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The political drivers of antipoverty policy in Italy: persistence, change and reversals

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Abstract

This article analyses the political determinants of antipoverty policy in Italy between 1948 and 2022, providing a long-term analysis of the Italian minimum income scheme. We look for an explanation of that evolution drawing on three theoretical perspectives: veto players, gradual institutional change, and party competition. Our methodology is process tracing which involves the examination of 'diagnostic' pieces of evidence for our broad political-historical analysis. We argue that the so called 'neglect' phase until 1992 can be explained by the veto players theory, the period after 1992 by gradual institutional change, whereas the final introduction of a minimum income scheme in 2018 is the result of competitive dynamics. The main lesson is that a case study analysis of the politics of anti-poverty policy offers fresh insights into a major challenge in capitalist systems, combating rising poverty trends.

Keywords: minimum income policy; Italy; political dynamics; party competition; veto player

Introduction

A significant indicator of a country's commitment to social justice is the existence of a safety net, a last-recourse income a person obtains if unemployed or 'working-poor' without any family support. Though the literature has stressed the growing need for social assistance benefits, we still know little about the politics of minimum income schemes (Noël 2019). Safety nets have remained on the edge of welfare state research. It was assumed that social insurance programmes, economic growth and widespread education would over time make social assistance and poverty increasingly marginal (Marx and Nelson 2013). However, prospects of declining poverty appear largely misguided as innumerable findings report that in most countries the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer (Blanchard and Rodrick 2021; OECD 2011).

We contribute to a small but growing literature concerned with the political dynamics of social safety nets. Recent scholarly work detects the role of politics and emphasises in particular the relevance of party competition dynamics, departing from previous claims about the limited importance of politics in this policy field (Natili 2019; Jessoula and Natili

2020; Vesan and Ronchi 2019). Our work builds on this literature and adds 'veto player theory' to explain minimum income reform trajectory in Italy. It examines the long and winding road to a minimum income scheme (MIS) in Italy, asking what it reveals about the politics of the safety net. Unlike most other EU member states, Italy lacked a national safety net until 2018. Our history of MIS in Italy begins by exploring the policy status quo (1948–1992), then turns to policy reversals (1992–2012) and policy innovation (2012–2019), and concludes with partial policy reversal (2022).

The article is structured in seven sections. The second section reviews the literature and outlines the theoretical framework. The third discusses the methodology and case selection. Section four analyses the first period of policy maintenance and path dependency of antipoverty policies between 1948 and 1992. Section five explores go-stop-go antipoverty policies between 1992 and 2012. The sixth section examines the final steps of MIS in the new tripolar political competition created by the rise of the populist Five Star Movement. Section seven addresses the most recent policy reversals. The conclusions summarise the contribution of this article, describe its scope and explore implications for future research.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Safety nets have remained on the edge of the political impetus on social policy because this policy sector is allegedly less relevant to the politics of the welfare state. Political mobilisation and organisation require access to resources, including money, education and information, which poor individuals are often denied. In addition, benefit recipients, i.e. poor individuals, are a diverse group with a wide range of interests, beliefs, attitudes, identities and needs (Bonoli 2005; Bonoli 2013; Clegg 2014). Therefore, theories centred on power resources, including the strength of the working class, to explain social policy outcomes, cannot be applied to this policy field.

Perhaps for this reason, scholars concerned with antipoverty policies have often focused on institutional variables that shape poverty regimes (Amable 2016; Ferrera, Fargion and Jessoula 2012; Pierson 1998). The new institutionalist theory offers several distinctive interpretations of antipoverty policies. One strand of the literature views poverty regimes as modes of regulation underpinned by the interplay between labour market conditions and state-family responsibility in protecting against social risks (Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio 2020, 1). These modes of regulation focus on configurations that involve economic processes, systems of social protection, gendered norms and cultural values. Regime approaches explore how these configurations are rooted in the specific history of a country, carving path-dependent trajectories of antipoverty policies.[1] In this manner, poverty regimes remain 'frozen' in their institutional trajectory (Esping-Andersen 1990).

Critics note that regime approaches are powerful in explaining stasis and stability, but are unable to account for policy change. Noel (2019) finds variation in minimum income schemes among 18 OECD countries increasing over time between 1990 and 2012. Recently, significant changes in antipoverty policies in several countries have raised the question: how do we explain policy change in this field? Minimum income scheme changes result from critical junctures, such as sudden economic crises. Critical junctures are shocks with an inbuilt capacity to overcome the status quo (Mahoney 2001). The prediction drawn from this literature is that change in MIS is crisis-driven.

