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Changing the Transmission Belt. The Programme-to-Policy Link in Italy between the First and Second Republic

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Abstract

The linkage between party mandates and legislative outputs is at the heart of representative government. Using an attention-based model, this article tests: the existence of a mandate effect; whether incumbents have incentives to uptake issues emphasised in their main competitors' platforms; and whether the possibility of government alternation impacts on these two mechanisms. The analysis relies on datasets of the Italian Agendas Project recording the issue content of party manifestos and laws covering the period 1983-2012. The results of the time series cross-sectional models lend support to the presence of a mandate effect in Italy, a mechanism which was strengthened after the introduction of alternation in government after the 1994 elections. Additionally, opposition issues may have an impact in the legislative agenda, but only when considering the legislation initiated by MPs. Our findings have important implications for our understanding of the impact of government alternation expectations, a general institutional feature underlying - with varying intensity - all democracies, on the functioning of democratic representation.

Keywords: agenda-setting, parliament, electoral mandate, opposition, issue attention

Introduction

How elected representatives set their policy priorities and, subsequently, manage to translate them into policy decisions is central to the functioning of democratic government. As such, this question has attracted substantial attention from comparative politics scholars. According to mandate theory (e.g. McDonald, Mendes, and Budge 2004; McDonald and Budge 2005), political elections sanction the conferral of a mandate from voters to political parties. Parties are voted into government based on the platform of policy priorities that they present during election campaigns. Representatives know that they are expected to keep their campaign promises during their term in government if they do not want to face electoral punishment by their voters at the next election. Accordingly, mandate theory expects a high degree of congruence between the platforms of parties in power and the content of their decisions.

Agenda setting studies (e.g. Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Baumgartner and Jones 2015) do not dismiss the relevance of electoral platforms, but point out that the transposition of electoral priorities into policy outputs is constrained by several factors. Some – notably political institutions such as the system of separation of powers and the party system – are usual suspects for scholars of comparative politics. Others, such as cognitive frictions and incoming information about policy problems, have been traditionally more familiar to public policy scholars (Cobb and Elder 1983; Kingdon 1984).[1] In addition

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1 Cognitive friction refers to limitations in government's capacity to deal simultaneously with the abundance of policy problems asking for attention and solutions (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). The default response to this complex environment is to implement marginal adjustments in most policy areas most of the time. Occasionally, when new information enters the system and mount pressure on policy-makers to a level that cannot be disregarded (e.g. economic crises or natural disasters), government shifts their attention disproportionately.

to these multiple constraints and friction, agenda setting theories also describe a complex pattern of interactions between majority and opposition parties that may result in governing parties uptaking issues emphasised in the opposition's platform (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010, Seeberg 2013) to maximize their re-election chances. On the one hand, this strategy is aimed at neutralizing potential accusations from their competitors of having irresponsibly neglected certain problems (Sulkin 2005). On the other hand, these strategic responses may challenge the adversaries' monopoly or "ownership" of certain issues (Sigelman & Buell 2004; Damore 2004; Sides 2006).

Indeed, rather than as alternative accounts, party mandate and agenda-setting should be understood as coexisting "mechanisms through which a political system processes information to produce public policies" (Froio, Bevan, and Jennings 2016: 692). While they differ on the relevance assigned to the factors and processes affecting the congruence between electoral mandates and policy outputs, both agree on the relevance of political institutions, such as the agenda-setting power of the executive, the fragmentation and governance of the coalition or the role of the Prime Minister.

This article investigates the party program-to-policy link by analysing, first, the extent to which the content of the government or opposition's platforms is related to the policy decisions taken by elected officials. It does so by bringing into focus the case of Italy, which represents a least-likely case to expect such link to be detected, because of its heterogenous and unstable majorities (Russo 2015), and the traditional weakness of the cabinet vis-à-vis the parliament in the legislative arena (Zucchini 2011). Second, it studies whether and how this connection relates to the possibility of alternation in government. It analyses how the change from a blocked system with one dominant party to a competitive system based on the alternation in power of two competing coalition blocs influenced the transmission of party priorities to legislative outputs. Our contribution to the literature lies precisely in analysing whether the introduction of credible government alternation after 1993 increases the program-to-policy linkage. We

argue that Italy provides a unique case study to investigate the effect of different models of party competition on this mechanism, while controlling for relevant structural factors.

The article also contributes to research on party government in Italy. Italian law-making before 1993 has often been depicted as unpredictable and relatively unresponsive to party programs (Di Palma 1977). Indeed, the move from a proportional to a mixed electoral system in the early 1990s was also triggered by a desire to establish a more direct relationship between voters and representatives. By tracing party attention and government action to policies over long periods of time, our research design allows analysing whether such radical change in the political system brought about a closer linkage between electoral programmes and the legislative output. We thus provide empirical evidence on a crucial case which has rarely appeared in extensive comparative studies (e.g. Klingemann et al. 1994) or has mostly been studied by evaluating the rate of pledge fulfilment for a limited number of governments (Moury 2011; Newell 2000).

