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The first Conte government: 'government of change' or business as usual?

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ABSTRACT

The birth of the yellow-green 'government of change' – formed by the Five-star Movement (M5 s) and the League in 2018 – was a significant novelty in Italian politics. Concerns about its populist character co-existed with enthusiastic expectations concerning its capacity to overhaul politics. In what respects did the Conte I government mark a significant departure from its predecessors? To answer this question, we rely on data concerning legislative activity to analyse the executive's capacity to implement its policy agenda. Given the uneasy alliance upon which the coalition was based, we also attempt to evaluate whether or not the coalition agreement signed by the coalition partners actually worked as a focal point for government action. We find that, despite rhetorical claims about radical change, the Conte I government was less pro-active than its predecessors. We also find that the League was better able to affect the Government's policy priorities than was the M5 s.

On 17 January 2019 the Italian government approved the 'citizens' income' and a new pension scheme, marking a major overhaul of the country's welfare system. The *'reddito di cittadinanza'*, or 'citizens' income', was a flagship measure aimed at ending poverty promised by the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5 s), while the changes to the pension law – in terms of the retirement age and the social-security contributions required (*quota cento*) – had been pledged by the far-right League.

The two parties had formed a government following the Italian general election of 4 March 2018, when no political party was able to secure an outright majority. The M5 s led by Luigi Di Maio became the party with the largest number of votes (34 per cent) while Matteo Salvini's Lega (League), formerly the Northern League, emerged as the main political force within the centre-right electoral coalition (with 17 per cent of the vote). After 88 days of negotiations and several stalemates, the two parties struck a deal for a 'government for change'. Giuseppe Conte – a politically unknown law professor, albeit seen as ideologically close to the M5 s – was appointed as Prime Minister, backed by Salvini

and Di Maio as deputy-prime ministers. Following Senate approval, the Conte I government passed an investiture vote in the Chamber on 6 June 2018. As its component parties shared a fierce anti-establishment rhetoric, the governing coalition was regarded by most observers as the 'first "all-populist" government in postwar Western Europe' (Newell 2019, 205).

The formation of the yellow-green government puzzled many commentators due to the important differences between the coalition partners in key areas of fiscal and welfare policy.[1] The League and the M5 s reconciled the differences in their electoral platforms by drawing up a German-style 'contract for a government of change'. The coalition agreement included right-wing policies, such as tax cuts and measures against illegal immigration, and left-wing policies, such as the 'citizens' income' for job seekers. It also set out procedural rules for coalition governance and the resolution of disagreements.

The Conte I government lasted about 14 months. The European Parliament (EP) elections held on 26 May 2019 signalled a complete reversal in the electoral fortunes of the two governing parties: the League gained about 34 per cent of the vote while the M5 s dropped to 17 per cent. Such an impressive turnaround opened up multiple strategic possibilities for Matteo Salvini, who eventually triggered a government crisis that led to Conte's resignation. As the League's leader was the indisputable winner of the EP elections, many political analysts saw his drastic move of 8 August 2019 as an attempt to force the holding of snap elections whereby he could become the next Prime Minister of Italy. The gambit failed as President Sergio Mattarella gave Conte a mandate to attempt the formation of an inter-electoral government consisting of the M5 s, the centre-left Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) and the left-wing Liberi e Uguali (Free and Equal, LeU) party.

In this article, we will focus on the implementation of the coalition's policy agenda during the Government's short tenure, that is, the policy decisions made by the governing coalition between its formation and termination. Undoubtedly, the birth of the yellow-green 'government of change' was a significant novelty in Italian politics. Concerns about its populist character co-existed with enthusiastic expectations concerning its capacity to overhaul politics. In what respects did the first Conte government mark a significant departure from its predecessors? To answer this question, we will analyse the executive's capacity to implement its policy agenda by looking at its legislative activity as well as at executive-legislative relations. Given the uneasy alliance upon which the Government was based, we will also attempt to evaluate whether or not the coalition agreement actually worked as a focal point for the Government's action as well as to gauge which of the two governing parties was better able to affect the Government agenda. Then, we will examine trends in public satisfaction with the Government and its performance. The final section concludes.

Legislative activity: 'government of change' or business as usual?

The formation of the Conte I government was a puzzle for many commentators due to the key differences between the coalition partners in important policy areas. On a 20 points scale measuring positions on the left-right dimension, Italian politics experts placed the two governing parties, the M5 s and the League, seven points apart – a fairly significant gap, especially when compared to that (about three points) separating the League from the

centre-right Forza Italia (Go Italy) (FI) or the M5 s from the centre-left PD. On the other hand, experts perceived the M5 s and the League as being much closer in particularly important policy domains such as European Union (EU) authority and immigration: both parties campaigned against the EU and in favour of restrictive immigration policies (Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto, 2017; 2018).[2] The Conte I government ended prematurely due to increasing political conflicts between the two coalition partners – conflicts which became apparent especially after the May 2019 EP elections. Those factors that brought the Government down make the 14-month Conte I government an interesting case study. What did the Government actually achieve, despite its ideological divisions and beyond the populist narrative its partners shared? How did Parliament respond to the Government's legislative agenda? This section aims at answering these questions by providing data on the legislative activity of the Conte I government from 1 June 2018 – when the Government officially took office – to 20 August 2019 when the Prime Minister resigned. To provide a more precise assessment of what the 'government of change' actually accomplished, data regarding the Conte I cabinet will be compared with the corresponding data for the five previous governments (i.e. the Berlusconi IV, Monti, Letta, Renzi and Gentiloni governments). These governments differed according to whether they were electoral or inter-electoral in nature. They differed, too, in terms of their political composition, their type (according to whether they were minority, caretaker or surplus majority coalitions) and the time horizons necessary to implement their policy agendas. However, despite these profound differences, comparison might shed light on the peculiarities – if any – of the Conte I government, as both of the coalition's party leaders, and opinion makers, emphasized its radically novel character.[3]

We start our analysis of legislative activity by looking at the extent to which the Government succeeded in steering its own agenda. To do so we rely on Table 1, which

Table 1. Legislative activity and rates of approval of government's bills.