Others suggest that minimum income protection may experience major transformations not driven by crises but rather resulting from fragmented trajectories of gradual institutional change (Natili 2018). Crisis-driven approaches run the risk of perceiving all other types of change as minor adaptive adjustments to circumstances, understating

the extent of change (Streeck and Thelen 2009, 95). Looking through the lens of gradual transformative change involves moving beyond the analysis of big changes in response to big shocks. The prediction is that antipoverty policies evolve incrementally rather than in an abrupt fashion.

Though neo-institutional scholars offer strong arguments for using institutional data to capture essential differences between poverty regimes, the central problem is that patterns of conflict and consensus on MIS can be extremely varied. Some countries introduced cuts, others implemented new MIS, still others first introduced and then retrenched safety nets. The declaration that policy change is driven by non-political forces, whether incremental or abrupt, has led to minimum income schemes being largely devoid of serious analyses in a political context.

Recent innovation and reforms of antipoverty policies in some West European countries have reignited the debate on the causal mechanisms of variation in antipoverty policies. This variation has spurred a new wave of research in the political dynamics affecting MIS (Jessoula and Natili 2020; Natili 2019; Vesan and Ronchi 2019; Taschwer 2021), which has however reached inconclusive results. For some authors, social democratic parties often pursue policies that benefit those with secure employment and neglect the preferences of those without (Gingrich and Haüsermann 2015; Rueda 2007). These parties endorse social investment policies that work against the poor, who are often unable to take advantage of programmes meant to facilitate job integration (Cantillon and Vandenbroucke 2014). Other scholars find instead a positive relationship between left-wing governments and minimum income protection as they pursue inclusive policies to broaden their electoral appeal (Wang, Van Vliet and Goudswaard 2018; Van Vliet and Wang 2019). Still others claim that what matters is the strength of union organisation in influencing party politics (Noël 2019, Swank 2019).

To be sure, these inconclusive findings may reflect different research designs, as statistical results are sensitive to the inclusion or exclusion of specific cases. For instance, Wang, Van Vliet and Goudswaard (2018) include 26 OECD countries while Taschwer (2021) includes only 16. Moreover, Bandau and Ahrens' (2020) meta-analysis of 63 empirical studies indicates that the choice of the dependent variable is most crucial. Studies using entitlements are 'four times more likely to find partisan effects than studies based on social spending' (Bandau and Ahrens 2020, 35). That is, partisan effects exert much greater impact on entitlement rules and may not be equally pronounced on all social policy domains. In light of these findings, the limited relevance of political variables in explaining antipoverty policies should be reconsidered.

The central questions addressed in this article are: which political dynamics explain persistence and change in MIS in Italy? Is the causal mechanism path dependence and path departure as predicted by historical neo-institutionalism, or were there gradual transformative changes that finally took shape in more recent years? What was the role of partisan veto players and party competition? To address these questions, we adopt Cairney's (2013) 'complementary' approach which uses multiple concepts to produce a series of perspectives with which to examine minimum income schemes. We apply neo-institutional interpretations and party system theory in a combined framework with other central theoretical expectations on policy change derived from veto player theory.

To the best of our knowledge this combined framework has not yet been applied to examine antipoverty policies. Our complementary approach may help to move beyond neo-institutionalist views that unduly neglect the dynamics of party competition. For example, minor leftist parties may appeal to low-income voters, triggering competition with dominant left-wing parties for the support of these voters (Anderson and Beramendi 2012). Moreover, two-party systems with one-dimensional policy space, may

yield an overlapping consensus on MIS between left and right-wing parties, whereas multi-party systems with ethnic, cultural and territorial cleavages may unleash major political conflicts (Jessoula et al. 2014). In addition, Conservative parties that support traditional family values and the principle of subsidiarity prevent public intervention to combat poverty and social exclusion (Van Kersbergen 1995). More recently, populist parties competing for the votes of left-leaning blue-collar workers have softened retrenchment efforts to protect these workers (Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Röth, Alfonso and Spies 2018). The quest for a new populist identity shapes credit-claiming strategies aimed at implementing minimum income schemes in a 'context of persistent austerity' (Vesan and Ronchi 2019, 391).