It is worth pointing out that we do not look at either the fulfilment of single pledges (Mansergh and Thomson 2007) or at by-issue variation, that is, at whether some parties are more responsive to specific policy areas. Rather, we focus on the composition of the policy agenda as a whole and analyse the congruence of the distribution of attention across all policy issues in party manifestos and legislative priorities, an approach adopted also by other works (Baumgartner, Brouard, and Grossman 2010; Borghetto, Carammia, and Zucchini 2014; Brouard et al. forthcoming; Bevan, John, and Jennings 2011; Froio, Bevan, and Jennings 2016; Persico, Froio, and Guinaudeau 2012).

To reconstruct the electoral and legislative agendas, our analysis relies on the policy content coding of all party platforms and primary acts adopted in Italy between 1983 and 2013 using the coding system developed by the Comparative Agendas Project (Baumgartner et al. 2011, www.comparativeagendas.net). We measure *attention* to policy issues (the share of mentions of single policy areas in party manifestos and the share of laws adopted in each of those policy areas), not policy

preferences (that is, the policy position of parties and government on single issues). We do not deny that policy preferences are relevant to party competition and policy making – quite the opposite. We simply contend that a focus on policy attention is key to understand the "struggle for control over the political agenda [… and that] studying this process is a natural way to learn how political systems function and change over time" (Green-Pedersend and Walgrave 2014, 1-2).

The article is organized as follows. Having set the stage for the analysis by discussing existing theories on the relationship between party policy priorities and the legislative agenda, we make our expectations explicit and develop three hypotheses. We then show how those expectations apply to the analysis of the Italian transition, and illustrate the data and methods used to test them empirically. Finally, we present our findings and draw some conclusions.

Alternation in power and the programme-to-policy link

One of the tenets of representative democracy is that a legislator's behaviour in office should take into account the interests of the voter (Przeworski, Stokes and Manin 1999). The so-called promissory model of representation (Mansbridge 2003) assigns political parties a fundamental role in the policy process, as "they alone tie representatives to a particular set of past and promised policies on which voters can make an informed choice in the elections" (Budge and Hofferbert 1990, 113). Beyond rhetorical statements and attacks to the opponents, party competition during election campaigns revolves primarily around pledges and intentions that political parties promise to fulfil, if voted into office. Through electoral manifestos, political parties outline their distinctive profiles and make them public by emphasizing those issues that they repute will gain them votes, while trying to de-prioritize those issues that might advantage their opponents (Petrocik 1996; Budge and Farlie 1983; for a review see Budge 2015). In sum, it is on the basis of distinct manifestos that political parties compete during election campaigns; and it is through

party competition that voters make sense of the policy stances of each party, and choose the party that is closer to their preferences.

Empirical evidence on whether party manifestoes matter to policy making has been mixed so far. For example, Klingemann et al. (1994) found a strong correlation between policy priorities emphasized before elections in party manifestos and patterns of budgetary allocations (Budge and Keman 1990; Hofferbert and Budge 1992). However, Imbeau et al's. (2001) meta-analysis of 43 policy studies on the subject showed no consistent linkage between the left-right composition of governments and policy output. Only recently, empirical research shifted the focus on the congruence between government party agendas and law-making priorities (Baumgartner, Brouard, and Grossman 2010; Borghetto, Carammia, and Zucchini 2014; Brouard et al. forthcoming; Bevan, John, and Jennings 2011; Froio, Bevan, and Jennings 2016; Persico, Froio, and Guinaudeau 2012). Against this background, our first hypothesis makes the basic point that some degree of mandate effect is generally present in democracies:

H1: The issue emphasis of majority manifestos positively affects the legislative agenda.

The agenda-setting approach shifts the attention to the fact that governments have to adapt to a constant flow of information and thus address problems that were not foreseen at the time of election (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). They have to please not only the voters that voted them into office in the first place, but also their future voters. Governments also have to constantly keep track of changes in public opinion (Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995; Wlezien and Soroka 2012), respond to the media (Vliegenthart et al. 2016) and maintain open channels of communication with interest groups (Hall and Deardoff 2006). Moreover, problem-solving is certainly a key factor for policy-making (Adler and Wilkerson 2013). According to this model, we should not entirely discard some level of congruence between the priorities of governing parties and the legislative agenda. Strategic and forward-looking representatives do have

an incentive to show that, given the opportunity, they carry through their programmatic priorities. However, a wide range of factors may push them away from electoral promises.[2]

This article pays particular attention to one such factor – political oppositions – and tests whether parties in governments also respond to the issues prioritized by their rivals.[3] Recent empirical work on parties' issue campaigning provided consistent evidence that political parties do not simply focus on the issues on which they hold an advantage over their competitors, and simply disregard all the others (issue ownership); parties also tend to engage in direct confrontation on the same issues (issue overlap) (Sigelman and Buell 2004; Damore 2004; Sides 2006). Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) and Seeberg (2013) showed that the 'party system agenda' – the set of issues object of inter-party discussion at a specific point in time – is strongly influenced by opposition parties and this, in turn, can constrain the activities of governing parties.