Legislature:	18th	17th			16th	
Government:	Conte I	Gentiloni	Renzi	Letta	Monti	Berlusconi IV
Total bills presented	2293	963	3054	1939	1436	6229
Government bills	145	64	239	89	131	349
Government bills (excluding treaty ratifications)	57	38	136	53	77	239
Laws	67	96	246	33	105	269
Type: budget	3	3	10	4	2	14
Type: conversion of decree-laws	21	13	49	18	29	74
Type: ordinary	18	38	48	3	35	59
Type: ordinary with delegating powers	5	11	25	1	7	17
Type: ratification	20	30	113	7	31	105
Type: constitutional	0	1	1	0	1	0
Government laws	46	56	194	29	70	215
Government laws (excl. ratifications)	30	26	83	24	44	112
Success rate	0.32	0.88	0.81	0.33	0.53	0.62
Success rate (excl. ratifications)	0.53	0.68	0.61	0.45	0.57	0.47
Confidence votes	15	26	66	11	38	43
Tenure (months)	14	15	33	9	13	42

Note: Governments are presented in reverse chronological order, from left to right. Only bills and laws initiated or approved during government tenure are taken into consideration. Government tenure is measured as the number of months separating the swearing-in ceremony from the Prime Minister's resignation (or general elections, in the case of cabinets surviving until the end of the legislature). For the purposes of ascertaining the number of confidence votes, unified draft laws were counted as single legislative proposals, and bills absorbed by other bills are excluded.
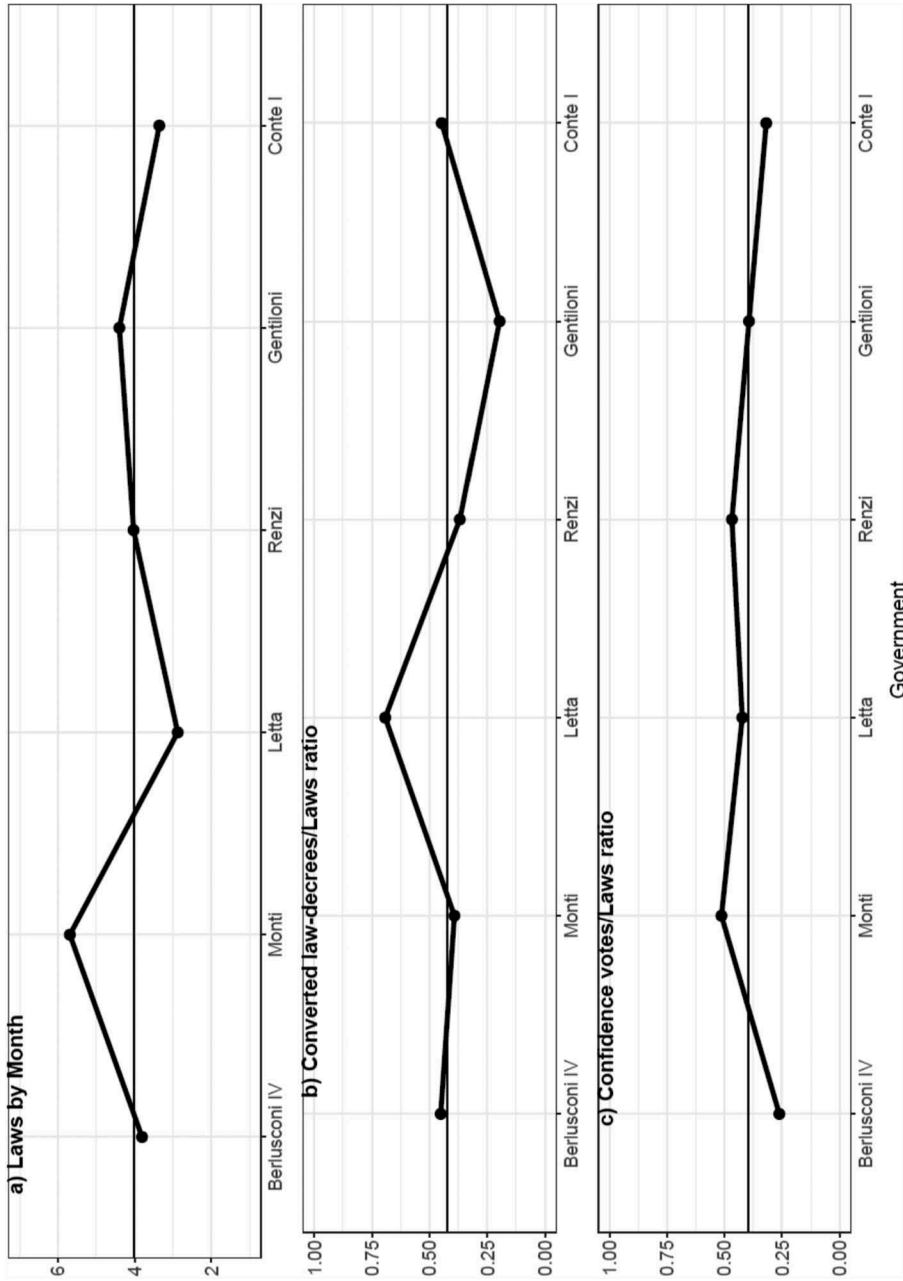Source: Authors' elaboration of parliamentary data.

reports quantitative background data on legislative activity and legislative outputs during the Conte I government, comparing them with the corresponding data for previous cabinets. The Conte I government initiated 145 bills, which become 57 when excluding proposals dealing with the ratification of international treaties, which constituted a significant proportion of government bills – as was the case for the previous governments considered here. Ratification proposals are often approved almost unanimously, with a very high success rates and often without any real debate in Parliament. For this reason, it is common practice among legislative scholars to exclude them from analyses of legislative production (Capano and Giuliani 2001, 2003).

