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Italian Political Science, VOLUME 17 ISSUE 1

SISP SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI SCIENZA POLITICA

Beyond Italian Exceptionalism? The 'Critical' Eighteenth Legislature

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Abstract

Italy's eighteenth legislative term stands out as particularly idiosyncratic throughout Italian history. Over the course of this term, three governments with varying political orientations came into power, relying on parliamentary votes that shifted between the right, left, and centre. In this article, we aim to highlight these peculiarities and explore whether they indicate a further complexification of Italy's already intricate governmental history, or if they instead reflect issues that are prevalent in most Western democracies. In addition to briefly presenting the articles included in the Special issue, in the last section the article will attempt to take stock of the eighteenth legislature, analyzing its legacy for the Italian political system and trying to identify those factors that are bound to characterize Italian politics in the future as well.

1. Introduction

Italy's eighteenth republican legislative term could rightfully be considered the most eccentric of a series of rather peculiar Italian republican legislatures. Three governments of rather different political orientation succeeded each other, finding their legitimation in parliamentary votes that fluctuated from right to left to center. In this Introduction, we highlight some of these oddities and discuss whether they signal a further complexification of the already rather complex governmental history of the country, or rather reveal problems that are common to most Western democracies. We further wonder whether, as is often the case, the most extreme manifestation of an event occurs when the causes underlying it are already on the wane, and we therefore must expect a 'normalization' of Italian politics from now on.

Italy is known in the literature for having had a record number of governments succeeding one another during its republican phase, from 1948 onward (Cotta and Verzichelli 2007; Pasquino 2019). Up to six different governments were formed and voted down during the second, fifth and seventh legislatures, marking the zenith of the exceptional governmental instability of what is commonly denoted as the 'first Italian Republic' (1948-1992) (though see Mershon 2002 for an interesting contrast between high governmental instability and surprising continuity in governmental personnel). The 'second Italian Republic' (from 1993 onward, though it is debated whether we had

Published in 2022 under Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license by:
Italian Political Science. ISSN 2420-8434.
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Volume 17, Issue 1, 1–15.

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already entered a third and perhaps even a fourth republican period, see Tebaldi 2022) was instead marked by relatively greater governmental stability, with an average of fewer than three governments per legislature, but by an increasing diversity in government composition and greater innovativeness in the way government majorities were formed and held together. In addition to the fourth 'technical government' led by Mario Draghi (after those led by Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, Lamberto Dini and Mario Monti during the eleventh, twelfth and sixteenth legislative terms), in the eighteenth term we witnessed the alternation in government of majorities of rather different (if not opposite) orientations, the first two led by the same prime minister (Conte I and Conte II governments), who was, to some extent, at least initially, also a non-politician!

The alternation between political and technocratic governments has characterized the Italian political system since the early 1990s, when two significant changes occurred: the 'political earthquake' brought about by the Clean Hands investigations (Gilbert 1995) and the decision, at Maastricht, to create a common currency and, therefore, the need for Italy to commit to fiscal stabilization. The decision to progressively disentangle monetary decisions from the needs of the Italian government to finance its debt had been made well before Maastricht (the famous 'divorce' of the Bank of Italy from the Treasury occurred in 1982 and became a reference case study, Epstein and Schor 1986) but after Maastricht what had initially been a recalibration of public debt seniority and a mild check on public deficits became an absolute imperative. The 'external constraint' – which was supposed to force Italian authorities down a virtuous fiscal path (Ferrera and Gualmini 1999) – dates from this period. It is this imperative that has motivated the periodic formation of technocrat-led governments capable of imposing much needed but much dreaded sacrifices onto an electorate on whose support they did not depend.

In this special issue we ask ourselves whether the peculiarity of Italian politics further accelerated during the eighteenth legislature, reaching unprecedented levels even by Italian standards or rather the long search for governmental stability has been so affected by the exceptional circumstances that have characterized the last thirty years – particularly the Euro and Covid crises, not to mention the migration and the Ukrainian war crises – that even the apparent 'normalization' of Italian politics, with different majorities alternating in government between the twelfth and seventeenth legislatures, has been once more postponed and high-jacked. We further wonder whether the long-coveted 'normalization' of Italian politics is now on the horizon. We contend that the unique developments of Italian politics during the eighteenth legislature reveal tensions and problems that are in fact common to many European and non-European democracies during these turbulent times, and expose the difficulties of these democracies to govern in times of heightened interdependence.

