

Planning the ‘government of change’: The 2018 Italian coalition agreement in comparative perspective

José Santana Pereira

ISCTE – INSTITUTO UNIVERSITÁRIO DE LISBOA

Catherine Moury

UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA

Abstract

Coalition agreements in the Italian Second Republic have traditionally been pre-electoral, often long, comprehensive but vague documents serving also as electoral manifestos for centre-right or centre-left coalitions. In this article, we analyse the 2018 post-electoral coalition agreement between the Movimento Cinque Stelle and Lega in comparative perspective, contrasting this agreement with former coalition programmes enforced since the mid-1990s in Italy and the pre-election manifestos published by these two political parties. The analysis reported here allows us to conclude that the first post-electoral coalition agreement in Italy is shorter than most centre-left documents, as vague as previous agreements, and constitutes a compromise committing the Lega to less right-wing positions, the ‘grillini’ to less progressive stances, and both political forces to tone down their Euroscepticism. The extent to which these commitments are solid and longstanding is unknown.

1. Introduction

Coalition agreements are binding written documents composed of policy intentions endorsed by parties involved in a coalition government solution before they take office, thus constituting a key feature of coalition governance (Strøm and Müller 1999, Müller and Strøm 2000, 2008, Moury and Timmermans 2013). Initially seen by the coalition politics literature as window dressing, composed of general statements aimed at winning everyone’s agreement (e.g. Luebbert 1986, Laver and Budge 1992), more recent empirical research has portrayed coalition agreements rather differently, stressing their importance both in communicating with voters and binding the decision-making process within the coalition (e.g. Müller and Strøm 2000, 2008, Timmermans 2006, Moury 2013, Eichorst 2014).

Italy has often been the focus of individual or comparative studies of coalition agreements (e.g. Moury, 2010, 2011a, Moury and Timmermans 2008, 2013). The country has been described as an underdeveloped system of coalition agreements, unlike polities such as Belgium and the Netherlands (Vassallo 2007, Moury and Timmermans 2008). This is both due to the number of coalition agreements drafted (virtually none during the First Republic and only four since 1994) and the features of the negotiation process (Moury, 2010, 2011a). It is noteworthy that, with the exception of the 2018 document, coalition

agreements in Italy have been pre-electoral, serving as electoral manifestos and, when victory is secured, as a bargained basis for government.

The 2018 coalition agreement, dubbed *Contratto per il Governo del Cambiamento* (Contract for the Government of Change) by its drafters *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S, Five Star Movement) and *Lega* (League), is an exceptional document in the Italian context both due to its post-electoral nature and the distinct nature of the parties involved in the negotiation. The former is an anti-establishment populist party not easily positioned in the left-right continuum (D'Alimonte 2013), while the latter, under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, abandoned its pro-north stance and became a classic nationalist radical right-wing party (Tarchi 2018). Except for their Euroscepticism and populist stances and style, these parties are ideologically quite distinct, and during the campaign both had refused the possibility of reaching an agreement after the election.

The aim of this article is to report a comparative analysis of this exceptional 2018 post-election coalition agreement in Italy, resorting to existing knowledge on the nature and features of these agreements in Italy and elsewhere. This article is structured as follows. First, we review the main steps of the coalition agreement specification process and the core roles that these documents fulfil in terms of coalition governance and electoral politics. Second, we present an overview of coalition agreements in the Italian Second Republic before 2018 and discuss the literature that explored them in longitudinal and comparative terms. We then describe the 2018 coalition formation process and the contents of the M5S-*Lega* coalition agreement, comparing some of its features to those of previous documents and also to the electoral manifestos published by the incumbent parties during the campaign. The article ends with some remarks on the future prospects of the incumbent coalition.

2. Coalition agreements: goals and process

Coalition agreements are, in several consensual democracies, a common instrument of coalition governance. Strøm and Müller (1999) show that, in a sample of 223 Western European coalition cabinets in office between 1945 and 1996, 61 per cent have produced an identifiable coalition agreement, more often after the elections (post-electoral agreements took place almost two-thirds of the time) than before election day. Their longitudinal analysis disclosed that there is a trend of greater use of coalition agreements over time, with the proportion of coalitions based on written agreements shifting from less than 50 per cent in the late 1940s to 70 per cent in the early 1990s.

