

Introduction to the Special Issue: ‘Governo del cambiamento’? Italian politics under the yellow-green government

Andrea Pedrazzani

UNIVERSITY OF MILAN

Guest Special Issue Editor

An exceptional government coalition?

The general elections of March 2018 opened, once again, a turbulent phase in Italian politics. While no coalition or party obtained an absolute majority of parliamentary seats, both the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 stelle*, M5S) and the League (*Lega*) claimed a win in the wake of the elections. The M5S turned out to be the most voted party in Italy, with as much as one-third of the popular vote. Surpassing its traditional coalition partner Forward Italy (*Forza Italia*, FI), the League became the leader of the most voted electoral cartel, as the centre-right bloc received as a whole about 37% of the vote. After a long government-formation process characterised by many twists and turns, a new cabinet was sworn in June 2018, including the M5S and the League as coalition partners and featuring law professor Giuseppe Conte as Prime Minister (PM). To mark a difference with the party system and policy processes which had characterised Italian political life since the mid-1990s, the leaders of the two ruling parties – M5S’s Luigi di Maio and the League’s Matteo Salvini – defined the new cabinet as the ‘government of change’. The latter was indeed formed by parties that were (the M5S) or had recently been (the League) outside the mainstream of the Italian party system. For the first time, the two political forces which had shaped electoral competition and had alternated in government almost uninterruptedly since 1994 – centre-right Forward Italy and centre-left Democratic Party (*Partito democratico*, PD) and its forerunners – were together put out of power.

The novelty of the Conte government, also known as the ‘yellow-green’ government, captured the attention of political observers around the world. In this regard, the headlines of some prominent newspapers published the day after Conte took the oath of office – ‘People power’ (*The Times*, June 2 2018), ‘Italy’s populists take power’ (*Washington Post*, June 2 2018) – are telling. Following the elections, Di Maio himself had stated: ‘Today the third republic commences, which will be at least the republic of Italian citizens’ (March 5 2018).

In a comparative perspective, the outcome of the Italian elections of March 2018 and the formation of a ‘populist’ executive potentially fit well into more general patterns of restructuring of well-established party systems across Europe, especially as a

consequence of the ‘Great Recession’ (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2017; Hernández and Kriesi 2016; Hooghe and Marks 2018). Moreover, these developments seem consistent with the increasing politicisation of issues other than the economic left-right in the most recent period in Italy and in the rest of Europe (Giannetti, Pedrazzani, and Pinto 2017; Kriesi et al. 2012).

Nonetheless, leaving aside the rhetoric of party leaders and possible media sensationalism, the formation of the so-called ‘government of change’ has undoubtedly introduced several novel elements into the Italian political system. The first and most apparent ‘change’ with the past is the (almost) unprecedented nature of the coalition members. The Conte government is supported by a ‘populist’ majority in the parliament, as the two coalition parties took strong anti-Europe and anti-establishment stances before and after the elections. The distinction between ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’ (Mudde 2004) is coupled with a call for instruments of direct democracy in the case of the M5S (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Corbetta 2017), and with nativist, anti-immigration attitudes in the case of the League (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). In an attempt not to become part of the *casta*, the former seems to have retained some of its original characteristics and aspirations of radical renovation of the political process (Tronconi 2018). The latter, which was previously known as the Northern League (*Lega Nord*, LN), is indeed the oldest party in the Italian party system. However, it chose to remain outside the government starting from the end of 2011, when technocrat Mario Monti was appointed PM during the most acute phase of the economic crisis. Under the leadership of Salvini, the League gradually turned from a federalist party to a typical nationalist, radical right force. In the 2018 elections, both the M5S and the League succeeded in channelling citizens’ frustrations with Italian traditional parties and with the European Union (EU) (Itanes 2018; Valbruzzi and Vignati 2018).