In this article we build and improve on extant literature on the political dynamics of MIS also by examining the specific features of veto players that help explain the *potential* for policy change. A veto player is defined as '[an] individual or collective actor whose agreement is necessary for a change of the status quo' (Tsebelis 2002, 19). Three relevant characteristics of veto players matter for policy change – the number of players, their ideological congruence and the internal divisions of each player. The higher the number of veto players and the wider their ideological range, the more persistent the status quo; the higher the internal division of majority veto players the lower the potential for policy change. The stability of a policy represents the difficulty of effecting significant change in the status quo. One advantage of veto player theory is to facilitate comparison across political systems or within the same political system in different periods, using veto players as a common yardstick.

Methodology and case selection

Italy is an interesting case study because, unlike most other West European countries, it lacked a fully-fledged national minimum income scheme until 2018. Safety nets were limited, uncoordinated and fragmented, while family networks and non-governmental organisations played a major role in social assistance, like in other southern European countries (Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio 2020). Over the postwar years political conflicts and competition marked the long road towards a national minimum income policy.

By opting for a case study, this article contributes to the 'return of single country studies' in comparative politics (Pepinski 2019). The intensive study of a single country can yield general theoretical insights with comparative implications, and this explains why single-country articles today are a central part of published comparative policy research. The strength of single-country research is that it facilitates better command of the empirical details necessary for making valid descriptive or causal inferences.

The case study methodology allows us to check the expectations raised by neo-institutional theory, veto player theory and party competition theory regarding changes in MIS in Italy from 1948 to 2019. Our methodology is process tracing which involves the examination of 'diagnostic' pieces of evidence within a case that contribute to supporting or overturning alternative explanatory hypotheses (Bennett 2010). It is therefore most appropriate for our historical analysis of minimum income policies in Italy. What matters is not the amount of evidence, but its contribution to adjudicating among alternative hypotheses (Beach and Pedersen 2019). Our work conducts a broad historical account of MIS in Italy, supported by a detailed process-oriented analysis using legislative acts and documents as well as a meta-analysis of the historical literature.

Policy status quo of antipoverty policies 1948–1992

Our central question in this section is: were minimum income policies ignored during the Italian golden age of welfare state development or was the potential for policy change too

weak? As mentioned above, family networks provided aid to poor relatives, thus allowing the state to focus on other areas of welfare, however our research addresses the role played by institutions. We begin by noting that from 1948 to 1992 Italian antipoverty policies were mainly administered by religious and non-governmental, charitable institutions. In many ways, this was a path-dependent outcome as neo-institutional theory predicts. Religious and local associations had historically managed, coordinated and implemented antipoverty programmes in Italy (Giorgi and Pavan 2021b; Sepe 1999). Over the years a plethora of national institutions joined these local associations, increasing spending fragmentation and discretionary criteria to relieve individuals from poverty, fuelling clientelist practices. Moreover, the Italian government exerted little control on independent local associations, limiting its remit to financially supporting them.

These basic tenets of fragmentation and discretionary criteria in social assistance endured for many years with successive governments choosing to 'deliberately ignore control over charitable institutions' (Sepe 1999, 11). Not surprisingly, the standards and procedures of the assistance scheme introduced under the Crispi government in 1890 would still be in place in the postwar period. A number of studies have examined the reasons for this long phase of status quo in the field of minimum income policies in Italy. Some scholars suggest that in the decades following the Second World War Italy had a very underdeveloped welfare state and, as in other Mediterranean countries, the paucity of aid to the poor in this period is largely explained by this backwardness (Ferrera, 1996). Others point to governmental neglect regarding antipoverty policies (Vesan and Ronchi 2019). Yet, still others claim that policies to combat poverty were often at the centre of the political agenda (Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio 2020, 44). Interesting historical evidence supports this latter view. In 1951 the parliament appointed the 'Commission of Inquiry on Destitution and the Means to Fight it' (*Commissione di Indagine sulla Miseria e sugli Strumenti per Combatterla*). The commission's aim was to investigate the population's poverty level, especially that of individuals living in southern regions. The findings revealed that about 23 per cent of families were living in poverty (Braghin 1978; Cova 2007). The Commission's report recommended better integration of social assistance schemes as well as broader coverage of social insurance programmes, and believed unemployment was the main cause of poverty. These recommendations, however, never came into force, consigning national antipoverty policies to 'the cold' (Franco 2007).