When coalitional agreements are pre-electoral, they have an important informative role during the campaign. Electoral manifestos are assumed to be the best indicators of what parties communicate to the voters, not because voters actually read them, but because they determine the political discourse of party officials (Klingemann et al. 1994). In Ireland and the Netherlands, for instance, media coverage of the campaign often includes a considerable amount of information on the specific pledges of the main political parties (Timmermans 2003, Costello and Thomson 2008). The importance of this informative role is linked with the 'promissory representation model' by Mansbridge (2003). The model describes a system where voters choose parties according to the policies they propose and, once in power, the parties enact these policies. Consequently, it is the voters' choice in the

elections that indirectly controls political decisions, given that the political party fulfils their pledges (Pierce, 1999, Klingemann et al. 1994, Royed 1996, Thomson 2001).

The communicational or advertising role of coalition agreements is important during the electoral campaign (in the case of pre-electoral agreements, such as those of the Italian Second Republic until 2018) but also afterwards, since 'voters can use them to make relatively accurate predictions regarding the direction of government policy, and retrospectively judge the completion of those promises that served as the basis of the coalition' (Eichorst, 2014, p. 99). It is therefore not surprising to find that more than 80 per cent of the coalition agreements drafted by Western European coalitions in the second half of the twentieth century were intended for publication (Strøm and Müller 1999).

Coalition agreements also serve a second, perhaps more important, purpose: they list the policy intentions to which the parties in the coalition are committed, binding them to this commitment. In Strøm and Müller's (1999) words, such an agreement is 'the most authoritative document that constrains party behaviour' (pp.263-265). Parties anticipate conflict and commit to deals on major policy issues, while maintaining the ability to differentiate their party positions over issues that were not included in the agreement. In most countries, common policy platforms effectively help coalition parties to accommodate their differences and produce decisions (De Winter et al. 2000; Timmermans 2006). In terms of coalition performance, these agreements include policy conflicts, commit parties to their contents, are key instruments in reducing within-party and inter-party conflict (namely by limiting agency loss in the process of delegation from parties to individual ministers), are good predictors of the legislative agenda and a majority of the testable claims within these documents become formal cabinet decisions (Timmermans 2003, Walgrave et al. 2006, Moury and Timmermans 2008, Müller and Strøm 2008, Moury 2011a, 2013).

Coalition agreements are mostly devoted to policy deals, but may also contain other relevant compromises, such as the procedural rules the coalition partners agree to respect and the distribution of offices and competencies. In the cited Strøm and Müller's (1999) comparative work, Portuguese and Austrian agreements devoted on average almost one-third of their space to laying out the procedural rules of the coalitional game, while references to the distribution of offices and competences between the coalition partners are much less common.

But how do coalition agreements come to be? In countries in which coalitions are common, the formation of coalition governments is preceded by extensive negotiations, led by party leaders who often become ministers and are subsequently designated to guide the cabinet's actions. Often, the main negotiators for the coalition agreements are party leaders, accompanied by party members who are experts in different policy domains and are subsequently given cabinet portfolios (Müller and Strøm 2000). The resulting document is then presented to the parties for ratification. This process fosters commitment due to two reasons: first, drafters of the coalition agreement, as party leaders, can impose commitment to the ratified document; second, ministers who participate in the drafting of the document internalize the deals, being therefore more likely to implement them (Timmermans 2006). In the next section we show that in the case of Italy the patterns of coalition agreement specification have often been different.

3. Coalition Agreements in Italy

In the Italian First Republic, party leaders usually dedicated much more attention to the allocation of ministries than the definition of policy, given the executive's difficulty in controlling its own parliamentary majority and adopting significant reforms (Di Palma 1977). Unsurprisingly, coalition agreements were virtually non-existent in Italy until the mid-1990s (Strøm and Müller 1999). The electoral reform of 1993 profoundly changed the Italian political system, having a strong impact in terms of party system and electoral competition dynamics (Bartolini et al. 2004). The First Republic was over, and a Second Republic was born. In the succeeding elections, two coalitions (centre-left and centre-right) were presented to the voters, often with a common electoral platform. This manifesto fulfilled the role of coalition agreement for the winners of the 1996, 2001 and 2006 elections.

The first coalition agreement in the Italian Second Republic was prepared and implemented by the Prodi I government (1996-1998). After losing the 1994 election, the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS, Democratic Party of the Left) decided to open up to the centre and accepted Romano Prodi's proposal of a coalition between several parties, named *Ulivo* (Olive Tree) (Di Virgilio 1996). Six months before the elections, Prodi and a group of seven 'wise men' started to prepare the common electoral programme: the *'tesi dell'Ulivo'*. None of these former technocratic ministers and university professors had a leading role in their parties, but all became ministers. This ambitious and very long programme (more than 40,000 words), covering a broad range of issues, was presented to the pre-electoral coalition parties' congresses for ratification. It was rejected by three small parties, which, nevertheless, stayed in the coalition and obtained seats in government (Moury 2011a).