2. The long quest for governmental stability

Perhaps the most distinctive trait of post-war Italian politics is the accentuated instability of its governmental majorities. Remedying such instability has been the goal of many electoral reforms and the object of endless expert debates, particularly after the demise of the so-called 'first Italian Republic' (D'Alimonte 2005; Ceccanti and Vassallo 2004). Governmental instability was initially attributed to the extreme polarization of Italian

politics, which forced governments to be formed by litigious coalitions under the fractious leadership of Christian Democracy (DC) – a predicament that was described by Giovanni Sartori as 'polarized pluralism' (Sartori 1976). These traits pre-empted the formation of alternative coalitions, a situation dubbed by Giorgio Galli 'imperfect bipartyism' (Galli 1966). According to both, the Italian political system appeared immune to the process of normalization that characterized other political systems and that allowed elsewhere a peaceful alternation in government between coalitions of different colorations. Only France and Finland appeared as polarized and as resistant to normalization, according to Sartori (1982).

Situated at the centre of a party system traversed by centrifugal forces, Christian Democracy (DC) was at the same time the headstone of many Italian governments and the cause of their inner brittleness. Unchallenged by alternative coalitions, Christian Democracy's internal factions could freely vie for governmental jobs and other plum positions, thus lending extreme instability to governmental majorities often identical to one another in all but the minutest compositional details (Venditti 1981). As is known, this situation became increasingly untenable, and was the cause of lavish disbursements of public funds to keep this or that political clientele happy (LaPalombara 1964; Pritoni 2017).

From the 1980s onward, Christian Democracy was increasingly challenged by new formations: the rejuvenated and modernized Italian Socialist party (PSI) under the leadership of Bettino Craxi, the various ethno-regionalist parties that later federated into the Lega Nord (LN) (Diamanti 1996; Biorcio 2010), and an Italian Communist Party (PCI) that managed to wean itself from the tutelage of the Soviet Union and to attract increasing numbers of young voters because of its capacity to govern well at the regional and municipal levels. The breaking point came, at the beginning of the 1990s, with the 'Clean Hands' investigations that caused the almost complete disappearance of the historical post-war parties, DC and PSI (Cafagna 2012), the troubled transformation of the PCI into Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS) (Ignazi 1992), then Democratici di Sinistra (DS) and finally Partito Democratico (PD), the re-foundation of the old neo-fascist party, Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), into a post-fascist party called Alleanza Nazionale (AN) (Ignazi 2023), and the emergence of a brand-new party, Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) (Ignazi 2014).

These – FI, AN, Lega Nord and PDS – were the main parties that characterized the 'second Italian Republic' between 1993 and 2013. During this period, Italy experienced a certain process of bipolarization, but the brittleness of Italian governments was far from over. Rather patchy and litigious coalitions managed to alternate in government, without, however, stabilizing the Italian political system (Verzichelli and Cotta 2000; Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2011). So, just when all political novelties seemed to have been exhausted, two new developments marked the further evolution of the Italian political system: the emergence of a populist movement – the Five Star Movement (FSM) – under the dual leadership and inspiration of comedian Beppe Grillo and computer guru Gianroberto Casaleggio (Campus et al. 2021; Tronconi 2015; Corbetta 2018), and the renaming of the post-fascist party AN as Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) (Vassallo and Vignati 2023). A further development was the attempt of the Lega Nord to extend its leadership beyond its northern strongholds and the consequent shedding of its label of the geographical qualifier, becoming now simply the Lega (Albertazzi et al. 2018).

Handmaidens of these party system transformations were a series of electoral reforms, each inspired by the attempt to make the formation of governmental coalitions more immediately dependent on electoral results and, therefore, hopefully more stable (Bartolini and D'Alimonte 1995; D'Alimonte and Fusaro 2008). The two camps or poles (the 'People of Liberties' on the center-right and the 'Popular Democrats' on the center-left) made timid attempts to legitimize each other and thus ease the normalization of Italian democracy between roughly 1993 and 2013, without much success (Ieraci 2013). A series of crises stalled this process and revealed the precariousness of this attempt. The increasing frequency with which, between 1993 and 2022, political governments were replaced by 'technocratic governments' (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014) is testimony to the difficulty of electing 'responsive and responsible' governments (Mair 2013) in a context of heightened interdependence and during increasingly turbulent times.