Why did Italian governments not follow the Commission's recommendations? One answer is that the dynamic of party competition and the specific features of veto players weakened the *potential* for policy change, precluding social assistance reform. The dynamic of party competition during the postwar era in Italy was marked by significant ideological polarisation between the main left-wing and right-wing parties – the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Italian Social Movement (MSI), while the Christian Democracy (DC) was located at the centre of the ideological space (Sartori 1976). In this context, the DC garnered the majority of moderate voters, and remained constantly in power until 1992, excluding opposition parties from government coalitions. Thus, the ideological distance among veto players (PCI and MSI) weakened the potential for policy change, and enabled the DC to retain the status quo on minimum income policies.

A further major cause of this weak potential for policy change was the high number of veto players. Oversized coalition governments between 1948 and 1992 were highly unstable, as almost no cabinet remained in office more than a few years. Another reason for cabinet instability was the internal divisions of governing parties. Intraparty strife was reflected in the so-called *franchi tiratori* (party snipers) that beset Italian politics in the postwar period. These were MPs from the government coalition parties who took advantage of the secret ballot to vote against government bills, guarding legislators from losing office or alienating voters. Therefore, in the postwar period all three features of veto

players that influenced government policy were well in place: their high number, the great ideological distance between them, and their internal divisions, all of which prevented policymakers from overcoming the status quo in minimum income policies.

To be sure, the reformers' efforts were made more difficult by the strong ties the DC had developed with the Catholic world (Leonardi and Wertman 1989). The Church and Catholic organisations exerted an enormous influence on social assistance, benefiting from substantial public aid without any control (Fiocco 2003). In this scenario, intraparty divisions on the design of social assistance did not bode well for policy change. Suffice to say that while the inquiry of the Commission on Destitution was under way, in October 1952 local DC leaders held a national conference on the topic of social assistance. At the conference, Maria Jervolino, then head of the DC Social Assistance Department, claimed that the welfare state had to retain the principle of subsidiarity; in her view, the government should encourage and support local religious associations rather than replacing them (cited in Fiocco 2003). Other DC party leaders, however, promoted modern social policies and aimed at reducing the party's dependence on the Church (Paniga 2011). In this situation, DC leaders played intraparty factions against each other and, in so doing, weakened the *potential* for policy change, precluding any significant reform of social assistance.

An additional factor contributing to the stasis of the policy was the DC's interest in preserving the fragmentation of public spending in social assistance because it helped fuel popular consensus and created clientelistic jobs. This went to the heart of a developing system of power that would weigh down on social assistance reforms for a long time (Ferrera, Fargion and Jessoula 2012).

According to political historians, the two major left-wing parties, the PCI and the Partito Socialista Italiano (Italian Socialist Party, PSI), firmly believed that the only problem to be tackled was unemployment and not simply poverty (Cammarano 1982, Giorgi and Pavan 2021a). In this view, for left-wing parties the policies to combat poverty represented a rear-guard action, useful only for stabilising capitalism.

After the 'economic miracle' of the 1950s and 1960s, industrialisation, urbanisation and the expansion of welfare benefits in the 1970s reduced the incidence of poverty (Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio 2020). Yet poverty had not disappeared. Survey research carried out by Sarpellon (1982) revealed that 20.9 per cent of households (3,626,000) were living in relative poverty in 1978.[2] This 'rediscovery' of poverty convinced the first centre-left government headed by Bettino Craxi in 1984 to appoint a National Commission of Inquiry on Poverty. The Commission's report stressed that being working-poor, and living in a large household, especially in the south, increased the risk of poverty (Brandolini 2021).

In short, the recommendations of expert commissions since the 1950s were never implemented, not only because of 'neglect' or path dependent mechanisms. Rather, government coalitions lacked the political will to overcome the status quo. A high number of veto players, their wide ideological range and internal divisions rendered policy change difficult, as predicted by the veto player theory.

Gradual institutional change 1994–2012

Scholarly work identifies the years 1992–94 as a turning point in the development of anti-poverty policies in Italy (Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio 2020; Vesan and Ronchi 2019). The historical parties that had shaped the status quo in antipoverty policies either no longer qualified as core parties or significantly reconstructed their identity. A new electoral law in 1993 offered incentives for pre-electoral alliances among political parties. This new electoral dynamic initiated bipolar competition between left-wing and right-wing

political coalitions competing for moderate voters (Calise 2010; Cotta and Verzichelli 2016; Di Virgilio 2010; Morlino and Tarchi 2006; Pasquino 2002).