During the 14 months of tenure of the yellow-green cabinet, Parliament approved a total of 67 laws. Almost one third of them (21) were bills converting decree-laws into laws. This proportion rises to about 50 per cent excluding ratification laws (20) from the total number of bills approved. As Table 1 shows, converted decree-laws represent the bulk of the laws proposed by the Government (21 out of 46, or 21 out of 30 excluding ratifications). In parliamentary democracies, it is usually the executive, rather than the parliament, that manages the legislative process (Martin and Vanberg, 2004). From this point of view, the Conte I government is no exception. As Table 1 shows, the tendency to use decree-laws to push the Government's agenda, avoiding the shortcomings of the ordinary legislative process, reflects a strategy pursued by all of the previous governments. However, the yellow-green cabinet stands out, in comparison to the others, for concentrating most of its policy initiatives into a limited number of decree-laws (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2019). Previous cabinets – those of Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni in particular – were able to steer their agenda using a more diversified set of legislative tools, including ordinary laws and laws with delegating powers (25 and 11 for Renzi and Gentiloni respectively, only 5 for Conte I). Overall, the success rate of the first Conte government's bills is 0.53, lower than that registered for the Renzi and Gentiloni cabinets, but in line with the figures recorded for other governments.

The differences in the duration of the cabinets, reported in Table 1, together with the fact that their mandates covered different periods of the legislature's life cycle, prevents us from comparing them in terms of the total amount of legislation produced during their terms. On the one hand, non-government bills tend to be concentrated in the first few months of the legislative term; on the other, post-electoral and inter-electoral governments face different time constraints that strongly affect the implementation of their policy agendas. To overcome comparability problems, Figure 1 offers a rough set of indicators that can help to shed further light on the legislative activity of the Conte I government. Panel a) of Figure 1 shows that, with the single exception of the Letta government, the Conte I cabinet approved fewer laws per month than all the other governments. Panel b) confirms the significance of converted decree-laws as a proportion of the total amount of legislation approved by the Government. Once again, the figures highlight the similarities between the Conte and the Letta governments, which, despite their many differences, share a common trait: both were based on coalitions that were heterogeneous in terms of the left-right dimension.[4]

Taken together, the two pieces of information reported in Figure 1 reinforce the picture outlined above: the yellow-green government concentrated its activity on a limited number of policy initiatives mainly using decree-laws as a legislative tool. However, as executive urgency does not prevent decree-laws from being modified by

Figure 1. Indicators of legislative activity during different governments.
Note: Laws ratifying international treaties are excluded.
Source: Authors' elaboration of parliamentary data.

Parliament during the narrow window available for conversion into law, the Conte I government did not hesitate to use the confidence-vote procedure to secure the passage of government legislation in Parliament. As panel c) of Figure 1 shows, the use of confidence votes by the yellow-green government is similar to that of previous cabinets. As we will show in more detail in the third section, the fact that most of the confidence votes requested by the Government related to bills converting decree-laws into laws shows that the confidence-vote procedure is a permanent feature of parliamentary bargaining in Italian democracy.

To summarize, the data show that despite the rhetorical claims of radical change associated with the M5 s-League government, the Conte I cabinet ended up being less proactive than its predecessors, especially when compared to the centre-left cabinets led, respectively, by Renzi and Gentiloni. Moreover, the yellow-green government does not show any novel traits in the ways the Government's agenda was implemented in Parliament, as it concentrated significant policy initiatives in a few decree-laws, securing their passage through the extensive use of confidence votes. This kind of inertia might be explained, at least partially, by the ideological divisions between the two coalition partners. According to influential theories of legislative politics (Cox and McCubbins 2005), governing parties are able to anticipate when they will suffer critical defections on a given bill. Consequently, they can use their veto power to prevent the bill from being considered in the first place. Ideological divergences can therefore restrict the set of viable policy outcomes, opening the 'gate' – usually after lengthy negotiations – only to those few initiatives upon which coalition partners agree.

Support for this interpretation might come from the data presented in Table 2. The table provides several pieces of information. First, it offers a classification of the content of the approved bills according to ten policy sectors. We coded the policy content of the 47 laws approved during the Conte government's term using the Italian Policy Agendas (IPA) codebook (Borghetto and Carammia 2010), which has been developed within the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP).[5] More precisely, we assigned each law to one of the 20 policy domains included in the IPA codebook. As some domains have only a few observations, we aggregated the original 20 policy sectors into 10 working categories. Second, the data presented in Table 2 allow us to measure the degree of parliamentary consensus in the final-passage votes on bills. More specifically, Table 2 reports data for three indicators of consensus. The first is the agreement index (AI), which measures the degree of compactness of the assembly and is designed to ascertain divisions in Parliament. The AI ranges from a minimum of zero – when parliamentarians are perfectly divided between those in favour, those against and abstainers – to a maximum of one – when all of them vote the same way.[6] The second indicator presents a measure of support, defined as the ratio between those members of Parliament (MPs) voting in favour, and those present. The third presents a measure of total support, defined as the ratio between MPs voting in favour, and the total number of members of the Chamber or the Senate (depending on which chamber the vote was cast in). A comparison between the three indicators allows us an evaluation of the consequences of abstention or absence from voting, two kinds of behaviour that can reasonably signal discontent, dissent or lack of interest among MPs.