Why should government parties also respond to the issues emphasized by their opponents in the election campaign? Sulkin (2005) defines "issue uptake" as the strategic activity in which "challengers have an incentive to identify salient issues that the incumbent has previously neglected and to prioritize these

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2 Agenda-setting scholars mitigated the claim that the 'program-to-policy' link is a normative requisite for the good functioning of democracies: besides respecting electoral commitments, governments also need to govern (Baumgartner, Jones, and Wilkerson 2011, 954), and this implies addressing new or changing priorities that may be different than those formulated during election campaigns.

3 Once again, the role of opposition parties is not entirely discarded by advocates of mandate politics: "[c]onstitutional and practical political considerations structure the situation in such a manner that those (temporarily) invested with authority must take some account of the agendas of 'out' parties" (Klingemann et al. 1994, 49).

issues in their campaigns. Winners are motivated to respond to these signals and act on their challengers' issues in office to remedy their weaknesses and promote their future re-election prospects." (Ibid: 168). This does not necessarily imply an alignment with the policy position of opposition parties.[4] Rather, majority parties are forced to take up issues they would have otherwise neglected.

Because they outline the main directives on which the challenger runs its electoral campaigns, party manifestos represent one of the major sources of information on which the incumbent builds its expectations on the lines of attacks of its opponent. Incumbents will be better placed to shore up those 'weaknesses' if at the end of their term in office they can show some record of uptake. Addressing an issue through legislation is often the best option to counter the blame, because it depoliticizes the issue rather than rising the hype around it (Seeberg 2013). Therefore, from an issue uptake perspective we should expect that the content of challengers' manifestos would contribute to shaping the majority's subsequent activity in office. Another reason to "trespass" is to counteract or undermine the competitors' issue ownership, i.e. changing the voter's perception on which party has the best solutions in that area.

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[4] Policy agenda scholars use different lenses to read into this relationship: their focus is not much on the congruence of *position* but on the congruence of *attention to issues* between representatives and the voters. This change of perspective has fundamental consequences on expectations about policy responsiveness. First, this account views the process of legislative representation as far more dynamic. Even though actors' policy preferences may remain stable for long time, incoming information about policy problems and ways to deal with them, coming from outside and/or from within the political system, continuously reshapes actors' policy priorities (Jones 1994). Second, and more interestingly given our interest on the linkage between elections and legislative behavior, agenda-setting scholars highlight a number of reasons whereby the agenda of the governing party should be only one among several other factors affecting the content of legislative outputs.

Although this is less frequent, there are studies documenting instances in which this strategy was successfully employed (e.g. Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen 2004).

In sum, mandate and agenda models lead to rather different expectations on the party program-to-policy congruence. The former predicts that majority coalition platforms will be the main policy templates for legislative decisions. There is little incentive to incorporate the priorities of challengers, because this would divert attention and resources away from the issues 'owned' that have a potentially higher payoff: building a reputation of efficiency in the eyes of electors. Conversely, in line with the agenda-setting perspective, the issue uptake hypothesis implies that opposition party manifestos should also have an impact on subsequent legislative decisions of the majority. Campaigns represent an important source of information on the issues that will be more rewarding in the future. On the one hand, governments can pre-empt the opponents' attacks. On the other, they can challenge their ownership over specific issues. Accordingly, our second hypothesis drawing on the agenda model reads as follows:

H2: The issue emphasis of the opposition manifestos positively affects the legislative agenda.

Political institutions matter – but how exactly? Comparative politics studies have traditionally emphasised the distinction between consensus and majoritarian models of democracy, entailing different levels of centralisation or dispersion of decision-making power (Lijphart 2012). By centralising power in the hands of government, and exposing them to the threat of electoral sanctions, more majoritarian institutional designs should facilitate the translation of inputs into outputs. In contrast, because they disperse power across multiple actors and institutions, and they complicate the assignment of responsibilities for policy choices, more consensual institutions should be expected to constrain the transposition of electoral priorities.

While acknowledging the relevance of this categorisation, this article draws attention to a relatively unexplored institutional feature that is alleged to have an impact on the studied mechanism: the

possibility of government alternation. This is different from mere cabinet turnover (Curini and Zucchini 2012: 828). We define it as the perception of voters and representatives that a concrete possibility exists that the incumbent may be replaced through elections by an actor with different policy preferences (Bartolini 2000, Pellegata 2016). On the one hand, since the possibility of alternation in government implies a greater vulnerability for the incumbent, it should create the conditions for a significant and positive effect of policy priorities on legislative output for parties in government. On the other hand, the greater vulnerability of incumbents to oppositions' attacks in a competitive alternation system should also create incentives for incumbents to trespass on their rivals' issue.