It is probably the perception of the Italian electorate that, no matter how hard political parties tried to establish the appearance of a responsive party or coalition government, contextual circumstances and previous international agreements limited their space for manoeuver, which sealed the period of bipolarism. This outcome was most certainly the effect of the financial turbulence unleashed by the US subprime crisis (2007-08), which in turn triggered an international financial crisis and eventually the Euro crisis (2009-2015) that particularly enveloped the more exposed economies – Greece, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus and Italy – of the Eurozone (Morlino and Raniolo 2017). The austerity measures enforced by the ECB and the European Council from 2010 cut deep into the flesh of a country like Italy that had already made a sustained effort, since 1992, to reduce its public debt and thus become eligible to adopt the Euro from its inception.

The perception among Italian voters that their economic sovereignty was severely limited by commitments made in the past (the Maastricht criteria) and even more by commitments imposed by the other partners during the crisis (suffice to mention the Fiscal Compact that Italy had to underwrite in 2012 and the strengthening of Stability and Growth Pact rules in 2011 and 2013) fostered growing criticism, and sometimes veritable skepticism, vis-à-vis the process of European integration (Cotta and Isernia 2021). These perceptions were compounded by the migrant crisis that erupted in 2014, caused by the growing inflow of illegal immigrants from northern Africa and by the feeling of being left alone to face this new emergency by outdated Dublin accords that no other member state had a real interest in revising.

Perceptions of reduced economic sovereignty and of inexistent or reluctant solidarity between member states (Basile et al. 2021) ultimately fanned the winds of populism that grew in Italy as well as in many other countries. It would be hard to find a European (and non-European) country in which populist or nationalist parties did not achieve substantial electoral successes in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, managing to conquer governmental power at the regional level (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Pappas 2019; Zulianello 2019). Disillusioned by many rounds of electoral reforms (1993, 2001, 2005) that had not managed to stabilize the political system and had not given back that 'control' that had supposedly escaped them since the creation of the Euro, Italian voters have been perhaps more disposed than other

national electorates to give credit to new formations and to shift their support from one party or coalition to another. The frustration may have been further intensified by the awareness that other, more structural problems of the Italian political system did not seem to find any durable solution. Among these, the prolonged weakness of the Italian economy (Notermans and Piattoni 2020), the enfeeblement of the Italian public health system due to painful and repeated cuts to welfare provisions that further exacerbated existing inequalities (Franzini and Raitano 2018), and the never-resolved issue of a bureaucracy apparently incapable of overseeing the speedy and efficient use of public resources to promote growth and territorial cohesion (Di Mascio and Natalini 2018; Polverari and Piattoni 2022).

3. The exceptional eighteenth legislature: the apex of Italian exceptionalism?

The developments described above came to a head during the eighteenth legislature and are well documented by the articles of this special issue. All share a common longitudinal comparative perspective, although the authors were free to focus on the aspects that they felt were more relevant. As much as the last legislature was indeed exceptional in several respects, it is nevertheless the result of some long-term factors that have characterized Italian political development. The comparative diachronic perspective here adopted allows us to analyze the structural factors that have conditioned the evolution of the Italian political system, in conjunction with some more contingent elements, such as exogenous shocks and the different crises of various kinds, that have recently hit Italy (along with other countries).

From this analytical perspective, the article by Luca Pinto, which is devoted to the analysis of (frequent and increasing) party switching in the last legislature, shows how the highly unstructured or fluid nature of the Italian party system ended up conditioning not only the relations between parties and voters at election times, but also the parliamentary dynamics themselves (Pinto, 2022). Indeed, the period between two elections has itself become a powerful generator of party fragmentation and systemic deinstitutionalization, with micro-parties, often of a personalistic nature (Calise 2010), arising from within the legislative assembly and then seeking electoral support – a phenomenon that distorts electoral responsiveness and obfuscates the mechanism of democratic accountability. What is more, the phenomenon of party switching and the related creation of new parties of exclusively parliamentary origin directly affect the recurring fluctuations of the electoral market observed on the demand side. This means that supply-induced fragmentation (generated from within the legislative arena) has an impact on the level of electoral volatility, thus creating a downward spiral of party system deconsolidation.