Table 2 shows that the average consensus registered during final-passage votes on bills is higher than that registered in the investiture votes in the two branches of Parliament,

Table 2. The degree of consensus over the content of legislation.

Policy sector	CAP policy domain	Laws	AI	Support (present)	Support (total)
Business Promotion and Regulation	Community Development and Housing and Regulation Issues; Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce	9	0.74	0.83	0.62
Education and Culture	Education; Space, Science, Technology and Communications; Cultural Policy Issues	2	0.55	0.70	0.53
Environment and Agriculture	Agriculture; Environment; Energy; Public Lands, Water Management and Territorial Issues	2	0.68	0.78	0.63
Foreign Affairs and Defence	Defence; Foreign Trade; International Affairs and Foreign Aid	2	0.68	0.79	0.52
Government Operations	Government Operations	9	0.46	0.64	0.47
Immigration and Civil Rights	Civil Rights, Minority Issues and Civil Liberties; Immigration and Refugee Issues	2	0.60	0.68	0.57
Labour and Welfare	Health, Labour and Employment; Social Welfare	4	0.51	0.67	0.53
Law and Crime	Law, Crime, and Family Issues	6	0.73	0.82	0.64
Macroeconomics	Domestic Macroeconomic Issues	7	0.56	0.70	0.52
Transportation	Transportation	4	0.86	0.90	0.66
Average consensus		**47**	**0.63**	**0.76**	**0.57**
Investiture vote (Senate)			**0.32**	**0.55**	**0.54**
Investiture vote (Chamber)			**0.35**	**0.56**	**0.56**

Note: Laws ratifying international treaties are excluded.
Source: Authors' elaboration using CAP coding scheme.

regardless of which indicator is used. This suggests that, in addition to the votes of the M5 s and the League, support for legislation likely came from the opposition's legislators, and in particular from MPs belonging to FI and Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI), the two parties closest to the League on the left-right dimension.[7] Moreover, these figures indicate that the coalition partners were able to reach high levels of intra-party unity when voting on bills, and to attract support in Parliament, as a vast majority of MPs who were present voted in favour of proposed legislation. The observed level of support is lower when we consider the last column on the right of Table 2, suggesting that participation in voting was not stable. In some cases, opposition MPs voted against or did not vote at all. Absence from voting might be interpreted as a signal of dissent, or of the existence of substantive or procedural concerns or, alternatively, as a signal of tacit agreement by some MPs.[8] Finally, a comparison between the three indicators suggests that dissent – reflected in lower-than-average levels of consensus – arose mainly in two policy domains: 'government operations' and 'labour and welfare'. The first category includes, for example, the so called *milleproroghe* decree-law, which incorporates a wide range of often unrelated distributive measures, and the 'anti-corruption law', sponsored in particular by the M5 s, proposing measures against political corruption in the public administration and political parties. The 'labour and welfare' category includes the decree-law implementing the governing parties' flagship policies: the citizens' income and the reduction in the retirement age known as the '*quota 100'*. Overall, these data indicate a less 'adversarial' relationship between the majority and opposition than might have been expected. This, in turn, reflects the support of FdI and FI for certain pieces of the Government's legislation – such as the first immigration and security decree-law – but also the behaviour of part of the opposition – including the PD – which in some circumstances, such as the vote on the annual budget bill, did not participate in voting.

Executive-legislative relations: use of the confidence vote

Governments' recourse to confidence-vote procedures has long been recognized as a prominent feature of decision-making in parliaments (Huber 1996). On the one hand, the confidence-vote procedure creates an incentive for ruling coalitions to vote together on policy issues that might otherwise split them, stabilizing fragile governments. On the other hand, this procedural device allows governments to exert substantial influence over final policy outcomes, as it enables them to restrict the legislative role of Parliament. In this section, we will focus on the confidence votes requested by the first Conte government both in the Chamber and in the Senate. As stated in the first section, in line with previous Italian governments, the Conte I government made extensive use of the confidence procedure, requesting 15 votes of confidence, 11 of which on bills converting decree-laws into laws. As Table 3 shows, most of these confidence votes were called on the same piece of legislation in the Chamber and in the Senate, indicating that passage of the laws in question was secured through multiple confidence votes.

Table 3 shows the level of parliamentary support in the confidence votes measured using the three indicators described above. The data show lower figures in comparison to those relating to the final-passage votes on bills displayed in Table 2. On average, measured as the ratio between those voting in favour and the numbers present, parliamentary support is higher than that received by the Government in the investiture

Table 3. The degree of consensus in confidence votes.