The relevance of government alternation to the transmission of electoral priorities to policy outputs needs clarification. While mandate and agenda models differ under several respects, both are premised on the implicit assumption that the conditions exist for alternation in power. The mandate model is grounded on the idea that political parties compete to become a majority and, once in office, the threat of losing the next elections pushes them to carry through their policy program. If elections do not imply the shift of power (at least not entirely) from incumbent cabinet parties to other political forces, there is little incentive to stick to the mandate. Research based on the agenda model also largely assumes that a real competition for political positions is actually in place. For instance, competition for election in single districts, and thus in the US Congress, is a central tenet of the issue-uptake theory in Sulkin's analysis (2005). Losing elections and not returning to Congress is a concrete possibility for individual representatives. Indeed, issue-uptake by Congressmen is expected to increase as "vulnerability", i.e. the chance of not being re-elected, grows (Sulkin 2005: 91). Re-election-oriented incumbents will not feel obliged to pay attention to opponents' issue priorities, in turn, if their prospects of being returned to office are already high. This line of reasoning results in our third hypothesis:

H3: Both the "mandate" and "opposition" effect should become stronger when there is a credible possibility of alternation.

Country selection: Italy (1983-2013)

In the early 1990s, the Italian political system underwent a radical institutional and political change. The transformation cascaded from the electoral law, adopted in 1993, to political parties, the party system, and the relationship between government and parliament. Consequently, the system shifted from a blocked political system with no alternation in power (1948-1994) to one where alternation became the rule: no coalition was confirmed in power at any of the five elections held between 1996 and 2013. As such, post-war Italy offers a privileged case study to analyse the impact of the transformation from a pivotal to an alternational party system on the programme-to-policy link.

Post-war Italy featured for its first 40 years a remarkably stable party system, characterised by two anti-system parties (the Communist Pci and the post-fascist Msi) making a bipolar opposition against a centrist coalition permanently led by the Christian Democrats (Dc). In this setting, government turnover was by and large peripheral, namely it consisted in the Dc creating different coalition partnerships with smaller parties in its ideological neighbourhood, while the anti-system credentials of the greatest opposition party, the Pci, excluded it from possible coalition solutions. The remote likelihood of alternation in power clearly affected the legislative behaviour of elected officials. Majority parties could decide to delay structural reforms, those more likely to be publicised in the coalition program, without the fear of getting replaced at the subsequent elections (for a spatial analysis explanation of the effect of the lack of alternation on major policy changes see Zucchini 2011).[5] Vice versa, opposition parties could indulge in the so-called 'politics of outbidding' or 'overpromising', since they did not have to respond of their pledges in front of their voters (Sartori 1976).

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[5] As aptly put by Di Palma (1977: 190-1): "What the government introduces in Parliament has little to do with the legislative programs that coalition partners agree upon at the outset of every new coalition.[…] The bulk of proposed government legislation is made of provisions not always so important as to be sanctioned in the coalition program, yet necessary to keep the machinery of government and private interests going and sufficiently narrow to obtain coalition support within the cabinet".

Although the pre- and post-1993 periods are often referred to as, respectively, “First” and “Second” Republic, the trigger of change was not constitutional reforms. Rather, it was the joint occurrence of international (end of the Cold War) and domestic events (the fiscal crisis; the criminal prosecution of a significant portion of the ruling elites known as “clean hands”; the change of the electoral law from a proportional to a mixed system) that determined the collapse or transformation of all those parties that governed Italy throughout the First Republic (e.g. Newell 2000).

In this work, we treat the two short legislative terms between 1992-1996 as a ‘transition period’. During the first term, the 11th, Italy abandoned - as a consequence of a referendum - its proportional electoral system and shifted to a mixed system, favouring the creation of pre-electoral coalitions. But it was in 1994 that the change in electoral behaviour - at the first elections using the new rules - resulted in a radical breakdown of the party system, with the collapse of the Dc and the emergence of a new party, Forza Italia, as the most voted political force.

We take the 13th legislative term (1996-2001) as the beginning of the Second Republic. This was both the first alternation in power in republican history and the first time a leftist coalition won the elections. Italy seemed to have taken the path of a competitive democracy. The change is apparent when looking at electoral outcomes and the perfect alternation between two centre-left coalitions (1996 and 2006) and two centre-right coalitions (2001 and 2008). On the surface, this change implied a relative simplification of the system shaped as a bipolar competition between pre-electoral coalitions headed by clearly identified leaders – the candidates of each coalition to the position of Premier. Coalition agreements, on their turn, took the form of large pre-electoral “coalition manifestos”, spelling out policy pledges as in typical majoritarian democracies. More importantly, under a system where the risk of electoral punishment for not fulfilling the electoral program increased exponentially, parties faced stronger incentives to be both responsible (make more realistic bids) and responsive (meet the increasing expectation from their voters that they ‘respect their promises’). What did not change with respect to the

format of the previous party system is the fragmentation and the level of ideological distance, which remained always significant (Ignazi 2017).[6] We argue that this mix of continuities and changes makes Italy a perfect case to study the impact of credible alternation in power on the programme-to-policy link. In sum, a set of formal (new electoral rules) and informal (collapse of the old party system) factors made alternation to government, previously not a credible option, a likely one. The effect of these set of factors makes us expect a stronger effect of policy programs on policy-making. However, in line with our third hypothesis, we also expect an increase in the incentives to engage in issue uptake in the competitive Second Republic.