The second coalition agreement (Berlusconi II) was drafted before the general election of June 2001 by the six parties comprising the *Casa delle Libertà* (House of Freedoms) coalition: Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (FI; Forward Italy), the post-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN, National Alliance), the right-wing ethno-regionalist *Lega Nord* (LN, Northern League) and three other very small parties. This centre-right coalition presented several electoral programmes, including a letter to the Italian people (sent to centre-right activists and published on FI's website) and a contract with the Italian people (signed live on television by Berlusconi himself), composed of five broad pledges and Berlusconi's commitment to abandon politics in the case of non-fulfilment. The official coalition agreement was, however, published only a few days before the elections, after centre-left politicians had accused FI of not having a programme. This comparatively short manifesto (less than 10,000 words) was later recognized by all coalition parties as their official manifesto, but never formally ratified by their rank and file. It represented a compromise between FI and the other parties, with the country's federalization ('devolution'), LN's central claim, included in the programme along with certain elements of the other parties' demands (Diamanti 2007, Moury 2010, 2011a).

The Prodi II coalition agreement was enacted by the government elected in 2006, based on a coalition between the former *Ulivo* partners and other parties, for a total of nine independent political forces with considerable ideological differences. The extremely long (92,000 words) coalition agreement of this *Unione* (Union) was prepared one year before the elections by its disputed leader, Romano Prodi. He coordinated

several workshops aimed at drafting the programme, which was finally amended by Prodi, party leaders and specialists, being ratified by all coalition members except one (Moury 2010).

The history of formal pre-electoral coalition agreements ends here. The 2008 elections gave the victory to *Popolo della Libertà* (PdL), resulting from the merger of FI and AN, coalescing only with the LN. There was no pre-electoral agreement, as both parties drafted their independent manifestos. By and large, the PdL's programme was adopted, with a few fundamental claims by the *Lega*. Berlusconi himself, together with a handful of future cabinet members, conducted a very hierarchical process, generating a short document (nine pages) with specific proposals. The governments that followed have not produced coalition agreements.

As mentioned above, there is a difference in the process of coalition agreement drafting in Italy, when compared with the common practice of consensual democracies such as the Netherlands or Belgium. To be sure, the process has seldom included all coalition party leaders and the documents have rarely been ratified by party bodies. As we have seen, the common manifesto of the Prodi I government was drafted by Prodi himself and a group of seven experts that did not include the party leaders, though they all became ministers. Negotiators internalized the policies included in the document but lacked the authority to impose a strong commitment to these deals. Also, the fact that some coalition parties refused to ratify the resulting manifesto paved the way for disloyal behaviour afterwards. The formulation of the Prodi II common manifesto resembled the common practice in countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands more closely, as it involved both experts and party leaders, most of whom became members of the cabinet. Nevertheless, again, not all parties ratified the document which had been prepared over one year of negotiations. Instead, the Berlusconi II agreement was mainly drafted by Berlusconi's collaborators, in just seven days, and was not formally ratified by the other coalition partners.

In terms of fulfilment of pledges in the coalition agreements, Italian institutional features are seen as obstacles: the Constitution, the electoral law and the parliamentary procedure rules contribute to the existence of two parliamentary chambers with inconsistent majorities, in which each law must be passed and within which individual MPs and group leaders and committees enjoy substantial prerogatives (Capano and Giuliani 2003). Additionally, researchers have shown that congruence – measured by party seat distribution or legislative data such as the time for adopting legislation in both Chambers – has declined since 2001 (Zucchini 2008, Pedrazzani 2017).

Interestingly enough, Moury (2013) shows that almost all (former) ministers or junior ministers she interviewed feel constrained, at least to some extent, by the coalition agreement when making decisions, a finding that underlines the relevance of the institutional framework as a constraining factor. But just how limited has pledge fulfilment been? Looking at the Prodi I and II and Berlusconi II governments, Moury (2010) observed that important pledges, recurrently emphasized during the campaign, were not adopted. Governments fulfilled – at least partially – on average half of all their pledges, with a minimum for the short-lived Prodi I cabinet (40.7 per cent) and a maximum for Berlusconi II (58.7 per cent). Unsurprisingly, the fulfilment score of the Prodi I and II governments, which were minority (or quasi-minority) governments that did not

complete their mandates, is lower than that of the Berlusconi II government, which relied on a large parliamentary majority and lasted four years. Nevertheless, in a comparative study of coalition agreements and records in Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands, Moury (2011b) found that around 60 per cent of all cabinet decisions originated in the coalition agreements, this figure being similar for the seven coalitions analysed (including the Prodi I and Berlusconi II governments).