Date	Bill	Chamber	Policy sector	AI	Support (present)	Support (total)
13/09/2018	*milleproroghe*	Chamber	Government Operations	0.39	0.59	0,52
07/11/2018	immigration and security	Senate	Immigration and Civil Rights	0.51	0.68	0,52
28/11/2018	immigration and security	Chamber	Immigration and Civil Rights	0.36	0.57	0,53
13/12/2018	tax policy	Chamber	Macroeconomics	0.36	0.57	0,49
13/12/2018	anti-corruption	Senate	Government Operations	0.36	0.57	0,51
07/12/2018	annual budget bill	Chamber	Macroeconomics	0.40	0.60	0,52
22/12/2018	annual budget bill	Senate	Macroeconomics	0.51	0.67	0,53
29/12/2018	annual budget bill	Chamber	Macroeconomics	0.73	0.82	0,50
06/02/2019	reduction of administrative burdens	Chamber	Government Operations	0.31	0.54	0,44
27/03/2019	basic income/*quota cento*	Chamber	Labour and Welfare	0.34	0.56	0,51
12/06/2019	*sblocca-cantieri*	Chamber	Government Operations	0.36	0.57	0,50
21/06/2019	economic growth *(crescita)*	Chamber	Macroeconomics	0.42	0.61	0,46
27/06/2019	economic growth *(crescita)*	Senate	Macroeconomics	0.36	0.57	0,50
24/07/2019	immigration and security bis	Chamber	Immigration and Civil Rights	0.67	0.78	0,51
05/08/2019	immigration and security bis	Senate	Immigration and Civil Rights	0.51	0.67	0,51
Average consensus				**0.44**	**0.63**	**0.50**
Investiture vote (Senate)				**0.32**	**0.55**	**0.54**
Investiture vote (Chamber)				**0.35**	**0.56**	**0.56**

Source: Authors' elaboration of parliamentary data.

vote, both in the Chamber and in the Senate. However, as the last column on the right in Table 3 reveals, parliamentary support measured as the ratio of favourable votes to the total membership of each branch of Parliament is on average lower than that received in the investiture vote, indicating once again that a large number of MPs did not take part in voting.

Absence from voting may be interpreted as the indicator of an increasingly damaged relationship between the Government and Parliament. Frustrated opposition MPs often chose to leave the floor, complaining that the Government had imposed its will on Parliament, preventing it from making any changes to legislation. This is because in most cases confidence votes were requested to replace the original text of a bill with a broad and wide-ranging Government amendment (*package vote*) and to secure the passage of a bill by preventing the opposition from presenting and debating amendments or further articles. In this respect, the process of approval of the 2019 annual finance bill, which overcame its final hurdle on 29 December 2018 when the Government won a vote of confidence in the Chamber of Deputies, is highly indicative. Although opposition MPs participated in the confidence vote, they left the floor before the final-passage vote on the budget law complaining that the Government had deprived MPs of the right properly to assess or debate the amended package of measures. Other examples are the confidence vote on the decree-law concerning economic growth (*decreto crescita*) of 21 June 2019 when 31 per cent of PD, 19 per cent of M5 s and 41 per cent of FI MPs did not participate in voting, with only a few of them absent due to institutional obligations. Absence from voting may also indicate intra-party conflict. Increasing divisions within the M5 s became apparent in the vote of confidence requested by the Government on 24 July 2019 regarding the second immigration and security decree-law which toughened sanctions on charities operating migrant rescue ships in the Mediterranean sea. Seventeen deputies belonging to the M5 s – including the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Roberto Fico – left the floor as a manifestation of dissent. More generally, the Conte

I government's use of confidence votes on decree-laws regarding important policy issues on which it was difficult to achieve consensus through parliamentary debate, reveals a further restriction of the role of the legislative assembly.
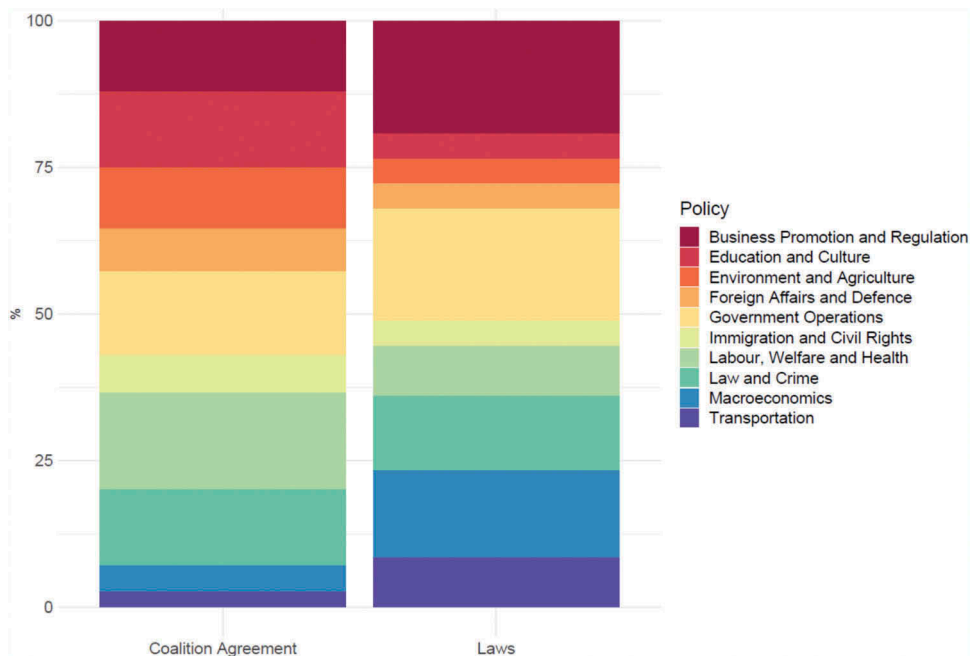
The implementation of the coalition agreement

The Conte I government was formed on the basis of the 'Contract for the government of change' (*Contratto per il governo del cambiamento*) signed by Di Maio and Salvini on 17 May 2018 and subsequently approved by a vast majority of M5 s and League supporters. The *Contratto per il governo del cambiamento* was a 58-page, 30-chapter, 17,000-word document. The prologue sets up some procedural rules for coalition governance while 29 chapters are devoted to policy issues listed in alphabetical order.