Data

To test our hypotheses, this article uses data built using the coding system of the Italian Policy Agendas Project (Borghetto and Carammia 2010). Under the supervision of the authors, teams of trained coders located respectively at the University of Catania and the State University of Milan coded the policy content of party programs and legislation using the Italian policy agendas codebook, which envisages a total of 21 main policy areas (see appendix). Our dependent and main independent variables are the share of attention devoted to each of these policy areas respectively in the legislative agenda and in the party agenda of the majority and the opposition. More information on the operationalization of these and other control variables is given below.

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[6] In order to overcome the fetters of a still slow and cumbersome legislative process, executives made a greater use of existing procedural tools, such as delegation acts, which ultimately reinforce the government agenda-setting power with respect to the parliament (Zucchini 2011).

Dependent Variables: Law-making

Data on legislative outputs were drawn from the Italian Law-Making database (Borghetto et al. 2012) and comprise a total of 5615 content-coded acts. We filtered out laws ratifying international treaties (n=1343) and budget laws (n=142), so our final data set includes 3214 acts. The former are, to some extent, technical measures by and large exogenous to domestic party politics. The latter are mostly complex bills with heterogeneous content spanning many sectors and thus they could not be assigned to a specific topic area.

We also run the analysis on the subset of executive-sponsored legislation (n=2213, 69 per cent of the total). The Italian law-making process put relatively little constraints on legislative initiative. Single MPs can and do propose a large number of bills, yet - differently from executive sponsored bills - most of these are never turned into actual laws (Kreppel 2009). Therefore, testing our model using only those laws initiated by the government should provide a more detailed understanding of the operation of the mandate hypothesis, as well as a more stringent test of the issue uptake hypothesis.

To obtain a yearly measure of the legislative agenda, we did not use the calendar year to aggregate laws since elections normally fall in the middle of the year. Rather, each legislative term was divided in periods of 365 days. This entailed that the last year of the legislature has slightly more or less than 365 days.[7] Finally, each version of the variable is calculated as a percentage of the total laws in each legislative term and therefore represents the share of attention given to each topic relative to every other topic legislated on that year.

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7 The last legislature years include 355 days on average, with a standard deviation of 33. The longest one occurs during the 12th (391 days) and the shorter during the 10th (297 days).

Independent Variables: Party platforms

For party manifestos, we focus on the number of 'quasi-sentences', i.e. each part of a single sentence which includes a logically autonomous statement. Overall, the party manifestos included in the dataset have been broken-up into more than 39,000 quasi-sentences, each coded based on its main policy content. Note that, in the Italian case, formal post-election coalition agreements have never been signed. On the other hand, the reforms of the electoral law adopted in 1993 and 2005 provided powerful incentives for political parties to form pre-election coalitions. When available, we coded pre-election coalition manifestos. When these were not available, we were confronted with the need to merge single parties' manifestos.[8] Our aggregation criterion is based on the idea that in forming the legislative agenda of the coalition, parties with a larger representation in parliament have a stronger bargaining power (Strøm 1990). This translates into a measure of coalition agenda where the mean of party agendas for each issue is weighted by their relative share of seats in the Lower Chamber. Since we take legislative years as our time units and manifestos are only written before a new election, we repeat our measure of the majority and opposition party platforms for each legislative year making up the legislative term.[9] The same

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8 During the First Republic coalitions were post-electoral and their main policy lines also were generally agreed after elections, when single parties could count their votes and bargain agreements (mainly on the distribution of government portfolios) far from the spotlight of public attention (Verzichelli and Cotta 2000).

9 Therefore, for the 11th, 12th, and 15th legislative terms we repeat the party agenda twice, in the case of the 9th term four times and for the remaining terms five times. Functionally, this means our party platform measures occur before our law-making data easing concerns over endogeneity. Furthermore, while party

procedure was used to compute the agenda of the main opposition coalition or party (e.g. the Pci in the First Republic).

Control variables

Our models include three legislature-specific control variables. The first variable is total government support (*Government Seats*) and measures the seat share of all parties in government weighted by the numbers of days in office in each year. Additionally, the *effective number of parties* uses Laakso and Taagepera' formula and data on parliamentary seats (1979) to produce a legislature-specific score. Both indexes were drawn from Armigeon et al. (2016). Finally, ideological distance (*Rile score*) measures the difference between the left-most and right-most party for each legislature using estimates of party positioning on the left-right axis provided by the Manifesto Research Project (Volkens et al. 2015).[10] These three control variables aim at accounting for institutional characteristics of the legislative terms which are reputed to have an impact on the capacity of a majority coalition to implement its agenda: the

platforms are likely to be partially based on previous law-making, many other factors like issue ownership, events, public opinion polling and more will go into individual manifestos that is further complicated by our aggregation of platforms making reverse causality quite unlikely.