The remarkable difference in length between common centre-left and centre-right manifestos illustrates their different approach in addressing voters: in the first case, long before the elections, voters are presented with a book-length document – obviously very difficult to read and understand; in the second, a few days before election day, citizens receive a short and well-structured programme through the mailbox. Interestingly enough, in a comparative study of coalition agreements in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Germany, the Italian documents are outliers due to their dimension – the Prodi II document is the largest of the eleven considered, and the Berlusconi II agreement the second shortest (Moury and Timmermans 2013). Not surprisingly, long documents like these are remarkably complete; however, they tend to lack precision (Moury 2010). Although the Prodi I and II and Berlusconi II coalition agreements contained more pledges than the average (due, of course, to their length), they also had a lower number of very precise pledges: an average of 13%, vis-à-vis a total average of almost 40% in the eleven documents analysed in Moury and Timmermans's (2013) comparative study. This inverse relationship between size and precision in the Italian documents may be due to the fact that these are pre-electoral agreements, which discourages parties from presenting the voters with clear commitments on key issues – and thus risking punishment by the electorate (Moury and Timmermans 2013).

Coalition agreements have been, of course, different for centre-right and centre-left coalitions not only in communication terms but also with regard to coalition governance. The centre-left, due to the fragmentation of the coalitions, was very aware of the necessity to draft a long and precise coalition agreement in order to foster the efficiency of the governmental and legislative decision-making process. On the centre-right, given the larger ideological coherence of the coalition and the lower number of actors involved, the question on whether ministers and MPs committed to the coalition programme was indeed less of an issue. Nevertheless, their role in terms of management of interparty-policy conflict has been portrayed as inefficient. Given the nature of the negotiating process, Italian common manifestos do not represent an obligation for parliamentary parties to deliver. Conflict is often followed by non-decision, even when disagreement regards deals included in the coalition agreement (Moury 2010).

Finally, it is worth noting that coalition agreements are not the only tool for a coalition to put its priorities on the agenda: government speeches might serve a similar purpose. The prime minister, before the investiture, has to deliver official speeches in the lower and upper house. On both occasions, the premier expounds in detail the government's future policy proposals and, after each speech, party representatives are allowed to speak and comment (Curini 2011). This investiture speech addresses a wide range of issues that disclose policy proposals of the future government (Ieraci 2006, Cotta and Marangoni 2015). In that line, for example, Borghetto and al. (2017) have

shown that governments with different ideologies will prioritize different policy issues in their government speeches.

4. The 2018 coalition agreement

In the Italian general election of 4 March 2018, no political group or party was able to secure an outright majority. The centre-right alliance composed of Silvio Berlusconi's FI, Matteo Salvini's *Lega* and Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI, Brothers of Italy, named after the country's national anthem) won a plurality of seats in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, while the M5S, led by Luigi di Maio, was the party with the largest number of votes (Paparo 2018). No clear government solution arose from these elections, and a process of almost three months of negotiations was necessary for the formation of a coalition cabinet.

During this period, several possibilities – including new elections or the establishment of a technical government – were discussed. Both Di Maio and Salvini asked for the president to recognize their prerogatives as *formateurs* as, respectively, leaders of the most voted party and pre-electoral coalition. The M5S assumed a leading role in the government formation process, and March-April saw the implementation of its 'two oven' (*due forni*) strategy, the *grillini* being open to negotiations both with the *Lega* (but not the centre-right coalition as a whole) and the centre-left *Partito Democratico* (which was divided regarding this matter). In early May, *Lega* and M5S asked the President for some additional time to come up with a government agreement. On 13 May, they reached an agreement about procedures and policies, described in a document entitled 'Contract for the government of change' (*Contratto per il governo del cambiamento*), but an agreement on who would be the prime minister and the other cabinet members was harder to reach. The final version of this document¹ was published on 18 May and approved by a majority of the M5S and *Lega* electorates (in online and offline consultations, respectively) shortly afterwards.