However, beyond the enduring deinstitutionalization of the party system [Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2021], another long-term element observed in the eighteenth legislature was the willingness of voters to change their political preferences and behaviors. In this respect, Nicola Maggini and Cristiano Vezzoni (2022) note the presence of what they term in their article ‘multiple availabilities’ on the demand side of the electoral market. Voters are willing to change their political choices in relatively short periods of time – all the more so, given that during a relatively short timeframe there have been at least three major crises, from the Great Recession to the Covid-19

pandemic, to the recent international crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, capable of changing the structure of Italian voters' preferences. However, in the face of the great fluidity of the Italian electoral and party landscape, the analysis conducted by Maggini and Vezzoni reveals the existence of another long-term factor in the Italian political system, namely, the greater cohesion or overlap of the center-right electorate compared to the more divided center-left electorate. This is a feature that was further reinforced during the course of the eighteenth legislature and that led, in the 2022 parliamentary elections, to the emergence of that 'asymmetric bipolarism' (Vassallo and Verzichelli 2023) – or 'imperfect bipolarism' to echo an older expression already mentioned (Galli 1967) – that is neatly unbalanced in favor of the center-right coalition.

The exceptionalism of the eighteenth legislature is even more pronounced if one interprets this phase as a synthesis of the political events of the entire 'second Italian republic' inaugurated in 1993. On the one hand, as highlighted above, the crumbling of the party system and the level of electoral volatility have been taken to extremes. On the other hand, what was once, especially during the first republican phase, party government 'Italian-style' (LaPalombara 1987) has been gradually replaced by governments led by populist forces or technocratic figures. Indeed, the last cabinets supported by traditional mass-based parties in the early 1990s were followed, in 1993, by the technocratic government led by Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, and in the following decades, at different intervals, governments led by or composed largely of populist leaders were followed by other technocratic governments (such as the one headed by Mario Monti between 2011 and 2013). This kind of atypical alternation between populism and technocracy (which, in Mair's terms, we could describe as fluctuation between phases of 'irresponsible responsiveness' and 'unresponsive responsibility') found its ultimate synthesis precisely in the eighteenth legislature. This began with a government composed for the first time entirely of populist parties (Valbruzzi 2018) and ended with a cabinet led by the emblem of all European technocrats, former ECB President Mario Draghi (Garzia and Karremans 2021).

Despite these pendulum swings between populism and technocracy, the three governments formed during the eighteenth legislature showed some trends in the formation of cabinets and the choice of individual ministers similar to past decades. In particular, as Andrea Pedrazzani and Michelangelo Vercesi's (2022) analysis regarding the patterns of reselection and promotion of ministers shows, more than individual factors (such as gender) or structural factors (such as the prestige of the ministerial office or the party size), what counts in the composition of the ministerial team is the previous political experience of the would-be rulers. This confirms a long-standing trend in the Italian political system, namely that of 'decentralized personalization' within cabinets, where greater weight is carried by individual ministers with their respective personal political followings than by other more objective features. It is worth stressing that this is a form of decentralized personalization which, as Balmas et al. (2014, 37) note, may go hand in hand with that form of 'centralized personalization', also commonly known as 'presidentialization' (Poguntke and Webb 2005), that has steadily characterized Italian politics and its executives for more than three decades.

If we now move from the level of politics to the level of policies, we once again observe signs of innovation introduced by the three governments of the eighteenth legislature, which, however, had to come to terms with some structural features of the Italian political system. This description applies in particular to the reforms introduced in the Italian welfare state, analyzed in great detail by Igor Guardiancich, Ilaria Madama and Marcello Natili (2022). The article investigates the extent to which the social policies adopted by the governments of the eighteenth legislature represent a substantial break with the previous institutional legacy, also in light of a rapidly changing socio-economic context, affected since 2020 by the dramatic Covid-19 health emergency and its consequences. In the face of what the authors describe as a 'frozen landscape' (Guardiancich et al. 2023, 76), with a welfare state long characterized by distinctive functional and distributive distortions, some new measures were introduced between 2018 and 2022 that can indeed be interpreted as 'path-departing reforms'. We refer especially to those reforms enacted in less costly and institutionalized policy fields, where there was the potential to expand social protection onto previously neglected (and politically weak or dispersed) constituencies (the poor, families, etc.). Among these were anti-poverty measures (starting with *the Reddito di cittadinanza*), which finally overcame one of the main weaknesses of the Italian welfare state, that is, the lack of a safety net guaranteeing income protection to all poor (Italian) individuals, and some pro-family policies, such as the introduction of the Single Universal Allowance and some significant investments in other childcare services. However, alongside these policy innovations that involved a recalibration of the Italian welfare state and reduced some historical distortions, in other areas – such as pensions and the labor market – path-dependency ended up prevailing, through the introduction of reforms that strengthened the traditional Italian approach to welfare, prioritizing pensions by means of well-established insider-biased policies (as in the case of *Quota 100*).