[10] Additionally, we controlled for ideological distance (data from Volkens et al. 2015) and number of "necessary" parties within the governing coalition, plus a categorical variable for the type of government (minimal winning coalition, surplus coalition, multi-party minority government and technocratic government as classified in Armigeon et al., 2016). The results were not affected.

parliamentary support it can rely upon, the fragmentation of the parliamentary arena and its level of ideological heterogeneity.[11]

Analyses

The consistent topic coding across each of these datasets allows us to test the general relationship between both the majority and opposition agendas in relation to legislative outputs. Before moving on with the analysis, it is useful to inspect visually. Figure 1 presents the weighted majority and main opposition agendas alongside the all laws measure for each topic. While the laws measure varies from year to year, the majority and opposition agendas measures are repeated throughout the legislative session representing the stated priorities of the parties before the most recent election. Here the two vertical dashed lines indicate the end of the first republic and the beginning of the second republic with the period in-between representing the transition. Importantly this demonstrates that there is attention and movement on all issues, and except for government operations which includes several reforms around the transition period, no clear patterns or trends seem to emerge.

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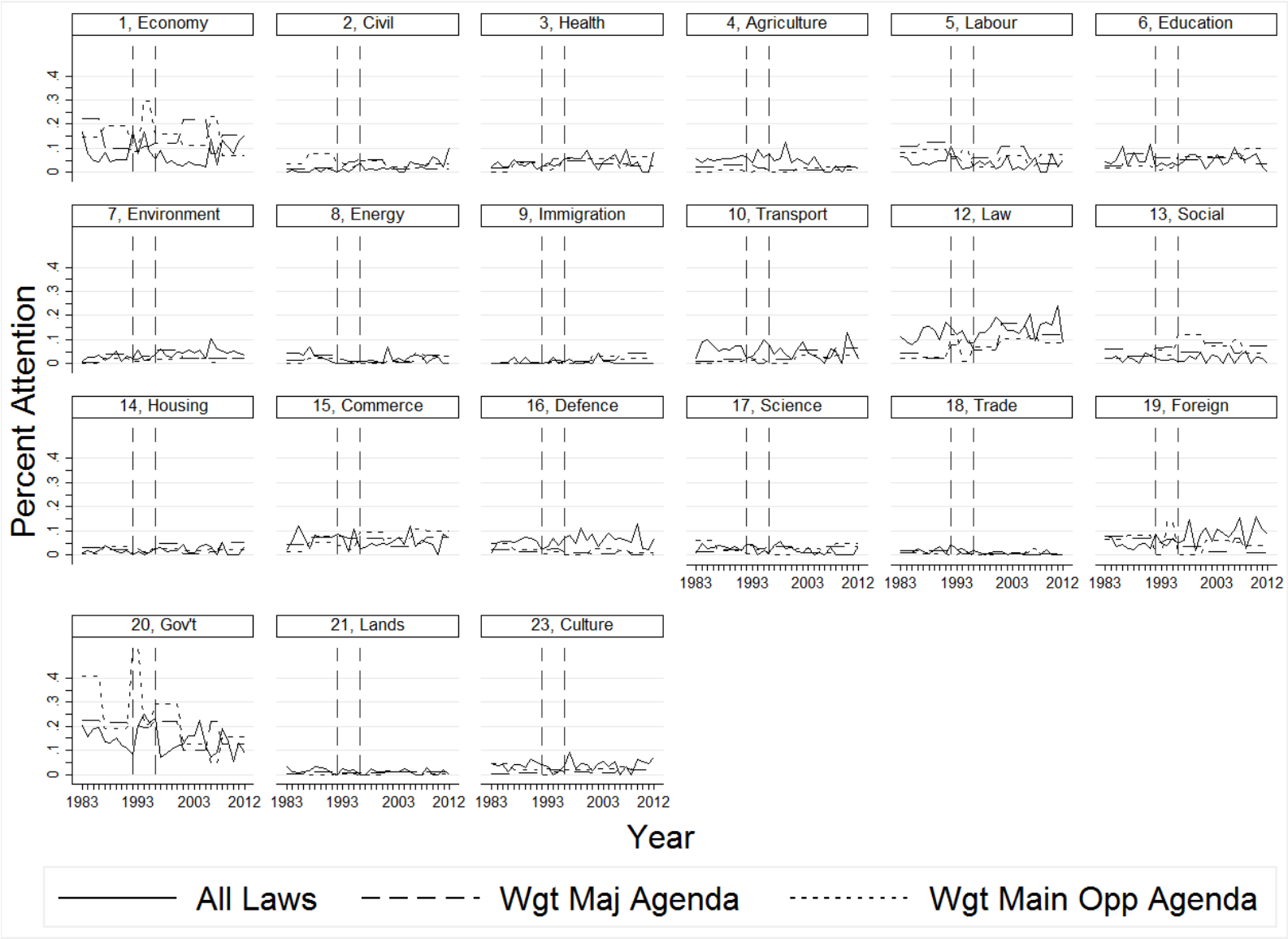
[11] We also checked for the presence of 'electoral cycle' effects to legislative productivity, by introducing two dummy variables taking the value of 1 when the year is respectively the first (post-electoral) and the last (pre-electoral) in the legislative term. This did not change our results and we have excluded it from our analyses.

