of these tools and practices can be associated with key factors like the degree of fragmentation in the party system and electoral volatility. Preliminary findings on law-making data collected at the start of Legislature XVIII highlight links between parliamentary fragmentation, electoral volatility and the characteristics of the legislative process in Italy. As pointed out by the author, persistently high parliamentary fragmentation is associated with the frequent use of decree-laws, delegating-laws and legislation protected through votes of confidence by the Italian governments, at the expense of ordinary legislative procedures. Moreover, high electoral volatility seems to lead governmental actors to promote the executive’s initiatives through non-ordinary instruments of legislation. By showing a high degree of decision-making efficiency, these instruments help government parties to respond – or at least, appear as more responsive – to the political demands of volatile voters.

In his contribution, Valerio Di Porto reviews the main events of the first Conte government, seeking to establish a connection between the political-institutional aspects of this (unprecedented) government coalition and the use it made of legislative instruments, as well as between the devaluation of parliament and the success of legislative parliamentary initiatives. In this review the author also compares the first months of Italian Legislature XVIII with the first months of the preceding legislative terms, going back to 1996. Di Porto concludes that the first Conte government and the legislature in which it operated differentiate themselves from the preceding ones in terms of the types of action mainly orientated to the present and to constitutional reforms – apparently small but huge in terms of impact. An example was the reduction in the number of parliamentarians, which was strongly supported by the Five Star Movement and then approved by the referendum held in September 2020.

Exactly like the other legislatures taken into account in Di Porto’s comparison, the current one will end with a government and a parliamentary majority which are different from the initial ones, but (so far) with the same prime minister. Of course, the emergency and relative actions related to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (not covered by the author) have made the ‘present day’ mentioned in the article’s title even more significant and have thrown into the game further variables that will need to be explored at the end of the legislature, in order to have an overall view and evaluation of both Conte governments.

The last article in this Special Issue concentrates on elements of continuity and discontinuity in the nature of the main players of party competition at the start of Legislature XVIII. The elections held in March 2018 have been repeatedly described as the triumph of the populist parties. However, the characteristics which make a party ‘populist’ are still the subject of fierce debate. The article by Claudia Roberta Combei, Matteo Farnè, Daniela Giannetti and Luca Pinto pays specific attention to political discourse to understand whether and to what extent prominent politicians belonging to

populist and non-populist parties focus on different topics. From a methodological point of view, this work utilizes – and contributes to – the growing body of literature using the text-as-data approach. In particular, the authors analyse party manifestos through a dictionary approach to estimate the degree of populism of Italian parties and an unsupervised learning method to capture the policy content of Tweets. Moreover, the authors take a step forward to measure the populist tone of Tweets. The results are interesting in at least two respects. On the one hand, the analysis of party manifestos considers both the M5S and the League as populists but denies that the extreme-right Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FDI) belongs to the same category. This finding, based on clear and explicitly declared criteria, has the merit of reinvigorating the debate on how to measure populism, going beyond impressionistic judgements. On the other hand, and on more substantive grounds, the article reveals that the issue dominating the agenda of both populist parties, albeit to a different degree, has been immigration, which has also been discussed in populist tones by the League. Interestingly, also the Tweets posted by politicians belonging to Brothers of Italy frequently addressed migration, but they did so in a non-populist tone.

## Concluding remarks

Italian Legislature XVIII opened with great hopes for discontinuity from the past. The Conte I government, formed by two anti-establishment parties, promised to finally deliver that ‘change’ which Italian citizens had been expecting for a long time. With regard to the functioning of parliament, Roberto Fico – the new President of the Chamber of Deputies and a prominent figure in the Five Star Movement – made several promises in his inaugural speech. First, in its role as the central representative institution, the new parliament would be able to resist external pressures. It would cut its costs. Finally, the Chamber of Deputies would learn the lesson of the Senate and reform its Rules of Procedure.

A number of novelties are undeniable, starting from the reduction in the number of parliamentarians. At the same time, the contributions of this Special Issue reveal that, in several regards, the radical changes expected by many have not occurred: the most relevant policy outputs have been imposed by the government on parliament without much discussion and the new rules introduced in the Senate have proved insufficient to improve the efficiency of the legislative process. In these respects, the keyword of this legislature has still been continuity rather than change. This conclusion is valid even when looking at the communication strategies of the parties: while the advent of new media imposes new ways to relate with the public, the most debated themes have not changed very much: migration, a topic that became salient on the public and political agenda about two decades ago, in the early 2000s, remains a signature issue for many parties.

As mentioned above, in this picture one can risk overlooking the most important, and perhaps only significant change: the reduction in the number of parliamentarians approved by the Italian parliament and confirmed by a large majority in the popular referendum held in September 2020. This institutional change – jointly with a likely new electoral system – will perhaps bring a major transformation in the way the Italian parliament functions. In which direction it will go, though, it is too soon to say.