It is important to note that many of the reforms introduced in the social welfare sector have occurred primarily in the wake of, or as a response to, exogenous factors, such as the pandemic outbreak, that opened unexpected windows of opportunity for changing the status quo. However, while these external shocks triggered a reform process in some areas of welfare, the same cannot be said for the modernization of Italy's public administration. As Fabrizio Di Mascio, Alessandro Natalini and Stefania Profeti show in their article, beyond the populist rhetoric about the need for radical changes in the structure of public administration, the two governments led by Giuseppe Conte were characterized by a substantial 'decoupling of talk and action on the issue of administrative reform' (Di Mascio et al. 2022, 102). This means that once they came to government, populist parties quickly adapted to the previous situation, leaving the overall structure of the bureaucratic apparatus unchanged, without 'any significant reform efforts in two key areas that are typically targeted by populist parties in government that aim to "dismantle" or "capture" the state, namely the appointment of senior civil servants and the reorganization of the state apparatus' (Di Mascio et al. 2022, 102).

Italian public administration thus confirmed its traditional, decades-long resistance to change despite the many efforts to remedy its well-known 'backwardness' (Fabbrini 2013, 428) and the need for its modernization. What is even more significant

is that the veto power of the Italian public administration remained basically intact even after the arrival of the Draghi government and the acceptance of the absolute priority, so strongly emphasized by the new supranational governance, to implement some badly needed 'structural reforms' (among them also the overhaul of legal procedures with the aim of shortening the length of civil litigation) before the funds of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) could be released. Although the salience of administrative reforms as an enabling factor for the implementation of the NRRP did indeed grow in the latter part of the legislature, the policies adopted 'can be qualified as loosely interconnected and piecemeal' (Di Mascio et al. 2022, 101) rather than as a set of consistent interventions capable of profoundly transforming the structure and functioning of the Italian public administration.

Finally, the last factor that is now structural to Italian politics is an increasing integration with the supranational political arena, represented by the European Union (EU). Long considered by both experts and politicians as an 'external constraint' (Dyson and Featherstone 2007) capable of conditioning public policies in Italy and pushing the country in the direction of greater 'responsibility' in the area of fiscal policies, after the Covid-19 pandemic and in response to the subsequent economic crisis, the EU has progressively loosened its austerity measures putting in place 'interventionist' public policies and economic support for the countries severely affected by the crisis. This 'new social Europe', no longer viewed as an 'austere stepmother' but rather as a 'caring mother', caught the Italian governments of the eighteenth legislature off guard, starting with those composed mostly of populist parties.

It is precisely the changed relationships between the EU's supranational institutions and the Italian governments of the eighteenth legislature that are the focus of the article by Roberto Di Quirico (2022). In particular, he highlights the policy U-turn of the Conte I government, which began on vaguely Euroskeptic positions and then gradually became absorbed by the mechanisms and constraints of European governance. In the reconstruction provided by Di Quirico, the three cabinets formed during the eighteenth legislative term depict the three stages of gradual rapprochement between the two decision-making arenas, i.e. the national and the supranational: from the 'challenging the EU' approach adopted by the first Conte government, through the intermediate stage of 'begging the EU' by the second Conte government amid the pandemic, and then ended with the 'pleasing the EU' stage with the government led by Mario Draghi, created to foster a more effective implementation of the NRRP.

This historical reconstruction reveals at least two noteworthy aspects. First, despite the anti-system and anti-establishment charge of the populist actors, la *force tranquille* of the EU's supranational institutions has shown itself capable of absorbing internally the challenges coming from some member states and progressively including them in the complex, accommodating governance of the EU. Second, European institutions can no longer be viewed, somewhat narrowly, simply as an 'external constraint' on national political systems. The EU should increasingly be seen and studied, particularly in light of the effects of the pandemic and then the Russian attack on Ukraine, as an essential component of a *sui generis* multilevel political system capable of conditioning both the political dynamics and policy choices of individual member states. As far as Italy is concerned, this complex multilevel governance emerged profoundly changed during the

course of the eighteenth legislature: above and beyond the changes of government triggered by general elections, the national executives formed in the future will inevitably have come to terms with this.