Figure 1. Percent attention to single topics in the majority and opposition agendas and in legislation (all laws)



To test our expectations, we make use of ordinary least squares in a time series cross-sectional design with panel corrected standard errors. Years are used as our unit of time and each major topic code acting as an individual panel producing a total N of 630 (30 years (T) * 21 major topics (n)) observations. Specification tests for each panel demonstrate no clear time series processes in the form of autoregression or a moving average and unit root tests also offer no evidence of such a process for all panels matching our visual inspection of Figure 1. Finally, most panels are white noise according to the Ljung–Box Q that tests for the joint significance of autocorrelations across a number of lags.

In order to test our hypotheses concerning the differences in the effects of the majority and opposition agendas during different time periods we make use of a number of multiplicative interaction terms between the majority and opposition agendas measures and dummy variables coded 1 for the first (1983-1991) and second republic (1996-2013) and zero otherwise. Namely, we include a majority first republic and a majority second republic interaction as well as an opposition first republic and an opposition second republic in our models. These interaction terms allow us to calculate substantively meaningful marginal effects for the majority and opposition agendas with the transition period as the omitted time period. As is necessary with interaction terms we further include the first and second republic dummy variables in the model separately although we have no expectation for differences in the overall number of laws by year based on time period.

Our analyses are completed for two versions of the dependent variable, namely all laws and all executive sponsored laws. The results comparing the two dependent variables are presented in Table 2 and to fully assess our results the marginal effects based on the interactions are presented in Table 3.

Table 2: Weighted Majority and Main Opposition Agendas on the legislative agenda

	All Laws	Executive Sponsored Laws
Majority	0.957***	0.801***
	(0.255)	(0.238)
Majority * 1st	-0.728**	-0.537*
	(0.278)	(0.270)*
Majority * 2nd	-0.696**	-0.496+
	(0.268)	(0.256)
Opposition	-0.029	0.053
	(0.120)	(0.116)
Opposition * 1st	0.205	0.135
	(0.155)	(0.161)
Opposition * 2nd	0.231+	0.099
	(0.140)	(0.143)
1st	0.025**	0.019*
	(0.008)	(0.009)
2nd	0.022**	0.019*
	(0.008)	(0.009)
Government Seats	-0.000	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Effective Number of Parties	0.114**	0.056
	(0.040)	(0.048)
Rile Score	-0.008***	-0.005+
	(0.002)	(0.003)
Constant	0.003	0.007
	(0.008)	(0.008)
R^2	0.32	0.28
N	630	630

Note: + p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

Table 3: Marginal Effect of Weighted Majority and Main Opposition Agendas on the legislative agenda

	Marginal Effects – All Laws	Marginal Effects – Executive Sponsored Laws
Majority 1st Republic	0.229*	0.264*
	(0.110)	(0.126)
Majority Transition	0.957***	0.801***
	(0.251)	(0.238)
Majority 2nd Republic	0.261***	0.305***
	(0.081)	(0.092)
Opposition 1st Republic	0.177+	0.188+
	(0.098)	(0.113)
Opposition Transition	-0.029	0.053
	(0.120)	(0.116)
Opposition 2nd Republic	0.203**	0.152+
	(0.073)	(0.084)

Note: + p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

As our primary findings contain interactions we first focus our discussion on the marginal effects for the first republic, transition period and second republic contained in Table 3 where our marginal effects calculations are based on an appropriate combination of the majority and opposition variables with the relevant interaction or in the base variable for the transition (see Brambor et al 2005).

Consistent with hypothesis H1, we find a positive and significant effect of the majority agenda in both the first and second republic for the two models. Further support for this hypothesis also exists during the transition period where the focus on reform had comparatively large positive and significant coefficients in both models. Substantively the results in Table 3 indicate the average congruence rate of priorities of the weighted majority and main opposition manifestos by our different legislative outputs. This can be expressed as a percentage. For example, during the Second Republic there was a 30.5 per cent match between the weighted majority manifesto mentions and the executive-sponsored legislative

agenda. For the sake of interpretation, t is important to remember that our variables account for the distribution of attention and is therefore not a direct indicator of the fulfilment of manifesto pledges.

The effect intensifies by becoming both larger and more significant in the second republic over the first pointing to the attempt by the majority coalition to follow the priorities of its legislative agenda and offering support for H3 that posited that the effect should increase with the introduction of alternation.[12]

In both of our models the effect of the opposition was positive, but only marginally significant during the first republic and in the second republic when looking at executive laws. These findings offer only limited support for H2, that the opposition parties influence the majority agenda through issue uptake. During the second republic the effect of the opposition agenda was however both positive and significant when considering the whole legislative agenda, namely the agenda that takes into consideration legislation sponsored by both the executive and MPs. We take this as evidence that the introduction of alternation brought a greater incentive for the majority to engage in the issue-uptake of main opposition priorities, but only in the residual part of legislation starting in parliament. It is in this arena that majority and opposition meet and, at times, find compromises. Consistently with the mandate hypothesis, executive-sponsored legislation - which has a far higher adoption rate and increasingly represents the lion's share of legislative output in Italy (Kreppel 2009) - is used to deliver on the issues emphasised in the majority agenda.