A second point of discontinuity regards the peculiar ministerial composition of the Conte cabinet, where a number of technocrats stand beside ministers coming from the two ‘populist’ coalition parties. To begin with, the two ruling parties chose as PM a virtually unknown figure without any previous political or parliamentary experience. The appointment of a non-partisan PM is not new in Italy. However, unlike Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, Lamberto Dini and Monti – who headed a semi-technocratic cabinet in 1993 and fully technocratic cabinets in 1995 and 2011, respectively – Conte is neither a high-ranking bureaucrat nor a renowned economist. His primary task seems to be that of ensuring coordination between the two coalition partners in the course of day-to-day policymaking. As a whole, the yellow-green cabinet has a strong technocratic connotation, as it presents the highest share of ‘technical’ ministerial personnel among all the Italian partisan governments (Valbruzzi 2018). Besides the PM office, five of the nineteen ministerial positions were given to non-partisan figures. In particular, to ensure the credibility of Italy abroad, two independents were appointed in the key portfolios of Foreign Affairs and Economy. The latter element is actually in line with the past, as the economic portfolios of Italian governments have been heavily controlled by non-partisan ministers since the 1990s (Verzichelli and Cotta 2018). However, the ministerial personnel of the M5S-League cabinet exhibits the highest degree of volatility – i.e., a share of ministers belonging to parties that were not in power in the previous cabinet – in Italy’s post-war history (Calossi and Cicchi 2018).

Compared with the usual patterns of government formation in Italy, the presence of a formal coalition contract represents a third innovation. The government formation process bringing to the Conte cabinet was similar to the process leading to the Letta cabinet in many respects. Just as in the spring of 2013, the yellow-green government coalition was not based on an alliance formed before the election, but was built after a long bargaining period in which one of the pre-electoral coalitions was broken and the President of the Republic played a crucial role (Curini and Pinto 2017). Yet, for the first time in Italian republican history, the yellow-green cabinet relies upon a formal post-electoral contract signed by the leaders of the coalition parties. While absent until 1994, some forms of coalition agreements made their appearance in Italy during the Second Republic. However, these were much less formalised than the coalition treaties that can be found in other European countries. In fact, they were simply the joint electoral manifesto that the winning coalition had issued before the election (Cotta and Marangoni 2015; Moury 2013). The coalition contract between the M5S and the League is more similar to the pacts that are common in countries like Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. Not only is it a public document officially signed by the two party leaders after the election, but it also sets up mechanisms for handling possible conflicts within the coalition along with a list of policy priorities.

Shifting the focus from the executive to legislative institutions, a fourth change with the recent past is a regained congruence in the partisan composition of the two houses of the Italian Parliament. While being almost perfectly congruent throughout the First Republic, starting from 1994 the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate had increasingly diverged in terms of the distribution of seats among parties owing to the electoral reforms of 1993 and, above all, of 2005 (Zucchini 2013). As a result, less than half of the cabinets from 1994 onward controlled a majority of seats in both houses (Pedrazzani 2017). The new electoral system used in March 2018 – the Rosato law – produced very limited distortion in the translation of votes into seats (Chiaromonte and D'Alimonte 2018), creating two congruent houses in terms of partisan composition. Consequently, the Conte government is a minimal winning coalition in both the Chamber and the Senate.

Finally, a fifth novelty in the political landscape under the yellow-green cabinet deals with the big policy reforms that the M5S's and League's leaders pledged to enhance. During the electoral campaign, the M5S promised a universal scheme of basic income while the League outlined a block of immigration and tax cuts in the form of a flat tax on income. Both parties were committed to repealing several policy measures adopted by previous governments: among these, an unpopular pension restructuring that was enacted under the Monti executive and a controversial law increasing compulsory vaccinations that was approved under the outgoing Gentiloni cabinet. Although the leaders of M5S and the League did not openly declare to be willing to abandon the Euro currency, they also vowed to use tough tactics to force the other EU members to accept Italy's new spending plans. The reforms promised by the yellow-green coalition would then radically change the status quo in several crucial policy domains.

Why this Special Issue

For all the above-mentioned reasons, the birth of the 'government of change' can be a true turning point in the most recent evolution of the Italian political system. Moreover, the

'populist' government coalition formed in Italy can be an extremely interesting object of study also in comparative perspective. The aim of this Special Issue is to shed some initial light on the new political phase under the M5S-League government. We make no claim to provide a comprehensive account of the formation, dynamics and policy production of the new cabinet, as just a few months have passed since its swearing in on 1 June 2018. Nonetheless, this Special Issue can offer to the scholarly community in Italy and abroad some analytic tools and initial empirical findings to develop further research.

The Special Issue consists of seven research articles analysing a number of topics related to the functioning of the Italian political system under the 'government of change': the traits of the new parliamentary class elected in March 2018, the restructuring in the party system and in the space of party competition, the organisational evolution of the M5S in its route to power, the differences and commonalities of the two ruling parties along new salient dimensions of competition and in terms of their behaviour in parliament, the characteristics of the coalition contract upon which the yellow-green government is based, and some initial assessment of the way the M5S and the League are about to implement the new policy priorities in the government's agenda. In spite of the different theoretical and methodological approaches, all the articles offer fresh, descriptive (but theory grounded) accounts that help us to understand Italian politics under the 'government of change'. On the whole, this Special Issue can give some useful hints about the degree of cohesiveness of the yellow-green government and the issues that might put the coalition under strain.