4. Where is the Italian political system going? The legacy of the eighteenth legislature

What is ultimately the political and institutional legacy of the eighteenth legislature? Or at least what lessons can be learned for the present and future of the Italian political system? In our view, there are at least four lessons that are worth bearing in mind.

The first lesson is that the Italian political system, despite its continued deinstitutionalization (or perhaps because of it), is still capable of absorbing both internal and external challenges. Regarding the domestic challenges, Italian liberal democracy has indeed managed to integrate in the system some political parties that entered the scene with a strong anti-systemic connotation and upholding ideals – such as binding online direct consultation with party members or the introduction of the imperative mandate for members of parliament[1] – that are at odds with the principles of representative democracy. In the Italian case, unlike in many other European political systems, populist parties did not limit themselves to gaining representation in the legislative assemblies, but impetuously crossed the 'threshold of executive power' (Rokkan 1970), conquering and dominating governmental offices. Nevertheless, the institutions of representative democracy, on the one hand, have facilitated the reduction of political polarization produced by the breakthrough of populism and, on the other hand, have enabled the transformation of anti-system political actors into stable (and essentially loyal) components of the political system. All this happened in the space of not even a decade, moreover in an international context characterized by profound upheavals.

As for the external challenges to which Italian democracy has been exposed, they have been numerous, unforeseen, of different kinds (economic, health, diplomatic, etc.) and requiring timely reactions by political institutions. We refer not only to the long-term consequences of the Great Recession, but especially to the health emergency due to the spread of Covid-19, the subsequent economic difficulties that emerged in international markets, and, finally, the war that broke out in the heart of Europe between Russia and Ukraine, again with significant socio-economic consequences for Italy. Many analysts, pundits and scholars feared that democracies, starting with the most fragile and least consolidated ones, might weaken to the point of collapse (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mounk and Foa 2016; Bartels 2023). Instead, as far as the Italian case is concerned, despite various forms of protest and some signs of disaffection toward institutions and political actors, the political system has been able to react promptly, avoiding or limiting some possible excesses (such as, for example, the expansion of powers for the head of the government during a prolonged state of emergency). Thus, despite obvious difficulties,

[1] This was, at least, the original ambition. The actual use of this instrument revealed strong manipulative behavior on the part of the party leaders, with the dominance of top-down over bottom-up, inclusive processes of decision-making. This eventually led to the emergence of that form of plebiscitarian 'reactive democracy' (Gerbaudo 2021) in which members were simply called upon to ratify decisions already made by leadership.

Italian democracy, with its fluid party system, still passed the stress test of a literally 'critical legislature'.

The second lesson is institutional in nature and concerns, precisely, the functioning and quality of Italian political institutions. Despite a constitutional framework constantly under criticism, with an institutional transition that opened in the early 1990s and that no one seems able, or willing, to conclude, the Italian political system nevertheless seems to have found its own way of functioning, through mechanisms and safety valves of internal self-regulation. As discussed above, Italy is the only country in Western Europe that, after the demise of its mass-based parties, gave birth to a strange form of alternation between populisms and technocratic governments – that is, of cycles of varying duration in which total electoral responsiveness was followed by phases of complete institutional responsibility, a bit like a dog chasing its own tail (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2021). If in the first republican phase it was the mass bureaucratic parties that ensured some sort of balance between responsiveness and responsibility, in the next phase the balance was produced only in cyclical form: populist waves created the conditions for the arrival of technocrats without direct electoral legitimacy who, in turn, fueled forms of protest against the establishment.

From this perspective, the events and cabinets of the eighteenth legislature have been the epitome of this new, all-Italian, cyclical balance between phases of irresponsible responsiveness and unresponsive responsibility: during the eighteenth legislature, in particular, from a government born ventilating the specter of an 'Italexit', Italy ended up with a cabinet led by a pro-European technocrat supported, albeit unwillingly, also by populist parties.