Empirical research stresses the importance of coalition agreements as governance structures that crucially influence the implementation of a joint policy agenda during a legislative term (Strøm and Müller 1999; Müller and Strøm 2008; Bäck, Müller, and Nyblade 2017; Kluwer and Bäck, 2019). Although coalition agreements are mostly devoted to substantive policy content, they may also include procedural rules to limit intra-party conflict or facilitate conflict resolution. When coalition agreements take the form of written documents to which parties in a coalition publicly commit themselves, they may differ in being issued before or after the election – as well as in their length; in the proportion of policy content as opposed to procedural concerns, and in their degree of comprehensiveness. According to Müller and Strøm's (2008) classification, by the 1990 s post-electoral coalition agreements were virtually non-existent in Italy whereas they had become a permanent feature of coalition politics in many Western European countries from 1980 onwards. In their comparative study of Italy, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, Moury and Timmermans (2013) classified the manifestos of the electoral coalitions alternating in government from 1996 to 2008 as coalition agreements. In comparison to those documents, Moury and Pereira (2018) stress the exceptionality of the 'Contract for the government of change', referring to it as the first post-electoral coalition agreement in the history of Italian democracy. This view is shared by Marangoni and Verzichelli (2019, 265). They point out, however, that 'although the stipulation of a formal coalition programme represents a real innovation (…) it remains problematic to assimilate the contract to the coalition agreements routinely featuring in other consensual democracies, or to those explicitly requested by the parties when post-election alliances, such as the Große Koalition between the Cdu-Csu and the Spd in Germany, are established between former competitors'. This is mainly because on closer inspection the contract reveals its vagueness, its discursiveness and the non-technical character of its discussion of policy substance; its lack of implementation pathways; its lack of specific financial commitments.

Coalition agreements can be analysed in terms of their policy content, looking at the way they accommodate the divergent preferences of the coalitions' partners to organize the government's policy agenda. A study by Valbruzzi (2018), based on a comparison of the coalition partners' party manifestos, and the policy issues mentioned in the coalition agreement, points to a process of 'convergence' underlying the first Conte government's agenda. In contrast, Verzichelli and Marangoni (2019) emphasize that the contract was merely the 'mutual acceptance of autonomous, parallel, action' in pursuit of the two

coalition partners' separate agendas. While a detailed analysis of the convergence hypothesis is beyond the scope of our work, in what follows we present some evidence about the implementation of the coalition agreement by looking at the extent to which the laws approved during the Government's term matched the policy issues emphasized in the coalition agreement.

We rely on data derived from coding the coalition agreement using the codebook developed within the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) described above.[9] The 17,400-word text of the 'Contract for the government of change' was split into 816 quasi-sentences, which were coded by looking at their specific policy content. We aggregated these data and compared them to those relating to the laws approved during the Conte I government, which we classified and aggregated using the same codebook (see the previous section). We are aware that our approach is purely quantitative, and consequently tells us little about the importance of single pieces of legislation. Despite their roughness, however, our data allow us to compare the relative salience of different policy sectors in the coalition agreement and in the legislative outputs.[10] The results are plotted in Figure 2. The figure shows that the policy sector to which the governing parties devoted most attention in the contract is 'Labour, Welfare and Health' (16.54 per cent). This category includes the two flagship policies championed by the governing coalition – namely the citizens' income and the reduction in the retirement age – that eventually became law in March 2019, a few weeks before the EP elections. Although the Government managed

Figure 2. A comparison between the policy content of the coalition agreement and the content of legislation.

Note: Laws ratifying international treaties are excluded.

Source: Laws: Authors' elaboration using CAP coding scheme; data deriving from the coding of the coalition agreement by Niccolò Conti.

to get these policy initiatives approved by Parliament, the 'Labour, Welfare and Health' category is under-represented in legislative output as only 8.51 per cent of the approved laws can be classified under this heading. One of the least salient policies in the coalition agreement is macroeconomic policy (4.53 per cent), which is instead prominent in legislation (14.89 per cent). This is due to the fact that the category, 'Macroeconomics', includes all the laws related to the budget, which includes mandatory acts for managing public finance. Figure 2 shows that legislation focused mainly on two categories: 'Government operations' and 'Business promotion and regulation' (19.15 per cent each). The first category includes policy issues and laws related to the functioning of state institutions (government departments, local authorities, the public administration, the regulation of political parties etc.). The second includes policy issues and laws related to community development, banking, finance, domestic trade and other regulatory policies. Although the coalition agreement devoted less attention to those policy domains (14.5 per cent for Government operations and 12.5 per cent for Business promotion), our comparison suggests that the policy initiatives approximately matched the issues – such as anti-corruption provisions, regulation of political parties, institutional reforms – emphasized in the contract.

Empirical research shows that the immigration issue was an important dimension structuring party competition in 2018 (Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto, 2018; Vezzoni 2018; D'Alimonte 2019). It is not surprising that the issue received attention in the coalition agreement (6.37 per cent). This figure roughly matches the legislative output (4.56 per cent). The data show almost perfect correspondence for the category 'Law and crime' (12.67 per cent in the contract and 12.87 per cent in the approved laws). Taken together, 'Immigration' and 'Law and Crime' sum up to about 17 per cent of the approved laws. The percentages of approved laws coded in these categories are in stark contrast with the percentage of approved laws coded in the category, 'Labour, Welfare and Health'.

Several factors – institutional or issue-related – not taken into account here may affect the implementation of coalition governments' agendas, from the allocation of ministerial posts to the divisiveness of policy issues. Nevertheless, these data provide partial evidence of the agenda control exerted by the League on coalition policy decisions, as the issues resulting in legislation were ones particularly important to the party. Although the short tenure of the Conte I government makes it impossible to infer long-term rebalancing effects, our data provide additional evidence concerning the dominant role of the League, especially during the initial months of the Government's tenure. To sum up, our analysis shows that despite its vagueness, the coalition agreement established reference points for future policies, especially given the divergent preferences of the coalition partners concerning important policy issues. Moreover, our data suggest that the League was better able to influence Government priorities than the M5 s. This might also help explain the growing popularity of the party during the period under consideration.