One crucial novelty was the narrower ideological distance among veto players in the run-up to the 1994 elections (Bartolini and D'Alimonte 1995). The radical transformation of two postwar anti-system parties – the PCI that morphed into the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS), and the MSI that mutated into *Alleanza Nazionale* – unleashed centripetal party competition. Both parties were now well integrated in the Italian party system and competed in the new bipolar context after 1992.

According to veto player theory, the reduced ideological distance among veto players should have increased the *potential* for policy change. This was exactly what happened. Left-wing governments implemented innovative pilot attempts which were subsequently blocked by centre-right cabinets, leading to policy reversals (Natili 2019; Jessoula and Natili 2020). Bipolar competition encouraged strategies of adversarial politics manifested in what we label 'go-stop-go' antipoverty policies. As Natili (2018) observes, minimum income protection lacked a single reform agenda but developed instead from an uncoordinated and fragmented trajectory. This process of gradual institutional change may nonetheless be as transformative as an abrupt, crisis-driven change (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). The following paragraphs follow detailed process-tracing accounts of this peculiar historical development.

Perhaps spurred by the role played by the European Union in pushing welfare states such as Italy into taking steps to combat poverty, the first attempt at providing a national minimum income protection occurred in 1998 under the centre-left government led by Romano Prodi.[3] Following the 1992 EU recommendation for a minimum resource guarantee, in 1998 the Prodi government launched a pilot scheme called 'minimum insertion income' (*Reddito minimo di inserimento,* RMI). Although short-lived and beset by many implementation difficulties, the RMI deserves attention because it influenced subsequent policy discourse and the variety of minimum income schemes which followed (Sacchi 2007; Sacchi and Bastagli 2005; Guerzoni 2008).

The RMI was initially introduced as a pilot scheme in 39 municipalities mainly located in southern regions, but involved another 267 municipalities in the following two years, accounting for 8.6 per cent of the resident population. The RMI was a safety net that helped individuals living in severe material deprivation and social exclusion, a condition particularly acute in southern regions (arrears in rent payment, failure to achieve compulsory education, etc.). However, it was less effective in helping the unemployed re-entering the labour market. One reason was the insufficient administrative capacity to manage the take-off of the new policy (Benassi and Mingione 2003).

The Law n. 328/2000 extended the RMI implementation to the entire national territory with a new regulatory act and a comprehensive review of income support. However, the centre-left government under Giuliano Amato in the Finance Bill 2001 discontinued the RMI apparently because of budget constraints, but increased minimum pension supplements and family tax credits (Ranci Ortigosa 2018, Sacchi 2007). One explanation of the Amato Finance Bill 2001 is the path-dependence of social policy, because an increase in minimum pension supplements reflects the Italian social policy tradition based on categorical benefits. Another explanation could be a strategy to garner pensioners' support in the run-up to the May 2001 general election.

The advent of the Silvio Berlusconi centre-right government in 2001 brought a final blow to the RMI. Berlusconi declared the pilot scheme 'a failure' and claimed that social assistance was better left to families and charities (Madama, Natali and Jessoula 2013). Clearly, a strategy of policy reversal was put in place (Jessoula et al 2014). Under the centre-right governments that ruled Italy for nearly a decade, antipoverty polices were sidelined, with only minor measures in place to combat poverty. Furthermore, between

2008 and 2013, funds for family policies, already low compared to other EU member states, dropped from 346.5 million euros in 2008 to 19.8 million euros in 2013. On top of that, the government withdrew financial support for housing to low-income families (Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio 2020, 125).

In spite of these policy reversals by the centre-right governments, many local experiments and policies helped to broaden the consensus for an MIS among scholars, administrators, and third sector associations. In 2013 the Christian Italian Workers' Associations (*Associazioni cristiane lavoratori italiani,* ACLI) and Caritas launched the Alliance against Poverty (*Alleanza contro la povertà*), later joined by trade unions and the National Association of Municipalities (ANCI). As Natili and Puricelli (2023) argue, the 2008 financial crisis led to a strategic reconfiguration of trade unions' social policy preferences. Until then Italian trade unions had chiefly supported the social rights of workers in core economic sectors but the political and socio-economic consequences of the economic crisis weakened their legitimacy, pushing them to expand their 'welfare borders' and support anti-poverty campaigns for the first time.