The process of coalition agreement drafting was, of course, rather different from the ones described in the previous section. First, it took place after the elections and involved two political forces which were apparently rather unwilling to govern together, at least according to the declarations made during the election campaign. The agreement drafting process was much quicker than those of the Prodi agreements (six months to one year), but nevertheless longer than the drafting of the definitive Berlusconi II agreement: Di Maio and Salvini needed about three weeks to come up with their coalition government programme. While this is a relatively short period of time, it does not denote carelessness in this process, since, unlike the other Italian agreements, drawn up from scratch, the M5S-*Lega* contract was informed by the electoral manifestos and pledges of both parties before the elections. Therefore, most of this time was presumably not spent in drafting realistic/sophisticated pledges but in reaching agreements regarding which individual party pledges could be adopted, in part or completely, by the coalition.

The *Contratto per il governo del cambiamento* is a 58-page, 18,500-word document covering 30 specific topics. In comparative terms, it is notably longer than the Berlusconi II agreement (twice as long) but shorter than the centre-left documents. The

¹ Available here: http://download.repubblica.it/pdf/2018/politica/contratto_governo.pdf.

document focuses mainly on policy, but the first section is devoted to procedure: readers are informed of how cooperation between the two parties and their parliamentary groups will take place (for instance, there is a Conciliation Committee – *Comitato di Conciliazione* – to solve divergences and find agreement on controversial topics), as well as the political coordination with the European institutions. This section also comprises an ethical code for government members and the promise that the cabinet's record will be assessed after the first half of the current legislature. The policy areas are not organized according to their relevance for the parties (as in the two parties' electoral platforms)², but in alphabetical order – from Public Water (*Acqua Pubblica*) to University and Research (*Università e Ricerca*).

The coalition agreement encompasses several concepts that are dear to the M5S, such as green economy, a State owned and controlled investment bank (even if the word bank appears between quotation marks), conflicts of interest, the *reddito di cittadinanza* (a sort of basic income policy), direct democracy and cuts in the 'costs of politics'. Instead, one of the main ideas of the *Lega*'s electoral manifesto, the flat tax, is central in this coalition agreement, although two tax rates are proposed, instead of one, which is obviously a stretching of the flat tax concept. On issues such as pensions, the need to discuss European treaties or immigration, the ideas of both parties were congruent enough (even though *Lega* tends to be more extreme and make these issues more salient in the public arena). The title of the section devoted to the last of these issues actually reproduces two M5S electoral platform sound bites: to end the 'immigration business' and the repatriation of irregular immigrants.

As regards saliency attributed to specific issues, the analysis carried out by the *Istituto Cattaneo*³ shows that the coalition programme confers much less space to law and order issues (16.2 vs. 40 per cent of quasi-sentences) and much more to welfare and education (27.6 vs. 13.3 per cent) than the *Lega* manifesto. Instead, it devotes a smaller proportion of space to environmental issues than the M5S electoral programme. This same analysis places this coalition agreement almost to the centre within the left-right and pro-/anti-EU dimensions and shows that it is closer to the positions held by M5S than to those of the *Lega*. The main features of this centrist position are the statist approach to welfare and the economy, a dilution of the most drastic securitarian measures initially proposed by Salvini and a moderation of the Euroscepticism present in both manifestos. Nevertheless, the agreement moves away from M5S and becomes closer to *Lega* on the progressive-conservative axis, resulting from the disappearance of the *grillini*'s expansion of a civil rights agenda.

Still according to the *Istituto Cattaneo*'s report, 56 per cent of the contents of this agreement are very general, which resonates with Moury's (2010) conclusion regarding the lack of precision of pre-electoral agreements in the Italian Second Republic. Indeed, most pledges are presented in a very general fashion, lacking precision, which will make pledge fulfilment assessments – by experts and the citizenry – rather tricky. Generally speaking, vagueness is also the main trait of the investiture speech made by Giuseppe

² For instance, the first four topics of *Lega*'s programme were the most salient issues for this party: Taxes, Pensions, Immigration and Europe.

³ Available here: <http://www.cattaneo.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Analisi-Istituto-Cattaneo-Il-governo-M5s-e-Lega-23-maggio-2018-1.pdf>.

Conte in the two chambers of the Italian parliament.⁴ However, a comparison between the 2018 coalition agreement and the electoral manifestos published by M5S and *Lega* shows that the degree of concreteness of the former is considerably higher – in fact, about three in every four quasi-sentences⁵ in the electoral manifestos were generic. The coalition agreement is remarkably specific on issues such as law and order (in which the *Lega's* contribution is clear) and institutional and public administration reform (with one in every two quasi-sentences presenting policy proposals), and considerably vague on issues such as welfare, employment and foreign policy.