Content and findings of the Special Issue

The analysis of the Italian political system under the 'government of change' provided by this Special Issue starts with an evaluation of some key characteristics of the parliament which gave birth to that government – in particular, the traits of the new parliamentary class elected in March 2018. In their article, Bruno Marino, Nicola Martocchia Diodati and Luca Verzichelli analyse data on members of the Chamber of Deputies taken from the database of the Centre for the Study of Political Change (CIRCaP), showing that the general elections of 2018 did not engender any radical renewal of Italian parliamentary class. The authors put forward a typology of members of parliament (MPs) based on their previous experience at the local government level, career within the party and parliamentary seniority, which is used as an analytical tool to explore patterns of elite recruitment and circulation. Although a noticeable number of fresh new parliamentarians were elected in March 2018 (especially within the M5S ranks), well-established politicians at the national level currently represent more than half of Italian deputies. Newcomers are almost absent in the League's group, where experience in sub-national governments or in the local party appears to be extremely relevant in order to be recruited and become an MP. For most Italian parties, MPs who are more experienced and central in the party organisation also benefited from the use of multi-candidacies in the last election. With regard to the selection of parliamentary and ministerial offices, the analysis reveals that, in spite of parties' rhetoric associated with the 'government of change', the patterns adopted by the two coalition partners are rather traditional. The most prestigious offices tend to be given to those MPs who had already been elected in 2013 in the case of the M5S, and to top-experienced politicians in the case of the League.

A crucial task in a study of Italian politics under the 'government of change' is to understand the very birth of the yellow-green cabinet in light of well-grounded theoretical perspectives developed in the scholarly literature on government formation. To this purpose, the article by Daniela Giannetti, Andrea Pedrazzani and Luca Pinto offers an account of the formation of the Conte cabinet based on a spatial approach to party competition and on the policy-seeking motivations of the parties involved in the coalition bargaining process. The authors assess the dimensionality of Italian policy space and build bi-dimensional maps of party competition on the basis of the salience parties attribute to various issues and the parties' positions on those issues. The analysis relies on original expert survey data on Italian parties collected by the authors following the election of March 2018. The 2018 data are compared with similar data covering Italian national elections since 2001. As the authors point out, the formation of the M5S-League cabinet can hardly be explained if we assume that the classical economic left-right represented the main axis of party competition in the general election of 2018. Indeed, the policy platforms of the two ruling parties are far from each other in economic terms. However, a diachronic analysis highlights dramatic changes in Italy's policy space, with a decline of economic issues and a significant rise in the salience of non-economic issues such as European integration and immigration. The formation of the Conte government was then decisively influenced by long-term processes in Italian politics, and can be explained in light of the policy positions held by the M5S and the League on non-economic domains.

The differences and commonalities between the M5S and the League are investigated more in depth by two articles in this Special Issue. One of these is the contribution by Benedetta Carlotti and Stella Gianfreda, who analyse how two highly politicised topics connected to the general integration-demarcation cleavage – the EU and immigration – are framed by the two coalition partners in the legislative arena. The authors outline a multi-dimensional (re-)conceptualisation of the EU and immigration issues aimed at untangling the various specific aspects of these two multi-faceted dimensions. To assess possible differences between the two coalition parties in the political arguments used to frame European integration and immigration, an original dataset was constructed comprising the legislative speeches delivered by M5S and League representatives in the Italian and European parliament. The data, which cover debates held between May 2014 and December 2016, were coded through computer-assisted discourse analysis. Results highlight that M5S legislators tend to emphasise an anti-elite position when talking about immigration and the EU, while the League's speeches reflect more of a cultural-identitarian and sovereigntist framing strategy. In particular, the League opposes immigration, relying most of all on arguments related to nativism and law and order logics. Moreover, Salvini's party criticises the EU from a typically sovereigntist point of view, whereby supra-national institutions are blamed for seizing fundamental decision-making powers from the member states. Conversely, the M5S frames its opposition to European integration by stressing the lack of democratic accountability of the EU-level elites, while M5S's speeches about immigration tend to focus on the mismanagement of the refugee crisis. The analysis also shows the Movement's adaptation to different institutional settings, as its members frame immigration-related topics using distinct arguments in the Italian parliament and in the European parliament. Such differences in how the two parties

position themselves on the integration-demarcation dimension can point to possible ‘wedges’ in the current governing coalition in Italy.