The Alliance became one of the main proponents of a genuine minimum income scheme, labelled 'Social Inclusion Income' (*Reddito di inclusione sociale,* REIS), which was coherent with the idea of 'targeting within universalism'. Moreover, the election in 2013 of Pope Francis, who asked Catholics to engage not only on 'ethically sensitive' issues but also in social justice, contributed to the renewed interest in policies to combat poverty (Gori et al 2016).

Meanwhile, in 2013 the new left-wing government under Prime Minister Enrico Letta had planned a new minimum income scheme, which was a universal, means-tested benefit that included active labour market policies, labelled Support for Active Inclusion (*Sostegno per l'inclusione attiva*, SIA). The proposal was rejected chiefly due to the opposition of trade unions, who pressed instead for the refinancing of employment subsidies (Saraceno, Benassi and Morlicchio 2020, 127).

In 2014 the new centre-left government under Matteo Renzi introduced the New Social Card (*Nuova Carta Acquisti*, NCA), a pilot scheme implemented in 12 municipalities with more than 250,000 residents. The budget law 2014 extended this policy to central and northern regions, funding 40 million euros per year for a three-year period between 2014 and 2016. Interestingly, Prime Minister Renzi implemented these expansionary measures during a period of economic austerity caused by the global financial crisis in 2008–2009 and the sovereign debt crisis of 2011.

Party competition: issue ownership and issue trespassing 2013–2019

Expansionary social policies under austerity economic conditions may be puzzling. However, credible anti-establishment challengers competing with the prime minister's party may promote specific types of social policy issues (Vesan and Ronchi 2019). This happened in the 2013 general election, when the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) campaigned for unemployment benefits for all the unemployed, and not only for the so-called insiders (*Sussidio di disoccupazione garantito*). The M5S also campaigned for a minimum income scheme called *Reddito di cittadinanza* (Citizenship Income), for all poor people, without categorical distinctions of age, health status, etc. Unexpectedly, the M5S made a major breakthrough by garnering nearly 25 per cent of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies, turning the newborn party into a credible threat to established parties. Moreover, unlike other parties, the M5S was able to attract votes across all geographical areas, making it the sole national party in Italy (Diamanti 2013). Furthermore, the electoral success of the M5S radically changed the structure of party competition from bipolar to tripolar for the first time in 20 years, so much so that scholars defined the 2013 elections as an 'electoral earthquake' (Chiaramonte and De Sio 2014).

Against this new political background, it is not surprising that policies to combat poverty took centre stage, and the three-year period 2015–2018 records a series of measures to combat poverty that has no equal in Italian history. The 2016 Stability Law established a new Fund of 600 million euros (raised to one billion euros from 2017) to finance a National Plan to combat poverty and social exclusion. In 2018 Prime Minister Gentiloni launched a new 'Inclusion Income' (*Reddito di inclusione,* REI), whose main features were defined in a memorandum signed by the government and the Alleanza contro la povertà in April 2017.

The Inclusion Income was the first comprehensive minimum income policy in Italy. Although it was a path-breaking policy, scarce funding limited its coverage and ability to combat poverty as benefits were means-tested and conditional on joining activation programmes. According to the data published by the Italian National Social Insurance Institute (Istituto Nazionale di Previdenza Sociale, INPS) in 2018, the Inclusion Income reached 1.3 million individuals, which was about a quarter of the target population.

Arguably, the final step in the troubled journey to a minimum income scheme in Italy was the 2018 electoral campaign of the M5S grounded on 'Citizenship Income' (*Reddito di cittadinanza,* RdC), a means-tested cash benefit conditional on job-searching. In so doing, the M5S acquired issue ownership of the minimum income scheme which at the time was a prominent theme among dissatisfied voters (Vesan and Ronchi 2019).

As Gori (2017) indicates, voters' unhappiness probably stemmed from the consequences of the Great Recession of 2007–2008 that had increased poverty among previously less vulnerable social groups, namely households with employed people, one or two children and residents in the Centre-North. In this scenario, the M5S hastened the introduction of a minimum income scheme by claiming issue ownership on antipoverty policies. By doing so the M5S represented a credible political challenger to the Partito Democratico, pushing the latter to claim 'issue trespassing', thus effecting exclusive governmental decision-making in anti-poverty policies. 'Issue trespassing' is invoked during electoral competition when a party addresses an issue on which a rival party has ownership (Seeberg 2020; Sigelman and Buell 2004).