It should be added, moreover, that the Italian political system has also been able to rely, as a rebalancing mechanism, on the flexibility granted by its parliamentary regime and, in particular, by the figure of the head of state, often described by jurists as 'the most enigmatic and elusive among the public offices provided for in the Constitution' (Paladin 1986, 165). To a significant extent, the cabinet instability that continues to characterize the Italian political system has been counterbalanced by the figure of the President of the Republic, a factor of institutional stability and continuity. It is not by chance that, during the last legislature, we witnessed the reiteration of what in 2013 (with the re-election of Giorgio Napolitano) was considered an absolute exception. Indeed, the re-election of Sergio Mattarella to the Presidency of the Republic in 2022, in the face of a possible political stalemate, confirms the growing centrality of the head of state in the Italian institutional setting, transforming a neutral political figure into a political actor who is increasingly vested with formal and informal political powers to guarantee the stability of the political system.

In addition to the role of the head of state as a balancing factor, the eighteenth legislature also showed the growing relevance of the European Union, including for domestic policy decision-making – the third lesson that we can draw from our analysis. After years of growing criticism of, and opposition to, supranational institutions, characterized by a shift from the initial 'permissive consensus' to 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks 2009) toward the increasingly complex workings of European governance, the Italian political system seems to have come to terms with the importance and centrality of the European anchoring, especially as a factor of institutional and democratic

stability. The EU has enabled Italy to include in its complex multilevel decision-making process even those actors – such as the Lega and FSM – that had initially placed themselves in an openly Euroskeptic position, transforming an opposition of principle to the EU polity into a critique of EU policies.

The Italian political system's ability to absorb challenges arising from the international context was further aided by transformations in the EU's own approach to economic policy. In contrast to the 2009 sovereign debt crisis, which was tackled by European institutions with policies of fiscal and social austerity, the approach shown in the aftermath of the pandemic emergency and the war in Ukraine was the opposite. On these occasions, the EU showed a willingness to create and share its own resources, finance investments, and even absorb debts incurred during the pandemic with innovative instruments. From this point of view, therefore, after the eighteenth legislature Italy's anchoring to the European Union is even firmer, and whatever government may come in the future, including a government dominated by 'sovereigntist or 'neo-nationalist' rhetoric, it will not be able to question this link.

Finally, the fourth and last lesson we can draw from such a 'critical legislature' concerns the long-lasting debate over the institutional transition that began in the Italian political system at the dawn of the 1990s in an attempt to transform a consociational democracy based on proportional representation into a Westminster-style, adversarial model of democratic government based on a quasi-majoritarian electoral system. A season of attempts at 'major reforms' (*grandi riforme*), that is, systemic interventions in the political regime and the distribution of powers between the central government and the regions, came definitely to an end during the eighteenth legislature. The only institutional reform that was approved during the period was the reduction (by one-third) of the number of parliamentarians of both chambers. This reform, as it was later realized, served more to give rhetorical answers to the anti-political sentiments of Italian society than to effectively improve the performance of the Italian political system. Thus, any hypothesis of comprehensive reform of the Italian institutional setting, capable of bringing the Italian transition to a conclusion, is now scarcely credible. At most, as observed at the opening of the current nineteenth legislature, sectoral or limited institutional reforms may be explored, with a piecemeal approach and with low or no level of systematicity. This is the case, for instance, of reforms granting 'differentiated autonomy' to the Regions or bestowing greater powers on the executive or the head of government/state.[2]

In any case, these reforms, however daring, will meet fierce opposition from all those that have come to appreciate the balancing effect of a political system that is held together by many checks and balances. Although some of these reforms might constitute a breakthrough in the long Italian institutional transition, they might not lead to desirable conclusions, not least because, as the events of the eighteenth legislature have well

[2] Naturally, it is still too early to evaluate the proposals for reforming the form of government put forward by the current executive led by Giorgia Meloni. However, both presidentialism and the so-called 'elective premiership' model (adopted only by Israel in the late 1990s and then quickly abandoned) do not seem to be able to solve the problems of the Italian political system, which concern political parties much more than political institutions. Moreover, both solutions would make the functioning of the political system more rigid, reducing that flexibility and room for manoeuver that has so far allowed the President of the Republic to effectively solve different crises and emerge from political deadlocks.

highlighted, the structural problems of the Italian political system (i.e., party fragmentation, ineffective decision-making, governmental instability) have more to do with the uncertain nature of the parties and the dismal condition of the party system rather than with the Italian institutional set-up. As long as no action is taken on the former, it will be difficult to achieve positive results on the latter. And in the meantime, the never-ending transition will continue to unfold, assuming anyone knows or remembers what the destination is.

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