As regards the legislature-specific models' controls (see Table 2) – which, according to the literature, are relevant for legislative productivity - no effects were found for the number of government seats, but our

[12] It should be noted that while these effects do not overlap for all laws, their confidence intervals do meaning that while H3 is supported, that support is not as strong as it could be.

other two controls (Rile Score and Effective number of parties) were significant in the “all laws” model. Finally, model fit denoted by the R-squared is slightly higher for all laws indicating that our model is best at explaining this part of the law-making agenda.

Conclusion

The transmission of priorities from voters to parties and their translation into public policy is at the heart of what many mean by democracy (Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994; Robertson 1976). Yet, the extent to which, once in government, political parties stick to the policy priorities emphasized during election campaigns is still a contested question. In this article we use thirty years of data on the Italian political system to test the influence of party mandates on the legislative agenda, the extent to which majorities also try to take up issues from the opposition platforms and, finally, how these two strategies are affected by changes in the institutional context. Because of the fragmentation of its majority coalitions and the weakness of the cabinet powers, Italy represents a least-likely case to observe an operative mandate effect. Moreover, with its shift from a blocked system to a system of alternation in government, Italy provides a quasi-experimental context for studying the effect of the exposure to increased party competitiveness on the party program-to-policy link.

We find robust evidence that both a mandate and a weaker, but still present opposition effects are at play under the new alternation system when the whole legislative agenda is considered. Overall, these findings point to the complex and dynamic character of the governmental process. While there is evidence of a mandate effect following the introduction of alternation – which supports previous research on the topic (Borghetto et al. 2014, Borghetto and Carammia 2015) – mandate politics seems to capture only part of the picture. The paradox of the introduction of alternation in Italy is that both the effect of the majority’s and that of the main opposition’s agenda became stronger. On the other hand, when our model is run

only on executive-sponsored legislation, we find that the effect of the main opposition agenda decreases in the Second Republic, which casts doubt on the actual application of an issue uptake strategy specifically by the government. Rather, these results point out that MPs-sponsored legislation represents the preferred channel to pragmatically integrate a wider range of issues in the legislative agenda, some of them resulting also from the opposition's initiative. This supports previous findings (Giuliani 2008), pointing to a continuity in the level of consensual law-making in Italy.

Although our study focused on a single case study and considered a rather exceptional and sudden shift from a strong pivotal to an alternational system (the only other similar case among modern democracies being Japan), our findings still bear significance for a wider debate on the impact of partisanship on policy-making. We provided evidence that possible alternation is a factor that should be taken into consideration when analysing the congruence between the priorities outlined in policy platforms and the areas of legislative actions. This relationship deserves further analysis in other democratic systems that did not experience government alternation for long periods such as, for instance, some Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. Furthermore, the relationship between majority and opposition, and the way in which each contributes to shaping the agenda of government, appears to be more complex than is generally assumed. Our findings reveal that differentiating between legislation sponsored by MPs and by the executive could be a useful perspective to understand how issues closer to the opposition agenda can find their way into legislation.

Future research should also more closely investigate the party strategies aimed at influencing voters' perceptions over the attribution of issue ownership. We still know little about how issue trespassing is used, whether it is directed to weaken the opponent's issue ownership or, when the circumstances allow it, to steal it. Remarkably, however, this strategy is sometimes very clearly put in place in everyday politics. For example, in the summer of 2017, the main party in government, the Democratic Party, tabled

a bill to abolish the so-called "vitalizi" (the life pension granted to MPs who have served for at least four and a half years). This "anti-caste" measure, a valence issue in its essence, was not included in its manifesto but in that of its main opponent, the Five Star Movement. Successful or not, the Democrats' move was a clear attempt to disarm the M5S anti-elite attacks in the coming 2018 elections, by preventively shifting their position closer to the Movement on the need to lower the "costs" of politics.

Future studies should also focus on the influence of additional agendas on the manifesto-policy link, namely the role of media and public opinion (see for instance Froio et al. 2016 and Visconti 2018). These actors exert pressure on government actors along the whole political mandate and may end up mediating the impact of the opposition agendas: ultimately the government should take up its rivals' issues only when they are likely to dominate the next election. Finally, future research should incorporate issue preferences, which – alongside attention – are a fundamental determinant of party competition. For instance, the greater the distance between a governing party and its rival on a popular issue, the more difficult for the former to effectively take it up without triggering revolts in the party and among its supporters. Even with these limitations, our contribution sheds new light on the transmission of electoral mandates into policy agendas.

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Data

The replication dataset is available at http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/ipsr-risp

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