The electoral results of 2018 generated a new seismic wave that swept across the Italian political landscape (Chiaramonte et al. 2018; Pasquino 2019). The M5S, led by Luigi di Maio, became the largest single party in both houses of parliament, with about 11 million votes in the Chamber of Deputies, garnering 32.7 per cent of the vote, and about 10 million votes in the Senate, accounting for 32.2 per cent. In 2019, under the coalition government led by the M5S, a minimum income policy in Italy took a decisive step forward with the launch of 'Citizenship Income'.

The RdC was the biggest cash transfer to poor people ever made by an Italian government. However, a close scrutiny of the RdC policy design shows important inconsistencies (Baldini and Toso 2022; Busilacchi and Fabbri 2023; Gori 2020). First, confusion stems from improperly naming the measure 'citizenship income', since the flagship measure of the M5S does not coincide, despite its name, with citizenship income properly understood. True citizenship income is universal, unconditional and not subject to means-testing, i.e. it is paid regardless of the beneficiary's economic condition and willingness to participate in social or work requalification programmes. Second, both indicator and target population changed from relative to absolute poverty, which marked a significant policy reversal. In fact, in the electoral campaign of 2018 the M5S pledged to abolish poverty with a monthly cash benefit whose maximum amount was 780 euros per person. This amount was the relative poverty threshold estimated by Eurostat for Italy in 2009. In the event, following negotiations with the European Commission, funding for Citizenship Income had to be drastically cut and the original target population changed from relatively to absolutely poor individuals. The government thus veered towards a much less ambitious goal, namely to tackle absolute and not relative poverty. The

difference between the two concepts of poverty is significant because absolute poverty is more severe than relative. In 2019 there were 4.6 million individuals in absolute poverty in Italy, against about 8.8 million in relative poverty (Istat 2020). That is, by changing the target population the number of potential beneficiaries halved and so did the amount of public spending on the measure.

By setting an equivalence scale with an excessively low coefficient relating to children (0.2, compared to a value of 1 for the first adult), the government underestimated poverty among large families. The inequity of treatment also applied to immigrant families, whose incidence of absolute poverty was much higher than that of Italian families. The strict eligibility requirement on the years of residence in Italy (ten, of which the last two continuous) penalised poor households of more recent immigration. The political reason behind the tighter eligibility for foreigners was to appease the anti-immigration League, which had enough parliamentary seats to join the coalition government with the M5S.

Another major conceptual shortcoming of the RdC has to do with the high implicit marginal tax rate of the subsidy, in fact coinciding with 100 per cent. From this point of view, the RdC does not seem to adequately address the issue of the poverty trap, that is to say the disincentives to the labour supply inherent in any means-tested benefit.

A policy reversal, yet again? 2022–2024

The advent of the centre-right Meloni government[4] in October 2022 effected a policy reversal in the Italian minimum income policy by reintroducing the categorical criterion for eligibility for income support (Maino and De Tommaso 2022; Sacchi et al. 2023). Policy reversal to the long-established criterion clearly reflected its endurance, thus revealing path-dependence in the policy field.

The Meloni government replaced the RdC with two new measures, the 'Inclusion Allowance' (*Assegno di inclusione,* AdI) and the 'Support for Training and Work' (*Supporto per la formazione e il lavoro,* SFL). These policies marked a step backwards by refuting the principle of selective universalism that had characterised the *Reddito di Cittadinanza*, which was inspired by the European Recommendations on minimum income, and the concrete national applications of the same principle for about 30 years previously.

Both the AdI and the SFL cannot be defined as minimum income measures, i.e. aimed at the poor as such. The former is granted only to poor households with members who are either disabled, minors, aged 60 and over, or people who are included in care and assistance programmes of the territorial social and health services. The latter is a monetary benefit, with a non-renewable maximum duration of 12 months, which is granted to individuals aged between 18 and 59 who participate in work activation programmes. In addition, the two measures are not complementary in that once the SFL has ended, no AdI can be applied for. The criterion for distinguishing the two groups of beneficiaries is that of employability/non-employability. This criterion, however, is not based on individual characteristics (age, gender, education, nationality, geographical area of residence, work history), but on those of the family unit to which individuals belong, such as presence or absence of persons with disabilities, minors or members over 59 years of age.