The common traits and differences between the two ruling parties are the primary object of study of another contribution in this Special Issue. In particular, the article by Elisabetta De Giorgi and António Dias compares the legislative activities of the M5S and the League when these parties entered Parliament as new challengers. As underlined by the authors, the M5S entered the Italian Parliament after the start of the Great Recession. Similarly, the (Northern) League had crossed the representation threshold more than twenty years previously, amid Italy’s political and economic crisis of the late 1980s-early 1990s. The authors apply social network analysis to bill proposals in order to empirically evaluate the extent to which each of the two parties cooperated with other opposition groups during its first term in the Italian Parliament – that is, the 1992-1994 legislature for the League and the 2013-2018 legislature for the M5S. The analysed patterns of bill co-sponsorship in the Chamber of Deputies highlight strong similarities in the legislative behaviour of the M5S and the League when they first entered Parliament as new challengers, as both parties chose to stand apart from the other parliamentary groups, whether in government or in opposition. Such a strategy served the same purpose: both the M5S and the League sought to present themselves to voters as an alternative to all the existing political parties. Interestingly, under Salvini the League revived this strategy in the 2013-2018 legislature, in an attempt to (re-)build for itself a reputation as an anti-establishment political force. Altogether, these findings suggest that the new ‘relational’ dimension investigated by the authors – i.e., the patterns of cooperation with other parties in the legislative arena – can be fruitfully employed as a further dimension of analysis in future research on new challenger parties.

Whereas the League has long experience in political institutions and has consequently been extensively studied by scholars in Italy and abroad, the M5S is a much newer political actor and hence is a much less known subject in the political science literature. To help fill this gap, the article by Davide Vittori provides a theory-grounded account of the organisational evolution of the Movement from its early days before the economic crisis to its participation in the Conte executive. In analysing the transformation of the M5S from a challenger party into a government member, the author makes a compelling comparison with the Greek Syriza, whose route to power has been very similar to that of the M5S in spite of a different ideological profile. As demonstrated in the article, for these two (formerly) anti-establishment parties, elections represented a crucial factor for bringing change within the party organisation. Although a link between electoral shocks and internal reforms is normally found also in the case of mainstream parties, for Syriza and the M5S party change was triggered by an unexpected good performance (in 2012 and 2013, respectively) rather than by an electoral defeat. Following electoral breakthrough, both policy-seeking Syriza and democracy-seeking M5S became more oriented towards a purely vote-seeking strategy. In both cases, internal reforms were introduced in an attempt to anticipate future challenges coming from a new electoral shock – i.e., an even better electoral result and possible participation in the government. The author also underlines that organisational changes in Syriza and the M5S followed the same pattern characterising mainstream parties, as centralisation was strengthened and the institutionalisation process was steered by the most powerful party face at the time of the

internal reform. In the case of the M5S, internal reforms reinforced a structure based on dual leadership: an organisational leadership (the internet and publishing company *Casaleggio Associati*) that controls the party in central office, and a political leadership (Di Maio, who has replaced Belle Grillo) that controls the party in public office. In many respects, then, anti-establishment parties do not really differ from mainstream parties when it comes to taking or managing power.

As discussed above, the presence of a formal post-electoral contract between the M5S and the League undoubtedly represents a major innovation in the patterns of government formation in Italy. The article by José Santana-Pereira and Catherine Moury is devoted precisely to such an agreement, which was dubbed 'Contract for the government of change' (*Contratto per il governo del cambiamento*) by its drafters. As the authors stress, the coalition agreement at the basis of the yellow-green coalition is exceptional in several ways in the Italian context: it is the first post-electoral coalition treaty in Italy's republican history, and came out of negotiations between parties that had very different policy priorities and no record of cooperation in the past. In this article, the 2018 coalition contract is compared with former coalition documents adopted in Italy since the mid-1990s as well as with the party manifestos issued by the M5S and the League before the 2018 general elections. During the Italian Second Republic, the joint electoral programme of the winning pre-electoral coalition – often a long, comprehensive but vague document – served also as a bargaining platform for the government. Although no less vague, the M5S-League agreement contrasts with those documents because it was formalised after the election and was specifically conceived of as a programmatic basis for the government. Both the M5S and the League had to compromise in the 2018 contract, in which they also toned down their Euroscepticism. Altogether, the authors suggest that the lack of precision in the coalition contract may grant a great deal of autonomy to cabinet ministers in the course of the legislative term.