The first Conte government's relationship with public opinion

The analysis carried out in the previous sections highlights that the Conte I government was less proactive than its predecessors, concentrating its action on a number of policy initiatives for which it obtained approval by curtailing debate in Parliament. How strong

was support for the Government among the general public during this period? To measure the extent to which the public approved of the Government's performance, we can examine voting intentions for the government parties over time. Figure 3 displays voting intentions for the main parties in Italy from October 2018 to October 2019. Up until May 2019, voting intentions for the League remained rather stable at around 32 per cent. Voting intentions for the M5 s instead dropped significantly from about 28 per cent in November 2018 to nearly 21 per cent in May 2019. The argument that governments enjoy a 'honeymoon period' (Hix and Marsh 2007, 496) is based on the idea that the party or parties in government will be in a state of grace right after the election. In other words, support for governing parties may rise as if voters switch support to the winners of the national elections. Why then did the League increase its popularity while its partner in government, the M5 s, did not? Several factors may account for this.

A first possible reason is the quite different 'nature' of the two parties. Although the League was born as an anti-establishment party with hostile positions towards the underdeveloped South (Diamanti 1996), it has been in government twice since then – during the periods 2001–2006 and 2008–2011 respectively. From the very outset, the M5 s has mainly, and almost exclusively, focused on a fierce critique of Italy's political class (Biorcio 2014). For such an anti-establishment party, entry into government is a particularly delicate moment, 'because there is a risk of "normalising" [its] image, assimilating it to the logic and behaviour of the elite [it] contest[s] and from which [it] claim[s] to be different' (Tronconi 2018, 173).

Second, and relatedly, League voters are, on many salient issues, much more ideologically cohesive than M5 s voters. M5 s voters have varied ideological positions, which
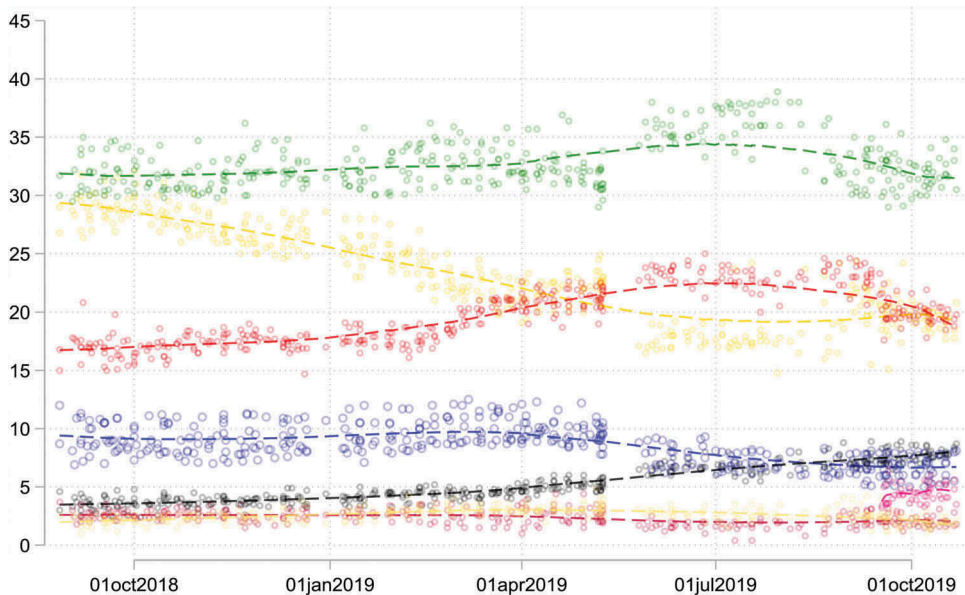
Figure 3. Opinion polls (moving average).

Note: League in green; M5 s in gold; PD in red; FI in blue; FdI in black. Più Europa in dark yellow; LeU in dark red; Italia Viva in pink.

Source: Authors' calculation from various polls including Termometro Politico, Demopolis, EMG, Ixè and SWG.

means that they are divided on many issues. Consider, for example, the issue of immigration: the M5 s electorate is divided on the subject (Ipsos data suggest that that the median placement, accounting for 47 per cent, lies somewhere between being 'very much' and 'somewhat' in favour of immigration). On this issue, the M5 s has thus oscillated between different positions, without a clear, unambiguous and recognizable stance, which makes it less credible on the issue.

A third possible reason has to do with the visibility and public approval of the League leader. As soon as the Government was formed, Salvini, in his capacity as Minister of the Interior, became highly visible across the Italian media, with social media being his preferred instruments of communication. Research shows that he is one of the most active and most followed of Italian political leaders on Facebook (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone, 2018; Bobba, 2019). To a large extent, arguably, Salvini was able to eclipse many of the remaining government figures. The highly publicized cases of the humanitarian ships, Open Arms and Sea-Watch, which were kept waiting off the Italian island of Lampedusa for days, sparked intense and polarized debates in the media with an overwhelming majority of the Italian population in favour of the '*linea Salvini*' on immigration. In this regard, the salience of the immigration issue during the months immediately following the formation of the Government helped Salvini to acquire an even higher media profile and effectively to portray himself as the real face of the Government and the spokesperson for the hard line on immigration (today supported by a majority of the public in Italy). On the basis of these arguments, it is not surprising that the League rather than the M5 s reaped most of the benefits of the government's honeymoon period.