The reform improves on two shortcomings of the *Reddito di Cittadinanza*. First, it reduces from ten to five the number of years of residence required for eligibility. Second, it mitigates the disincentives to work by introducing an exemption of 3,000 euros gross per year on the higher income from work by one or more members of the household receiving AdI, as well as for participating in active labour policies that provide allowances or benefits. However, the exemption must be assessed in the context of the tightening of the activation conditions for AdI recipients who can be activated at work. Another flaw of the reform concerns the equivalence scale used in calculating the access

thresholds and the AdI amount, which is very different from any theoretical reference and from those used internationally.

The Meloni government's reform is in line with a centre-right ideology that divides the poor into deserving and undeserving, reflecting the conservative vision of poverty in the nineteenth century. The reintroduction of categorical criteria will considerably drop the number of beneficiaries to about half of those entitled to the RdC (Bovini, Dicarlo and Tomasi 2023). This may significantly save resources for the public budget, but will inevitably weaken the fight against absolute poverty. In light of the number of policies over the last five years, the path towards a universalistic policy of income support for the poor in Italy is still marred by adversarial political dynamics and by the policy legacy of a categorical approach.

Conclusions

This article contributes to the small but growing literature on the political dynamics of minimum income policies. We use a complementary approach that applies conceptual tools from neo-institutional theories, veto player theory and party competition theory. Veto player dynamics in the postwar period shed light on the policy status quo until 1992, while adversarial go-stop-go policies in the early 1990s triggered gradual transformative change and, finally, party competition after 2013 helped put in place a minimum income scheme in 2019 which was recalibrated by the Meloni government's adversarial politics. Opening up the analytic space in this way allows us to see combinations that are difficult to analyse and even hard to conceive by using only one single theoretical framework.

Turning to the limits of our study, it is important to note that the article focuses on the supply-side dynamics of minimum income protection. Due to the word limit other political dynamics, including the role played by trade unions and civil society associations, were mentioned but not fully discussed. Future research should also engage with other sources of data, looking at opinions and attitudes of voters regarding minimum income schemes and, more generally, policies to combat poverty.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Notes

1. Path dependence means that policy arrangements put in place at time T shape the incentives and worldviews of the actors involved, and thus policies become entrenched by T+1, creating the stickiness of policy patterns. Thus, path-dependent policies are resistant to redesign ultimately because they incorporate vested interests in their standard operating procedures and are liable to incur major change only in moments of special circumstances triggered by external shocks, such as international economic crises (Pierson 2001).

2. The percentage of households in relative poverty refers to the share of households in the total population whose expenditure does not exceed 65 per cent of the average consumption expenditure of Italian households (Sarpellon 1982, 111).

3. It should be noted that some regional initiatives in the field of antipoverty policies had been implemented over the years well in advance of the above-mentioned attempt (Natili 2018; Gallo 2019).

4. In the political science literature focused on the Meloni government there is a flurry of intellectual activity on whether the government is to be described as centre-right (Cavalieri, Mangoni and Vercesi 2024), right-centre (Newell 2023) or populist radical right (Garzia, 2023). However, a closer scrutiny indicates that most authors when discussing the government coalition use the term 'centre-right', in that while two out of three government partners – Meloni's party Fratelli di Italia and Salvini's League – are deemed radical right parties, the third coalition partner Forza Italia is a centre party. Hence the government coalition is generally defined as centre-right even by those authors who claim that after the 2022 elections the populist radical right took charge (Garzia 2023). For this reason we follow the mainstream definition of the Meloni government as 'centre-right'.

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Italian summary

Questo articolo analizza le determinanti politiche della politica contro la povertà in Italia tra il 1948 e il 2022, fornendo un'analisi di lungo periodo dello schema di reddito minimo italiano. Spieghiamo questa evoluzione attingendo a tre prospettive teoriche: i veto players, il cambiamento istituzionale graduale e la competizione tra partiti. La nostra metodologia è quella del process tracing, che comporta l'indagine di elementi 'diagnostici' per la nostra ampia analisi storico-politica. Sosteniamo che la cosiddetta fase di 'disattenzione' fino al 1992 può essere spiegata dalla teoria dei veto players, il periodo successivo al 1992 dal graduale cambiamento istituzionale e, infine, l'introduzione di uno schema di reddito minimo nel 2018 come l'effetto di dinamiche competitive. Il risultato principale dello studio è che l'analisi di un caso di studio della politica contro la povertà offre nuovi spunti di riflessione su una delle principali sfide dei sistemi capitalistici, la lotta all'aumento della diffusione della povertà.