The relative lack of precision in this agreement makes it less useful than necessary both in terms of communication with voters and coalition governance. Not only do Italian citizens not know exactly what to expect in several policy areas (namely welfare, employment and foreign policy), but also individual ministers from both parties have more room for manoeuvre, with the corollary risk of conflict and dissidence. The deplorable mid-October 2018 scandal over the *pace fiscale* agreement, with Di Maio accusing a 'little hand' of having changed the final law proposal in accordance with the *Lega's* initial stance on this issue, is an example of how easily dissidences and conflicts may arise and be made public in the current coalition cabinet. The generic nature of the coalition agreement also blurs analysis of the extent to which the coalition has governed in accordance with what was promised. This is despite political declarations such as those of the vice prime-minister Di Maio who states that in four months of government, half of the policies contained in the M5S manifesto⁶ had been delivered (interestingly enough, the comparison was made with his manifesto and not with the coalition agreement).

5. Concluding remarks

The 2018 Italian coalition agreement is exceptional in several ways: it is the first post-electoral coalition agreement in the history of this consensual democracy, and required negotiations between parties that had no record of cooperation nor willingness to govern together, as well as completely different positions in the conservative-progressive and left-right policy dimensions, though being similarly Eurosceptic.⁷ The post-electoral negotiations resulting from a hung parliament granting political prominence to M5S (the most voted party) and *Lega* (the largest party within the most voted pre-electoral coalition), led to the establishment of an unexpected coalition cabinet and the publication of a comparatively long and complete, but imprecise, coalition agreement. The *grillini* seem to have been able to place the policy proposals closer to their own position in the left-wing spectrum, but the *Lega's* intervention in this process has caused the agreement to be more conservative and therefore more distant from the moderate to progressive

⁴Speech given on 5 June 2018, available here: <https://documenti.camera.it/leg18/resoconti/assemblea/html/sed0011/stenografico.pdf>.

⁵The Istituto Cattaneo adopted the concept of quasi-sentences used in the Comparative Manifesto Project, meaning one bit of text regarding one specific political object. Some natural sentences are quasi-sentences, others contain two or more quasi-sentences.

⁶Available here: <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2018/10/29/m5s-di-maio-vili-attacchi-contro-di-noi-restiamo-compatti-una-testuggine-romana-chi-attacca-m5s-attacca-litalia/4727012/>.

⁷According to the analysis carried out by Istituto Cattaneo based on their 2018 electoral manifestos, available here: <http://www.cattaneo.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Analisi-Istituto-Cattaneo-Il-governo-M5S-e-Lega-23-maggio-2018-1.pdf>.

M5S stances. These negotiations, and arguably the interventions of the President of the Republic, has also caused both parties to shift from a position of blatant Euroscepticism to a slightly more moderate critical stance towards the EU.

In comparative terms, the 2018 coalition agreement is shorter than centre-left deals and longer than centre-right deals and resulted from a rather quick process which benefited from the fact that there were already two consolidated pre-election manifestos to work from. In spite of this, and similarly to the pre-electoral coalition agreements implemented in the previous two decades, the M5S-*Lega* agreement lacks precision, which gives a great deal of room for manoeuvre to cabinet members and makes conflict resolution slightly trickier.

Over and above these patterns, it is worth mentioning that the extent to which this coalition agreement will indeed be the basis for the government of Italy in the next years is unknown. On the one hand, two of the most important pledges – the flat tax and the basic income – require an increase in public expenditure that fails to comply with European requirements in terms of deficit. In late October 2018, the European Union indeed rejected the Italian 2019 budget proposed by the incumbent coalition on these grounds.⁸ On the other, the polls have shown that *Lega* is increasing its electoral appeal (going from 20 per cent of vote intentions in late March to 31 per cent in late October 2018), while M5S is losing consensus (from 34 to 28 per cent in the same time span), in a context in which all the other electoral forces display some degree of stability.⁹ This may hinder the coalition's cohesiveness either because M5S decides to interrupt its electoral haemorrhage or because *Lega* understands that it may well win subsequent elections and either govern alone or with more natural political allies. The history of the first post-electoral coalition agreement and its implementation might be a very short one.

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⁸More information here: <https://www.ft.com/content/db7a59ac-d6c9-11e8-ab8e-6be0dcf18713>.

⁹ Poll trends available at <https://www.termometropolitico.it/>.

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