As stated in the introduction, the results of the EP election on 26 May 2019 saw a stunning performance by the League, with an increase of almost 17 percentage points compared to its 2018 general election result. Compared to its performance at that election, the M5 s lost about 15 percentage points. Data from the post-electoral wave of RECONNECT (Plescia et al. 2020) show that government party supporters are, unsurprisingly, much more satisfied with the performance of the Government than supporters of opposition parties. Nevertheless, evaluations of Government performance on the part of respondents generally, including supporters of the two parties in government (with 6 on average on a scale from 0 to 10) are rather tepid (Plescia and Kritzinger 2020).

Figure 3 shows that the boost for the League continued even after the EP elections, reaching its peak of 37 per cent just before the Government's break-up in August, when support for the League began dropping again to the levels registered in the pre-EP election period. While the M5 s gained some support as a result of the Government's collapse, the Movement never really recovered to the levels of the general election of March 2018.

In this context, the role played by the Prime Minister, Conte, deserves attention. As discussed in Marangoni and Verzichelli (2019), Conte's technocratic aura allowed him to perform a dual mediating function during the yellow-green government: between the party leaders themselves and between them and the rest of the world. His role both inside and outside Parliament was mainly that of a mediator, distinguishing his political position very clearly from those of Silvio Berlusconi and Renzi, and highlighting its similarity with that of technocrats like Mario Monti. However, Conte was able to acquire an increasingly autonomous role, surviving the collapse of his own government and

improving his poll ratings, as about the 60 per cent of respondents approved of his performance according to polls released in August 2019 (GPF Inspiring Research for ANSA). The Prime Minister's resignation speech, accusing Salvini of 'irresponsible behaviour' and of jeopardizing the national interest in pursuit of his personal interests, marked the beginning of a new phase in Italian politics, one where Giuseppe Conte 'went from irrelevant to irreplaceable'.[11]

Conclusion

The birth of the yellow-green government – formed by an unusual and untested coalition between the populist Five-star Movement and the far-right League – was regarded by many commentators as a substantial shake-up of Italian politics. After signing an agreement for a 'government of change', the coalition partners purported to be the agents of a radical turning point. In this article we have attempted to assess the extent to which the Conte I government was different from its predecessors by examining the implementation of the Government's policy agenda. Quantitative data regarding legislative activity show that the Conte I government approved fewer laws per month than did the five previous governments. This was probably due to latent conflicts among the coalition partners in key policy areas. In procedural terms, the Conte I government did not differ markedly from its predecessors. The yellow-green government concentrated its activity on a limited number of policy initiatives mainly using the decree-law as a legislative tool. Moreover, the Cabinet did not hesitate to use the confidence-vote procedure to secure the passage of government legislation in Parliament. Our analysis of final votes on bills suggests less adversarial relationships than one might have expected, as support for legislation also came from opposition parliamentarians, although participation in voting was not stable. Looking at the content of the approved bills, a comparison of the 'contract for a government of change' and legislative outputs shows that the coalition agreement acted as a focal point for pursuit of the Government's agenda. However, despite the approval of flagship measures such as the 'citizens' income', the data show that the League influenced the policy priorities of the Government more than the M5 s did. Overall, Salvini's League was better able to reap the fruits of governing as shown by its increasing popularity over time, culminating in its stunning performance in the EP elections.

Notes

1. M. Anelli, I. Colantone, M. Pulejo, and P. Stanig, 'Italy just voted for two very different kinds of populism', *The Washington Post*, 28 March 2018.
2. The expert survey methodology is characterised by an *a priori* approach whereby policy dimensions or scales are predefined and parties are located on these scales by country experts. Estimates of party positions are therefore the aggregated results of expert judgements (Benoit and Laver 2006).
3. The Berlusconi IV government was a post-electoral minimal winning coalition government formed by the Northern League and FI. The Monti government was an inter-electoral caretaker government. The Letta government was a post-electoral surplus majority coalition formed by the PD and other centre and left wing parties. The Renzi government was an inter-electoral surplus majority government formed by the PD and other centre parties. The

Gentiloni government was an inter-electoral surplus majority coalition formed by the PD and other centre parties. The Conte I government was a minimal winning coalition.

4. According to Italian politics experts, the distance on the left-right dimension between the PD and the Popolo delle libertà (People of Freedom, Pdl) – the two parties supporting the Letta executive – was about nine points (Di Virgilio et al. 2015).

5. The classificatory scheme of the CAP was drawn up to study how attention toward different political issues varies and how such oscillations affect policy. The scheme is used to analyse the policy content of various kinds of agendas, including party manifestos, government programmes, and legislative production.

6. See Hix, Noury, and Roland (2005) for further details about the way the index is computed.

7. For instance, FI and FdI voted in favour of the two decree-laws on immigration and security sponsored by Salvini's League.

8. For instance, in the vote on the citizens' income law, 37 per cent of the PD MPs did not participate in the voting while 63 per cent voted against. It should be noted that, given the Government's majority in the Chamber, we can rule out the possibility that absences were motivated by attempts to sabotage legislation by rendering the assembly inquorate.

9. We are grateful to Niccolò Conti for providing the data.

10. An alternative approach would have been to analyse the rate of enactment of electoral pledges (Mansergh and Thompson 2007). We opted for the CAP classification for consistency with the analysis carried out in the previous section and given the fact that our study focuses on the post-electoral period taking the coalition agreement as a starting point.

11. J. Horowitz, 'How Giuseppe Conte of Italy Went From Irrelevant to Irreplaceable', *New York Times*, 29 August 2019.

Disclosure statement

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