Certainly, the label 'government of change' itself hints at big policy reforms that, according to the public pledges of the M5S's and League's leaders, the Conte cabinet is willing to bring about. Since just six months have passed since the birth of the government, it is of course too early to evaluate the implementation of its new policy agenda. However, some initial clue about how the two coalition partners are about to enact the promised changes can already be found. In this regard, the final article in this Special Issue deals with one of the policy fields in which the yellow-green government is supposed to alter the status quo – that is, childhood vaccination. In particular, Mattia Casula and Federico Toth analyse how the two ruling parties are coping with a possible reform of the controversial 'Lorenzin decree', which was approved in 2017 and increased the number of compulsory vaccinations. As illustrated by the authors, both the M5S and the League are in favour of modifying the Lorenzin decree, but they do not agree on the strategy to be followed. The article provides a rich account of the debate surrounding mandatory vaccination in Italy, a topic that has divided both the public opinion and the political parties. In this debate, the M5S was apparently on the same side of the League, although the former seemed to wink at the so-called 'no vax' movement, and the latter held a much more pragmatic position. In addition, the authors formulate some plausible hypotheses about how the yellow-green government will tackle the issue of infant vaccinations, suggesting that the choice will probably depend on the balance of power within the coalition.

Although focusing on a single policy topic, this article may be useful for understanding how the M5S-League coalition will deal with other controversial issues such as the construction of high-speed rail networks (TAV) and the building of a natural gas pipeline (TAP) on Italian territory.

Open issues and avenues for future research

Summing up, the articles of this Special Issue have sketched a tentative account of the Italian political system under the ‘government of change’. Although a number of crucial topics have been touched upon, the picture is of course far from being complete. This is because just a few months have passed since the swearing in of the Conte executive. Moreover, a final word on the functioning of the political system under the M5S-League government cannot be provided as Italy’s political situation is still evolving in many respects. In particular, several important issues remain uncertain and may open up avenues for future enquiry.

First, the Italian party system may undergo further transformations. At the time of writing, it seems indeed hard to tell whether the tripolar party system that has emerged since 2013 will stabilise or a new bipolar phase will begin. In this regard, much will depend on the electoral rules as well as on the relevance of the ‘integration-demarcation’ cleavage, whose salience appears to have increased in Italy in the most recent period. Second, the fundamental actors in the party system are themselves subject to a process of internal change: the M5S is experiencing the evolution from an anti-establishment political force to a government party, the League seems oriented to fully becoming a right-wing party seeking votes on the entire national territory, the PD is in search of a new leader and FI is coping with the decline of its historical leader. Third, the possible duration of the M5S-League cabinet is uncertain. On the one hand, tensions in the day-to-day relationships between the two coalition parties are not unexpected. On the other hand, the outcome of the European Parliament election of May 2019 can open up new possibilities for either the M5S or the League, which can undermine the stability of the government.

Fourth, and related to the former point, it is unclear which model of decision-making will prevail in the coalition. While a prime ministerial model does not seem to apply to the Conte cabinet, it is probably too early to know whether individual ministers are left free to set policy in their department or ministerial discretion is somehow mitigated through specific mechanisms. So far, a lot of ‘position-taking’ activity can be observed, as Salvini and Di Maio tend to publicly take positions that please their own party constituency, sometimes in spite of the agreed-on coalition compromise. At the same time, the ‘conciliation committee’, an instrument specifically established for settling intra-cabinet divergences, does not seem to have been used yet to enforce the M5S-League contract. The most severe conflicts within the coalition are handled through semi-informal meetings involving Di Maio, Salvini and the PM, and possibly other key ministers. Fifth, at the time of writing it is not possible to know if the ‘government of change’ will indeed be able to enact the promised radical policy reforms. The process of approval of the government’s budgetary bill that is currently taking place in the Italian parliament is highlighting not only the importance of external ‘hurdles’ such as economic and financial constraints, but also the policy divergences between the two coalition partners.

Furthermore, the implementation of the coalition treaty can be hindered by the appearance of unexpected new issues on the policy agenda. Finally, it is not clear whether the government will try to make only reforms at the policy level or it will also – and more ambitiously – attempt to change the ‘rules of the game’, modifying the electoral system and the constitution.

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